

Gold panners scour Southeastern Pennsylvania's streams

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GLEN ROCK — Gold. The very word conjurs up visions of grizzled, bearded prospectors grubbing in a stream with an iron frying pan, a pack-laden donkey grazing against a background of western mountains.

But panning for gold in York County? Or in Lancaster or Chester County? Gold, in the hills and meadows of southeastern Pennsylvania's rich farming country, has apparently been one of the best kept secrets around.

Don't rush out to sell your pickup and buy a donkey just yet, though.

"Gold in York County is mentioned in passing in old mineral records of 1832, as well as a few other times," according to Jeri Jones, geologist for the York

County Parks and Recreation Board. "It was always reported very casually, sometimes as being around certain old quarry sites."

Jones organized the recent second annual Gold Panning Seminar, hosted at the county's Spring Valley Park, and conducted by members of the York Rock and Mineral Club.

Local interest in panning for gold, he says, can mostly be attributed to one mineral collector, Don Schmerling of York.

Some years ago, Schmerling set a personal goal to collect a sample of every mineral known to Pennsylvania. Gold happened to be one of them. Since historical references were so vague, he and Jones pored over geological maps, looking for clues to the puzzle.

What they sought were certain



Ken Kauffman, left, and Don Schmerling demonstrate digging out panning gravel at a potential site. Interruptions in a stream's flow allow the heavier gold to be deposited at natural collection spots.



Using the preferred dark-colored, shallow plastic pan, novice mineral collector Brad Kohler tries his hand at going for the gold.

types of metamorphic rock formations, long associated with deposits of gold found elsewhere. This formation, A Wickhisson or Peters Creek type, is believed to have been formed by volcanic eruptions, then changed, or metamorphosized, through later actions of heat and pressure.

Hydrothermal fluids from deep in the earth caused the gold to be deposited in these certain sites, millions of years ago. As the rock weathered over the eons, the gold became exposed.

Glacial action often moved the rock deposits, and gold in the Northeastern part of the United States, say the geologists, likely was deposited by glaciers that pushed it from original locations in Canada.

"Geologically, gold often is related to areas of slates, and serpentine types of rocks," says Schmerling.

Studies of the local geological formations showed that a potential gold-bearing formation begins near Glen Rock, and more or less follows Muddy Creek, to the Susquehanna River. It then continues on an east, northeast angle through Lancaster County and into Chester County, south to about Delaware.

That formation line extends in the opposite direction toward the Great Falls, Maryland, section of the Potomac River, to Fredericksburg, Virginia, and south into Alabama. This extension is believed to be from the eastern slope of the Piedmont area. Certain of its rocks, including some in the Spring Valley Park area, are estimated at 700 million years old.

Placer gold, which is the type found by panners working creeks,



York County Parks' geologist Jeri Jones demonstrates the technique used in panning for stream gold.

is washed by weathering and water from these ancient rocks, and then becomes trapped at points in a stream where the water velocity is interrupted. Sites below a small natural rock dam, at a bend, or where a creek might suddenly widen and slow are what a gold-panner looks for as a starting place in his search.

"Panning for gold in Pennsylvania is strictly for recreation," both Schmerling and Jones strongly emphasize.

Even the most avid panners admit the volume of gold they find is minimal. Flakes found locally are very tiny, with a pinhead size piece considered a credible find. A productive day's panning might bring a collector just a few of the tiny, shiny flakes, often shaped with irregular finger-formations.

"It would take about 20,000 flakes to make an ounce of gold,"

Schmerling estimates, adding with a chuckle, "No one is going to get rich at this; it's strictly for enjoyment." After panning for about five years, he estimates having found maybe a maximum total of one-half ounce.

"Streams don't have to be large to be gold-bearing," says the panning expert. Even small feeder creeks, perhaps just a foot wide, have the potential, if they are at the right location. Creeks flowing into the Susquehanna from southern York and Lancaster counties, offer promise of a few flakes.

Property owners with creeks flowing through their property — and most farms seem to have at least one — might enjoy spending a few hours, especially some hot afternoon, digging in the creek bed.

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Jeff, Patty, Benjamin and Carolyn Kuhn of York concentrate on the contents of their panning equipment.

Homestead Notes