

Article courtesy of Columbia -Willamette Faceter's Guild Newsletter FACETS
 Publication 376 June 2006

First published in FACETS, Nov. 1980.

BURIED?

by Merle A. Reinikka

I'd rather not be telling about this... in fact, I wish it had never happened to be written about. But, in the hope of averting future pain and possible tragedy for other FACETS readers, I tell this tale of woe. Pin wearing a rather uncomfortable back brace these days - and have been for the past seven weeks. All because of neglected safety precautions.

A midsummer trip to the sapphire diggings in Montana yielded some fine stones for me, Anxious for a repeat of that good luck, I and two faceting friends returned to the scene in early September. FACETS readers who similarly dig their own sapphires are familiar with the situation - vertical walls of alluvial sand aril gravel from which the sapphire-bearing concentrate must be extracted,

A cardinal rule in this endeavor is: DON'T UNDERCUT! The collapse of overburden is always a hazardous potential. Land that countless others have dug for years, without accident or injury and, I suppose because of that, the tendency to become less cautious follows as a result. Well, I can attest to the fact that undercutting - even a little - is flirting with disaster!

My digging partner and I were working the six foot wide face of a gravel embankment, trying to dig out as many buckets of lower-level gravel as possible before it became necessary to remove the overburden, about 20 inches of which we would have to knock down and shovel away. For about half the length of the face, we had undercut to the depth of 18 inches - not really a lot, in comparison to some of the three and four-foot undercuts we'd witnessed.

Nonetheless, as I hunkered down and took a couple of whacks with the pick at the lower portion of the embankment - WHUMP!! - the entire upper level of the bank collapsed.

I hadn't even been directly under the ledge, but when it cut loose, it spread outward in a pile that completely buried me in a stooped position.

I was only fleetingly aware that something was happening, for my head and shoulders were suddenly thrown forward under the weight of nearly a ton of cascading sand, gravel and rock. I was immediately knocked unconscious. Only the back of my head was visible to my two friends who hurriedly began scooping the fallen material away from my head and face. Within moments I came to, but with excruciating pain sweeping across the middle of my back.. When enough of the debris had been removed and I had regained my sensibilities to the point of determining that I could move my legs. I was able to get up with some difficulty.

That ended my digging, of course, because the back pain connected with any lifting or bending was more than I could take. With limited movement, though, gradually the pain lessened. I figured I must have either suffered a bad sprain or torn muscles at most.

At the doctor's office the day after I arrived home, X-rays indicated that I had sustained a compression fracture of one of the vertebra in my spine. Prescription: wear a back brace for up to two months, pain pills as needed, and a program of exercise to strengthen the back muscles after the brace comes off.

Three weeks later, at the same mine, a woman - digging by herself - was pinned under the collapse of a similar gravel bank. She died of suffocation before anyone could reach her,

The realization that your life can be snuffed out in the blink of an eye is a sobering one, believe me. I've certainly learned by painful experience that it's not just the "other guy" that harm can befall, and if there's a lesson to be learned or a moral to this story - I've learned it first hand!

END



FACETING ROUGH FOR SALE

I usually have in stock faceting rough for sale e.g. amethyst, purple scapolite, basnasite, tourmaline as well as collectors rare cutstones.

Some can be seen on my website

www.crystalvine.co.uk

Contact me for your requirements

Telephone: 01366 377064

Email: saragiller@crystalvine.co.uk

Or see me at most of the Rockngem shows.