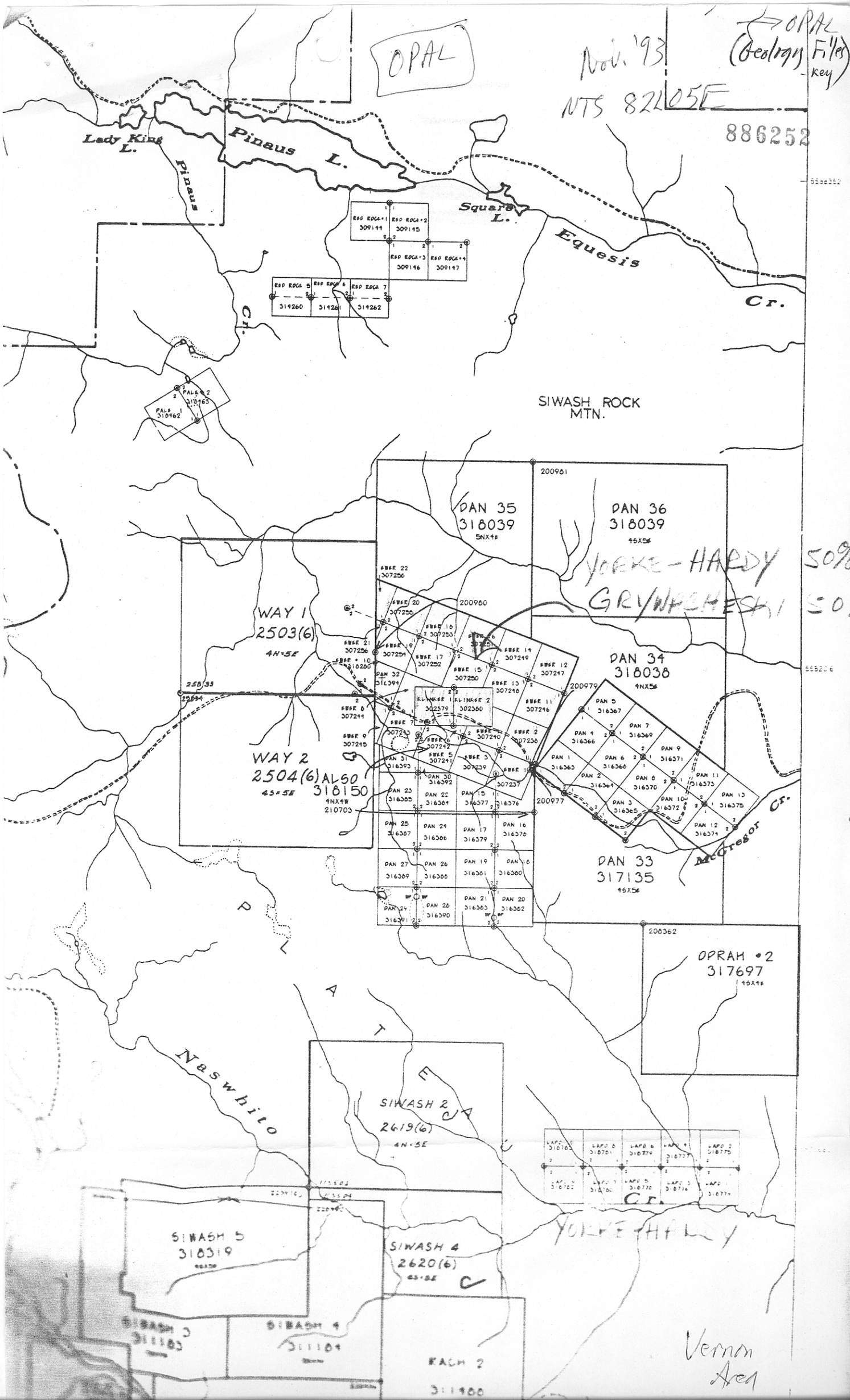
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Vernon Area

The Morning Star, Vernon, B.C. Sunday, 28 November 1993.

Opal discovery sparks optimism

North Okanagan's Thanksgiving opal in national museum

by DAVE WHITFIELD
Morning Star Writer

The North Okanagan may soon join global hotspots like Australia, Mexico and Brazil as a major opal producing region.

Two years ago, local prospectors discovered Canada's first precious gemstone find and are now hoping to attract investors and start mining the deposit.

One of the prospectors who way in on—what will likely be the discovery of a lifetime is Vernon's Bob Yorke-Hardy.

He describes the strike as "absolutely unique to Canada, the only one of its kind" and estimates it could possibly be worth millions. Time will tell.

Yorke-Hardy describes the strike simply as being west of Vernon. Due to thefts and equipment damage, that is as close as he cares to pinpoint the location.

What makes the find all the more amazing is that his partner's daughter more or less came across the first quality opal, by accident, on what could only be described as a spectacular Thanksgiving Day in 1991.

"It was an accident," said Yorke-Hardy. "We looked at some property from a general interest point of view and we found a lava-like rock used commonly for landscaping.

"We thought we might develop that, but we then found some agate that could be used for jewellery items. We staked a couple of claims for that purpose."

"But then we found some common white opal, then clear yellow-orange jelly opal.

"My partner Glen Grywacheski and his kids were out on a nice, sunny Thanksgiving Day looking for agates and found a seam of common opal. They were looking with hammers and chisels, then his daughter Carolyn found a spot where it looked like a green light was shining out of the hole she had excavated.

"It was a fire opal and after that it was like someone threw a switch." More than 30 pieces of fire opal were located on the site that day, with Carolyn's first stone becoming known as the 'Thanksgiving Opal,' the first precious fire opal to be found in Canada.

Bob Yorke-Hardy

This stone (20 X 10 X 3 mm in size) is now located in the National Museum in Ottawa, along with several other pieces, large and small.

Since the find, the partners have staked extra claims to cover an area two by two and a half kilometres. The main area of the find is a patch 750 by 300 feet.

"Right now it's a small area," said Yorke-Hardy. "And although it's hard to quantify or qualify, there are no proven reserves, it is attracting some international attention."

Articles in the Lapidary Journal and the Gems & Gemology, a quarterly published by the Gemological Institute of America have spread the word about Okanagan Opal.

Yorke-Hardy hopes some of this interest results in financing so the company he and Grywacheski formed, Okanagan Opal Inc., can begin mining.

"We want to mine and manufacture the stones as cut stones and jewelry. We hope to excavate enough material to establish values and production rates," said Yorke-Hardy.

"At this stage we're a small group (a handful of shareholders) and underfunded as most small companies are."

Yorke-Hardy was owner of the rock shop in the Swan Lake Fruit and Garden Centre, but all his stock, including opals taken from the find since '91, were destroyed in the July 6 fire that razed the store.

The search is now on for another site for the rock shop.

The Morning Star, Vernon, B.C. Sunday, 28 November 1993.

Okanagan Opal intriguing

by DAVE WHITFIELD
Morning Star Writer

Perhaps one of the most alluring qualities of Okanagan Opal is that it is a Canadian phenomenon.

The stone itself apparently defies categorization and the better examples blaze with a rainbow of color.

"An expert who picked up a piece of our opal said 'this looks just like Honduras opal,'" said Vernon prospector Bob Yorke-Hardy, one of the discoverers of the find.

"Then he turned it a bit and said 'this looks like Mexican opal,' and after turning it some more he thought it looked like Australian opal - it's opal, but it's different."

Yorke-Hardy believes the uniqueness of Okanagan Opal will make it a popular seller as a Canadian product, mined and manufactured by Canadians.

Some of the Okanagan Opal has been set in gold as beautiful rings and earrings. One particularly interesting stone found was in the shape of a fish's head and has been made into a broach - given a gold body and a diamond for an eye.

And besides the value of the finished product itself, which can be sold to tourists, Yorke-Hardy believes tours of the site will continue to be popular.

"We've already had rock diggers from Oregon, Texas, New Jersey and Vancouver here to look around," he said. "And they pretty well all find something."

Yorke-Hardy's rock shop burned down along with the Swan Lake Fruit and Garden Centre July 6 and he is now looking for a new location from which tours could be run.

Thus far, Yorke-Hardy and his partner Glen Grywacheski have found mostly smallish stones, suitable for setting into rings and jewelry, "but typically, opal is cut into smaller pieces anyway."

According to Yorke-Hardy, the opal find is actually better than a gold mine.

"When you find an opal, you can cut it and sell a specimen right away," he said.

"But to make a gold mine work you have to have a proven tonnage to show its economic viability. Then you have to put a mine into production, with all the environmental headaches, and you have to deal with fluctuating prices.

"With opals you have to explore enough to find them, but then as soon as you dig them you can cut them. It's like a placer gold mine or an oil well - you've got an instant cash flow - you don't have the same front end costs and you don't need to use chemicals in the processing.

"From a prospectors point of view opals are just as marketable as gold and less of an environmental hassle. You dig a hole to get at them, but that can be filled up again or smoothed over. It's a small blemish compared to other mines."