



January 24, 2009

Local 'rockhounds' find, share treasure at Gemboree in Exeter

Exeter event exhibits passion some have for transforming raw stones into beautiful art

BY GERALD CARROLL

gcarroll@visalia.gannett.com

If there's anything Raul Gonzales likes more than admiring his collection of strikingly colorful rocks, it's slicing into them with a diamond saw.

Like many of the 132 members of the Tule Gem and Mineral Society, Gonzales, the mayor of Woodlake, owns his own. Such saws are used to hack into what appear to be plain old stones, the kind found all around California and elsewhere.

But there's nothing plain about what the saws often reveal.

"Look at the patterns," Gonzales said while showing off two display cases of half-cut Brazilian agate stones at "Gemboree," a Jan. 17-18 event at the Exeter Veterans Memorial Building. "They're beautiful."

Gonzales gets his raw stones — and some finished ones — from Brazil.

"You can get a really nice rock for about \$5," Gonzales said.

But when the stones are cut in half and polished, he said, they can go for \$100 each — and more.

"They all look like just ugly old rocks [to start with]," said Visalian Harold Schmidt, 60, a longtime "rockhound" transplanted from Wisconsin five years ago. "It's amazing what happens, though, when you cut into them."

Don Vieira, 74, who takes over as president of the Tule Gem and Mineral Society in March, demonstrated the process this week. At the society's stonecutting shop in east Visalia, he used three saws and polishers to transform raw stones into fine art and jewelry.

"It's amazing to see a gray stone become something colorful and wonderful," he said.

At the weekend show, 12 vendors paid \$300 each to set up shop for visitors. The memorial building's entire main meeting room bristled with gems, fossils and jewelry of all kinds.

"Can you believe what you can find here?" asked current society president Marshal Havner. "From rough-cut stones to finished, there's nothing like it."

Rare rocks and fossils

Judy Link, 57, likes to create jewelry from all manner of stones. She's especially fond of rare rocks,

showing off a piece of purple "bertrandite" from Utah and a piece of "green jasper" from Madagascar.

Among the big sellers at Gemboree: fossils. Barbara Lucas, 60, of Paso Robles-based Rocks and Relics showed off a polished portion of a fossilized squid that came from Indonesia.

"This is something," Havner said. "It only cost \$6. I couldn't polish one up for that."

The hundreds of Gemboree visitors included clusters of children. One of them, Jacob Norman, 11, of Lemon Cove, was captivated by a skull made of rose quartz and a clear rod of quartz crystal.

"I think I'll take this one, and this one," he said.

Additional Facts

TULE GEM AND MINERAL SOCIETY

- Affiliated with the California Federation of Mineralogical Societies.
- Chartered in 1952 to promote interest in the art of lapidary and earth sciences as well as the study and preservation of nature.
- Promotes the collection, study, exhibition and exchange of mineral specimens (and their sources) within the federation and the presentation of our findings to the general public during various shows and events
- Conducts regular meetings starting at 7:30 p.m. on the first Monday of each month at the Farmersville Senior Center, 444 N Gene, Farmersville.
- Annual dues: \$20.
- Publishes monthly newsletter, "Smoke Signals."
- Address: P.O. Box 1061, Visalia, CA 93279. Phone: 562-4132.
- Online: www.tulegem.org.

Sources: Tule Gem and Mineral Society members and Web site.
