



## These rocks are gems to those who search

AS A KID GROWING UP in northern Illinois, Jim Magnuson would head to the woods and fields with his dog and walk endlessly, searching for fossils.

"It drove my dad nuts," Magnuson said of his hobby.

Years later, as an adult, Magnuson would move to St. Cloud. And, you know what? He's still searching fields and gravel pits. But his passion has turned to Lake Superior Agates.

Magnuson is a self-taught rock hound. He had heard about Lake Superior Agates being beautiful, so one day he drove to a gravel pit near Mora and began scrounging. He had no idea what an agate in its rough condition would look like. He had seen pictures of polished agates with

their beautiful red and white swirled lines.

"I wandered around and didn't find anything," Magnuson remembers. "I went back the next week and didn't find anything."

It was on his third visit to that gravel pit, with his daughter, Dorsey, in tow, that they found their first

agate. Actually, Dorsey found the first one, and then Jim landed one or two.

Since then, Magnuson has had agate fever bad.

He loves looking for rocks as much as some guys love playing golf.

In fact, Magnuson used to be a regular golfer. But then the agate bug bit.

Agate hunting may not be a well-known pastime, but those who are involved in it are passionate. Those who are unfamiliar with the hobby may laugh at the thought.

Why, there's even a festival devoted to agate hunting in Moose Lake. Agate Days in the Park will be July 14-15 this year. You even can stop in to the new Minnesota Agate and Geological Interpretive Center in the Moose Lake City Park and view hundreds of beautiful agates.

Agates can be found all over the world, but in Minnesota, one of the most sought after is the Lake Superior Agate. The rock is formed from layers of quartz that usually show varicolored bands. Tiny quartz crystals can form within the stone and add to the beauty and uniqueness of individual stones.

**"I enjoy looking for something that is unique. I spend a lot of time in gravel pits and farm fields."**

Agates aren't easy to find. Well, sometimes they are. There was the time that Dorsey Magnuson got tired as she searched for agates and decided to seek shade under a tree. As she sat down she spotted an agate, known as "the shade agate" in the Magnuson household.

"You can spend five or six hours on a good day and come home with maybe 10 or 12 specimens," said Jim Magnuson, who has anywhere

from 500 to 1,000 prized agates. That is about one-quarter of the rocks he has harvested. In his St. Cloud garage are buckets of rocks that are borderline keepers. Someday, perhaps, they will be part of a rock garden.

Magnuson polishes some of his agates, and someday hopes to get the equipment to cut some of his agates. Some, he leaves unpolished because of their natural beauty.

"In most cases, when you find an agate, you know right away. You get really excited."

The best time to search for agates is right after a nice rain. That rain often can leave agates exposed where before they may have gone unnoticed. When Magnuson goes agate hunting, he'll carry a spray bottle of water to help clean rocks he stumbles upon.

And while agate hunting doesn't draw crowds like the golf courses do, more and more people are getting turned on to the hobby.

"Over the years it's gotten more popular. Now it's unusual to be the first person out even early in the morning," Magnuson said. "On a nice day I'll probably see eight to 10 people."

While they are friendly, most rock hounds are a bit guarded about where the best agate-hunting places are. It's a little like folks who have a favorite fishing hole.

If you're interested in agate

hunting, Magnuson suggests getting a good pair of hiking boots. You'll do a lot of walking, climbing, bending. You'll also want a fanny pack or back pack to carry your supplies and the agates you unearth. Don't forget your spray bottle of water, and be sure to take along some water to drink and sunscreen.

"When I go out, it's a full-day deal. You're guaranteed a good five mile hike."

Magnuson has not sold a single agate he's collected, although some folks do. Instead, he has given them away as gifts.

What makes a good agate?

"Size matters," said Magnuson, who has one 2-pound rock that, if he were to sell it, might be worth between \$200 and \$300.

The quality of the pattern also is important. Some of the most sought-after agates in the world are called Fairburn and can be found in the Badlands and just east of the Black Hills.

Agates can come from around the world. In his collection, Magnuson has some "exotics" that come from places as far away as Australia and Africa. ▶



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