

The Black Opals of Lightning Ridge

by
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PART II

In White Cliffs, a man called Murphy was buying opal for the greatest buyer of all time, T. C. Wollaston.

Years later, Murphy wrote of his first meeting with black opal, "On November 11, 1903, Charlie Nettleton, prospector of the Lightning Ridge opal field, came to me at White Cliffs with a parcel of an entirely new variety of opal, very dark, although it did have some good color. He had sent 100 ounces to Sydney and had been offered 10s. for it, since it was considered too dark for commercial value. Personally, I thought the opal had possibilities and wanted Mr. Wollaston to see it, so I bought it. Charlie returned to the Ridge to await further news. When Mr. Wollaston received the parcel, he endorsed my opinion and said to go on buying the opal and that he would introduce it. I then wrote to Nettleton telling him I was

prepared to buy all they produced. I continued buying by mail, then decided to visit the field myself. I arrived there on April 8, 1905, and bought \$1250 worth. There could not have been more than 30 men there at the time, and I was the first buyer to visit the field."

Wollaston was to write of his first meeting with black opal "Who indeed, can hope to capture and describe this amazing, glad-eyed, responsive thing, cribbed in its dark cage, yet exultant there beyond measure, and trembling with a gratitude which we thrill to watch? In one small stone what varying heaven-lit scenes — mountains and lakes and curtains of Arctic fire; there is Pilatus piercing through golden hail, against the dark storm cloud, his sacred summit agleam with molten emerald, and there the Rigi bristling with crimson daggers, and at the foot that match-

less lake, its shadowed greens slashed with brilliant bars of purple — the pathway of the King!

"Or surely this is Kiluea, fearful in mysterious beauty, its sleeping fires partly veiled over with sullen hues of cooling iron till Old Faithful bursts out in sudden splendor and throws aloft his meteoric showers, while a surging wave of glory sweeps across the awesome pool!"

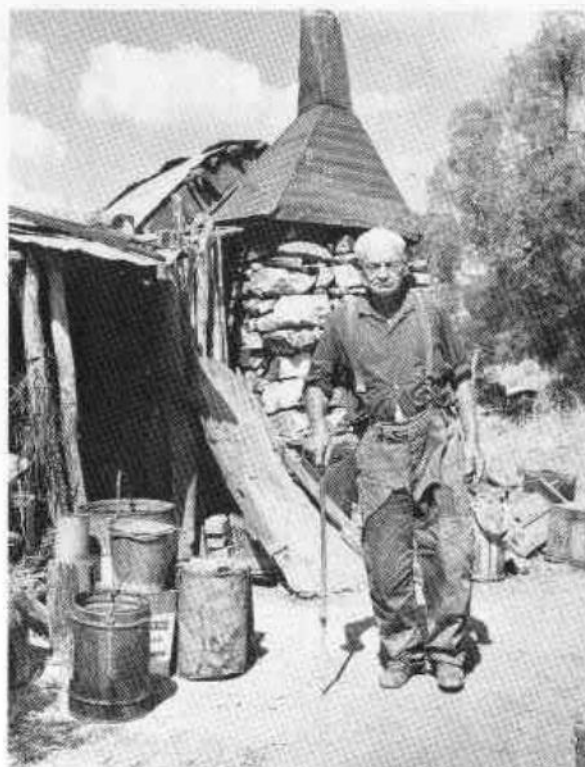
Wollaston had suffered a bad attack of black-opal fever. His agents in London could find only one dealer who would handle black opal, and then only in small lots of \$224.

In 1906, Wollaston went to London and worked for two years convincing dealers and jewelers that a new and magnificent gem had been discovered in Australia.

He followed this up by visits to America. He persuaded a jeweler on Fifth Avenue, New York, to feature a display of black opals in settings with diamonds and other precious stones, and slowly the world began to realize the worth of black opal. Wollaston drily remarks of this period, "For several years it was uphill work indeed to create a demand and persuade the market to take the gem to its bosom, which goes to show how dull and unresponsive the heart can be which beats there."

In 1910, success was achieved and black opal began to find a steady and increasing sale that has continued to this day.

By 1908, through Wollaston's hard work overseas, the demand for black



Lightning Ridge pioneer "Lucky" Fred Bodel outside his stone-and-tin shack. Bodel came to the opal field more than 60 years ago before opal was found at the Ridge.

opal produced another big opal rush at Lightning Ridge.

Fourteen hundred miners were camped at the place they called Nettleton's Flat, and the silence of the outback was broken by the thudding of a thousand picks.

Lightning Ridge was established.
"We Dug Them out like Potatoes"

Fred Bodel will not tell his age. He will, however, admit to 45 of his 80 years, and most of those years has been spent at Lightning Ridge. He lives by himself in a shack made of piles of loose stones, pieces of corrugated iron and supported by a rough timber frame, with a chimney made out of beaten-out kerosene tins. He is the last of the pio-

neers of Lightning Ridge. They call him *Lucky Fred*.

Bodel was working around Lightning Ridge, as a general hand on a sheep station, before opal was discovered there. He gave up working with the sheep when opal was discovered.

In 1907, he caught a lifelong attack of black-opal fever when he and his partner bought a claim, now known as the New Chum Diggins, from a man called Ned Plunk for \$3. It was one of the richest patches ever found at the Ridge. Plunk had found nothing for his efforts and was glad to get rid of it at the price. The two new owners of the claim set to work cutting through the bank of opal underground dirt until suddenly they came upon a fault — a break in the formation resulting from earth movement. In this fault they found an immense haul of opal. "We dug them out like spuds (potatoes). I've never seen *nobbies* so thick before or since," says Bodel.

Murphy, the opal buyer, bought the whole of the great find. He would come to the partner's camp every evening and buy the day's production, which would be spread for his appraisal on an upturned butter box.

The demand in those days was for stones with red fire. The miners threw away green stones. Now the greens bring up to \$90 a carat.

Bodel and his partner received \$500 for the opal they took from the twenty-by-eight-foot patch. Today, the opals they won from that patch would be worth more than \$2,250,000.

In 1929, Bodel was indirectly responsible for finding one of the biggest opals ever to be won from the Ridge. He had tossed a penny with a friend, Jack Nichols. Heads, Nichols was to start a new shaft — tails, he was to clean out an old one. The coin fell heads. Nichols walked over to the spot where the penny had fallen and marked out a shaft around it. The day was Friday, and Nichols, like many of the oldtime miners, was a superstitious man and regarded it as bad luck to start a shaft on Friday. He went home and spent the evening trying hard to get Bodel to come into partnership with him on the new shaft. Bodel refused. He preferred to work on the old shaft. A few days later, and fifteen feet down the new shaft, Nichols found the Pandora Star, which Bodel describes as having been "big as a man's forearm and shaped much the same." Today, it is said to be in the United States and worth well over \$150,000.

In spite of the fortunes and misfortunes that Bodel has experienced, he lives on in his shack at Lightning Ridge. He is still mining for black opal, for that elusive patch of *nobbies* that could be but a pick stroke away. Opal fever, it seems, is even worse than the traditional gold fever.

Lightning Ridge has a permanent population of about 250 people. This swells to 400 or more during holidays when amateur prospectors invade the town. Many of the now-permanent residents were former visitors who came on holidays to do a little prospecting

Mrs. Flo Smith shovels opal dirt into her "dry puddler," which separates the opal from the dirt.



and stayed on to become opal gougers.

To become an opal miner is a simple matter. The prospector purchases a Miner's Right for \$2.25 and then pegs a claim 100 x 100 feet.

Prospecting for opals can be done in three ways:

Noodling. The miner works slowly through the abandoned mullock of an old digging. In the early days of Lightning Ridge prospectors discarded many stones that are now worth a small fortune.

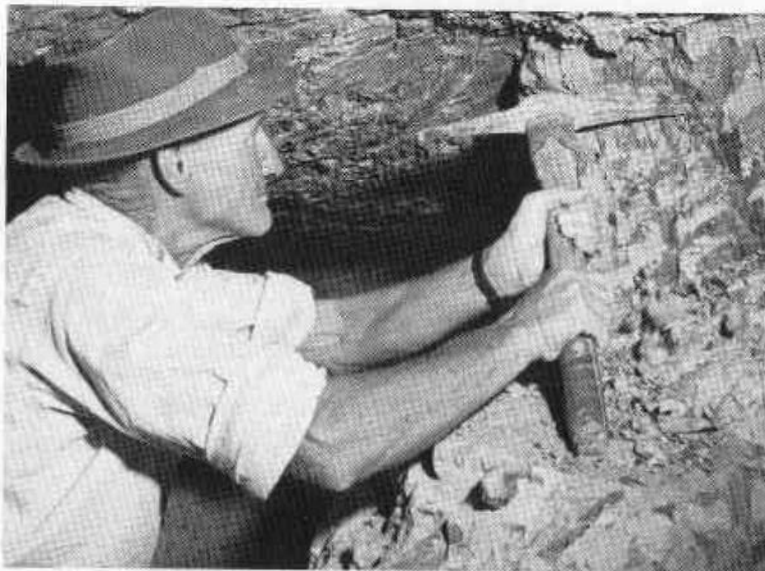
Puddling. The miner draws from abandoned shafts piles of opal dirt that are either fed through a small crusher driven by a petrol engine, which pushes the dirt through a wire basket that catches any opal (called *dry puddling*), and *wet puddling*, which separates the opal from the clay by washing with water.

Digging a Mine. The miner either digs or blasts his way through the surface crust of desert sandstone until he reaches opal dirt running in a

grayish band at varying depths beneath the sandstone. When he reaches the opal dirt he drives shafts into it, working his way cautiously forward, gouging with a pick through the crumbling clay. He knows he is *on to* opal when his pick makes a distinct *click* on contact with a *nobby*.

There are six opal dealers on the field, ready to buy if you strike opal. One such dealer is Len Cram, who lives with his wife and two children in a modern house he has built on a small hill overlooking the little township of Lightning Ridge. He readily admits, "Opals are in my blood." Ten years ago he went to the opal field in Queensland from a coastal city in New South Wales and since that time he has lived and worked with opals. He came to Lightning Ridge three years ago and started as a miner; however, he was unsuccessful, so he started as a dealer with a bank of \$675. Now, his turnover exceeds \$13,500 a year.

Every week, opals worth \$6,750 on



An opal miner at work underground. He is gouging away at the crumbling seam of opal dirt. If his pick "clicks" when he is gouging, he knows he is on to solid opal.

an average are being produced at Lightning Ridge.

Len Cram has started his own company called *Lightning Ridge Opals*, and has gone into the export business. In a small shed at the back of his house he cuts and polishes rough opals that will eventually grace the velvet shelves of jewelers' display windows throughout the world. The cutting and polishing require a deft touch and skill. A stone can be destroyed if the cutter takes a fraction too much off the surface.

Cram says, "The future of Lightning Ridge is assured. The price of opal is going up steadily and there is a potential opal field of 40,000 to 60,000 acres. The work that has been done around Lightning Ridge over the years has only scratched the surface."

About three dozen miners are at present producing the world's supply of black opal. They range from veterans like Fred Bodell to comparative youngsters like Mrs. Flo Smith (Smithy), who came to Lightning Ridge for a

holiday five years ago and stayed on. Now she works up to eight hours a day at dry puddling, shoveling opal dirt into the wire basket. It is hard and dusty work, but she has managed to find something for her efforts. Only recently, she found a stone valued at \$2,700 on the field. For instance, if it reaches New York, through the hands of dealers and jewelers, its price will have increased to about \$22,000 before it is worn by a customer.

However, the residents of Lightning Ridge have become aware of another potential source of revenue leading from black opals — tourists. Practically each mullock dump now being worked has a little sign "Opals for Sale."

Coachloads of tourists are now arriving in this isolated small town and there are plans to fly tourists direct from the cruise ships that call at Sydney, to spend a weekend in the outback as opal gougers.

The local shire council has installed electricity. It has a bore deep under-

Construction underway on an unusual form of accommodation for tourists — a "Tramotel," being built at Lightning Ridge from the bodies of old trams (street cars), converted to self-contained motel units.



ground that has resulted in a constant supply of hot artesian water; enough to supply the swimming pool that has been constructed 100 yards away.

Mr. Harold Hodgess is busy erecting what could be a unique type of motel. He is converting old tram (street cars) bodies brought from Sydney into self-contained motel units with verandas and lawns. He calls it a *tramotel*. It will solve a widespread need, since the one and only hotel, the *Diggers' Rest*, has only two bedrooms.

Lightning Ridge has most of the amenities — hospital, school, butcher, baker, garage, post office, stores and a police station.

Whether the tourist wants to look at the history of the Ridge and see old workings such as *Dead Man's Claim*, the *Revolver Mine* and the *Ladybird Mine*, or hire a pick and shovel and go *noodling*, Lightning Ridge is now ready to welcome him.

Statistics prove that it will be there for a long time to come.

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Opal dealer Len Cram examines a black opal found by Mrs. Flo Smith at Lightning Ridge.

He is survived by his wife, Ruth; two sons, James and William; his brother, Roger; and five grandchildren. Fred passed away unexpectedly late Saturday, May 7th. He was thought to be well on the road to recovery from a blood clot in his leg, which had occurred shortly after his return from the annual GIA Governors meeting in Atlanta.

After serving in the armed forces during World War I, Fred J. Cannon came to the West Coast. He and his brother Roger were associated in business for many years with Herbert Slaudt in the firm, Koke-Slaudt & Company. Later, they formed the Slaudt-Cannon Agency Company. Not many years ago, he and his long-time associate, Kelly Schaefer, formed a new company, Cannon-Schaefer Agency. Their company represented the eleven western states for such firms as Church & Company, Jabel Ring Manufacturing Company, Juergens & Andersen, Meyer Koulish Company, Lester & Company and Wefferling-Berry & Company. Cannon-Schaefer sold to retailers over most of the area west of the Mississippi. Fred

was well known to many jewelers and beloved by the host of retailers who knew him well. He continued to maintain a heavy schedule of traveling right up until his fatal illness.

In addition to his service to the Institute as an advisor to Robert M. Shipley in the early days, for many years Fred Cannon had served on the Institute's Executive and Finance Committees, as well as providing unfailingly wise counsel in his capacity as Secretary-Treasurer and as a GIA Governor. Over these many years, he likewise served in key advisory positions with the American Gem Society.

Fred Cannon was one of that rare breed among suppliers in any field who are regarded not as salesmen, but as advisors. Retailers all over the West turned to him for ideas, asking him what merchandise he felt they should have, and consulting him whenever a major or even a minor change was under consideration. This man was truly one of the pillars of the jewelry industry. Respected, loved or admired by all who knew him, Fred J. Cannon will live on in our hearts.

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In 1960, Australia exported opals worth \$2,250,000. Three years later the figure had risen to \$6,000,000. Last year it was \$6,750,000. The production rate has been increasing at the rate of \$450,000 a year for the past four years.

Nettleton's faith in the mysterious black stone is now more than justified. Also the faith of Wollaston, who tried

so hard before succeeding in convincing the world that here was something unique.

As the poet Robert Burns once wrote:
"Ask God why He made the gem so small

And so huge the granite.

Because God meant that man

Should place a higher value on it."