INTRODUCTION

Many years be competitors in the mineral business began their incursions into this wild and often forbiddingly mountainous country, Herb was making regular visits there and establishing contacts with potential suppliers of specimens. Before venturing into Pakistan, Herb had already been chasing minerals in neighboring Afghanistan with his then partner Frederick (Rick) L. Smith, a fellow New Jersey mineral lover, and it was there that he learned of the wonderful mineral potential in Pakistan’s rugged peaks. When in 1973 he was prevented from exporting from Afghanistan, Herb went to Pakistan for the first time, though only because he was able to have his minerals delivered there and could then easily take them out of that country. In the 34 years since, Herb has been back to Pakistan more than 100 times. His success is grandly apparent in his mineral show display cases.

EARLY LIFE

But first, some history. Herbert Paul Obodda was born in Brooklyn, New York to Catholic German-speaking parents, Heribert and Elsa Obodda. German was the only language in which he claimed fluency when he entered grade school. His grandfather and great-grandfather had been the owners of a hotel/restaurant in Gemlitz (near Danzig, modern-day Gdansk, but in those days it was part of German-speaking Prussia); it was called “Gasthaus Paul Obodda.” There in Gemlitz his father Heribert was born and educated. He worked for a while as a teacher, then in 1919 he hired on as a waiter on a steamship in order to visit America. Once in New York he worked variously as a waiter, chauffeur, butler and bartender. In 1929 he met Elsa, a milliner from the Freiburg area who had recently immigrated; they worked together for an affluent family, she as cook and he as butler and chauffeur. Soon they were married, and their son Herb was born on September 24, 1942.

The Nazi invasion had forced the rest of his family to flee Prussia and give up their Gasthaus, but after the war it was possible to visit Germany again. Herb remembers discovering the fascination of collecting minerals during a family visit to Germany in 1949, as he was collecting pebbles from his grandmother’s driveway. Back in the U.S., driving to a country home his family owned in nearby northeastern Pennsylvania, they passed the Buckwheat dump in the town of Franklin, New Jersey. Herb was “bewildered to see people bent over piles of rocks, swinging away with sledgehammers.” Curious, he subsequently visited the American Museum of Natural History and saw his first Franklin mineral, a “huge, perfect franklinite crystal perched on white calcite with a wide band of rich, deep-red zincite across the front.” He was hooked. “Wow, now I knew why those people were on their hands and knees digging. They were finding these things.”

He pleaded with his parents until they finally agreed to take him to the Buckwheat dump to do his first real collecting. Contacts with
other collectors there led to discovering the mineral wonders of the zeolite-rich trap rock quarries so prevalent in the West Paterson region of New Jersey.

MINERAL DEALING

As a teenager in 1957, Herb obtained part-time employment at Ronald (Ron) C. Romanella’s mineral and gem shop in New York City. (Romanella would also greatly influence the career paths of other mineral and gem dealers, including Lawrence H. Conklin, Narinder Malhotra, Eric A. Engel and David P. Wilber.) At the time, there were actually three or four mineral dealers in the city, among them Harry Bookstone. Having read a note in *Rocks & Minerals* about Bookstone’s recent trip to Brazil, and an ad describing the fantastic aquamarine, tourmaline, green spodumene and other crystals he had obtained there, Herb got on the subway and made the easy trip to see him at his 12th floor shop at 22 West 48th Street. Harry failed to recognize the potential standing before him and said, “Look, kid, I don’t have any time for you. You want minerals, you go downstairs with that Romanella”—whose shop was indeed one floor down in the same building. This Herb did, and it turned out to be one of the most serendipitous things Herb could have done in a life that was to be filled with serendipity.

First, he and Ron really hit it off. Second, Ron happened to need someone to replace Larry Conklin, who had left to go into the mineral business on his own. After Herb had admired the wonderful crystals in the showcases and they had been chatting a while, Ron said, “Hey kid, do you want to work for me?” It was easy for Herb to say yes. He got out of school around mid-day and could take the subway into Rockefeller Center and work the afternoons until about five or six. Ron was also a good mentor. He taught Herb how to sell minerals, what made them desirable, how to interact with customers, and many of the other basics of dealing in stones.

About six or eight months later, when Herb had pretty much learned how to run the business, Ron announced that he was leaving for Wyoming to see about another business he owned—and put the 15-year-old Herb in charge! “You can take care of everything; put the money in the bank,” Ron said, and he just left. So Herb ran the shop, only hearing from Ron about once a month (long distance calls were very expensive in those days) with questions like “How’re things going? Is there enough money in the bank?” That was about all the support he got.

This continued for about two years, at which point Herb decided he wanted to go to college. Infatuated with the minerals of Butte, Montana, particularly the sulfides and sulfosalts, he enrolled at the Montana School of Mines, but soon realized that he’d been making more money working for Romanella than a graduate mining engineer would make. He was also disillusioned to learn that he knew more about minerals than his professor. After about six
Figure 3. A hinged ivory tusk with carved miners inside. The miners are carrying lamps called Freiberger Blende, indicating that the carving was made in Saxony, ca. 1880. Obodda collection and photo.

Figure 4. Miners in a bottle (a Geduldsflashe), 19.8 cm, made in Schemnitz, Hungary ca. 1750s. Obodda collection; Jeff Scovil photo.

Figure 5. Mining memorabilia from Butte, Montana: a mother-of-pearl shell with silver adornments and engraved view of the Anaconda mine at Butte; a copper-washed inkwell in an ore barrel with miner holding a pickax and a shield depicting the Anaconda mine; a Calumet and Hecla mine tumbler; and three silver souvenir spoons from Butte. Obodda collection and photo.
months, he dropped out and went back to work for Romanella, joining Narinder Malhotra, who had been hired to replace him when he left for school. Herb mostly handled the minerals and Narinder was responsible for the gems.

In 1964, Herb decided to enlist in the U. S. Army “to see the world.” The army offered him his choice of jobs and stations, which meant he could go to Germany, so he ended up in an artillery division there. Volunteering to join the army would not seem to be the smartest thing to do, and yet it had its own serendipitous quality. “Romanella fought like crazy to keep me from enlisting in the army,” Herb says, “but it may have saved my life because it kept me from having to go to Viet Nam. I got out of the army in 1965, and by 1967 things were really beginning to heat up in Viet Nam. In fact, some of the people I was in the army with died over there.”

By the time he enlisted, Herb had been going to Europe privately just about every year, and was also doing some mineral shows in the U.S. for Romanella. At one of them, Herb bought for himself a small packet of gemmy pollucite from Maine. When Ron found out, the two got into a serious fight. Ron felt the stones should be his; Herb argued that he was in the business because he loved minerals, and there wouldn’t be much point in his working for the business if
he couldn’t have his own specimens. Ron wouldn’t agree, so Herb quit; but about two weeks later Ron called and said he’d better come back to work, and agreed that Herb could keep anything he bought with his own money. Herb began amassing specimens. By the time he left Romanella for good in 1969, he had a very substantial inventory and many good U.S. and European contacts. It was while working for Romanella that Herb first met Rick Smith and Charles Key, who were at that time partners in the mineral business. Victor Yount came in at the age of about 13 or 14 with his mother, who admonished Herb not to take advantage of her son. Mary Murphy was a regular customer at 13 and would routinely spend about $100 or $200 a visit, which really impressed Herb, as he was making only about $100 a week.

Among his earliest gem and mineral contacts in Germany’s Idar-Oberstein gem district was Gerhard Becker, an excellent cutter of rare and unusual gem materials, such as fluorite. Herb had him cut much of the rough he’d been stockpiling, enabling him to offer rare stones that made his inventory stand out from those of most other gem dealers.

Another Idar friend was Rudolph (Rudi) Cullmann, a gem dealer about four years younger than Herb, who was the son of Karl August Cullman, one of Romanella’s suppliers. Ron had invited Rudi to work for him in New York, more or less as an apprentice and, while there, he and Herb had become close friends. Herb invited Rudi to stay at his home where he lived with his invalid mother, which Rudi did for about six or seven months, after which he returned to Idar-Oberstein before moving to Canada. While they were together, the two seemed to have been as much focused on partying as on minerals and gems. The association also gave Herb the opportunity to become acquainted with Rudi’s then-girlfriend Monika (“Moni”) Zaumseil of Dusseldorf, who was working at the time as an apprentice goldsmith in Idar. On October 10, 1970, Herb proposed marriage to Monika, figuring it was cheaper to get married than make all those long distance phone calls and fly back and forth to Germany from New York for the purpose of dating. Herb and Moni were married April 30, 1971, a fact for which all of us who love this wonderful couple will forever be thankful.

Back in the states, Herb and Moni began doing mineral shows...
in a big way, some ten to twelve a year. He never had a shop but did invite customers for private showings.

Herb has been a regular presence at the Tucson shows since 1968, when he and David Wilber together managed a booth for Romanella. Looking back on his nearly 40 years of Tucson participation, Herb reflects on how the mineral business has changed. In the earlier days, it seemed that everybody (in the U.S. and Canada, at least) knew everybody else. Dealers, collectors, curators—we all worked together and played together. At the Desert Inn in Tucson, late-night (or early-morning) poker games were a fixture for many of the dealers, including Herb. There was serious social drinking, and rooms tended to stay open late into the evening. One could wander down the halls and pop into any number of rooms where there would always be a lively discussion taking place.

The pressure on the dealers was less severe than it has since become, and prices for minerals had not yet reached the stratospheric levels we see today. Herb loves to tell the story about the time Romanella sold a 54-kg Brazilian topaz—which Herb and another employee had to drive to Florida to deliver—for less than $1,000, delivery included. In short, mineral shows were far more fun in the 1960’s and 1970’s than they are today and Herb and Moni were a major part of that fun. Even in Munich, which at that time was the only European show that was heavily attended by Americans, the fun continued as many of us (mostly Americans) gathered in the evenings at the Hackerkeller next to the show for some major beer drinking, something that Herb enthusiastically participated in.

HERB AND PAKISTAN

Herb’s first buying trip on his own was to Morocco. Since then, although amazingly he has never been to Brazil, his buying trips have taken him to Chile, Peru, Nigeria, Russia, Poland, the Congo,
Tsumeb in Namibia, Romania and East Germany, mostly in association with Rick Smith. But he’s made his reputation through his trips to Pakistan. In the mineral world, it’s probably fair to say, Herb is “Mr. Pakistan.”

The route to that South Asian country was not direct, however. It came about, serendipitously as usual, through his business ventures with Rick Smith when the two began traveling to Afghanistan around 1972. Afghanistan was producing tourmalines and other exciting gem minerals long before Pakistan. At the time that Herb and Moni were dating in Idar, she was employed teaching German to an Afghani, Hussain Rezayee, who was living in Idar and Berlin. Once, while the three of them were having a beer together, Hussain casually pulled out a remarkable “pencil” of tourmaline. The crystal was about 15 cm long and 7 mm thick, gem clear, beautiful green—and Hussain had no idea what he had. “Do you know what this is?” he asked. “Does it have any value?” Sometime prior to this choice little exchange they had attended a Tucson talk by Pierre Bariand (then curator of the mineral collection at the Sorbonne in Paris) about collecting rubies and lapis crystals in Afghanistan. Herb and Rick decided they simply had to go there. They did, and encountered lots of great material that was incredibly cheap. They would have continued focusing on Afghanistan had it not been for that exporting problem mentioned above that drove them to export from Pakistan instead.

Herb was one of the first western dealers to go to Pakistan and ever since has returned about five times a year, estimating that

Figure 12. Leadhillite crystal, 10.6 cm, from the Tsumeb mine, Namibia. Obodda collection; Jeff Scovil photo.

Figure 13. Gold, 6.5 cm, from Rosia Montana, (Verespatak), Romania. Obodda collection; Jeff Scovil photo.
Figure 14. Four colored-glass crystal models of gem minerals. These are part of a set of 70 such models, in a fitted, suede-lined locking case measuring 30.5 x 45.7 cm, made in Czechoslovakia before 1920. Obodda collection and photo.

Figure 15. Toad carved from ruby corundum and green zoisite from East Africa, 8 cm, by master carver Gerd Dreher of Idar-Oberstein, Germany.

Figure 16. Epidote, 7.6 cm, from Knappenwand, Untersulzbachtal, Austria. Obodda collection; Jeff Scovil photo.

Figure 17. Gold on quartz, 6.4 cm, from the Eagle’s Nest mine, California. Obodda collection; Jeff Scovil photo.
he has made over 100 trips into that country overall. Many visits yielded only disappointment, especially in the early years before he had established a solid relationship with a reliable “lead man.” There were also great dangers. Treacherous roads with landslides were always a threat, and political unrest has been a running theme. On one 1982 trip with David Wilber to a small village (actually a refugee camp) near the border with Afghanistan, they could hear Russian artillery in the distance. When they arrived, they had to wait for hours to see the lot of “fabulous” kunzite crystals they’d come for. While they waited, the crystals were being retrieved from their underground hiding place as mortar rounds whistled overhead and exploded in the hills around the miners. When Herb and Dave were finally shown the crystals, they turned out to be of little value.

With the excellent relations Herb has since established with reliable suppliers, such fruitless excursions have occurred much less frequently now. In fact, Herb’s taste in mineral specimens has become a Pakistani mineral standard of excellence: I’ve heard of dealers being told not to waste their time going to a specimen-producing area because there are no “Obodda specimens” to be had there.

COLLECTING

Circa 1962, Herb started buying highly collectible mineral specimens, forming the basis of his then-general mineral collection. One of his sources was the F. Krantz company in Bonn, where he liked to “cherry pick” the stock. There may have been 50 or so pieces of Knappenwand epidote, for example, in a drawer and Herb would take all of the decent ones, leaving scraps that were more or less unsaleable. This really annoyed Krantz’s employees, so he was soon allowed to do this only while Krantz himself was present. Herb picked out whatever appealed to him, including fine phenakite crystals at a time when phenakite was considered a rare
mineral; Krantz, however, had kilos of phenakite crystals from Brazil, virtually the world’s supply. With his firm grasp of mineral aesthetics, Herb was able to pick out the best of the best and make great purchases. He bought from other suppliers in Europe as well, including Gregory, Bottley & Co. in London long before it became Gregory, Bottley & Lloyd, and Rayner, primarily a jeweler who also sold many minerals, especially fluorites from many localities in the U.K.

Herb’s mineral collecting quickly expanded to include a variety of other things, all in one way or another connected to minerals. Those most directly related include a one-time collection of fluorites from worldwide localities, a collection of faceted rare stones in the 1-carat to 3-carat size numbering about 400, a faceted tourmaline collection of about 45 pieces ranging in size from 15 to 175 carats and representing all colors, a collection of the minerals of Pakistan with emphasis on gem minerals of the Northern Areas and rare-earth and associated minerals from the Zagi Mountain deposits in the North West Frontier Province, and choice minerals from worldwide classic localities, with specialties in silver minerals and gem minerals. The subcollections that are more peripherally related to minerals are so diverse and extensive that they defy adequate treatment in an article of this size, but I will list 14 of them here:
Herb’s gemstone carvings are by master carver Gerd Dreher of Idar-Oberstein, considered by many experts to be the world’s best gem carver. All of the carvings in the collection are one-piece artworks carved from a single piece of rough, such as ruby/zoisite, agate, morganite/aquamarine, amethyst, obsidian, and gроссular/chromite, with only eyes made of other material. There are 22 carvings in Herb’s collection, and he plans to add two to five pieces annually.

A large collection of manuscript correspondence contains items mostly from and to George F. Kunz, but also from many other famous 18th and 19th century mineralogists and crystallographers. The collection includes over 400 letters to Edward Daniel Clarke, the first professor of mineralogy at Cambridge University. Many of these are from the most famous scientists of the time, such as Humphrey Davy, William H. Wollaston, Michael Faraday, Smithson Tennant, Henry Heuland, James Sowerby, and numerous others.

A large collection of “mining art” consists of both exotic and everyday articles featuring depictions of miners, mining processes and scenes, minerals, etc. Included are cast-iron objects such as paperweights, inkwells, urns, candlesticks and more. Porcelain objects such as snuffboxes, pipe-heads, tea and coffee service pieces are included, with emphasis on those from Meissen (mid 18th century) and Furstenberg (19th and early 20th century).

Art objects carved in elephant ivory date mostly from around 1880 and before.

Herb has some extraordinary, historic “mining parades” (mining equivalents of “tin soldiers”) in wood and pewter. There are three sets; two are of tin, one by Väterlein (a famous tin founder of Freiberg, Saxony) with about 65 pieces, made around 1880, and another with more than 75 pieces by R. Schumann of Dresden, also made about 1880. The third set of about 75 pieces is made of wood by Werner in Seiffen, Saxony.
(6) Antique gnomes with mining themes are surely a unique specialty.

(7) Herb also collects portraits of mineralogists, geologists, naturalists and scientists, as copperplate engravings, lithographs or paintings.

(8) He also owns mid-18th century art objects from Herrengrund (an historic mining town in Hungary). The various pieces, mostly cups, beaters, snuff boxes, small statues of miners, etc., were made from “cement copper” extracted from the “cement water” in the mine by precipitation using scrap iron. The pieces were made, in part, to commemorate the end of Turkish occupation. When the miners returned to the mines they had abandoned, they found the iron implements they had hidden in the mine waters (which were rich in copper sulfate) had been replaced completely, or in part, by much more precious copper. Most of the cups and beaters have sayings engraved upon them which allude to this “magic” transformation, such as “I once was iron, and in a short time I was turned into copper by the wondrous waters of Herrengrund.” Others have sayings similar to “When I was iron no one wanted me, now that I’m copper everyone desires me.”

(9) A small collection of items from Mount Vesuvius in Italy includes ashes from 13 different eruptions in April of 1906, pieces of lava embedded with coins, and special “medals” made by gathering small gobs of molten lava and forming them into flat shapes in waffle-iron presses engraved with the maker’s name and date.

(10) He also has hundreds of silver, copper, and enameled spoons with mining motifs.

(11) And small, early 20th century copper souvenir items with emphasis on those from Butte, Montana.

(12) Herb’s collection of antiquarian books dealing with mineralogy, mining, geology, gemology and crystallography is world-famous and numbers about 3500 cataloged items. The earliest book

\[ \text{Figure 23. Some thumbnail to miniature-size specimens in the Obodda collection; Obodda photo.} \]
in the collection was printed in 1491, and others date to as recently as 2006. The total shelf space required is about 137 meters (equal to about 1½ times the length of an American football field).

(13) Herb’s collection of over 150 antique scientific instruments used in mineralogy and crystallography is especially attractive. Many examples are included of contact and optical goniometers, crystal models, refractometers, boxed mineral study collections, blowpipe and assay kits, microscopes and accessories. Seventy of these instruments were on long-term loan to the Houston Museum of Natural Science from 1991–2007, and some 40 of them were placed on public display while there.

(14) A more recent collection, started in 2005, consists of art objects from the baths of Karlsbad, Bohemia. Most of these sou-

Figure 24. Sperrylite crystal in chalcopyrite, 3.8 cm, from the Oktyabrisky mine, Talmakh, Norilsk, Siberia, Russia. Obodda collection; Jeff Scovil photo.

Figure 25. Some thumbnail to miniature-size specimens in the Obodda collection; Obodda photo.
Figure 26. Herb Obodda’s home office and part of his library. Jeff Scovil photo.

Figure 27. G. E. Löhyneyss Bericht vom Bergwerck (1617), among the rarest of the early mining books, inscribed and signed by the author (the only known signed presentation copy). Obodda Library; Jeff Scovil photo.
venirs were made between 1880 and 1915. All contain detailed mosaics (*pietre dure*) made of multicolored aragonite “Kalk-Sinter,” and take the form of boxes, desk utensils, eyeglass cases, money purses, smoking implements, gaming pieces and a myriad of other frivolous and useful objects. There are about 150 objects in this collection to date.

The *pietre dure* collection is a fine example of how important serendipity has been in the evolution of the Obodda collections. Herb had encountered a couple of examples of the above-mentioned mosaics from Carlsbad and was showing them to his friend Brian Lloyd, mineral dealer in London who is quite knowledgeable about antiques in general and also a collector of antique mineral craft items. Brian told him he was unlikely ever to find additional pieces, but within days Herb had walked into a shop that had an entire collection of them for sale—which, of course, he promptly bought.

I have to say that I have never in my life been as overwhelmed by the depth, strength, quality, diversity and general excellence of a private collection as I was by the Obodda Collection(s). The scientific instruments alone are breathtaking. Each is as fine an example of a craftsman’s art as one could hope to find, all painstakingly restored to their initial pristine condition. Drawer after drawer is filled with crystal models, far more different sets by different makers than I knew existed. There are other smaller collections not mentioned above, each reflecting an intellectual curiosity on the part of this remarkable collector that is insatiable with respect to any object relating to minerals and mining.

Herb seems completely unaffected by what he has accomplished. He is as warm, engaging and friendly to everyone as he has always been. Because of the press of his intense collecting efforts, which include exhaustive cataloging incorporating digital images of nearly every object, he has recently retired from participating as a dealer in shows, but still plans to enjoy visiting the Tucson Show and others.

Herb can be maddeningly opaque when it comes to commenting on his competition or on controversial mineral collectors. He simply says nothing. His carefully honed approach to business has meant that he has avoided controversy, his reputation is impeccable, he is universally respected and (I suspect) envied, and his merchandise is always so exciting that most collectors and curators consider it a must-see at any show where he displays.

In spite of his reticence to indulge in criticism, it is easy to engage him in fascinating conversations on virtually any subject that is connected to his interests, which are so diverse that almost nothing is ruled out. He is one of the best *raconteurs* I have ever encountered, and he can remember in great detail every adventure or encounter he has ever had. As he gets into his stories, which are usually peppered with amusing anecdotes, he often chuckles with genuine delight as the tales unfold.

Figure 28. The catalog of the Éléonore de Raab collection (1790), by Ignaz von Born, inscribed and signed by the author. Obodda library; Jeff Scovil photo.
Herb Obodda is a gentleman in the best sense, a credit to the mineral trade, and truly a collector *extraordinaire*. At the end of our interview, I asked him what still drives him, at this point in his life, to continue dealing in minerals and making those exhausting and potentially hazardous trips to Pakistan some five times a year. It is, in fact, his insatiable need to collect. “I have to stay in business,” he told me as I was leaving, “so I can afford to buy this stuff.”

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ADDITIONAL READING


