

ST. PAT'S AND THE LEGEND OF THE C. T. BROWN SMITHSONITE

Why Us Curators Speak Fluent Blarney

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LEGENDS IN STONE WRIT LARGE

Many visitors to the mineral museum in Socorro, New Mexico have seen and admired our so-called “flagship” specimen – ‘mascot’ if you will – the rather large and superb C. T. Brown smithsonite, specimen no. 793 (Fig.1; Museum Catalog). The specimen is legendary, and rightly so: it is one of the best of the larger blue-green Kelly pieces to survive the ravages of time as well as the gaping jaws of early-day crushers, and it was carefully and lovingly preserved by C. T. and the Brown family. Legendary also due to a very persistent rumor over the years that would have us believe that this blue-green gem was used for the Blarney Stone during one or more of the annual St. Patrick’s Day ceremonies at the New Mexico School of Mines. For those of you who may be unfamiliar with the “legend,” herein are the essentials: once upon a time it was decreed by the Sons of Erin that a special day should be set aside at the School of Mines to honor the memory of the patron saint of engineering – St. Patrick. So it was that the seventeenth day of March was declared to be the hallowed Engineers’ Day at NMSM. The St. Pat’s ceremony, we should note, was held at many other engineering schools across the nation; thus it was further decreed that the NMSM ceremony should be the most extravagant of them all. In line with this extravagance it was decided that the honorable centerpiece of the ceremony, the precious Blarney Stone, must be nothing less than a large piece of gem-green smithsonite from the nearby Kelly mine.

This was entirely appropriate because Patrick Kelley himself, for whom the mine was allegedly named,¹ had only recently ventured forth from the “Ould Sod.” Thus the C. T. Brown specimen was carefully removed, as the legend goes, from its spot in the old Brown Hall mineral museum and, once a year fulfilled its royal destiny. During one such episode the precious stone was slightly injured – some say “bumped” while others say “dropped” – but the result was the same: one of the bubbles was chipped. Thereafter the mineral museum refused to loan the specimen for fear of further damage. Over the ensuing years the Sons of Erin were outraged that their precious and symbolic jewel was denied them, and vowed to steal it for the purpose. As a result, the piece was taken off display and kept under lock and key thereafter.



Fig 1 near here: The C. T. Brown centerpiece, museum specimen no. 793, is one of the valuable jewels of the Bureau's display. Photo courtesy of mineral museum archives.

The story sounds just plausible enough to believe, we suppose, viz.: first, it is obvious that our specimen has, at one time or another, suffered some damage. One "bubble" on the back side has indeed been "dinged." And, secondly, the specimen was in fact withheld from display for many years out of fear for its safety. Armed with this knowledge, your authors decided to plumb the very depths of this folk tale and put to rest, one way or the other, the legend of the St. Pat's smithsonite. Some mighty dark corners would be visited before the truth was ferreted out!

PROVENANCE AND PEDIGREE

The history of specimen no. 793 is such: C. T. Brown (figure 2), one of the staunchest supporters and benefactors of the fledgling New Mexico School of Mines, and a mining man of wide repute, obtained the specimen from the Kelly mine doubtless during the late 1880s or 1890s when the great carbonate stopes were in full production. We do not know whether Brown collected the specimen himself or acquired it from a colleague or miner. The piece was the center of attraction in Brown's mineralogical cabinet until the School of Mines acquired the entire collection in 1938 (NMSM, 1945, p 32; Regents, 1938). It follows then if this piece saw duty as the Blarney Stone such an event must have taken place after 1938.



Figure 2. The famous “cornfield” portrait of C.T. Brown, 1922. Thought to have been taken on Brown’s farm in the Socorro area, the pose was selected to emphasize the height of the corn crop or Brown (6’4”), or both! Photo NMBGMR #1504, courtesy Frank & Peggy Dailey.

When Robert M. North arrived at the Bureau to take over the duties recently vacated by mineralogist Joe Taggart (1978) the smithsonite was locked away and had been off display for some time. North and the senior author decided it was time to place it back on view and about 1980 it once again became the centerpiece of the New Mexico room in the old Workman museum. Frank Kottowski, our Director, was never really comfortable

with that, however. To help allay some of the fears we eventually installed a video camera in the museum and pointed it directly at that smithsonite! Later we installed after-hours motion detectors. I will reveal here that the motion detectors were quite real but no one other than the museum and one or two Bureau staff knew that the video camera was a sham – it wasn't functional. I suppose we should be grateful that we had no break-ins as a result. I should also state, for the record, that the motion sensors and video cameras in the new Workman Addition museum are VERY real, and all that transpires in that museum is faithfully recorded around the clock. Should a mouse cross paths with one of those motion detectors after hours, the campus police arrive within minutes!

Frank Kottowski, as it turns out, had good reason for being uncomfortable with the specimen back on display – it was, after all, quite valuable (a well-known eastern museum had allegedly offered the Bureau some \$20,000 for the piece, an offer immediately declined, fortunately). And there *was* at least one theft “scare” during the 1970s. Bureau mineralogist/curator Joe Taggart received a tip that a certain student -- one with a checkered past and a police record – was planning to steal it. The student, who shall remain anonymous, was a well-known purveyor of smithsonite stolen from the depths of the Cowboy Stope in the Kelly mine as he skillfully eluded, time after time, the watchful eye of Tony Otero & Sons. His last few forays had been unsuccessful, however, and his business was suffering. Thus he announced his intention to steal the C. T. Brown specimen, break it up, and sell it – talk about brazen! ² The tipster even showed Joe the access “hatch” leading to the crawl space in the ceiling through which the thief intended to remove the specimen. That was enough for Taggart and he wisely took the piece off display and locked it away to await a safer museum environment. Therefore we can safely state that the specimen was never used for a Blarney Stone from the time the senior author had been with the Bureau (1977 to present) nor was it so used during Taggart's tenure (1974-78). Likewise, Frank Kottowski verified the same back to the time the Bureau became responsible for the collection (a fact that is further supported by the senior author who was on the scene from September 1963 to June 1969 during which time a whitewashed rock painted with a green shamrock served as the official Blarney Stone).

The authors then decided to consult the “Oracle at Delphi” himself – that pillar of all knowledge worth knowing relative to NMSM/NMIMT for the past 50 years: Dr. Clay T. Smith. Little has escaped his finely tune oculars during that time: some students have accused him of harboring a formidable photographic memory behind eyes equipped with reticulated, if not graduated, lenses! Most importantly, Smith was almost single-handedly responsible for oversight of the mineral collection from the day he arrived in Socorro in February 1947 to the time it was turned over to the Bureau in 1964. Had we finally tracked down the origin of the legend? Alas, though he too had *heard* the legend, he could clearly state that at no time since he had been in Socorro had that specimen been used for the Blarney Stone. Any such use had to predate him!

We then hunted up Cyril “Cy” Perusek, NMSM Class of '43, another alumnus with an equally remarkable memory, and who had actually worked in the museum. Cy jumped on the question like a St. Pat's Honor Guard would jump on a Shillelagh and stated, “That smithsonite was never used for a Blarney Stone or anything else for that matter during the fours year I was there. It was **never** allowed out of that museum!” Cy went on to say that it was considered ‘way too valuable even then. This sentiment was echoed by Walt

Fulmer, NMSM Class of 1940. Herein your mineralogical sluths have documented the life of specimen 793 from the day it arrived on campus in 1938 to its present position on the south wall of the Workman Addition museum. Most certainly this 75lb chunk of zinc carbonate never saw a St. Pat's Ceremony in its life!

THROUGH THE MISTS OF TIME

Yet that legend is *awfully* persistent! Could it be that your mineralogical sluths have failed to dig deeply enough into the murky past? Yes Laddies and Lassies, that is exactly the case for some seventy-three Highland Mists have coalesced o'er the Land O' The Green, and uncounted drams of Tullamoor Dew passed into the great beyond since St. Pat and his Honor Guard performed their libations over a chunk of Kelly green. Should you be fortunate enough to have access to the very first New Mexico School of Mines yearbook, the 1925 "Porphyry," (and there are fewer copies extant than Leprechauns at the end of the rainbow), you will find within that rare tome on page 104 the following account:

"The main (St. Patrick's) ceremonies started at sunset, March 16, when the Class of '28 under the command of the... Guards of Honor, brought the Blarney Stone from its position in the Mineralogy Museum to the Main Dormitory and guarded it faithfully until sunup the next morning. The Blarney Stone is a beautiful green mineral that glitters like a jewel. It is composed of Smithsonite."

Was its value fully appreciated by these future Knights of St. Patrick? You bet it was for "it would have been a terrible disgrace is anyone had stolen the stone." Thus the freshmen guarded the stone as if their lives depended on it:

"(They) were compelled to make an announcement every hour in front of Driscoll and Barnard Halls to the effect that it was such and such a time and everything was well with the Blarney Stone. It seems that they were somewhat worried for fear the upperclassmen would lose some sleep worrying about the safety of the precious stone and they armed themselves with a big brass drum, bugles, bells, and other noise making devices, so the rest of the students would know that they were faithful to their trust."

Finally the freshmen "brought the stone to its resting place as the sun rose over the Manzano Mountains, happy with the thought that there was no blemish on their perfect record." Later that evening at the Grand Ball, a telegram was read at 10:30 announcing that St. Pat and His Royal Guards had arrived in Socorro. All the engineers rushed outside the ballroom (the old gymnasium) to greet him and then marched back in "in solemn order to escort their patron saint to his throne." Two freshmen carried the Blarney Stone. The seniors advanced to the throne where St. Pat performed the miner's blessing with his Crozier – a transit rod made up with a crossed pick, shovel, and double jack. Each senior knelt to kiss the Blarney Stone and was "dubbed a Knight of the Ancient and Honorable Order of St. Patrick, [solemnly] taking the oath that they would advance their

chosen profession [that which Georgius Agricola had named “A Calling of Peculiar Dignity” so many centuries before], work for the welfare of mankind, thereby bringing honor and Glory to their Alma Mater (Fig 2).” By the most incredible stroke of luck, we have a photograph of that very first St. Pat’s ceremony (Fig. 3) and even a casual examination of same clearly reveals a large smithsonite nesting on a pillow, securely strapped to a pallet. After the proceedings, the smithsonite was returned to its position of prominence in the mineral museum. But something happened after the second ceremony in 1925 for the museum thereafter refused to permit the removal of the specimen, whereupon a large, and far less valuable, chunk of green olivine became the new Blarney Stone (Porphyry, 1926, p 82). Was the smithsonite slightly damaged – giving rise to that “other” part of the legend? We’ll doubtless never know because the smithsonite visible in this 1924 photograph is NOT the specimen we have in the museum today.³ A close examination of the photo reveals that the earlier specimen, while similar, is somewhat wider at the base and not as high – i.e., its height to length ratio is different. Moreover, this specimen was lost along with all else when Old Main was destroyed by the 1928 fire.

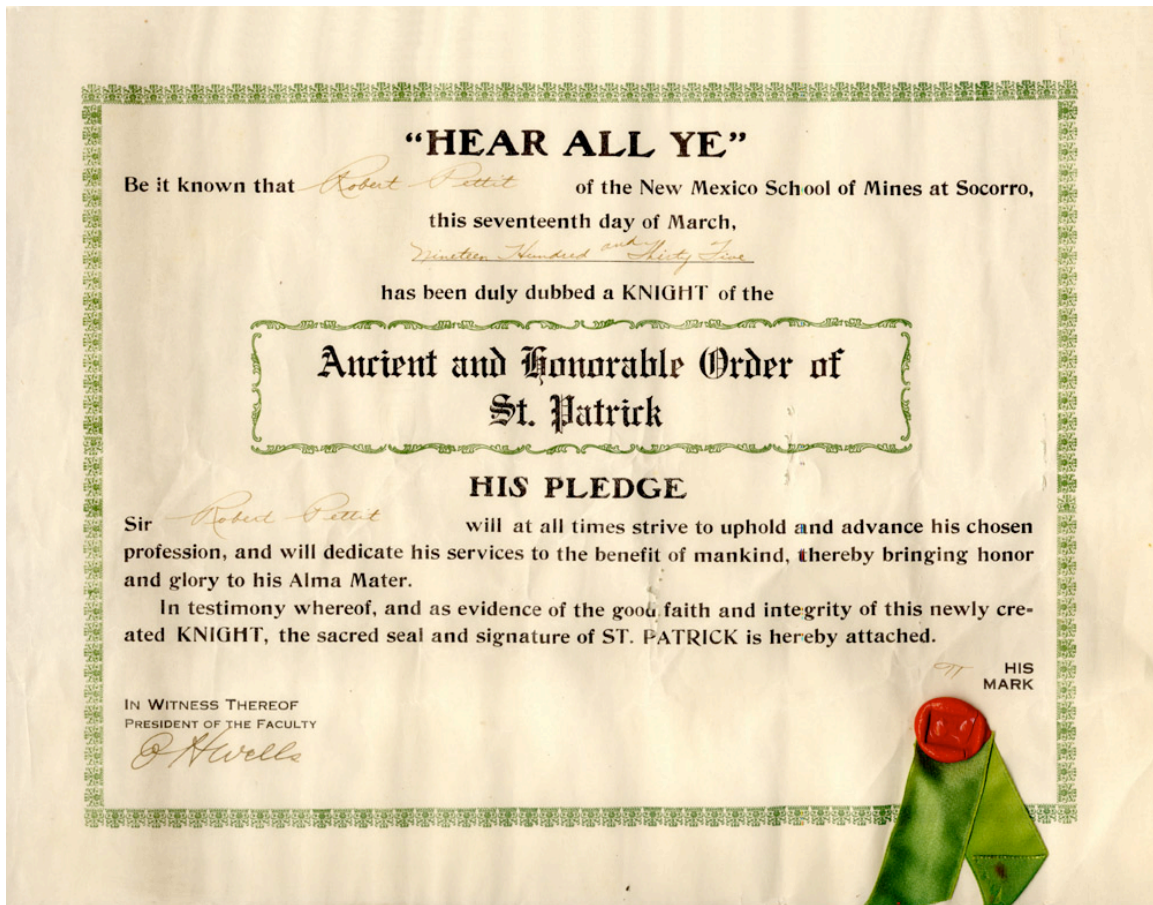


Fig 3: each inductee was issued an “official” certificate attesting their taking the oath of St. Patrick. A very rare example of the certificate, this one issued to Robert F. Pettit 17 March 1935, and signed by NMSM President Edgar H. Wells, is preserved in the senior author’s collection.



Fig 4: This view of the very first St. Patrick's ceremony at the NMSM in 1924 very clearly shows the large smithsonite "Blarney Stone." Photo courtesy of NMIMT Photo Archives, NMBGMR #01829.

SPECIMEN #793 IS NO "SHAM" ROCK

Now you know the whole story and should someone in the future ask you if you were aware that the C. T. Brown smithsonite had once been the centerpiece in the St. Patrick's Engineers' Day ceremony, you can now tell them with complete authority, "sorry, Pard, that's just a bunch of "blarney."

FOOTNOTES

¹: Fayette A. Jones in "New Mexico Mines and Minerals," World's Fair Edition, 1904, p 120, tells us that [Col. John S.] "Hutchason found (i.e. discovered the deposit that would become) the Kelly mine and turned it over to his friend Andy Kelly to locate." Kelly apparently later failed to keep the assessment work current and rather than see another claimant acquire the Kelly by relocation, Hutch "jumped" it – i.e. reclaimed it first. Hutch did indeed locate the Kelly Lode on 16 December 1879 (Socorro Mining Deeds, Book B, p 127-128) but he was probably *re-locating* it. For a most interesting variation on Jones' story, see the Socorro *Bullion* (newspaper) 10 April 1886, p 2, in which we are informed that P. H. Kelley, "the original locator of the Kelly mine...has been spending several days in Socorro. The mine and the town of Kelly is named after him, but by accident an "e" in the name has been dropped." Brown (1916, p 197) also states the Kelly was

located by Patrick Kelly (sic) and gives the date of 1866. Obviously both accounts cannot be true: the *Bullion* article dates from just 20 years after the fact while Brown arrived in the district many years before Jones and was personally acquainted with Kelley. Jones account, on the other hand, is doubtless based upon hearsay and is considered the least plausible!

²: The specimen is far too recognizable to be sold “as is” – broken up it would be much less valuable but more easily disposable!

³: Is it possible this old photo is playing tricks on our eyes and the smithsonite in the view really is specimen no. 793? No, for this would require that C. T. Brown himself loaned the specimen for the 1924 ceremony and, as noted in the Porphyry, the ‘blarney stone’ specimen was already in the old museum collection, and there is no question it was lost in the 1928 fire.

REFERENCES CITED

Museum Catalog; detailed catalog, both analog and digital, of the New Mexico Bureau of Mines & Mineral Resources mineral collections.

NMSM; Annual Catalog of the New Mexico School of Mines. The catalog for 1945 states, on page 32, “The Brown mineral collection was added by purchase in 1938....”

Porphyry; Biennial Yearbook of the New Mexico School of Mines for 1924-25 and 1926-27 (vols. 1 and 2).

Regents, 1938; unpublished minutes of the Board of Regents, NMSM. Voucher #5705 issued February 4, 1938 shows a disbursement to T. (Tom) C. Brown, Cony Brown’s then surviving son, in the amount of \$200, the only such voucher to any member of the Brown family.

OTHER SOURCES

1): Author’s recollections and collection.

2): Photo archives, New Mexico Institute of Mining & Technology.

3): Personal communications with Dr. Clay T. Smith, Dr. Frank E. Kottlowski, Joseph E. Taggart, Cyril Perusek, and Walt Fulmer.