

Remembering Bill Depue

by Lisbet Thoresen

Back story

BILL EARL DEPUE was a California native, born on January 14, 1926, in Gardena, a suburb of Los Angeles County. He spent his early years in the South Bay, where his father Earl owned an independent service station called Top Notch Gas. The business flourished until the Great Depression smothered it. Like so many families during this period of disruption and dislocation, the Depues had to reinvent their lives. Bill's parents moved the family to a 160-acre homestead near the town of Hinkley, located a few miles northwest of Barstow, in California's high desert. It was a rustic setting in a pristine desert landscape as far as the eye could see and not much else. When Bill and his sisters were school-age, their father donated a portion of his property for the building of a school. It was the only elementary and middle school for miles around, and children were bussed in from as far away as Randsburg, over 50 miles away.

Bill became enamored with rockhounding around age 15, when a family friend who knew all about minerals took him along on his rock collecting field

trips. They trekked all over the hills and canyons which are now part of the Mojave Trails National Monument. His mother Hazel was interested in minerals and lapidary, later running a shop in Lenwood, so both Bill and his sister Beth naturally gravitated toward self-collecting minerals and carving them. Before long they became active members of the Mojave Desert Gem and Mineral Society.

Bill graduated from Barstow Union High School in 1942, which was followed by a stint in the Navy, where he specialized in sonar. He attended UCLA, majoring in mathematics, and from there he went on to teach college-level math. Until the end of his life, he loved to work on solving mathematical problems.

Bill's heart was always in the Mojave Desert, and he was happy to return home after his service in the Navy and attending university and teaching. He became interested in flying and obtained a private pilot's license. He and a friend collaborated on a novel design for a lightweight kit-built aircraft, which they planned to develop into a business. However, his friend's near-fatal crash chilled Bill's keenness for the

Pictured above, left. Bill at the Top Notch claim in the North Cady Mountains, May 28, 2016. **Center.** Bill at the end of a day of collecting, May 28, 2016. **Right.** Bill with his best friend, Jonathan Davis, inspecting an agate at Lavic Siding, May 13, 2017. Photos: Lisbet Thoresen.

enterprise. Even so, he never lost interest in flying. As recently as the early 2000s, he built a light plane from a kit. This light craft would enable him to land on small islands of collecting areas surrounded by private lands. This required a light craft that required only a short landing path and unflappable demeanor on the part of the pilot. Alas, this plane was wrecked before its maiden flight while being transported by truck to California. In recent years, Bill never missed an opportunity to fly with a friend, especially if it meant having the opportunity to survey the old trails in the desert where vehicular access was difficult.

In the early 1970s, Bill and a friend developed a prototype machine for grinding and polishing stones. By 1974, Bill was ready to begin manufacturing and distributing his equipment. He established Diamond Pacific Tool Corporation, based in Barstow, which is now in its fifth decade of operation. Until his retirement, he continued to refine his designs, and he developed other equipment that could do different things related to cutting and deburring. Together with his nephew, Don Depue, who would later become president of the company, followed by Bill's three grandnephews who run the business today, Bill and Don traveled to gem and mineral shows demonstrating Diamond Pacific's equipment. They built a loyal clientele throughout the United States.



Bill in the showroom at Diamond Pacific. June 2016. Photo: Lisbet Thoresen.

Legacy

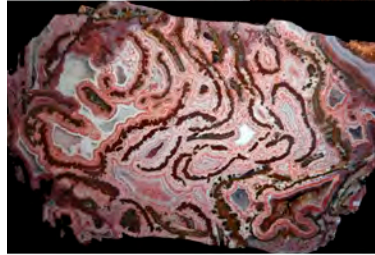
Bill Depue was well known in the high desert community centered around Barstow and in the southwestern states where he was a frequent exhibitor at gem and mineral shows demonstrating the lapidary equipment he invented. As a business owner and avid rockhound he was “old school,” a man of his word who never had a contrary word about anyone, a friend beloved by just about everyone who knew him, and a legend in the hobby collecting community because of his love of the Mojave Desert. Bill saw glorious beauty in the desert landscape and in the amazing diversity of its flora and fauna. On an outing to the North Cadies at end of March 2019, as we bumped along a sort-of trail in his pickup truck, he pointed out the mounds of shrubs carpeting the desert floor, with their ethereal flowers of white, pink, purple, and bursts of yellow broom shimmering in the breeze. They were just emerging in what would be a superbloom year, “Did you know that the Mojave has more than four hundred unique plants, many of them flowering? Four hundred!” (Bill had taken a botanist on a field trip a few weeks earlier.)



“Tight Squeeze Pass” in the North Cady Mountains in a superbloom year. March 30, 2019. Photo: Lisbet Thoresen.

He loved the fauna, especially the tortoises and bighorn sheep. His longtime, close friend John Pickett recalled a time when they were out rock collecting, and they just stopped to marvel at a bighorn that

they noticed had been following them around from a distance all afternoon, curious it seemed about what they were doing. Bill loved the Mojave's unique geology, pointing out ridges, switchbacks, folds, slot canyons, and features like fossilized cattails weathering out of the rocks in Pyramid Canyon. And, of course, he loved the gem minerals, marveling at their colors, patterns, and textures, knowing that they too were unique to this desert. It never got old for him. Most of all, Bill loved sharing his enthusiasm for the desert with friends. He especially enjoyed introducing first-time visitors to the desert. He admonished me on my first outing: "Repent! Mend your ways, it's never too late to become a rockhound." Bill could make anyone a true believer.



Bill at the Top Notch claim. **Overset image.** "The Pink Stuff," agate from the Top Notch claim with a pink, red, and white paisley pattern. May 2016. Photo: Lisbet Thoresen.

The Cady Mountains was Bill's favorite place in the Mojave Desert. He would say, "Why go anywhere else, when the very best agates are found in the Cady Mountains?" He and his friend Joe Sumners took out a claim in the North Cadies expressly so everyone would have access to it, and no one would be barred from collecting there. Bill named the claim Top Notch. When he passed away on October 22, 2022, at age 96, no other person knew every trail, ridge, rill, or canyon in the Cadies better than Bill. He had been going there three weekends out of four, tens month out of twelve, for nearly 80 years.

Although Bill was a mathematician, pilot, inventor, and inveterate tinkerer, he created a business related to his lifelong hobby of making lapidary carvings from his self-collected gem minerals, primarily agates. He was the best ambassador advocating for the preservation of the desert and sharing all there was to discover and learn about its wonders. Collecting a remarkable gem mineral, and from it crafting a cabochon carving that might elicit its special beauty was supremely gratifying. Bill cut and polished hundreds of cabochons over a period of nearly eight decades. He never sold a single one. For him, each specimen was connected to a special place. Each place was attached to a memory of a discovery and an experience shared with friends.



Bill and John Pickett with slabbed agates collected by Danny Watts at the Top Notch claim. June 2016. Photo: Lisbet Thoresen.

Remembering

In December 2022, some of Bill's friends shared with SDMG their personal memories of him and what he meant to them. We have gathered these messages together with a montage of photographs by which all his friends might remember him with affection. It is available online at: <https://bit.ly/depue-poster>, and on the following page. A printed poster-sized version of this montage has been prepared for the Depue family.



Mike Sintatos (BLM environmental specialist), Bill Depue, Kyle Sullivan (BLM, monument manager for Mojave Trails), Joe Summers, Afon Canyon outlet, March 30, 2019.



A panoramic view of the Mojave Valley floor from a vantage near the Sleeping Beauty collecting area in the South Cady Mountains, May 2017.



Pyramid Canyon, March 30, 2019.



Bill Depue at the Top Notch claim in the North Cady Mts, May 2016.



Tight Squeeze Pass, superbloom, March 30, 2019.



Jim Hare, Bill Depue, Joe Summers, and Danny and Vivian Watts, Baxter Wash, May 2016.



Bill Depue with Jonathan "Goober" Davis, Lava's Sting, May 2017.



Bill Depue, Diamond Pacific showroom, May 2016.



Danny and Vivian Watts trek through the fluorite collecting area near the Top Notch claim, North Cady Mountains, May 2016.

Bill at BLM's Envisioning Session for Mojave Trails National Monument August 2016.

Bill demonstrating at the Ventura Gem & Mineral Show, 2018.

REMEMBERING BILL E. DEPUE

January 14, 1926 ♦ October 22, 2022

Bill helped me understand and appreciate rockhounding in Mojave Trails National Monument. His expertise of the area and deep knowledge of the hobby was invaluable for understanding the recreational activities occurring in the monument. Bill met me early in the morning at the Afon Canyon Campground and we spent the day exploring his favorite parts of the area for rockhounding. I was amazed with his energy and enthusiasm.

Kyle Sullivan
former Monument Manager, Mojave Trails

Bill has been such an integral part of the rockhound community's life. I loved how he set up a Genie at shows demonstrating capping, and boy, did he make beautiful caps! I will miss him.

Nancy B.
La Habra, California

I met Bill in 2006 at Mojave Desert Gem and Mineral Society. Both he and his sister Beth were big supporters of the club. Bill encouraged my interest in rock collecting, and I learned a great deal from him about cutting and polishing the agates that we collected on our field trips. We hiked all over the Cady Mountains, which he said had the very best agates, none better anywhere. Why would anyone give a choice go somewhere else? He knew more about the Cady Mountains than any living person I ever met. Although I was nine years younger than Bill, I could barely keep up with him as he scrambled over one ridge after another. As much as he inspired and awed me with his great knowledge, the quality I most admired about Bill was his kindness and generosity of spirit. He never had a contrary word about anyone. He loved the Mojave Desert and everything about it, and he was always happy to share it. Bill will be greatly missed, he truly was a unique person.

Joe Summers
Early, Texas (formerly Barstow)

All I know is his kind heart has been imprinted on our family's future generations through his family. His legacy will carry on into the future now by my grandchildren.
Tula

The beautiful memories we have with such a gifted and giving man, Bill Depue was always looking for that last special agate. Bill wasn't an ordinary man, he was and always will be a true legend. Our grandson Jonathan (Goober), at the age of 17 months, started rockhounding with Bill. Bill taught us all how to lick those agates. Still amazed at his ability to find agates and climb those hills. Hope you find those agates in Heaven. RIP, Bill.

Danny, Vivian Watts & Jonathan (Goober)

Bill had a lot of accomplishments in the lapidary field, but what I will always remember are the trips to collect and the conversations we had. I learned more than how to find pretty rocks from him. You will be missed, my friend.

Tim G.
Duncan, Arizona

Bill has been a great contributor to the San Diego Mineral & Gem Society for many, many years. Our building holds many of his machines from Diamond Pacific for all our lapidary work. I wish I could have been a participant on one of his field trips into the desert. He will be missed by many who knew him or who knew of his work in the lapidary business. Either way, I'm sure many will carry these memories forever.

LuAnn Benton
San Diego, California

I first met Bill in 2016, when he invited me to go along on a rock collecting trip to the Top Notch claim in the Cady Mountains. He would often say (with a smile), "I will be happy to share my desert with you." On that occasion and others since, it was always a special experience to see the beauty of the desert through his twinkling blue eyes. Bill, you made the world a better, happier place. Your life was a blessing and now your memory is too.

Lisbet Thoresen
Temecula, California

Bill was such a huge part of the Rockhound community. He will be missed at shows where he demonstrated and inspired many new lapidaries. Bill advocated to keep collecting areas open, becoming a spokesperson of sorts for us in the Mojave Trails National Monument. I was always happy to sit with him at DAC meetings. For me the adventures we had in the desert are most memorable.

Ruth H.
California

Bill helped me rebuild an old Diamond Pacific I got from Dee Smith more than a decade ago - still running fine. Thanks!

RIP.
Evelyn Hill

About 10 yrs ago Bill invited me to drive up from San Diego and go collecting in the Cady Mountains. He didn't say where, but others called it "Side-winder." He said he had the food for Saturday all ready. So, I trusted him. We spent the morning collecting, and at lunchtime Bill pulled out a bunch of previously cooked sweet potatoes and informed me that was lunch. He said they had everything needed to exist, and we didn't need anything else. From then on, I always brought my own food.

Jim Parrish
San Diego, California

I'm very sorry for your loss. Thank you so much for so many years of dedication and service to this beautiful craft.

Sincerely,
Itziar Parramon

We loved Bill. He taught us so much, and when we rockhound in the Cady's I will still look for Bill with his trusted rake to come up over the hill. We were truly blessed to be his friend.

Adam and Teresa Dean