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T H E
SEARCH
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JEWELS
A N D
GEMS

FROM ABANDONED MINES
TO THE BOTTOM OF THE SEA
THE QUEST CONTINUES

THE SEARCH FOR JEWELS & GEMS

by James Buckley

SILVERHORN

Carole and **Mike Ridding**, co-owners of Silverhorn at 1155 Coast Village Road in Montecito, are partners in every sense of the word; they have been married 41 years, were together before that hiking and exploring abandoned mines in search of mineral specimens on weekends while still in college, and have owned and operated Silverhorn since 1976. They still travel together to out-of-the-way and often dangerous places in pursuit of exotic gemstones and other rarities.

Carole is the knowledgeable proprietor of one of the most renowned gem and jewel shops in the United States. Her peripatetic husband, Mike, is the Tiger Woods of his industry. Spelunking since a child in the caves and caverns outside Toronto, Mike has been a mineral collector his entire life and knows as much about stones, quartz, cuts, and facets as Tiger does about bunkers, drives, chip shots, and putting, and both began their respective careers at a young age.

Mike Ridding, co-owner of Silverhorn, has traveled to forlorn and war-torn areas in search of minerals, stones, jewels, and gems, and has the wardrobe to prove it

Before founding Silverhorn in Banff, Canada in 1976 (they opened in Montecito in 1984), Mike was an administrator at the National Museum of Canada in Ottawa; Carole worked in a psychiatric children's hospital.

Silverhorn co-owner Carole Ridding is a vital part of the team that carefully assays every item before setting a final purchase price



EXPLORING ABANDONED ASBESTOS MINES

"I never had an office for years," Carole says as we climb the stairs above and in back of Silverhorn's showroom to conduct our extended interview. "I'm frequently on the floor with customers; I like to be involved," she explains, as we settle around a small glass-topped desk that doubles as a conference table in her newly acquired office.

From here, one can look straight out over Highway 101 to the Pacific Ocean. The adjacent sunroom is where Silverhorn's impressive collection of minerals is kept. Just below and outside is a separate entrance to the workshop/studio where the five European-trained designers and craftsmen (and one woman) work to create the unique items that Silverhorn turns out.

It's a long way from Nova Scotia, Canada, where she was born, and from Toronto, where Mike grew up, Carole muses. Her career track was that of a social worker, so when asked what drew her to this business, she admits it was Mike. They were both college students, but he studied

geology and had been collecting and trading since childhood and he introduced her to the joy of gemstones.

After college, one of the towns where the couple spent a great deal of time collecting was Asbestos, Quebec, which contained the world's largest asbestos mine. They would travel to the mining area from Ottawa and visit miners' homes buying crystals from them. A byproduct of the mine's output was "a most beautiful garnet, called hessonite garnet," Carole recalls, describing it as "a beautiful transparent honey-colored crystal, which was rare." Discovery of those garnets, she continues, "was one of the most important gem finds in North America."

The Riddings had a summer cottage in Ontario and explored abandoned mines in what is called "Shield" Country, named for the granite hills common to the area. "After the mines were abandoned, we'd



Mike Ridding's (left) background as a collector and trader has given him unparalleled knowledge and expertise with which to determine the value of the various specimens regularly offered by other traders



Mike and Carole developed relationships among collectors and maintained their hobby for a number of years while pursuing careers in Ottawa. “We had a mentor, an old South African gentleman that lived in Toronto,” Carole says, “and [because of him] we learned how to make a business out of our hobby.”

The following is the rest of our interview:

They may live in remote corners of the world, but these gem traders know the current value of their product, as Mike Ridding (bottom left) tries to negotiate a fair price

Q: A number of years ago, while visiting your office, I ran into an English gent who had an appointment with you. He wore wrinkled khakis and a three-day-old beard and opened up an oily sack containing a number of large precious stones, of which he seemed particularly proud. He also had photos of his trip to Afghanistan, where he procured most of those stones, showing him riding in the back of a pickup truck surrounded by AK-47-toting mujahideen fighters. Is this common?

A: It’s common that these beautiful stones are found in remote places, and in many different countries, some of which may have a lot of political unrest and change heads of state frequently. The man you are referring to is a friend of ours who became very friendly with the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance tribal leader Ahmad Shah Massoud, who was killed by supporters of Al Qaeda disguised as journalists. The mujahideen controlled most of the lapis mines at that time, and they produced more lapis than they had for many years because they needed the money.

You and Mike traveled to the northwest frontier province of Peshawar in Pakistan around the same time (mid 1980s) to obtain what you’ve described as “very fine mineral specimens.” What was that like?

It was exciting. We didn’t go into Afghanistan; we stayed in Pakistan and adjoining tribal areas. But it was not dangerous for us then; the people respected us. It was strikingly rugged and beautiful, one of the most beautiful places I’ve ever been; we traveled along dirt roads where the driving was treacherous, and [traversed] wild rivers; we slept in converted army

go in looking for uranium minerals, all kinds of things,” she says. “You’d have to have a real passion for it,” she laughs, “because you could dig away all day and find two or three grubby dark little minerals. People thought we were crazy.”

But Mike had “a knack for finding interesting minerals,” she says. “He could look at the geology of an area – the crevices and different coloring – and pick this little spot to dig in, as opposed to the one twenty yards away,” she marvels.

“Many active miners produce mineral specimens,” Carole says, “and often one miner would refer us to another that he had heard had a ‘little stash of garnet,’ and we’d go and look at them. We’d go into these pubs – which, by the way, had a policy that required women to go in a separate entrance – and you’d hear about one man in some house who had a group of crystals.”



The joy they found – and continue to find – in the business they love is apparent on the faces of Mike and Carole Ridding, seen here when Silverhorn had just been founded



and visiting the deposits and buying rough stones. I'd take those stones to dealers in a small town in Germany called Idar-Oberstein, which had a history of stone cutting. Then, by trading it to these cutters in Germany, I learned what they were doing with the stones and found some of the most talented people who prepared the stones in different ways. So, when we started the store business, I was well connected to have things done.

Tell us about your work with the National Museum of Canada, before you started Silverhorn.

I got the job because I was selling the museum mineral specimens and met the director. They were starting a program to disburse funds to the provinces for museum projects that would, they hoped, unite the country, east and west. One of the projects was working on the West Coast, repatriating ceremonial masks and other ceremonial items back to the Indians. These items had been confiscated early in Canadian history because of the pagan nature of the dances and masks. The museum had a major collection, and through the Indian Rights Act they decided they would give them back to the Indians. To do that, the tribes had to prepare museums and make proposals to the government. I coordinated that, working with the Indians closely up and down the West Coast of British Columbia, figuring out where to put the museums and helping them write up the proposals and deciding what type of museums they'd be.

But my main interest had always been mineralogy, so I kind of drifted back to it, did a side business with it and eventually a full-time business. I didn't want to stay with the government; I found private enterprise and the trading of gems much more interesting.

Describe one of those early trips.

From Brazil, which was, at that time, a very productive area, I went to East Africa – Tanzania and Kenya – then Southwest Africa, Namibia, and Zimbabwe.

What were you looking for?

In Namibia, it was strictly mineral specimens; in the north there was a copper mine at Tsumeb famous for producing specimens and I made a few trips there. In Zimbabwe, there was an aquamarine mine, and an alexandrite mine. In Kenya and Tanzania it was rubies, sapphires, garnets, tanzanite and a whole batch of gems.

How often did you have to make such trips?

I'd start from Canada, to Bogota, to Rio, to Capetown, Johannesburg, Nairobi, to Europe, and I did that every three or four months for several

years. It would be a three-week trip. I still remember the price of that ticket: it was \$1,200 (Canadian).

Isn't security a problem for someone searching the world for gems and paying for them? The areas you mention are not listed among the safest countries in the world.

You usually deal with people you'd get familiar with and you develop close friends you could work with and they'd look after the export for a [small] fee so that we wouldn't have to carry the stuff. We're known in the trade, and once you build up a degree of paying your bills you have no problem. Everything would be shipped and you paid thirty days later. No problem anywhere in the world.

Traveling through Pakistan or Columbia, however, you always needed to have an armed guard with you, or someone that really knew the territory, because there were some areas that were dangerous.

You made deals with tribal leaders to get you from one section to another, correct?

It's not that difficult. Everyone seemed eager to facilitate a deal.

What strikes you as most remarkable in your career?

The start of it was the most interesting and exciting. Going to the asbestos mine in Quebec and buying these garnet specimens and finding out there were museums all over the country that would trade for them. Learning that I could make a living dealing with collectors and museums in Canada, then the Smithsonian, the Museum of Natural History in New York, the British Museum, the Sorbonne in Paris. I could trade what I could find in Canada for specimens that they'd had in their collection for over a hundred, a hundred and fifty years. If [museum directors] had duplicates of something that was found in the Ural Mountains, say, a hundred and fifty years ago, they would trade. And, with these, I'd take them back and sell them to collectors and museums worldwide.

Do you have any Indiana Jones type adventures to relate?

Well, there have been times when I'd get a phone call in the middle of the night that something was found and I'd have to give up my plans over the next couple of weeks to get on an airplane and fly away to some God-forsaken place, buy it up and bring it back. I remember several [incidents] like that, but I can't say I ever had to go in with a knife between my teeth.



Silverhorn's extensive collection of rarities, Mike explains, are all found and remain in their natural state, which is what makes them so fascinating – and valuable – to collectors



A staff of five European-trained goldsmiths and jewelry designers create Silverhorn's masterpieces on the premises from drawings to finished product



What kind of call would cause you to drop everything and fly off to some, as you call it, "God-forsaken place"?

Well, that there was a new discovery that they are mining and they "found a pocket of so-and-so and we'd like you to get there within the next two or three days." It happened to me several times in Brazil, several times in Africa. I'd have to race there to get it, otherwise someone else would get there the day before. You have to get lucky, and usually, the only way you get lucky is to keep moving. If you stay at home, it's not going to happen. It holds true today. The more you move around, the more likely you are to get the deal.

When you traveled to Pakistan with Carole, weren't you concerned for her safety?

No. We had good people with us that I trust fully. I'd go back and travel with these people to the most dangerous tribal areas today. If *they* said it was

valley that leads up to K2 because it's a very productive area for gemstones. I'd have no hesitancy to make the trip as long as there was something at the other end and I'd have my old Pakistani contacts with me.

Going back to the beginning, Carole, how did you decide to go into the jewelry business full time?

When we decided to turn an interesting hobby that we made a little side income from into our full-time careers, a couple of thoughts occurred to us. One was, 'We don't want to be running a rock shop.' We liked to sell exotic minerals, but we were also interested in the more refined



aspect of the minerals, that is, the cut stones too – not just the tourmaline crystals, but the cut tourmaline, or the ruby, or the aquamarine. If we were going to get involved in the cut stones, then we couldn't just sell loose ones; we'd have to have jewelry. Therefore, we would also look for young designers – goldsmiths – to work with us. Through Mike's contacts, we were able to hire some very talented young European goldsmiths.

Your first shop was in Banff; how was that decision made to move there?

We were in Ottawa, but always liked the idea of living in a resort area.

In Canada, there are many beautiful places. Banff, Alberta is the one we picked.

We saved a small amount of money and we had our mineral collection, which Mike eventually sold. I went ahead in a big old van with my potted plants in the back and it took me four days to get there. At first, I rented a house and found a location for the store, off the street, not a prime spot. We used **Stephen Campbell**, who also designed

How did you come to open Silverhorn in Montecito?

Branching out to California seemed a natural fit. We considered some resort towns from Carmel to Newport Beach and we chose Montecito. We didn't think there was anything like us. We chose Coast Village Road; people laughed at us (it was called "Ghost Village Road" in those days) and told us we'd just die on the vine there. The other thing we heard was that "you can't sell anything interesting there. It's very conservative and they'll only want the stone in the middle and diamonds all around it. That's all."



This delicate carving of a Kodiak bear about to snag a salmon lunch (right) was created out of a block of gem-quality root-beer-colored Citrine quartz (left) by German craftsmen in Idar-Oberstein, working exclusively for Silverhorn



our Montecito location. We met him through Mike's job; he had been designing temporary exhibits for museums and he did a great job.

And the name Silverhorn?

It was called Silverhorn after a mountain in Banff. We thought of the Matterhorn in Switzerland, and it fit.

What was your guiding philosophy?

Our "guiding philosophy" was to offer classic and simple design with a practical side: wearable jewelry in certain price ranges with a certain variety. We wanted to make and sell something special that was well made and that people would look twice at, not just a fashion statement of the moment. We wanted to cater to collectors, but in a big price range. We were, and still are, most fascinated with colored stones, although diamonds have become an increasingly important part of our current business. We still have those core values.

Did that prove to be the case?

I think both proved *not* to be true. The clients were out there and they just needed something to attract them. We are very grateful for the local enthusiasm for our product.

It has obviously worked out.

Sometimes a little knowledge is a good thing. We didn't think it was such a big deal to move here. We didn't think, "Oh, it's another country. What does that all involve?" We simply had a good feeling about the area.

So, how did you make the move?

We applied for and got an investment visa, and I came down as an expert to open a branch of my Canadian business. After some years, I applied for my green card. It was the beginning of 1984, and we opened off the street, down where Petersfield's [a long-gone deli-caterer] was. We were next door.



five times a year and have for thirty years now, and have exclusive rights to their production. We bring them the rough stones, which Mike acquires himself – fine gems, rough rubies, aquamarine, tourmaline, quartz, etcetera – and we store it there and work out ideas for the carving. This is a real specialty; there's nowhere else in the world where these carvings are offered in such high quality.

What do those carvings cost?

The price range is from fifteen thousand to seventy thousand dollars. It's amazing the amount of interest there is in these carvings. We have several clients from all over the world that have major collections. We just had the Gemological Institute of America photograph carvings from collections in Montecito. The gem carvings we're known for are the finest in the world, both in material and workmanship. But, it's a dying art;

Carole and Mike Ridding of Silverhorn reflect both the elegance and the casual nature of the jewelry they create

It was that easy?

Well, we just opened. But building the store and getting through the city permits was *difficult*. We had *no* idea what we were in for. Then, it took some time finding craftsmen and a place to live. Mike stayed in Canada to sell the store which took about six months; we brought down our best goldsmith, and I ran the shop. The bank manager at Montecito Bank & Trust where we continue to do our banking, suggested he'd hold a little reception for us. About fifty people came; we got a little write up in the local paper, then, a couple of other businesses opened nearby and we just took it from there.

Tell us about those intricate carvings that are always featured in your windows.

Our carvings are done by two well-known German carvers who live in the small community of Idar-Oberstein in Germany. We visit four or

there's no one now following in the footsteps of these craftsmen. Each carving takes six to eight weeks to complete.

Is it an exaggeration to say you are known – and admired – throughout the world?

Absolutely not. We have been featured in fashion and jewelry magazines; we're known all over the world in gem society, and our jewelry designs have won numerous awards. Mike is particularly recognized for his knowledge. We have – either in our inventory or access to – the finest gemstones in the world. Quite honestly, if it's out there we have it or we can get it. We have such longstanding relationships with people all over the world; they want to have their diamonds and gems here.

Silverhorn (805-969-0442) at 1155 Coast Village Road is open five days a week (Tuesday through Saturday); Silverhorn at Four Seasons Biltmore is open seven days a week; both are also available by appointment.

