

# BURIED TREASURE OF THE NICOAMEN PLATEAU

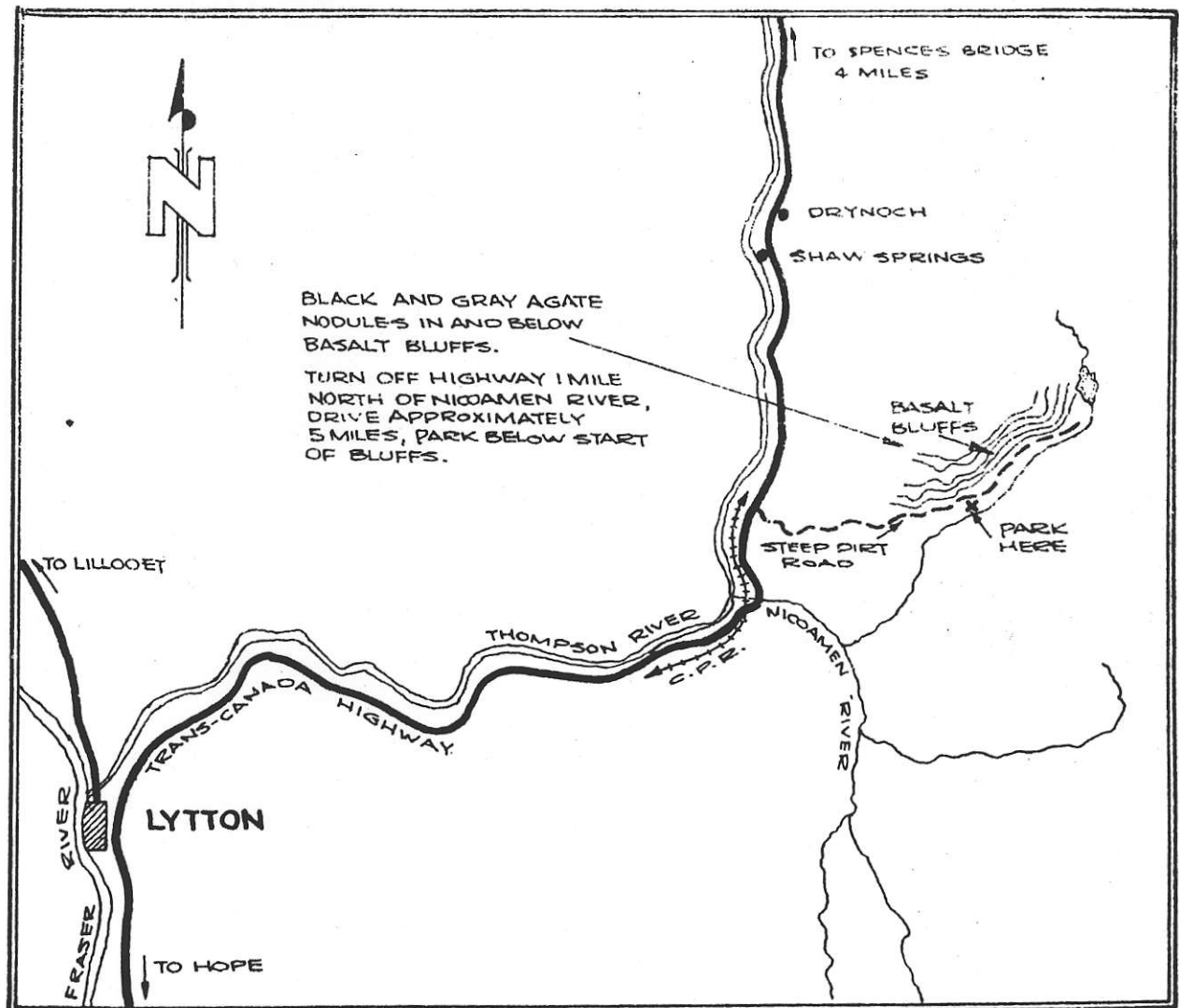
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Phyllis Richardson

During the Summer Seasons of the years 1888 and 1889, Dr. George M. Dawson, accompanied by Mr. J. McEvoy and 3 or 4 native packers, traversed the Interior Plateau of British Columbia. Plotting the Geology and Geography of the area, they revised existing survey maps, expanding on work Dr. Dawson had begun for the Geological Survey of Canada in 1871.

Provided with a few pack horses and riding animals, Dr. Dawson and his field party completed a survey notable for its detail and accuracy. His "Report on the Area of the Kamloops Map-Sheet, British Columbia", published in 1895 by the Geological Survey of Canada (now out of print) is a sought-after edition by many present-day Geologists.

Part of the area covered by this report is the Nicoamen Plateau, which lies between the Nicola, the Thompson, and the Nicoamen Rivers. Consisting largely



One of the many hunting locations for "Shaw Springs" Agate is near enough to the highway to make it an easy one-day outing.

of Tertiary Volcanics, this area is known to many Rockhounds from various parts of North America as an agate collecting locality.

Dr. Dawson reports that "of the several routes examined over this Plateau, only one could be described as following a travelled trail, the others being merely forced routes through country scarcely practicable for pack animals".

I wonder what Dr. Dawson might think if he could view this area today and see the numbers of Rockhounds who search there for agates, many of whom perhaps even walk in his footsteps. Others, for transportation, today use jeeps, Land Rovers, Pick-up trucks fitted with campers, Hondas, Buicks, Pontiacs, and even the occasional Mustang (the four wheeled variety). This has been made possible by access roads put in by Forestry and logging interests, and by the Department of Highways.

To many British Columbia Rockhounds, agates from this area are referred to as "Shaw Springs Agates", after Shaw Springs Resort, a favorite meeting place for Rockhounds from near and far, situated some 7 miles west of the village of Spences Bridge on the Trans-Canada Highway. The site of the Canadian Pacific Railway siding across the highway from the cafe at Shaw Springs was called Drynoch Station. The following is quoted from the Kamloops Report: "About a mile and a half above Drynoch Station, the railway track is laid across what is known as the Big Slide, a mass of soft debris, which is still in a gradual, if intermittent, state of motion towards the Thompson River. The material of the slide consists of yellowish and brownish soft tuffaceous deposits, completely poached together and packed with fragments of basaltic and other volcanic rocks. It has descended to its present position from a high level on the edge of the Nicoamen Plateau, where rocks of the same kind are still seen in place, and are supposed to represent a continuation of the Tranquille beds described on the Nicola. The outcrop of these beds probably crosses the northern part of the Nicoamen Plateau, but has not been definitely traced there. As viewed from high points on the other side of the Thompson, the Big Slide is found to have originated from the edge of a flat meadow-like area with little pools or lakes, which forms part of the edge of the Nicoamen Plateau here. Where crossed by the railway below, it consists of irregular mounds and ridges, with frequent gaping fissures, and is evidently slowly subsiding upon the inclined surface of hard underlying rocks, the evidence of motion being greatest at season when the soil is saturated with moisture."

The slide referred to here is still "slowly subsiding" today and both the Canadian Pacific Railway and the British Columbia Department of Highways have had a continuous and costly fight over the years to maintain their roadbeds. However,

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it is this same slide that gives access to one popular rock hunting area on the rim of the Plateau.

When the Highway Department was rebuilding the Trans-Canada Highway across the base of this slide, much was done in an attempt to stabilize the moving portion, and during this time an access road was put in to Soap Lake, (a distance of approximately 5 miles) with a fork leading to the base of the bluffs which form the rim of the Plateau. Since that time, logging interests have extended this access. It is possible during dry weather, with a pick-up truck, or four-wheeled drive vehicle to get within easy walking distance of the collecting areas.

From the rock faces here, a great variety of agate has been eroded by nature or "mined" by hardy Rockhound enthusiasts. The agate is mostly in the form of nodules, of gray or pale bluish gray color. Some of the more striking specimens have white, orange, pink, and greenish plumes. Others show striking fortification when cut. Also from this general area have come Geodes with Quartz, Amethyst and Calcite Crystals lining cavities, and seam agate with beautiful white plumes.

One peculiarity to nearly all types of agate from the Plateau is that whether it be seam agate or nodule, each is covered with a rind or skin of a brick red color. Many small specimens are taken home for the tumbler and when the reddish coating has been ground away, there often is a very interesting eye effect exposed. Also, when slicing agate from this locality, one should keep an eye open for iris effect. Many plain, smoky-coloured nodules produce an iris effect when properly oriented and thinly sliced.

Another access up onto the Plateau is by way of a logging road (see map) which leaves the Trans-Canada Highway at a point 4- $\frac{1}{2}$  miles West of the Shaw Springs Cafe. The road is quite steep for the first 1000 feet or so but once this ascent has been made, the climb is a gradual one, leading eventually to an abandoned ranch, where remains of log buildings set ones imagination free to reconstruct a picture of the effort that must have been spent where now neglect and decay have taken over. Here one can sometimes find an arrow head or spear point of the black basalt variety common to the Interior Tribes.

From the ranch, various jeep trails lead off. One of these crosses the Plateau, eventually connecting with the logging road at the top of the Slide area mentioned previously. All rock outcroppings encountered are likely prospecting areas, and should be examined.

In writing of the Geology of the higher parts of the Nicoamen Plateau, Dr. Dawson says "The rocks observed were entirely volcanic and chiefly basalts of somewhat varied colour and texture, often brecciated. Chalcedony and agates, together with crystalline quartz, are rather notably abundant in amygdaloidal cavities in some of the rocks and small specimens of zeolitic minerals, including stilbite and heulandite, were also found."

Also referred to by Dr. Dawson is the area at the mouth of the Nicoamen River. "The rocks forming high cliffs at the fall of the Nicoamen, bear its mouth, and seen in ascending the very steep hill on the trail to the north of the river, are chiefly vesicular and amygdaloidal basalts, weathering to red colours." Near here agates with banding of pink to orangy-red tints are found. These are mostly small in size but make lovely stones when cut and polished.

The Tertiary Rocks which make up the main body of the Plateau are described by Dr. Dawson as being part of a great Volcanic Series widely spread over the

region covered by his Kamloops Report, with the greatest thickness being between the Nicoamen and Nicola Rivers (estimated to be 3100 feet). This depth is presumed to be built up by recurring accumulations of volcanic materials at different stages of the Geological scale. Again quoting the Kamloops Report: "Agates and Chalcedony are found in considerable abundance in some parts of the extensive tracts characterized by Tertiary volcanic rocks, particularly those occupied by the upper part of the Tertiary. The colours are usually pale, but many examples are prettily striped and banded. Green tints are not uncommon. The Nicoamen Plateau and that in the vicinity of Savona Mountain, with the neighbourhood of Dufferin Hill near Kamloops, are among the places where agates were found to be particularly numerous, but their occurrence and character depend on combinations of conditions which are always more or less local."

The fact that a great variety of agates occur in "considerable abundance" in the Nicoamen Plateau area is proven each year when members of the Rockhound Fraternity display their favorite pieces at the B.C. Rock and Gem Show.

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