

Collector Profile:

RALPH CLARK

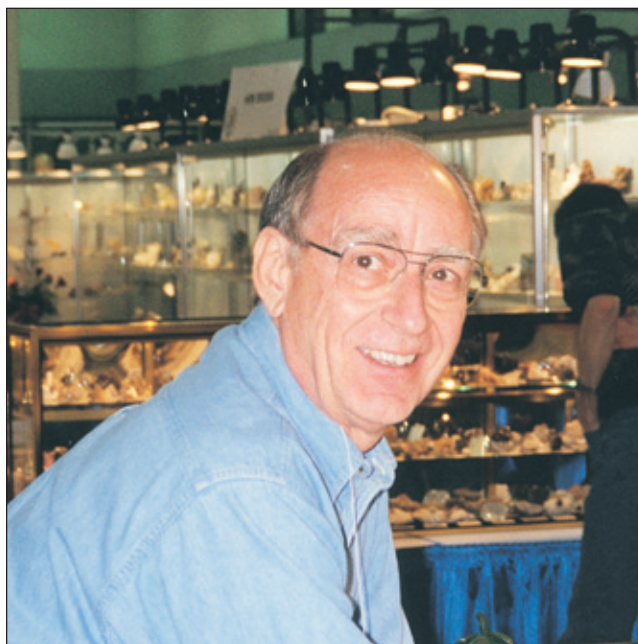
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Interested in building a “small” collection of large significance? Look no farther for a role model than Ralph Clark, a thumbnail collector from Denver, Colorado. His amazing accumulation of little jewel-like one-inch specimens shows connoisseurship in aesthetics, science and rarity, driven by passion and just plain perseverance.

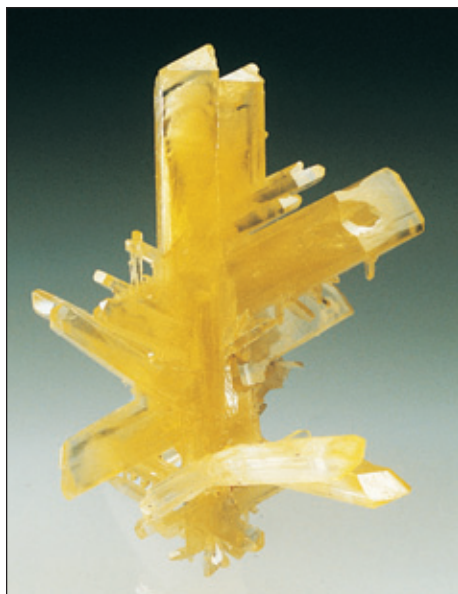
Thumbnail collectors are a breed somewhat apart from the larger mineral-collecting community. They tend to have their own goals, priorities and enthusiasms. But mineral folk of other inclinations who don't try to steer completely clear of the thumbnail world will have noticed how commonly the name of Ralph Clark comes up in discussions, and with what high respect the name is mentioned. Ralph collects *only* thumbnails (specimens that would fit within a one-inch cube), and his constantly evolving collection seems to stay at around 250 specimens of amazingly high overall quality. Piece-for-piece it is clearly one of the finest such collections on earth. Indeed the jargon among many thumbnailers these days has evolved to include the term “Ralph Clark specimen.” This is understood instantly as denoting not that the piece is necessarily owned by him but that the possibility of improving upon it defies the imagination. A “Ralph Clark specimen” is *the one* you would take if you could choose among *all* those of that kind which you have seen or might ever expect to see. Now that is high praise! To understand this, simply examine the photos shown here of “Ralph Clark specimens” which happen actually to be owned by Ralph Clark. Any questions?!

Ralph is not a professional mineralogist, not a curator, prospector, or dealer, not even a particularly wealthy man. He is an “amateur” who came to serious mineral collecting from a successful career in business. He now works—“works?”—close to full-time at cultivating his mineralogical knowledge, friendships, and contacts while refining his connoisseurship so that he may keep shaping and re-shaping his collection. Sitting down with Ralph during the Tucson or Denver shows for a little “show and tell” is always a high point. The specimens he has in his pocket can be memorable enough, of course, but trading stories and listening to Ralph tell about how he came by his acquisitions is always fun. With only a little irony, Ralph himself likes to call the passion for serious collecting “a healthy sickness,” but it is obviously much more health and enjoyment than pathology as Ralph does it.



Ralph Clark, Tucson Show 1998; Cal Greaber photo.

There are no special mineralogical antecedents in Ralph's early life: his father, John P. Clark, was a tractor salesman; his mother, Mary J. Clark, a full-time housewife. Ralph was born (April 12, 1937) in Denver, and there he has stayed all his life except for a three-year hitch in the Air Force and one business-related, two-year stay in Dallas, Texas. At the Community College of Denver and at the University of Colorado he studied electrical engineering, business administration and consumer electronics. His career has



Chromian cerussite; Dundas Extension mine, Dundas, Tasmania; 2.6 cm; W. Wilson photo.



Veselyite; Black Pine mine, Phillipsburg, Montana; 1.4-cm crystal; W. Wilson photo.



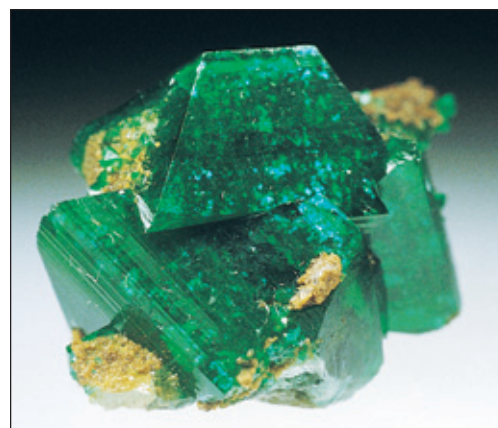
Corundum (ruby); Jegdalek, Afghanistan; 1-cm crystal; W. Wilson photo.



Bournonite; Yan Gou Shi, Hunan, China; 2.3 cm; W. Wilson photo.



Cuprian adamite with ferrilotharmeyerite; Tsumeb, Namibia; 1.2-cm crystals; W. Wilson photo.



included 17 successful years with J. C. Penney in positions of increasing responsibility in Product Service management, ranging from Manager of their "pilot service center" in Denver, to District Product Service Manager, and later Regional Product Service Manager in Dallas, where he was responsible for planning, organizing, developing and implementing product services and meeting business objectives and goals for a nine-state region. When J. C. Penney decided to discontinue the Product Service branch of its operations in 1983, Ralph went on to similar success working for RCA as Manager of their consumer and commercial service operations branch in Denver, then for General Electric (which acquired RCA in 1986) as Regional Quality Assurance Manager for their Major Appliance Division. His work there covered various programs in quality assurance, replacement parts, customer rela-

tions, technical training, and consumer services in the field of electronic and major appliance products for the company's largest geographic region. In 1989, when General Electric downsized their operations and closed their Denver Regional Office, he chose to retire from General Electric, although they had offered him the option of moving to Louisville, Kentucky to continue with the company.

Currently Ralph works a full-time job for a real estate management company. Unpretentiously comfortable, and with three grown



Chromian spodumene (hiddenite); Adams Farm, Hiddenite, North Carolina; 3.3 cm; J. Scovil photo.



Manganoan adamite; Ojuela mine, Mapimi, Durango, Mexico; 3 cm; W. Wilson photo.



Meta-autunite; São Pedro mine, Malacacheta, Brazil; 3.1 cm; W. Wilson photo.



Fluorite; Chamonix, France; 2.3-cm crystal; J. Scovil photo.



Gold; Colorado Quartz mine, Mariposa County, California; 2 cm; W. Wilson photo.

children (and four grandchildren) doing well on their own, Ralph does not really need the extra real-estate money for normal living expenses. In fact, he could just as well retire, but he enjoys using the extra income for—you guessed it—building his mineral collection. This has to be one of the best approaches I’ve ever heard of to the archetypal problem of how a man might build a new, active, interesting life after retiring from a successful business career: Pursue the world’s best South African poldervaartite thumbnail! (Hey, it’s more exciting than golf!)

JoAnn, Ralph’s wife of 45 years, has other interests herself, but she is wholly supportive of Ralph’s passion for minerals and is respectful of his concentrated pursuit of connoisseur thumbnails. (Although I do remember him complaining wistfully about not having found anything at the Tucson Show a few years ago . . . “My wife would call it a ‘great show’!” he said with a warm laugh!)

It is always interesting to learn how someone first became a mineral collector. In Ralph’s case the hobby had its origins in family life. One day back in 1969 Ralph’s son Todd had come

home from first grade very excited by a “show and tell” (naturally!) about fossils that one of the other kids had presented in class. Ralph and JoAnn soon found themselves joining the Gates Rock and Mineral Club and haunting rock shops during family trips. Tumbling, cabochon-cutting, and other lapidary amusements eventually gave way to crystal pursuits when Manuel Ontiveros, an El Paso, Texas dealer in Mexican minerals, showed the Clarks his personal collection, the first serious one they had ever seen. Ontiveros pointed them toward the Tucson Show and was otherwise very encouraging, but strongly advised that they should acquire only *high quality* specimens, and not go “vacuum-cleaning” around the shows, merely scooping up pretty rocks in quantity. Promptly disregarding that advice, the Clarks purchased a flat of 20 Mexican miniatures for \$20 from Ontiveros himself. But they soon learned to do better.

In 1971 mineral dealer Richard Kosnar (“Mineral Classics”) moved to the Denver area, and the Clarks, after seeing his ads in the *Mineralogical Record*, paid him a visit. Ralph and his other son,

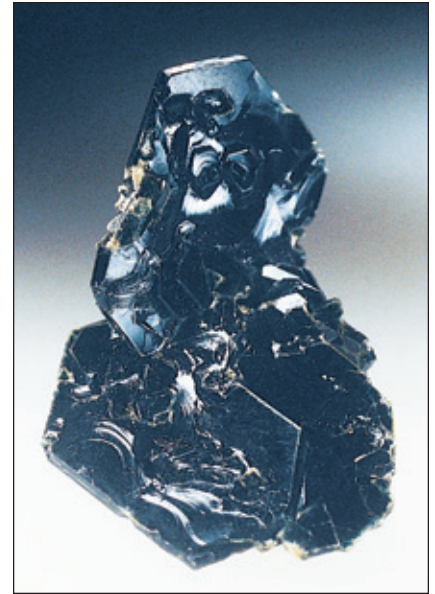


**Fluorapophyllite; Poona, India;
3 cm; W. Wilson photo.**

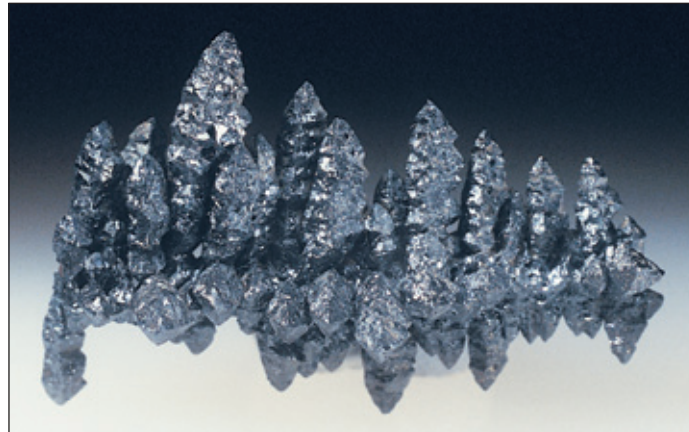


**Proustite; Svornost mine, St.
Joachimsthal, Czech Republic;
2.7 cm; W. Wilson photo.**

**Iowaite; Phalaborwa, Transvaal, South
Africa; 2.3 cm; W. Wilson photo.**



**Silver; Kongsberg, Norway; 1.5 cm;
W. Wilson photo.**



**Acanthite-coated
silver; Himmels-
fürst mine,
Freiberg, Ger-
many; 2.7 cm;
W. Wilson photo.**



**Polybasite; Fres-
nillo, Zacatecas,
Mexico; 2.1 cm;
W. Wilson photo.**

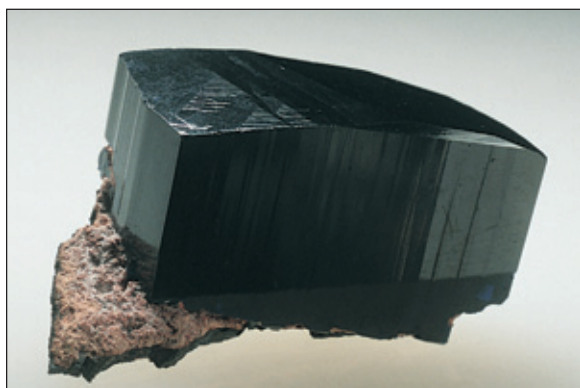
Don, became friends with Kosnar. They accepted him as their mentor in mineral collecting, and learned much from him. Although Kosnar himself favored miniatures, Ralph and Don zeroed in on thumbnails and began to build a serious, sophisticated, all-out all-thumb-nail collection. Todd lost interest in collecting around 1974, but Don and Ralph continued to build their first collection until they sold it in 1977, just as Don was entering college. Today Ralph admits that (like many of us who have ever sold our minerals) there is a handful of pieces from his older collection that he would love to have back again.

A hiatus set in after 1977, and Ralph ended up waiting until 1986 to begin collecting again, all on his own this time. The first-generation collection was fine enough to have won the AFMS National Award for thumbnail minerals in 1974 and 1977. The second-generation collection has scored six more major competitive-display awards: "Best of Species—Thumbnails" at the Denver Gem & Mineral Show in 1990 and 1993, "Best Master Minerals" at the Tucson Gem & Mineral Show of 1991, the "Richard Pearl Trophy" at the Denver Gem & Mineral Shows in 1992 and 1995, and the AFMS National Award for thumbnail minerals in 1993.

**Crostedtite; Wheal Jane
Cornwall, England; 1.5 cm
across; W. Wilson photo.**



**Azurite; Tsumeb, Namibia;
2.3 cm; W. Wilson photo.**

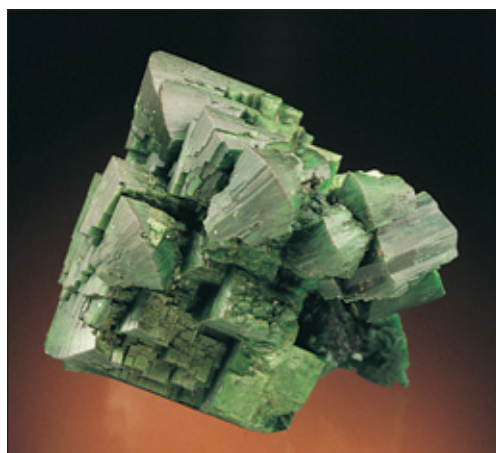
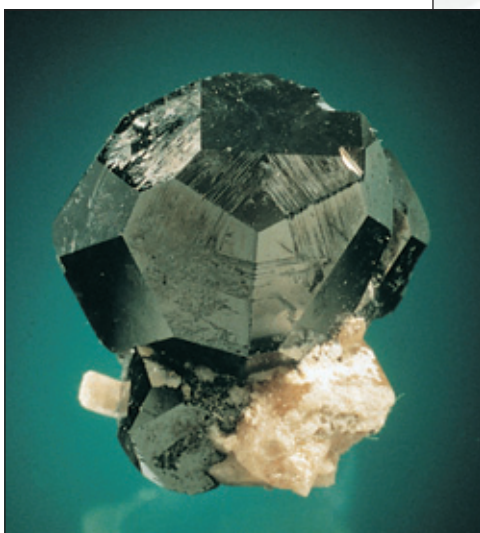


**Cuprian smithsonite;
Tsumeb, Namibia;
1.3-cm crystal;
W. Wilson photo.**

**Benitoite; Benitoite
Gem mine, San Benito
County, California;
1.7-cm crystal;
W. Wilson photo.**

**Metatorbernite;
Margabal, Aveyron,
France; 2.2 cm;
J. Scovil photo.**

**Bixbyite; Thomas Range,
Utah; 2.1 cm;
J. Scovil photo.**



Ralph has displayed about a dozen times at major shows, not always competitively, but always effectively. His top 35 pieces, set against black satin in his custom-built case, have made passing showgoers stop as if having been suddenly nailed to the floor, their minds filled with wonder and covetousness (“maybe he’d trade me *that* one for my own best three dozen pieces . . .”).

The philosophy that underlies a collection of this sort is also simple, and simply inferred, although Ralph states it well: “it doesn’t take a fortune to build a significant collection . . . what’s needed is a capacity to learn, a degree of expendable income, a

cultivated eye, and a singular passion to collect only what you love.” What Ralph loves are mineral species that are essentially at their best in the thumbnail size range, and not known to improve in larger sizes. He does make exceptions: recently, for example, he acquired some extraordinary thumbnails of Freiberg silver, N’Chwaning mine rhodochrosite, Moroccan erythrite, and even Dal’negorsk fluorite (the exquisite “invisible” octahedron on sphalerite pictured here), all of which also exist in world-class miniatures and cabinet specimens. And once in a while he can’t resist buying very inexpensive and “ordinary” specimens simply because they



Fluorite; 2nd Sovietskiy mine, Dal'negorsk, Russia; 1.4 cm crystal; W. Wilson photo.



Crocoite; Dundas, Tasmania; 1.7-cm crystal; W. Wilson photo.

Milarite; Jaguaracu, Minas Gerais, Brazil; 2 cm; W. Wilson photo.

Poldervaartite; Wessels mine, South Africa; 2 cm; J. Scovil photo.



strike him as interesting in some way, or because they somehow appeal to his aesthetic sense. Nevertheless, the really distinctive and most impressive pieces in the collection are those which combine rarity of species, exceptional form and/or crystal size (for the species), absolute freedom from damage, and the most impeccable aesthetics. Some of his pieces, small as they are, are arguably the world's best examples of their species! The big question that always comes to mind is one that Ralph hears a lot: "How do you do it?"

He does it through the constant activity and patient tenacity that are Ralph's real hallmarks as a collector. He is quick to point out that, if you really seek the best of the best, you cannot be content with just saving your money to be spent all within a few days, on whatever happens to meet your eye at shows or on other spot occasions. Rather, his approach is to keep up a constant flow of inquiries, letters and follow-up letters, connections to connections, etc., with personal visits as necessary, directed at potential sources literally throughout the world. He has often pursued a particular specimen for many years before finally acquiring it. Once, in the company of his good friend Dr. Steve Neely (a cabinet-specimen collector—no risk of competition between them), Ralph impulsively made a quick trip to Germany in pursuit of some specimens. He came back empty-handed but, typically, consummated some

years later the negotiations begun on that trip. Another German experience Ralph likes to relate is the one about how, when he was staying at the home of a German dealer just before the Munich Show, he picked up a copy of the German magazine *Lapis*, and saw there a color photograph of a blue euclase specimen from Zimbabwe. It was specimen-love at first sight. At the show a few days later, he located the stand of the dealer who owned the specimen, "camped out" there for days of negotiating and sweet-talking, and finally walked out of the show with the prize. The qualities of "focus," specific goals and priorities, plus flexibility, alertness and open-mindedness are essential to his approach. People skills, too, are important, along with rationality about working within a budget, tact, warmth, and a fundamental generosity of spirit.

Sharing is one of the joys of collecting, and Ralph is always an eager and complimentary audience when others want to show off their own minerals. Likewise he hospitably welcomes appreciative visitors to his own home, and is always up for a "show and tell," especially if the guest is a serious thumbnailer. (Weekends are best for visits: remember, he still works more or less full-time to make all this collecting possible.) He has no "mineral room" or other sort of display facility in his home—just a dinette table, a strong lamp, and a warm coffee pot. After all, one advantage of collecting thumbnails is that you can have a relatively large and very important collection, yet put the entirety of it into a couple of small boxes easily stored in a safe-deposit box, to be carried out and presented effortlessly, like servings of gourmet courses—which is exactly how Ralph does it.

In his demanding specialty Ralph is one of today's top collectors, and knowing him is a treat, whether you are a fellow collector of thumbnails or not. And if you *are*, well, a little humbling is good for all of us sometimes. ☒