



Bobby Robey on the face of the secondary Verde Antique quarry.

Where Green Marble Was Mined . . .

By EUGENE L. CONROTTO
Map by Norton Allen

IN THE 1890s when the management of the old Palace Hotel in San Francisco was seeking the most attractive marble that could be found to redecorate the interior of the palatial hostelry, among the stone selected was a handsome sulphur yellow and lime green marble veined in chocolate and cream—from the Verde Antique quarry 17 miles northeast of Victorville, on California's Mojave Desert.

The old quarry, located on the treeless highlands which slope down to the Mojave River, is no longer being worked commercially, but it remains a popular hunting ground for rockhounds in quest of attractive cutting stone.

The quarry's name was derived from the ancients' term for dark green marble veined in black—Verde Antique. The Italian marble's hue is much deeper than the marble found on the California desert.

I was glad to accept Bill Harrison's invitation to accompany him and members of the Ventura Gem and Mineral Society to the quarry. Marble, because of its close-grained hardness and ability to take a beautiful polish, is much esteemed by the amateur lapidaries who make book ends, spheres, desk

sets and similar large pieces from it. And too, this rich stone is having a revival in interior home decorating.

Here is a field trip to a long-inactive quarry on the Mojave Desert whose beautiful yellow and green marble once graced the interior of San Francisco's famed Palace Hotel. Today, rockhounds are turning out striking pieces from this same material on their home lapidary outfits.



Rough marble specimen, top, and slabbed face showing the vein patterns. These stones are a brilliant lime green in color.

We met early one warm Sunday morning in April at the observation ramp just east of the Victorville Bridge spanning the Mojave River. The desert rarely has been as beautiful as it was this past spring. Generous rains turned normally straggly bushes and trees into luxuriant full-leaved plants; and wind-scattered seeds into colorful wildflowers. The Mojave River was flowing nearly double its normal volume, and as we waited for late-comers, few could take their eyes from the brown water churning down the channel lined with waxy-leaved cottonwoods.

From this site, known as the Upper Narrows, the river course makes a 38-mile bow northward and then eastward to Barstow and Daggett. The road we traveled to the quarry—Standard Well Road—is a direct 33-mile short-cut connecting these two points. Older maps show this partially-paved trail as the Daggett Road.

In addition to the road and well, there is a mountain and ridge immedi-

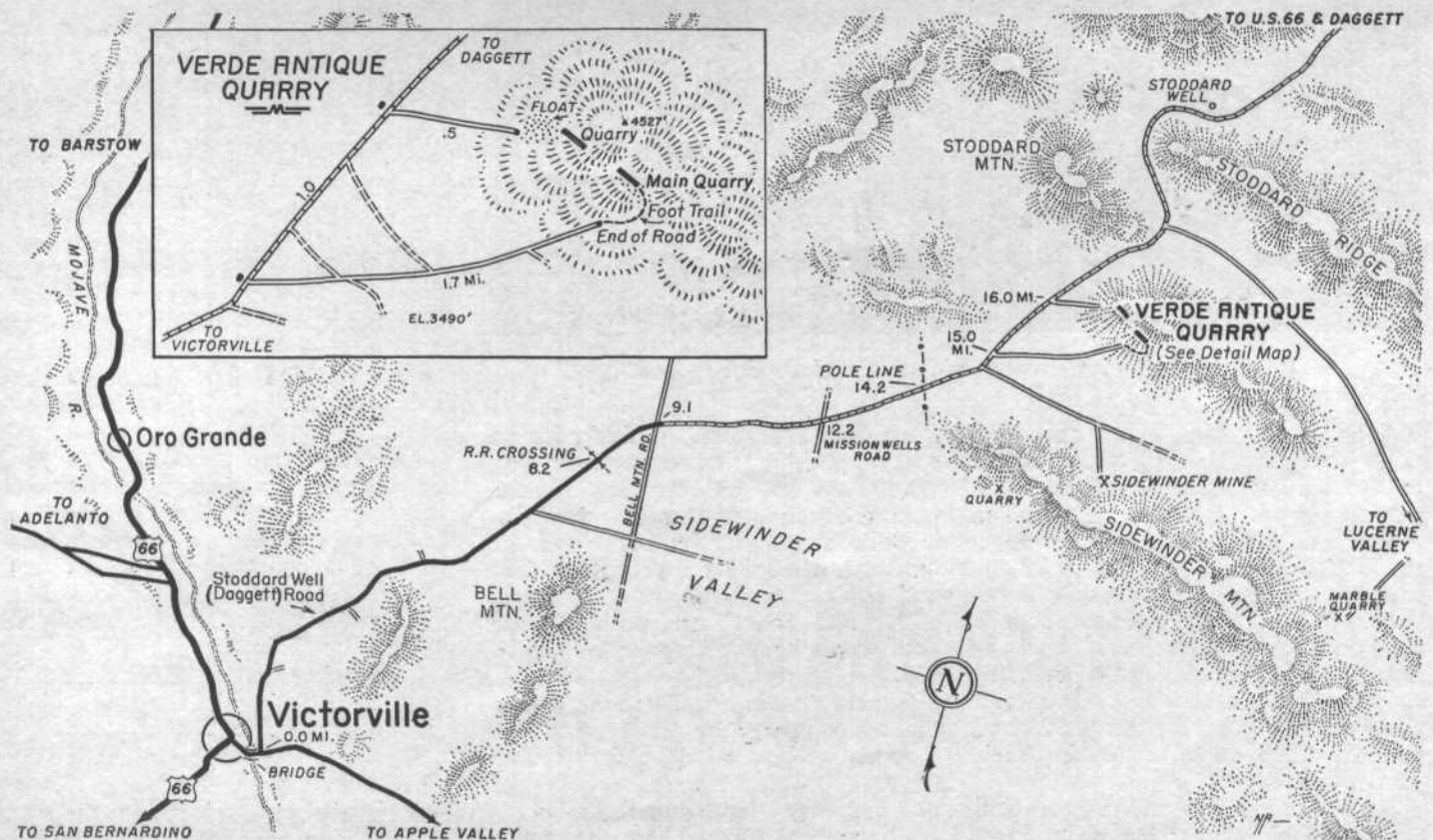


Bill Harrison and his nephew, Bobby Robey, prop up an old sled used over 50 years ago to drag the limestone and marble boulders from the dump, light scar on hill in background, to the wagon loading area.

ately north of the quarry named for Sheldon Stoddard, a San Bernardino County pioneer who came to California in 1851. For many years Stoddard carried mail and freight between San Bernardino and Salt Lake City, making 24 round-trips in all.

The field trip was led by Bill Temple, Sr., a Ventura carpenter, and his son, Bill, Jr., recently discharged from the Army and now an electronic's mechanic. The Temples come often to the desert, and they had made very thorough preparations for this outing.

The road passes through the pleasant narrow valley formed by Side-winder Wash which drains about 50 square miles of rolling terrain. There has been much home-building development here in the past two years. Scattered about were a few Joshua



trees overlooking the thick carpet of green creosote and other smaller shrubs, and yellow goldflowers and canary-yellow desert dandelions.

After the pavement ends nine miles from the Victorville Bridge, the road passes through a narrow defile in the barren and rocky hills. It then swings in a more northerly direction. After emerging from this pass the two Verde Antique workings near the top of the 1100-foot hill jutting out of the plain immediately east of the trail, are clearly visible. Stoddard Well Road is a better than average desert route and passable to all types of vehicles.

There are several short branch trails leading to the base of the quarry hill.

ing on stone came echoing down from several places on the steep face of the hill, Bill Harrison, his 10-year-old nephew, Bobby Robey, and I made a Jeep ride southward across the talus slope of the mountain to the base of the main working.

Bill is a chemist employed for the past 10 years by the Tidewater Oil Company at Ventura. A bachelor, he was born in Nebraska 36 years ago, and studied at the University of Iowa, University of Rochester and U.C.L.A. Of medium height, stocky and with short-clipped hair, Bill's serious interests are many. Photography, television script writing and rock collecting are chief among them. And the latter is

were freighted to Victorville, placed on trains and transported down the Cajon Pass to Colton where they were sawed and polished.

Bill told me the story of this deposit. The marble was laid down as limestone in the Late Paleozoic era, presumably during the Mississippian age when a great inland sea covered vast areas of the Southwest. This was about 200,000,000 years ago—the age of amphibians and floral life. The Victorville area was the scene of much volcanic action at the close of this era, and heat and pressure from this volcanism compacted the impure limestone into marble. The impurities in the bedding gave the stone its distinctive color patterns. Heat and pressure also explain why no fossil remains are found in the metamorphized stone.

When we returned to the field camp, Ruth Parker of Ventura, a country school teacher, avid Sierra Club member, and rockhound of 20 years standing, requested Bill's services. Only a few feet off the trail she had uncovered a 300-pound chartreuse marble boulder and needed his know-how with a sledge hammer and drill to break it into pieces she could handle.

Miss Parker is an amateur botanist. Knee-deep in wildflowers, she named off two dozen different species—phacelias, blue bells, 18-inch-high golden yellow fiddlenecks, the dried inflated stalks of desert trumpet, yellow mentzelia . . . The purple heads of chia (*Desert*, April, '58) were abundant, and when the summer heat has passed, those wishing to collect its cereal seeds will have a good harvest ground here.

Miss Parker's pride and joy was the discovery of a patch of delicate evening snow, a gilia, growing in a hollow on the side of the hill. The white buds were tightly closed in the bright sunlight, but at sunset they opened wide and remained so until morning, filling the air with exotic fragrance. Before extensive cultivation, miles upon miles of evening snow scented the air below Grapevine Canyon on Highway 99 near Bakersfield, still one of California's most famous wildflower areas.

The birds were very active on this desert slope, especially sparrows and rock wrens. Miss Parker laughed when she recounted how a pair of rock wrens advanced to within a few feet of her, scolding and bobbing with each hop, probably because she had been sitting near their nest.

Just before noon, Bobby and I made the tough climb up the hill's face to the secondary quarry.

The layer of verde antique atop the hill is from three to six feet in width. The quarries were driven into the side of the limestone bed and therefore



Ruth Parker is an avid amateur botanist.

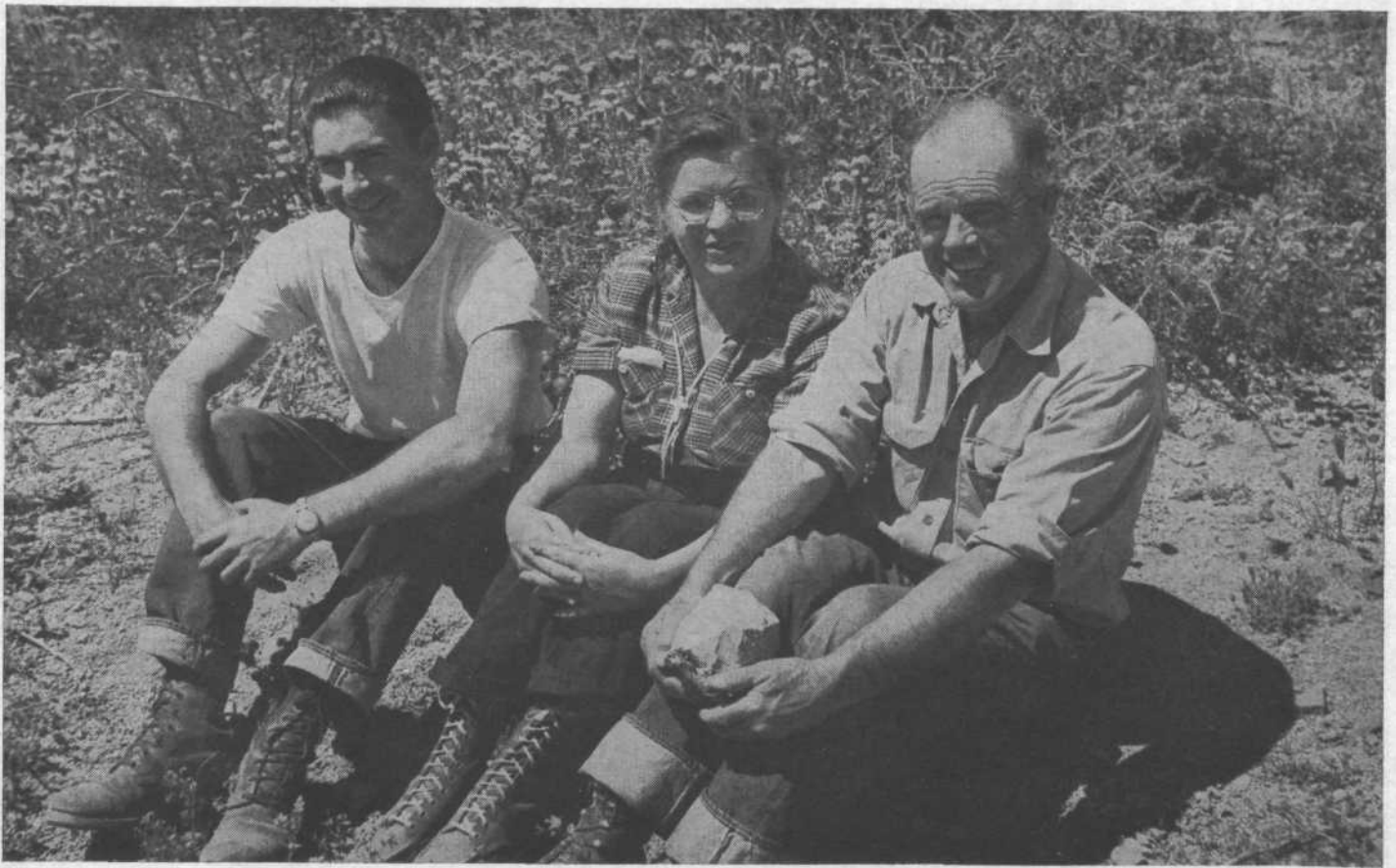
The one at the bend in the road (15 miles from the Bridge) which heads to the loading area under the main working, is very rough in places. The better trail forking at 16 miles from the Bridge leads to a point under the smaller quarry. The Temples conducted us to this latter point, for it is here that more float material is available to collectors, and more protected camping sites can be found. Of course, there is no water in this area, and campers would be wise to bring their own firewood.

After the convoy was parked and the sound of prospecting picks strik-

more than a busman's holiday, for he enjoys polishing stones and making jewelry as well as searching out the remotest secrets of stones and fossils.

Bill's enthusiasm for rocks and the outdoors has spilled over onto Bobby and Bill's other nephews and nieces. "Pretty rocks" are probably the first words they all spoke," laughed Bill.

At the loading area, connected to the main quarry by what once was a road but now a trail suitable only for foot travel, we found one of the old sleds used for hauling the boulders to wagons. From here the stones



The Temples have made many desert outings, and they have worked much verde antique marble on their lapidary outfit.

one must go sideways—not into the face of the quarries—for marble. Here the miners blasted off the overburden and threw it into the dump. The area where the cars were parked was strewn with huge limestone boulders only a few years ago. Nearly all of this easy-to-get-to material has been chipped down and carried off. Those who search for verde antique from now on are faced with a steep climb, which will greatly limit the amount of material one person can take home. A collector who enjoys hiking will find this area one well worth visiting.

When Bobby and I reached the secondary quarry, we took a long rest. It was a bright clear day and we were able to trace faint dirt roads for miles through the green desert. Immediately south of the Verde Antique hill is Sidewinder Mountain, a long rugged desert range with a great white scar high up on its flank. This is the Sidewinder Mine, one of the largest gold operations in the Victorville-Barstow region. Work began here in the 1880s and continued intermittently until 1942. In the old days the ore from the Sidewinder was shipped to Victorville for milling at a 10-stamp mill erected in 1887. The mine was then yielding \$30 in free gold to the ton of ore. A cyanide mill was built near the mine in 1928, but it has been dismantled.

On the same mountain flank, but further east, is the Three Colored Marble Quarry. This working, often confused in the old mining reports and even today with the Verde Antique, produced a stone of white irregular dolomite fragments in a green and black matrix of dolomitic limestone. As far as color is concerned, it is somewhat inferior to the Verde Antique marble. The Three Colored Quarry was worked between 1915 and 1918.

These two quarries are among half a dozen small dimension stone works in the Victorville area active a half century ago, yielding building, monumental, paving and curbing stones. Marble production declined sharply with the increased use of terra cotta in construction. Another curtailing factor was the establishment in San Francisco of mills to handle the much better grades of marble from Vermont and Italy. These stones were brought to the West Coast as ship ballast, and as such were transported more cheaply than marble from northern California quarries only 150 miles from San Francisco.

The tremendous limestone deposits throughout this area are responsible for the large-scale cement operations in Lucerne Valley, Victorville and Oro Grande. In addition, there has

been some silver, iron and a mineral filter—victorite pyrophyllite—development here.

Gertrude Temple, the field trip leader's wife, met us at the parked cars with a cool glass of lemonade. Mrs. Temple has cut and polished much verde antique, her specialty being button earrings. After slicing the material on her 14-inch slab saw, she roughs-out the desired shape on a trim saw. Next comes the shaping on a fine 220 carborundum wheel. Marble is relatively soft compared with other gem stones, and it cuts and grinds very fast. Sanding is done with a well worn 220 or 320 grit cloth—with the emphasis on "well worn" or else the material will show scratches. She finishes by polishing the piece with Linde A compound on a leather wheel. This last operation only takes two minutes.

I met many more fine people from the Ventura society that afternoon, and I was grateful for their thoughtful hospitality. There are many homes on the coast whose inhabitants share my recollection of a worthwhile and pleasant desert outing—and no doubt on their mantels or cupboards are bits of the same yellow and green marble admired in a long ago era by the patrons of the old Palace.