

The Maine Pegmatite Workshop

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Thanks in part to a generous travel grant from the Mineralogical Association of Canada, I was able to attend the Maine Pegmatite Workshop (June 4–13, 2005) in Poland, Maine (USA). The workshop was led by Dr. William “Skip” Simmons and Dr. Karen Webber, from the University of New Orleans, and Raymond Sprague, Maine pegmatite miner and administrator. I couldn’t have imagined a more inspiring, intimate atmosphere at an international meeting. Researchers, miners, mineral collectors, students, rockhounds, artists, and general pegmatite enthusiasts came together from all parts of the globe, with open minds and valuable perspectives, to learn about and discuss the multidisciplinary world of pegmatite.

The 34 participants assembled each morning for lectures and discussions and headed out each afternoon to a different pegmatite quarry or mine. Western Maine is a well-known pegmatite district with a dense history of mining and exploration; some of the more highly evolved pegmatites were exploited for mica and feldspar during the late 1800s and early 1900s. Many have yielded excellent examples of gem tourmaline, purple apatite, and a lot more. The field trips included a full-day excursion to the Palermo mine in New Hampshire, by invitation of its owner, Bob Whitmore. Palermo is a world-famous site for phosphates and is a type locality for ten mineral species. Other days included trips to Mount Mica, famous for its amazing gem tourmalines and quartz crystals, and to BB7, the Hole-in-the Ground, Pulsifer, Bennet Mt., Marie, and Emmons quarries. Seeing the glow of satisfaction on the faces of participants when they had just discovered a perfect quartz crystal, a brilliant tourmaline, or a euhedral beryl were some of my favourite moments.

What ignited *my* interest was the stimulating morning discussion. Here was a forum where a diverse group with varied perspectives could debate the controversial issues, and each participant’s ideas were as valued as the next’s. It was exciting to watch researchers present their theories and experiments, which could be supported or questioned by what miners were seeing in the field. For example, large crystal size is usually associated with slow crystal growth. However, Dr. Webber’s research suggests that pegmatite bodies may crystallize in a matter of days or months given the right diffusion and nucleation conditions, much like large ice crystals can grow overnight. Some of the discussions became quite lively, depending on the level of controversy associated with the topic. How should we classify pegmatites, and what is the origin of the quartz core common in zoned pegmatites? The “A-word” (anatexis) was also discussed as a possible origin for pegmatites, a topic hotly debated internationally.



Group picture of the Maine Pegmatite Workshop 2005

With the aid of their book, *Pegmatology*, Dr. Simmons and Dr. Webber guided the group through the basics of pegmatite science, plate tectonics, the origin of pockets, and pocket indicators. Faculty included Al Forster and Jim Nizamoff, also from the University of New Orleans, Ray Sprague, and the original “Pocket Fairy” himself, Frank C. Perham, with whom I had the pleasure of carpooling every day to the field sites. Frank has been a pegmatite miner and expert for over 50 years and seems to have been present at every major pocket discovery in the district! Invited speakers took over for the later lectures and evening programs, and included a worldwide tour of pegmatite

localities (Mike Wise), and more specifically Pakistan (Brendan Laurs), Brazil (Odulio J.M. de Moura), the Northwest Territories of Canada (Lee Groat), the Himalaya Pegmatite in San Diego County, California (Jesse Fisher), the Karelia beryl deposit in Finland (Peter Lyckberg), and the alkaline pegmatites of Zhomba-Malosa in Malawi (Alessandro Guastani). Evening events also included a Maine lobster feast, a display of the prize specimens and wares of participants and local mineral collectors, an exhibition of the fine mineral art of award-winning artist Fred Wilda, and a never-to-be-forgotten “Ugly Shirt Contest.”

Pegmatites were first introduced to me by my undergraduate thesis supervisor, Prof. Lee Groat of UBC, with whom I have worked for three years. For my thesis, I studied pegmatite-related emerald mineralization in northwestern Ontario, but I had also been able to visit the Little Nahanni Pegmatite Group (NWT, Canada) with Elspeth Barnes (completing a PhD on the area) and Prof. Groat the previous summer. The latter area is very large, containing hundreds of pegmatite dikes, and offers almost complete 3-D exposure of the pegmatite field, with amazing textures and mineralization. In the open-minded environment of the Maine Pegmatite Workshop, I felt completely comfortable contributing my own limited experiences to the conversation, a confidence I have never felt in a previous scientific forum. As pegmatite science evolves and attempts to answer some of the more controversial and difficult questions, this annual workshop can only grow more exciting.

The fifth annual Maine Pegmatite Workshop will be held May 27–June 4, 2006
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Allison in the field in the Northwest Territories