



Green Gem of the North

The story of Alaska's jade

BY MICHAEL ENGELHARD

Point Hope hammer made from a nephrite head fastened with rawhide thongs to a bone handle.

IT SHINES LIKE THE DRAPES OF NORTHERN LIGHTS, vibrant, viridian, and mysterious: pale to Kelly green, gummy-bear yellow, rarely lavender or pinkish-gray. The Chinese fittingly call it “Stone of Heaven.” The specific hue of Alaska’s state gem, nephrite—a tough aluminum silicate—depends on its iron content. More common and less valued than Asian jadeite, large nephrite deposits seed the ground in our state’s northwestern corner. Jade cools and condenses along margins of tectonic plates, the result of metamorphic compression where seafloor crust slips into Earth’s mantle.

One of the Brooks Range’s westernmost peaks, a semi-precious stone dome straight from Scheherazade’s tales, is jam-packed with this substance. Frost, snowmelt, and rainstorms pry blocks from Jade Mountain’s flanks, tumbling them into Jade Creek, a Kobuk River tributary. Nephrite outcroppings on the slopes outweigh dump trucks. The best quality is generally found in stream-rolled boulders, which have been smoothed. A brown, mineral weathering rind that

has to be cut away before polishing often disguises the wonders within. The interlocked crystals of some cross sections sawed with diamond-coated blades resemble a satellite picture of boreal forest threaded by rivers.

Like walrus ivory, *qiviut*, or gold, jade is pan-Arctic wealth, though less widely known and procured. Since the 1899 Seward Peninsula gold rush, prospectors had been aware of its presence. The region’s Inupiat had gleaned from the peak’s tool-stone sites since time before time. Intercepting caribou on their fall migration at Onion Portage, 118 miles east of Kotzebue, people combined Kobuk River hunting trips with rock hounding at nearby Jade Mountain. The travelers saw lithic debris on one Kobuk mountaintop as evidence of a luxurious, see-through house a shaman had built there for an orphan boy. Jade was a coveted trade item and in bead form served as a currency. Elders say Siberian Eskimos ventured to Kotzebue to barter for the celadon-colored material. Tools and weapons with jade components were valuable enough to be handed down from generation to generation, to be dug from

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sand-drifted ancient settlements: adzes, drill bits, harpoon points, spearheads, and hammerheads for crushing caribou bones to extract marrow. In pre-metal days, Point Hope whalers farther up the coast wielded *qalugiat*—hand lances to deliver the coup de grâce made of a nephrite blade mounted on a long bone attached to an eight-foot wooden handle. Cobbles of “axestone” also came from the Kiana hills and from stream gravels in the Shungnak headwaters. The name Shungnak itself echoes the Inupiaq term for jade, *isinnaq*. U.S. Naval Lieutenant George Stoney, who in 1884 gathered samples for the Smithsonian on Jade Mountain and gave it its English name, first reported it to the outside world.

Regarding names: none is tied to Kobuk jade as intimately as Marvin “Muktuk” Marston’s. During the 1950s, the mineral and the man, in his own words, became synonymous. In 1943, the founder of Alaska’s Territorial Guard and dogsledding commander of its tundra army of Eskimo Scouts had visited a homesteading couple on the Shungnak, lured by jade’s luster and a story he’d heard at the Kotzebue trading post. The trader had come into possession of a 250-year-old lamp gouged from a jade lump, lit by seal oil soaking a braided-grass wick. Its fame had drawn the curious from afar, and when its Inupiaq maker died, it had been placed on his burial mound.

Directed by the Shungnak homesteader, Marston set out for nearby Dall Creek and its apple-green nuggets of many tons.

After finding a choice chunk Marston estimated to weigh 100 pounds, he lugged it to Kobuk Village, strapped to his pack-board. A log bridge across the creek broke underfoot, and with each step he sunk ankle-deep into muck, down to the frozen layer. Groaning under his load, the 54-year old major and future delegate of the Alaska Constitutional Convention wondered if he’d grown too old. At the scales of the Kobuk trading post he marveled at his rock’s real weight: 164 pounds.

Seeing Jade Mountain’s lode as a boon to the local Native economy, Marston asked Territorial Guard captain Joe Sun from Shungnak to stake a claim for the Inupiat. A war correspondent witnessed the super-gem in Marston’s Nome office, and when his story broke stateside, it unleashed a mini-boom. Non-Natives who’d staked sections of the mountain sent barges full of jade to Seattle and from there as far as China and later Germany, supplying carvers and collectors. (One shipment was sunk off the Aleutians.) Soon, almost all the area’s surface had been picked clean; the glassy green now had to be quarried. That and the long transportation to processing centers made it expensive.

A rhino-sized monolith, which had taken five years to travel downriver, marked Kotzebue’s outskirts, a milestone to nowhere. Argentina’s dictator Juan Perón had ordered it for a statue of his wife, “Evita.” After his overthrow in 1955, it sat in town for some time covered in a white shroud, yet another roadside attraction.

Designated the official state gem in 1968, yields from this 40-mile stretch along the Kobuk became sculpted civic displays.



“Muktuk” Marston’s jade lamp.

The “Alaska Stone”—a marbled tablet slabbed from the tail of the continent’s spine—in 1982 was installed inside the Washington Monument. As the obelisk’s latest and uppermost dedication plaque, it towers above the National Mall, courtesy of the Northwest Alaska Native Association, the corporation that still owns the Kobuk claim.

Jade brightened the passage of statehood papers. Over a decade after his Shungnak treasure hunt, Marston had finished a lamp from his haul, obsessed with the trader’s tale of the legendary lamp, which had disappeared. In 1956, Marston’s creation graced the University of Alaska Fairbanks gym table, its diaphanous panels tingeing the snow-scape of constitutional documents about to be signed. Recounting his jade trek for the other delegates, Marston compared the path to statehood to those former travails. He thought jade appropriate for the occasion. It had been here when mastodons roamed the land, he explained, “and in the light of the ages past we could project the dream of the future.”