

*A. Smallwood*

OPAL REPORT FROM HONDURAS

"THE FIRE STILL BURNS"

By  
Tony Dabdoub

Published by

TROPICAL GEM EXPLORATIONS

P.O. Box 73536  
Metairie, La. 70033-3536

Copyright 1985 by Tony Dabdoub

First Printing  
June 1985

## ERANDIQUE

Near Erandique is the most extensive opal deposit in Honduras. It is located within two miles of the town of Erandique. The road that leads to the local airfield branches off to the summit of the main hill. The road "if it may be called one", is not in good enough condition to be used by an automobile.

The first observation made at the top of the hill is that there is an area void of trees and that the terrain is nearly flat. The natives refer to this place as the "Tablon". Here many large blocks of dense volcanic rocks are partially exposed and weathered on the surface.

As one crosses the Tablon toward the east, the scene begins to change considerably. Diggings or quarries may be found all along the eastern side of the hill for about a  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile in distance. The hill itself is not small, being at least 500 feet higher than Erandique and approximately 3 miles in length. Opal mines have been worked here for many years and yet the deposit is still quite productive. Farther down the hill, which has a gentle eastward slope, are to be found the old mines worked by the spaniards. Vegetation has grown over most of these sites, but extensive drives, deep quarries and even an adit can still be seen. From the evidence gathered, it appears that the spaniards worked mines that did not necessarily come in contact with the volcanic rock. A soft gray-colored bed of clay covering the Basalt/Trachyte Flows, also contains opal and it is obvious that their mines were designed to take advantage of this formation. Also, evident is that at one time, opals were searched for on a

much larger scale, as many of the channels are approximately 20 feet wide and extend hundreds of feet down. It has been stated that opal was once produced in large quantities and sold very cheaply. Presently, the miners have concentrated their efforts near the Tablon. They work in a rather care-free manner, making small quarries or pits as fancy may dictate. Their method is not intended to be anything other than simple. The miners use mauls, picks and chisels to break up the rock. Occasional use of dynamite insures a minimal yield. In fact, it is not often possible to obtain a flawless opal over ten carats in weight.

I am of the opinion that, if this deposit were worked systematically and on a larger scale it could be of real commercial importance.

The opal of Erandique is found in seams or veins that penetrate the Basalt/Trachyte rock in near vertical fashion. Sometimes the opal fills irregular gas holes and horizontal cracks as well.

The seams of opal are generally very inconsistent, appearing as jagged streaks throughout the dark rock. The seams branch off with various degrees of thickness and the main seam is usually under two feet in length. Sometimes, the seams branch right out to the clay bed making extraction much simpler. Trying to get whole pieces out of the hard rock is virtually impossible as chiseling tends to fragment the rock and the opal.

The valuable portions occur in bands or belts throughout the seams and are bordered by common opal with no play of colors. At times, the belts are narrow and numerous, alternating with common opal so compactly that unusual gems may

be cut to show the pattern. The banding tends to be in very straight lines and if the color play is strong, these stones can command high prices.

Some large and spectacular seams of opal were found in the early days and even today, seams up to  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch thick are still encountered, though quite infrequently. The best seams of opal are relatively straight containing many bands of brilliant precious opal, especially favored are the ones with brightly burning reds intermingled with deep inky blues.

Much rarer are the irregularly shaped masses filling the gas holes. These can yield large thick gems of superb quality.

I can still recall with vivid detail how I once purchased a lump of rock showing only a small spot of precious opal. The spot was so brilliantly colored that I kept it as a specimen. One day I decided to cut a small stone out of it, but upon examination, found that the opal appeared to have some depth. Figuring that I could get a little more out of it, I trimmed the upper portion of the rock off. Imagine the emotion I felt as I held the rock under a lamp only to find that the whole center was a solid mass of brilliant precious opal the size of a silver dollar! It was a thick piece of pure fire, no potch, no bands, no cracks, and yet displaying every color of the spectrum from a deep blue green base. I was literally stunned! Never before had I been so surprised! The excitement was so great that my hands actually began to tremble and I decided that I had better wait till the next day before cutting it. (When I would be more composed). What a gem it yielded,

and for quite some time, it remained the pride of my collection.

I have had the opportunity to examine much Erandique opal, this has provided me with certain consistent factors that are characteristic of this opal.

When the precious opal is of a milky white base, the color play is often in the form of elongated stripes. As the stripes become bolder and the colors crisper, they are better described as bars of color. These bars may flash different colors as the stone is moved and thereby provides a showy display. The white opal may also display a variety of other patterns and pinpoint and harlequin are also often seen.

The milky white opal of Erandique tends to resemble the now rarely known Hungarian opal in that the colors displayed are of a fine pastel shade. This in turn creates a softer more obvious white opalescence than many other varieties of opal.

When the opal has a translucent or transparent base, the play of colors is displayed with greater intensity. Sometimes, opals with an amber or dark brown base are found.

Occasionally, precious opal is found in very thin seams  $1/8''$  to  $1/32''$ , these thin seams often yield stones of brilliant intensity. The dark natural backing makes the play of colors similar to that of black opal.

Some Erandique opal has small shafts of vertical fire, comparable to Mexican Lluviznado opal but it is rarely encountered and not usually as fine as the Mexican variety.

Most lapidaries get the impression that seam opal, especially if it is thin, is difficult to work. With a little care however, one soon finds that the opal is not hard to cut. The

technique used is the same as for Australian boulder opal. A slightly rounded or nearly flat top is fashioned and part of the matrix is used to form the base. I find Erandique opal to be an excellent variety of precious opal. It is occasionally of very high quality and compares favorably with the best from anywhere else in the world.

Erandique opal is excellent cutting material. It is a stable opal that does not check or craze, in fact it is superior to some plains opal from Australia in this respect. However, it does have a peculiarity which one must become familiar with, especially if it is to be cut without disappointment. Before I describe this peculiarity, I would like to go back in time a bit.

Many years ago when Hungarian opal was beginning to lose ground to opal from Mexico, Australia and Honduras, rumors were spread that only the Hungarian mines produced true opal and that other sources were inferior. When Honduras opal was compared to Hungarian opal, it was generally described as being less desirable because the colors would fade over a period of years. Claims such as these were also made of the Australian and Mexican opals, but now that so much is known about both of these localities, that unqualified information, such as this, no longer has any significance.

Unfortunately, no one ever bothered to write much about the Honduran deposits after all, they never were and have yet to be of much commercial importance. It is really quite incredible, but those old rumors may have actually been part of the reason why opal has never been given much attention here, since.

Getting back to the peculiarity of the Erandique opal, it is associated with a substantial

amount of chalky hydrophane opal that may actually have a strong play of colors when wet but dries to a most un-gem like opacity. If the precious material is directly in contact with this chalky opal, it will affect the play of colors, and therefore, must be completely removed before a stone is cut. This chalky hydrophane is sometimes found sandwiched between the matrix and the precious opal and it can be bothersome as most of it is seam opal, usually not very thick and therefore cut to include the matrix as a backing. A gem cut with this chalk showing at the base will give the impression that the colors have faded. The simplest solution is to cut away the base and make a doublet by cementing another piece of matrix on the back.

Black opal matrix is found in abundance at Erandique. This is the material widely sold as "Black Honduran Opal", and constitutes the bulk of the production. It is not uncommon to find large massive pieces of many pounds in weight. It is the same basic rock in which opal seams occur, the difference is that the porous mass has been more or less impregnated with specks of fiery opal. If the specks are close knit, and the matrix dense and black, it can appear to be a solid opal. This is the best matrix, and it will cut and polish beautifully. More frequently however, the matrix is too soft and the colors weak. This material is fairly cheap and is sold by the pound or burlap sack. Several techniques have been devised to artificially harden the matrix and sometimes, the effect is a pleasant one. Opal doublets are often made from untreated matrix. I have found that very fine quality doublets can be made by using a simple process. Here is my technique:

Slice a piece of matrix with good color approximately 1/8" thick. Thoroughly clean and dry the matrix, then grind with the flat side of a 240 grit grinding wheel till you have a fairly flat surface on the slab. Once again, wash and dry the slab. Take a fine point felt tip pen and carefully darken all white or gray blemishes on the surface. Let it dry for approximately one hour. Next, place the slab in a small container of epoxy resin compound. Set the container in an oven at 250° for one hour, take it out and let it cool over night. Now, all you have to do is wipe the excess resin off and cement a clear quartz cap to the slab. After the cement has dried, trim off the excess and you have a sparkling black gem.

Black matrix opal has become popular with hobbyists in the United States. Japan and West Germany also purchase some quantities. If this variety of opal becomes fashionable in jewelry, Honduras could have a major entry in the opal market.