

Chuckawalla Slim



Chuckawalla Slim, "Rockologist," beside his pickup truck/shop in Papago Park near Phoenix (1920's). Note the rattlesnake skin and animal hides on the roof, and the rock hammer stuck in his belt.

(fl. 1920's->1960)

Edwin Vose—also known as Chuckawalla* Slim—was a colorful character who sold minerals by the roadside in California and Arizona beginning around 1925 (his 1950 ad in *Lapidary Journal* commemorates his 25 years in the "rock and mineral business," and a 1956 ad mentions that he started "30 years ago selling the best in crystallized rocks and minerals").



Chuckawalla Slim with some amethyst geodes (*Popular Mechanics* magazine, 1946)

Edwin Howard Vose II was born in Hyde Park, Massachusetts on February 27, 1902, the son of Lillian Louise Lewis and Henry Goodnow Vose (son of Dr. Edwin Howard Vose, a prominent Maine physician and Assistant Surgeon of the U.S. Navy during the Civil War). His parents moved around, from

ROCK COLLECTORS — Attention PHANTOM CRYSTALS

Two only smoky quartz xls. Many phantoms, \$10.00 each. 1 only apatite, fine phantom, \$100.00. Double terminated qtz. xls. with phantoms, \$2.50 each. Book phantoms in iceland spar, \$3.50 to \$5.00. 1 only selenite xl. with phantom, \$5.00. 2 only qtz. xls. with hematite inclusions on phantoms, \$5.00 each. 1 very choice large qtz. xl. unusual phantoms, museum spec., \$50.00. 1 only beautiful salmon pink phantom, in clear qtz. xl., \$25.00. I specialize in fine crystal groups, too, from \$1.00 up. War stamps gladly accepted.

THE ROCKOLOGIST
(Chuckawalla Slim)

Garvey Trailer Park
941 E. Garvey Blvd.,
GARVEY 32 P., CALIF.

Chuckawalla Slim's ad in *The Mineralogist* (August 1944)

Maine to Norfolk, Massachusetts (where Henry worked as a clerk in a jewelry store); to New Haven, Connecticut. In 1919, at the age of 17, Slim joined the Navy (where he was given the nickname of "Slim"), and then rejoined his family in Connecticut after his discharge in 1921. That same year he and



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his parents and sister Elise all moved to Washington State, camping out all the way for 28 days across the U.S. (He later claimed that he had moved west at the age of 12, in a covered Chuckawalla Slim's ad in *The Mineralogist* (August 1944)

wagon pulled by burros.) He attended school for a while in Washington, then worked for the Merchant Marine until seasickness forced him to end his seafaring career.

In the early 1920s Slim found two moonstones, and from then on was fascinated by minerals and rocks. Soon he decided he could make an enjoyable living collecting odd rocks and specimens in the desert, and selling them to tourists. He sold specimens from a mule-drawn wagon or from the back of his pick-up truck, which he would park at the side of the highway or in places frequented by tourists, such as Papago Park near Phoenix. In those early days he sold Indian bead work, "petrified apples" (a kind of fossil), animal-skin rugs, skulls and

rattlesnake skins as well as minerals. On the 1930 census Slim listed his occupation as “salesman, curios.”

By the 1940's Slim was operating out of a mobile mineral shop in a 30-foot yellow trailer (pulled at first by an old Willys pickup truck and later by a Model T Ford). On the back of the trailer was a sign saying "50 Feet to Pass. Vaya con Dios." As the customer entered the trailer he saw cabinets of drawers on either side, with choicer specimens displayed on top of the cabinets. Some mineral collectors considered his prices outrageous, but apparently he did well enough in sales anyway.

From the beginning of his business in the 1920s, Edwin styled himself as “Chuckawalla Slim,” and referred to himself as "the Rockologist," back in the days when "rockhound" was still a common and unobjectionable term for a serious mineral collector. His actual home was in the Los Angeles area (first in Glendale in the 1930s, then in Arcadia in the 1940s, and in Alhambra in 1942-1946). He was married to a nice, plumpish, soft-spoken woman whom he called "Chloride Kate.” But he appears to have spent much of his time (literally) on the road. He would park his "trailer rock store" (as he called it) along the roadside south of Cathedral City, near Palm Springs, California during the winter months, and sell mineral specimens to passing motorists. Not far from the trailer he had constructed a latrine which was just a hole in the ground with a flimsy shelter around it. This unsanitary arrangement eventually prompted the Riverside County Health Department to make him move his trailer off of the property.

Slim also ventured into Arizona, and was frequently found plying his wares in Phoenix, sometimes in the company of another itinerant peddler named Shorty Jones. For a while Slim and John Hilton, a noted desert artist, operated a shop together in Indian Wells, California. Slim occasionally advertised, asking interested mineral collectors to write to him with their addresses, and he would call on them the next time he and his trailer rock store were in their vicinity. In 1937, in the *Bulletin of the California Federation of Mineralogical Societies*, his ad read: "THE ROCKOLOGIST -- My portable stock of fine mineral specimens can be seen at Bakersfield during the Federation Convention. My stock of minerals comes directly to your door. CHUCKAWALLA SLIM, Palm Springs, California."

Slim cultivated his rough-hewn "desert rat" persona, and even sold photos of himself standing next to his pickup truck in the Arizona desert. He probably did relatively little field collecting on his own, though he did claim to mine for specimens in the desert periodically. He mostly bought specimens wholesale from other southern California dealers (including Russell Filer), and traded for specimens as well. As a teenager, Peter Bancroft lived just a block away from Slim in Glendale in the early 1930s, and would sometimes bicycle to Slim's house with his buddy Ed Swoboda to trade specimens; according to Pete, Slim generally got the best of them in the transactions.

Slim had an encouraging influence on other young collectors, including John Parnau, John Jago Trelawney and Kay Robertson. Kay first purchased minerals from him in 1942, and remembers that Slim carried some surprisingly good and varied

worldwide mineral specimens. In that year he advertised his address as 824 N. 2nd Street, Alhambra, California, then later from the Deluxe Trailer Park in Cathedral City.

In March 1943 Slim announced, "To get the war won quicker, I have taken a job at Lockheed for the duration," saying he would only be open Sundays. In 1945 he ran an ad in *The Mineralogist* offering 40 assorted specimens for \$10, giving his mailing address as the Garvey Trailer Park in Garvey, California. Kay Robertson recalls being proud of having talked him down from \$10 to \$5 on a fine English calcite miniature in 1952. His ads (in *The Mineralogist*) for "The Rockologist" in Cathedral City persisted at least through March of 1961, after which he remarried (to Mae Gray Ormsby in Imperial County in April 1961) and went into retirement. Mae died in 1964 (she was 18 years his senior), and Slim moved to Pasadena, where he lived quietly until his death on April 29, 1975. He had no children.

Slim's sister, Elise Vose Caward (1906-1993), arranged for the sale of his collection of around 400 specimens and his stock, including his trailer with 54 display cases and cabinets, and a separate "extensive and unique collection of gold specimens."

Slim was a teller of tall tales; one of the few that have been recorded is as follows:

I was doing a little mining at the time, said Chuckawalla, and had a tin can dump not far from my tent. The tin cans attracted a lot of flies and the flies in turn brought all the lizards out of the

surrounding hills. Pretty soon a roadrunner came along, sized up the situation, and decided he'd hit a bonanza. He took up a claim and started swallowing lizards. Pretty soon he was a very fat bird, but the supply of lizards was almost used up. Then one day the roadrunner made a stab at a lizard and only got the tail. That came off and the rest of the lizard escaped into a hole. The roadrunner stood there a minute staring at the wriggling tail and then at the hole. Pretty soon he swallowed the tail. The next lizard he saw, he deliberately made a grab at the tail. It came off, and he gulped it down and made no attempt to catch the lizard. He caught on fast, that bird. He never swallowed another lizard whole; just took their tails and waited for them to grow another crop. He was doing fine when I moved on, and I'll bet he's there yet, living off the produce of his lizard farm.

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***Chuckawalla** (or "chuckwalla") refers to the large, herbivorous, desert-dwelling iguanid lizard, *Sauromalus obesus*, common in the Southwest. The name is derived from the Shoshone word "tcaxxwal" or "caxwal," the form used by the Cahuilla Indians of southeastern California and originally written in Spanish as "chacahuala." In Chuckawalla Slim's case, however, he may have named himself in reference to the Chuckawalla Mountains or Chuckawalla Valley in southern California. A number of colorful, real-life characters of the Old West carried such geographical nicknames -- for example, Turkey Creek Jack Johnson (1852-1887) in Tombstone and Chuckawalla Bill Simmons. Fiction writers liked the name Chuckawalla, too: in Peter B. Keane's novel *The Parson of Panamint* (filmed in 1916), there is a grizzled old prospector named Chuckawalla Bill Redfield. More recently, the movie *Riders of Death Valley* (1941) includes an old prospector called Chuckawalla Charlie, and Pat Buttram portrayed Chuckawalla Jones in the 1949 Gene Autry movie *Riders in the Sky*.