

The Beauty in the Rocks  
by Bob Grove

It is traditional for history museums to display items reflecting the evolution of their local culture. Articles of a bygone era are of interest to visitors and residents alike. The Clay County Museum features many relics contributed by families, and some by nature. The Gem and Mineral Club has assembled a display of specimens found in our region.

Earth's rocky continents are actually floating atop a liquid mantle underneath. Hundreds of millions of years ago, the African continent collided with the North American east coast, compressing and folding the layers of sediment into the Appalachian Mountain chain. The frictional heat generated by that impact produced more than 300 different minerals, the largest variety in the United States.

Rubies, garnets, emeralds, sapphires, quartz crystals, agate, jasper and opals are only a few examples of the precious and semi-precious gemstones abundant in our state, and many of them are found right here in Clay county.

At one time, the Appalachians were twice their present size, but millennia of years have worn them down. So where does all that sediment go? It is washed out to sea by rivers. There, currents carry it southward. Did you ever wonder where all that Florida sand came from? Now you know.

Here, residents and visitors alike enjoy exploring rocky outcroppings, riverbeds and lakesides to find specimens of our rich geology. A local favorite is fairy crosses—staurolite to be mineralogically correct.

As seen by the accompanying photography, crosses are formed as the mineral gradually grows from a clump of molecules into a geometric prism. If the end of one prism collides with another, they share their growth in one of two angles their molecular attraction allows: ninety degrees (Christian cross) and sixty degrees (Orthodox cross).

Internally within the intersection, both crystals continue to grow, sharing new molecules from their environment. If no collision in the correct angle is found, the lone prisms continue to grow in their independent bar shape.

Many legends accompany beautiful gemstones. One says these are tears shed by angels for the crucifixion of Jesus; a second is that the tears were shed by the Cherokee natives as they were forced from their homes on the Trail of Tears.

The oldest legend describes how an ancient race of mountain fairies were dancing a welcome to the arrival of spring, but shed tears when a messenger brought them the news of the crucifixion.

While fairy crosses are considered scarce, it's because they are naturally located beneath soil layers. In fact, geology tells us that there is a deep band of them all the way from New England to Texas. They are often revealed in places where erosion has occurred, or excavations have been made, including road banks, farm plots, and river and lake shores. Locally, Brasstown, Warne and Mineral Bluff are popular hunting sites.

*This is part of a series of articles about historical gems in the Old Jail Museum and the interesting stories behind them. The museum is closed for the winter, but we hope to have made many improvements when it opens for the summer season.*

*The Clay County Historical and Arts Council is currently seeking to raise funds for the repair and restoration of the Old Jail Museum. To donate you may visit our website [clayhistoryarts.org](http://clayhistoryarts.org) or mail your check designated for Old Jail Museum Restoration Fund to CCHAC, P. O. Box 5, Hayesville, NC 28904*