



Died, John Medici, 84

John Coe Medici, Jr. (named after his grandfather), was one of the best-known field collectors of his generation. He was born in Montvale, New Jersey, on January 28, 1938, the son of Ruth and Otto Medici, owners of a masonry business. John developed an early interest in minerals, encouraged by his mother, who regularly took him to the American Museum of Natural History in New York City to see the great mineral collection there.

After graduating from Pascack Valley Regional High School, he enrolled at Middlebury College in Vermont. He considered majoring in Geology; however, realizing that his employment options might be somewhat limited as a geologist, John instead chose to study chemistry. He graduated from Middlebury College in 1959 with a bachelor's degree in chemistry, then went on to Rutgers University, where he married Elizabeth "Betsy" Maria Sandborg in 1963, and completed his PhD in biochemistry in 1964. It was also in 1963 that John retired from swimming competitions and had a lot of spare energy on his hands; a friend suggested field-collecting for minerals as an athletic endeavor, and John (who enjoyed the outdoors) jumped in with both feet.

Following graduation, John was quickly hired by the Martin Company in Baltimore, Maryland to work on systems for detecting extraterrestrial life: this work was intended for use in a planned Voyager mission to Mars which never occurred. In 1968, John was hired by Chemical Abstract Service, based in Columbus, Ohio. He spent 32 years with the company, retiring in 2000.

Although he moved away from the formal study of geology and mineralogy, John never lost interest in minerals, and he collected them in the field whenever he got the opportunity. His first major success came in 1967 when, with Dave Siegert, he

discovered a mineralized lava tube at Centreville, Virginia. The giant pocket took 27 hours to collect, and John wound up with hundreds of specimens; his favorite was a 22-cm plate of prehnite with apophyllite. He prized the piece so highly that he kept it in a safe-deposit box at the bank, so visitors to his home rarely saw it. The specimen is illustrated in his 1972 article on the Fairfax quarry in the *Mineralogical Record*, and on page 255 of the recent *Eureka!* supplement to the *Mineralogical Record*.

After moving to Ohio in 1968, John became a legend among the midwestern collectors for his constant visits to limestone quarries of the Findlay Arch and elsewhere in Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky and Michigan—field trips which regularly yielded outstanding specimens. One of the local collectors who met John in Columbus was a PhD student at The Ohio State University, Sandy Ludlum. The two became fast friends and spent a great deal of time together in the field. That time gave them the opportunity to discuss what to do with their extra specimens, ultimately concluding that opening a store might be a worthwhile endeavor. So in 1974, John, Betsy, Sandy and Sandy's wife at the time, Gloria, opened a rock shop called "What on Earth" in a shopping center in Columbus, Ohio. "What on Earth" became very successful; most Ohio mineral collectors have had some experience with it. But John found that being a storekeeper wasn't for him, so he sold his share to Sandy in 1980.

Another of John's more successful field collecting projects was at the Spruce claims in Washington, digging for pyrite and quartz specimens. According to Sandy Ludlum, the project began as a response to a comment, from a mid-1970s discussion in a bar during the Detroit show, that all the good field collecting opportunities were gone. John argued that this was not true; only the easy stuff was gone. Challenges were laid down, so John began planning a difficult but promising collecting expedition with the help of Neil Pfaff, Bill Hawes and Sandy Ludlum. After seeing a fine specimen in an old museum collection, the group settled on the Spruce area in Washington. John and Neil prospected the area on foot in 1976 and identified some promising areas. By later that summer, they had secured a bank loan to fund the collecting efforts (can you imagine the conversation with the banker?). The project operated for several years and produced many outstanding specimens of quartz and pyrite, separately and in combination. John and his cohorts wrote up the adventure in a 1978 article for the *Mineralogical Record*:

"Quartz and pyrite from King County, Washington."

Because John had a full-time job, he wasn't able to do much of the digging, but he came out when he could. During the summer of 1977 they moved the digging to a higher elevation and used helicopters to move equipment up the mountain. John arrived later, and an inexperienced helicopter pilot was assigned to take him and his son Jay up to the work area. The pilot had some problems with the air currents around the mountain and had to make a forced landing quite some distance from the planned work area. The helicopter landed hard (or crashed, depending on who tells the story), damaging the gas tank, which was located above the cabin, engulfing the chopper in flames. Both Medicis and the pilot were able to escape before the magnesium frame of the helicopter caught fire, producing a terrific fireball! They were forced to hike out, and that year John only got to collect a few specimens.

Yet another of John's favorite collecting spots was the famous Auglaize quarry in Paulding County, Ohio. He kept meticulous records for years that show exactly where in the large quarry hundreds of specimens were found and how their habits varied. His report on the quarry, coauthored by Ken Bladh, appeared in the July–August 2019 issue of the *Mineralogical Record*.

In 1991, John heard that smoky quartz had been found on Sierra Blanca Peak in New Mexico, so he and his three sons traveled there for a field trip. They began climbing the trail up the 11,981-foot mountain. At 10,500 feet, John and his son Eric moved back down



to a lower part of the ridge where some trees were growing. Thinking it odd that such big trees could grow on bare rock, they suspected that a collapsed pocket might be nearby. They began digging around the trees and, sure enough, broke into a collapsed, refrigerator-size, crystal-lined pocket holding the root system of the trees. They collected crystals for three rain-soaked days and hiked out with eight backpacks full of specimens. The largest specimen that John and his sons ever collected is a 900-pound quartz cluster from Herkimer, New York that the Smithsonian's curator-in-charge, Paul Desautels, asked them to look for. The property owner would not allow the use of any mechanized equipment, so they extracted the giant cluster in pieces using wedges, hammers and chisels, carefully labeling each piece for later reassembly. It ended up as an island display in the Smithsonian's Natural History Museum after it was purchased in 1991.

Everyone remembers John Medici as a tremendously determined collector. Sandy Ludlam remembers that once, while he and John were collecting pyrite concretions in Ross County, Ohio, John refused to leave the site until it was so dark that they couldn't see what they were doing anymore. He also remembers another time when John fell out of a tree while pruning it with a chainsaw, cutting his arm fairly badly, but was back in the field collecting after just a few weeks. Jay Medici remembers his father deciding at the last minute that they needed to go to the Portage quarry on Jay's birthday in 2001. Jay feared his mother had planned a party that he and his father would now miss. The decision turned out to be a good one, however, as they discovered a huge celestine pocket that day, one of the best they'd ever collected.

Jay Medici also remembers that his father was never terribly interested in making money off of specimens; rather, he was driven by the thrill of discovery. He often commented that the best specimens weren't found by the strongest or smartest, but rather by those who knew intuitively where, when and how to look.

John Medici was an active member of the Columbus Rock and Mineral Society and led many field trips for that organization, thus

helping to initiate many young rockhounds, including a 12-year-old Rob Lavinsky, who remembers getting stuck in a mudhole at the Lime City (Ohio) quarry in 1984. Medici rescued the nascent mineral dealer (except for one boot), and would later tease Lavinsky relentlessly about his incompetence in the field.

Some of John's other accomplishments include being a longtime athlete with many awards; serving as president of the Chesapeake Gem and Mineral Society and of the Columbus Rock and Mineral Society; composing the "Herkimer Diamonds" chapter for the *American Mineral Treasures* book; and speaking at numerous mineral shows and symposia. Some of his other publications include "Iridescent and other Fluorites from the Findlay Arch, Ohio" (with John Rakovan, 2008, Tucson Mineralogical Symposium Abstract, *Mineralogical Record*); "Fluorite and other minerals from the Suever quarry, Delphos, Van Wert County, Ohio" (with R. Peter Richards, 2020, *Rocks & Minerals*); and "Celestite and sulfur from southeastern Michigan" (1983, *Rocks & Minerals*).

In 2020, John was also the recipient of the 33rd Carnegie Mineralogical Award for "outstanding contributions in mineralogical preservation, conservation and education." He was justifiably proud and honored when the Carnegie Museum's Assistant Curator, Travis Olds, said:

His contribution to the mineral community has been significant, but his greatest contribution to specimen mineralogy is his dogged pursuit of top-quality specimens in the field, specimens that would otherwise be destroyed by industry or nature.

John was next in line for the American Mineral Heritage Award for field collecting when he died on July 6, 2022.

For the Medicis, field-collecting was always a family affair. John and his wife began taking the boys along as soon as they were able to walk, and it was great fun for everyone. Today all three sons are advanced mineral collectors in their own rights. John's collection has been dispersed among them.

Chris Stefano