



“Dinny the Dinosaur”

TREASURES OF THE BADLANDS

by Frank Dunn

A VERITABLE hoard of nature’s rare sculptures and one-of-a-kind ceramics awaits the imaginative explorer in the Borrego Badlands. Immediately west of the Salton Sea on both sides of Highway 99, a phenomenal deposit of concretions, as these sandstone formations are known, occurs practically all of the way to Borrego.

Nowhere else in the country does this freakish stone occur. At least, we have never encountered it in our numerous national forays. Hunting concretion specimens is a rather different kind of “rockhounding.”

Whereas veteran rock collectors quest for precious and semi-precious minerals with established intrinsic values, the concretion hunter is interested only in texture and shape, gratifying an esthetic desire. At one time or another most of us have let our imaginations discover forms in clouds or in outlines of trees, mountains, shrubs, even shadows. Very often a common snapshot reveals a surprising form in addition to its intended subject matter. Hunting concretions is just such an adventure—an exercise of the imagination, as well as of the limb.

Desirable for conducting these expeditions, but by no means a necessity, is the mechanical “camel” of the desert, the 4-wheeler. However, we’ve managed for lo these last twelve years in our half-ton pickup equipped with oversized, partially deflated tires, to traverse the terrain reasonably well. Several gunnysacks, a heavy screwdriver and a few 10-foot bamboo poles comprise the only equipment necessary to a concretion sortie. In recent years we’ve found a newsboy’s double pouch, slung over the shoulders to replace the cumbersome gunnysack, a solution for freeing hands and arms from the laborious toting task. The bamboo poles serve to mark a temporarily stashed cache for later pickup and a screwdriver is the tool perfect for scratching away sand which sometimes partially hides a worthy concretion. In most instances, our best pieces were 90% concealed. Caution may not be overemphasized in the operation of freeing them from their beds. It’s impossible to guess where a vital projection occurs and to amputate this member of the whole could be heartbreaking. In certain spots are scattered a profusion of “weirdies,” as we call them.

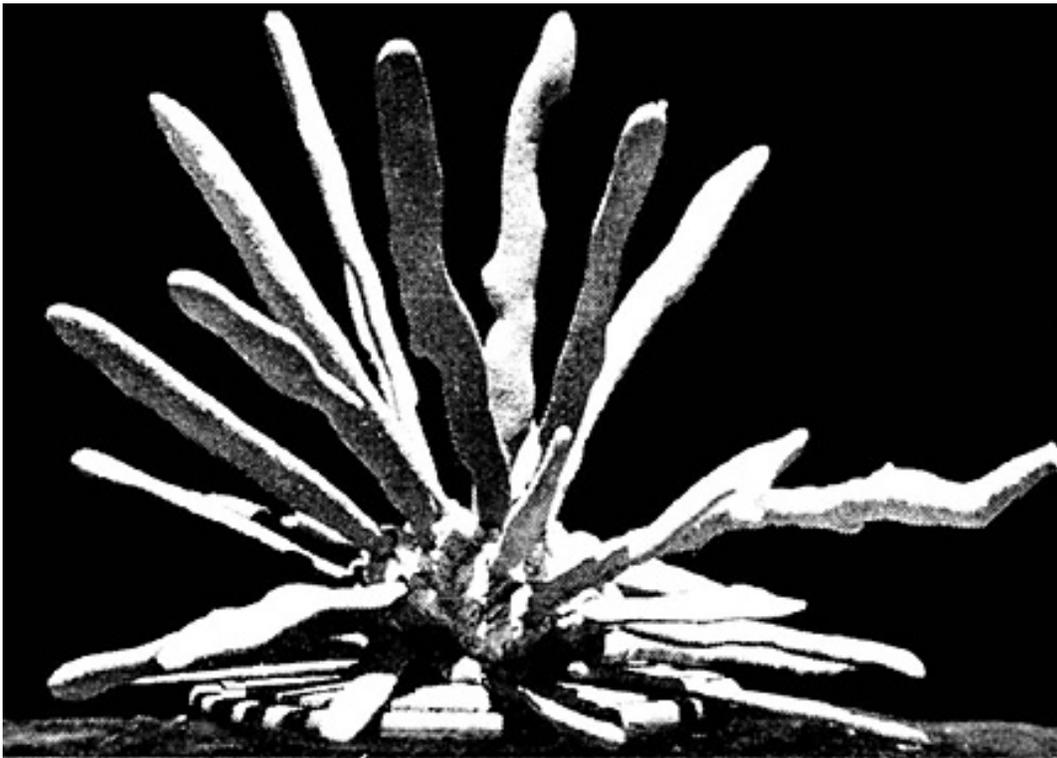


“Boreggo Wolfhound”

Strangely enough, they are all of similar texture, size and shape, as if members of one big happy family. This is more a rule than an exception. In one 50-foot circle, for example, we found about a dozen perfect replicas of oysters—same gray color, average size and grainy surface—and never have we found a similar batch since. Though they resembled petrified mollusks, we feel reasonably certain they were not.

Again, in a circumference of about 50-feet, the terrain was dotted with round orbs of diamond-hard consistency, sizes ranging from one-half inch to two inches. Never will we forget this sight, with late afternoon sun casting undulating patterns in brown, accented by sharp black shadows on tan sand.

November through March, preferably after one of our rare downpours, is the ideal time for the conquest of these rare concretions. Automobile traction is improved on the rain-packed sand and the pelting force of a storm helps to expose many of the partially buried specimens and send them tumbling along a channel. These particular functions of rain are secondary, however, to its primary function—that of sculptor.



“Bread of Stone”

Composed of sandstone, the grains of the formation vary in degree of hardness. A pelting downpour eradicates the softest parts in its first step of sculpturing, much as the artist first “blocks out” a model. Then fast moving freshets come into play, chiseling, sanding and chipping off additional soft sections as the piece is nudged and pushed along the path of the storm. As soft areas disappear a hard core is exposed, often in fantastic or eccentric forms. Thus demon erosion becomes artiste extraordinaire. Our first specimen looked so much like a Russian wolfhound that I fancied hearing a growl as we approached his lair. I hope you’ll forgive this fanciful coma I lapse into, but that’s the way these treasures effect us and I’m sure that once you’re victimized by this fascinating pastime you, too, will apply for membership in our exclusive dream world.

Our most outstanding find of a ten-year plunder is the sphinx-like head and shoulders of a little old lady we named “Tortilla Tia,” because it looks like a lovable Mexican mujer we knew in Zamora, Michoacan, who was extraordinarily adept at patti-caking tortillas. Displayed in a shadow box, she holds a choice spot in our museum.

Of particular delight to children is our “three bears” display. Papa, the big bear with jaw wide open and stentorian voice, growls, “Somebody’s been eating my porridge!” Slightly smaller, Mom says, “So what?” and Junior, the smallest, retorts, “Don’t mind him, Mom, he’s psycho.” Some of our specimens could not too closely be identified with any contemporary category, so we herded them into the realm of prehistorics.

Outstanding is a crooked-necked crawler, a formidable critter which might have escaped from a prop department of a mystery chiller film. Also among the prehistorics is a clumsy group of dinosaurs we’ve set into a replica of the La Brea Tar Pits.

Unique is a concretion molded like a fox. The sculpturing would seem like the work of a Dali, or perhaps an ovalist instead of a cubist. Its entire structure is a series of elliptical sections starting at one end with a proportionate head and terminating at the other with a well-formed bushy tail. We think he’s cute, but “cunning” would be a foxier description.

What animal pops into mind at the mention of the desert? Right, the camel. And quite naturally we have one replete with two lumps—but no cream, please. Just make one trip to the area and spend a forenoon or afternoon tramping around this desolate terrain. Even if you don’t find a worthwhile specimen, you’ll be well compensated by the salubrity of this invigorating desert land.

Like all rock-hunting expeditions you’ll occasionally draw a blank. We’ve found that with each foray, we’ve become more selective—the difference between a scavenger and a collector, perhaps. But even with a blank, we’re never without amusement and amazement as we climb back to Highway 99 and leave behind the treasure-laden Badlands with a promise to return some tomorrow for a new day of fun.

No stranger to *DESERT* readers is Frank Dunn (Jan. ‘40, June ‘63) who escaped New York during depression days and came west to “wait it out” on a ranch near Las Vegas. There he harvested fruit and vegetables which he traded for life’s other necessities at Mr. Ward’s dirt-floored store, in those days the leading market place of Las Vegas.

It was on this desert that Dunn first discovered the excitement Nature bestowed upon stones and twigs and thus began his incomparable collection, later acclaimed by the American Museum of Natural History, of which Dunn is now an associate member.

With his pretty wife, Celia, Dunn continually adds to his collection, seeking nature’s treasures near their Palm Desert home as well as on field trips afar.