

High-grade rhodonite mined at south end

# Semi-precious stone found on Salt Spring

**BY SCOTT WEBSTER**

What started out as a chance discovery for one man has lured thousands of others from every corner of the globe to a remote spot atop Musgrave Mountain at Salt Spring Island's south end.

Ever since stumbling across what he originally thought to be coal approximately 30 years ago, Fred Hollings has been scratching out of the earth's surface some of the highest grade rhodonite to be found anywhere.

Hollings, whose youthful appearance betrays his 74 years, looks every bit the prospector, from the gnarled rock-like hands right down to the sparkling gleam in his eye.

The grandson of a retired professional soldier who settled at Cobble Hill in 1884, Hollings took to logging as did both his father and his uncle.

**HOME SINCE 1941**

He has called Salt Spring Island home since 1941, at which time he bought the property at Fulford where he and his wife, the postmistress, now reside.

A logger by trade, Hollings has spent most of the last half-century or so falling trees or clearing some of the many logging roads that crisscross the 500 acres of land he has accumulated over the years.

An avid rock hound, Hollings explained to a novice that despite some of the larger deposits found elsewhere, Salt Spring Island rhodonite has gained a reputation for its brilliant colour and unusually high quality.

One of two deposits on the island, Hollings' claim is adjoined by another one of similar quality to the southeast but production, as far as is known, has been limited.

Most of the rhodonite in the Hollings claim can be found in one main seam about 1,000 feet in length and upwards of 12 feet in width.

**MILLIONS OF TONS**

While no one really knows how much rhodonite there is to be found on the property, Hollings estimates that there are millions of tons.

Discovered by Hollings around 1950 while clearing a logging road to Cape Keppel, the deposit is located at about the 1,000-foot level on the slopes of Musgrave Mountain.



*Fred Hollings with piece of rhodonite*

He unearthed chunks of the black manganese ore while operating heavy machinery on a section of the 160-acre parcel of land that he purchased just after moving to the island.

An initial inspection led Hollings to think that he had stumbled across a coal deposit. He quickly realized, however, that the substance was much too hard to be coal.

Having decided to have the ore analyzed, Hollings took a sample to the mines department in Victoria where it was determined to be manganese silicate.

Though known to con-

rhodonite, geologists informed Hollings that the material was "worthless".

**RELATIVELY SCARCE**

Exceptionally hard, rhodonite is relatively scarce in comparison to most other minerals but substantial deposits have been discovered in the USSR, the United States, Australia and right here in B.C.

The name is derived from the Greek word rhodon, meaning rose. Found throughout much of the province, the mineral ranks second to only jade in commercial importance.

A semi-precious stone, its chief importance is in the making of jewellery or ornamental objects, for which it is cut, ground and polished.

Manganese has also been used for the hardening of steel.

Hollings noted that around the turn of the century, glaziers used manganese for colouring glass. Bottles and other items bearing a beautiful pinkish cast can be easily identified as containing traces of the mineral. That practice has long since been discontinued, and running across this type of glass is considered to be quite a find.

**BEGAN EXTRACTING IT**

Approximately eight years after discovering the mineral deposit, Hollings began extracting the ore for commercial purposes.

Over the years the operation has met with varying degrees of success.

During its heyday a number of years ago, the quarry one year showed a profit of about \$4,500.

Since that time it has been mainly down hill, due in large part because of the prohibitive cost of extracting the ore on a large-scale basis.

For example, it is often necessary to blast in order to get at some of the larger chunks of ore, known as chert, some of which weigh up to several tons.

Most of the ore is discarded to be used as fill, leaving only about 10% as commercial-grade rhodonite.

**HIS OWN SYSTEM**

Even after separating the rhodonite from the ore, Hollings is still faced with the difficult task of breaking down large blocks of the mineral and in doing so uses a system he developed himself.

He first drills a series of holes, each of which is about six inches deep, and which are spaced just inches apart.

Hollings next drives metal plugs into the holes using a sledge hammer. This exerts tremendous stress on the block forcing it to crumble into smaller, more manageable pieces.

Though an effective process, this stage of the operation also runs into quite a bit of money.

Hollings has found that the costly tungsten carbide drill bits wear out in no time at all due to the unusually hard nature of the rhodonite and some of the other minerals found in the ore.

At one time he was shipping large quantities of rhodonite to dealers in California and in Don Mills, Ontario, particularly during the late 60's when the quarry was producing three or four tons of good grade rhodonite a year.

**SELLS FROM HIS HOME**

Because it is no longer feasible, Hollings has discontinued shipping the mineral and most of his sales are made to the general public from his house on Orchard Avenue in Fulford.

Hollings stresses that there are no standards by which to gauge the quality of rhodonite.

What is desirable to one individual might be just another stone to someone else. It's all a

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# Rhodonite is mined on Salt Spring

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matter of personal preference.

In general, a stone with fine texture and clear, rich colour is considered to be good grade rhodonite.

Colouration varies from light pink to deep red, and from turquoise to even brown.

Hollings explained that while more common in other areas, finding a stone with a splash of yellow on Salt Spring Island is a rare enough occurrence.

For those adventurous individuals willing to head up Musgrave Mountain along treacherous logging roads to dig for their own rhodonite, the going price is 50¢ per pound.

### EASIER ON YOUR CAR

There's another more practical way to make your purchase and one that is bound to be a lot easier on your car.

Dropping by the Hollings residence will cost somewhat more but it is pure rhodonite that Hollings will show you.

The rhodonite at his house fetches \$1.50 a pound or perhaps as much as "a couple of dollars" per pound, depending upon the quality.

An honorary member of the Victoria Lapidary and Mineral Society, Hollings has also amassed a fabulous rock, fossil and mineral collection from a good part of the world.

Most of the pieces were brought to him from some of the thousands of rock hounds who have made the trip to Salt Spring Island for a look at the quarry that has become known to rock enthusiasts everywhere.

### SPECIAL RUN

At one point a number of years ago, enough rock hounds had gathered at Swartz Bay that it warranted the B.C. Ferry Corporation making a special run over with a vessel laden down with cars, trucks and campers of all descriptions.

Though the tide



Rhodonite ring

While most of Hollings' present output goes off-island, a fair amount finds its way back in the form of jewellery, pen holders, belt buckles, book ends and other ornamental objects.

## Lifejackets should be in top shape

According to Canadian Power Squadrons, the proper care of life jackets should be mandatory as this part of your boat's equipment could be the difference between survival and loss of life one day.

Some suggestions they offer for keeping flotation devices in top shape include:

- Don't use the jacket for other things such as seat cushions or boat fenders.
- Store them in a cool, well ventilated area.
- When wet, hang up to dry

Lynn Mathews, proprietor of the Marsim Craft and Gift Shop on McPhillips Avenue in Ganges, says that her shop is the largest rhodonite dealer in the province.

The rhodonite that she handles is also exclusively of Salt Spring Island origin and more specifically is out of the Hollings quarry on Musgrave Mountain.

She buys from former islander Ellen Timbers who now operates her Arbutus Studios, along with her husband Bert, out of Nanaimo.

**TERRIFIC SELECTION**  
The Marsim Shop offers a terrific selection of jewellery in sterling silver settings including rings priced from \$24.95 to \$52.95, depending upon the size and consequently upon the amount of silver that has gone into it.

There are also chains, bracelets and various styles of earrings to choose from, including a pair of sterling silver and rhodonite seagulls.

Mathews recently ordered in two men's belt buckles, each with



Lynn Mathews with rhodonite jewellery

several rhodonite stones in handcrafted sterling silver settings. A San Antonio man with a Texas-size pocketbook walked off with the least expensive of the two for a mere \$125.

The other belt buckle, priced at \$179, can still be seen at Marsim.

Mathews said that she has had customers make a special trip to Salt Spring Island from Victoria

and Vancouver for the sole purpose of looking at her selection of rhodonite.

The more popular stones are those a deep pink in colour and some customers even insist upon having one with a touch of bright red.

"Some ladies tell me that if it has no blood, it has no character," said Mathews.