

THE EARLY FACETING COMMUNITY IN NORTH AMERICA

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There is more to faceting than faceting itself. There is also more to our hobby than the learning and sharing of information about current techniques, machinery, and gem species. One fascinating aspect that has not been adequately addressed by our **amateur** faceting community is that of its history. Rest assured, there is a great deal of interesting history about faceting, controversial and emotional stuff, too. Right now, we all need to do our best to seek out elements of its history, particularly local, and preserve it before it is lost. No one else will do it but members of our own amateur faceting community. It is time that we all took ownership over this responsibility.

We also need to realize to that there is a history of faceting beyond the development of faceting techniques and machinery which in themselves are interesting. There is the study of our amateur faceting community's historical evolution as a community. Such a study concerns itself with the process by which amateur faceters related, learned how to facet and undertook faceting activities together. Initially, amateur faceters operated in complete isolation by necessity, but then, when amateur faceters started to share their knowledge and get organized, our amateur faceting community started.

The focus of this article will be upon two men who had the earliest role in helping the North American amateur faceting community begin to get started. They were Peter Zodac, J. Harry Howard, and Dr. Henry C. Dake. Unfortunately, the limited space of this short article precludes an elaborate examination of the amateur faceting community's establishment in North America. A greater elaboration upon this subject will have to come about later and through a different medium. It is hoped that this short history, though, will reveal the need to find and

preserve personal correspondence, photographs, early magazines, equipment and attachments, etc., leading to the future writing of various aspects of the faceting history wherever we may live.

The early beginnings of the North American amateur faceting community really took place during the 1930's. A mentality and the means evolved at that time to share the information willingly which one had struggled to obtain by one's own efforts or had discovered with some difficulty from other sources. Contemporary readers may not appreciate the difficulties for someone to learn how to cut faceted gems before the 1930's. After all, now we have the many guilds and their newsletters and expert members, courses and workshops, commercial periodicals and books, Datavue and GemCad, internet chat groups and electronic newsletters, different techniques, and all the many manufacturers of faceting equipment. To novices today, it must still seem 'hard' to learn and apply the knowledge about faceting with their commercially available machines.

In perspective, though, it was much, much harder to learn before the 1930's. Before the 1930's, what faceting was done in North America was almost wholly by a very few professional cutters many of whom possessed an exclusive mentality. What most professionals had discovered or had handed down to them by family members or business colleagues too often was kept within their individual tightly-knit circles. Interestingly, evidence exists that there was a very small number of professional faceters in North America who were willing to share their knowledge but they themselves often did not have a wide understanding of faceting. For the amateur before the 1930's, there were no accessible books, no magazines, no groups to offer help, no local expert, no manufactured machinery. There was nothing to help unless one was very lucky to come across the few exceptions. There were some lucky individuals who linked up with the few anomalies to the general pattern, but basically you were on your own. No wonder that the number of noble amateur pioneers who faceted in those years was small!

By the end of the 1930's, this situation had changed in North America, and an amateur faceting community of sorts had emerged. It is important to note that the community, however, never took on a structure and organization of its own before 1939. Instead, it was an ill-defined part of the organizational development of the public's earth-related science interest and particularly the general lapidary hobby. The latter interest began during the early part of the decade as a consequence of the popular curiosity in the earth-related sciences in the 1920's. The basic knowledge and experience gained since the early 1930's in the cutting and polishing of cabochons and flat surfaces, such as agate, allowed the adventuresome to venture into the difficult realm of faceting with its additional complexities of angles and index bearings. Thus, the number of faceters increased in association with the growth of the lapidary movement. Although there were amateurs who had already begun to facet beforehand, the general beginning of an amateur focus upon faceting didn't start until just before the mid-1930's. By the end of the decade, faceting activity had definitely grown. There was a need of these faceters to communicate, learn and share about their own specific skills and interest. As the general lapidary movement began to get organized during the 1930's, albeit rather weakly, a place existed within it for the faceters to do so.

Just as no one person or geographic region made **the** discoveries in faceting knowledge during the 1930's, so was the establishment of the early informal amateur faceting community not derived from a single source. A few dozen individuals played key roles. However, it was the afore-mentioned Peter Zodac and J. Harry Howard who were the ones who first acted as a catalyst to the beginning of this informal community. However, Dr. Henry C. Dake played a major role shortly afterwards.

Peter Zodac was not personally involved in lapidary work. His importance lay in his position as editor of a magazine called **Rocks and Minerals** which he founded in 1926. This magazine was the only one in the US at the time which served the needs of the growing popular

non-academic interest in the earth sciences. It was his magazine which was the first one to encourage the lapidary field. Little space was devoted to lapidary, though, and the information provided was very scanty. However, for an amateur lapidary community which really didn't exist, let alone a faceting one, this magazine offered a fragile beginning. Its small circulation of 1548 in 1930 and 5226 in 1938 has to be viewed with this perspective in mind.

Rocks and Minerals allowed its readers who were interested in earth sciences to become aware of lapidary activities, and gave a source of scarce information of those already involved or who wanted to become involved. The few related advertisements in the magazine allowed cutters to procure rough and what machinery was available. Zodac also used his magazine to encourage and reinforce the development of earth-related science clubs amongst its readership. This was done by the printing of club activities. These clubs, even though they weren't specifically oriented to faceting, were important to our community. This is because they led to local relationships to develop within each club between those few members with a lapidary and specifically a faceting interest.

The magazine office itself also served as a central clearing house for enquiries by subscribers about faceting. One example is the enquiry to Zodac from Toronto's Grant Waite. Much later in 1954, Leland Quick, who was the founder and publisher of **Lapidary Journal**, said that Waite was one of the few real investigators in North America for whom he had always had a great deal of respect. Waite was just beginning to learn about faceting in the summer of 1937, but had a great deal of trouble polishing topaz as did many faceters at that time. Waite asked Zodac for advice. In his letter to Waite, Zodac suggested Damascus Ruby Powder and the writings of his magazine's editor on lapidary, J. Harry Howard. Within a few months, Waite received a personal letter from another faceter of at least four years experience complimenting him on his excellent topaz polish which this other faceter had up to that point being unable to achieve. Zodac and his magazine had made

another contribution to the faceting community. Most importantly, though, Peter Zodac's magazine allowed J. Harry Howard to emerge in a forum which gave impetus to the North American faceting community's early development.

There is no doubt that Howard was the first cutter to give the initial boost to the North American lapidary community. He did this in three ways. According to the current evidence at hand, it was he who was the first to have reached out in the media to other cutters (he meant non-faceting cutters) through correspondence - thanks to Peter Zodac. In 1929, Zodac published a letter to him by Howard asking for help in contacting fellow cutters among the magazine's readership. Needless to say, Howard was ecstatic with the number of replies, most of which were by far from non-faceters. This began a long tradition of letter-writing to those who had been cutting. It appears that initially Howard was the major beneficiary of this correspondence. However, as his knowledge grew, so did his influence upon other correspondents. Sadly, his correspondence cannot be found. Inquiries to the University Museum in the World War Building of the University of South Carolina located in Columbia, which received his collection of stones and personal equipment in 1962, have not been answered. (As an aside, there is a suggestion that this museum is not taking good care of Howard's gem collection or his equipment.). Thus, the exact faceting and other lapidary knowledge and history of those early isolated lapidary pioneers who influenced Howard, such as L. E. Bowser of Bairol, Wyoming, H. E. Briggs of Montana and Capt. Thomas A. Reiner, will be more difficult to write.

Howard's influence became more wide-spread when Zodac agreed to give him space in his magazine for information about cutting. Starting in December, 1931, a section called "The Amateur Lapidary" was started with Howard as its editor until 1937. Zodac did limit the space to a few columns, sometimes more to a few of the magazine's small pages, most often allowing only one article per issue. Most of it was oriented to non-faceting lapidary information, although it often was related because

information about such topics as dopping and the polishing of non-transparent surfaces did help the faceter. The first article about faceting appeared in December, 1932 but it was only 2 small pages in length and extremely general. Other articles specifically on faceting were somewhat spotty in frequency during the first couple of years, but they did increase over time.

What is important about 'The Amateur Lapidary' in terms of our community's development is that it helped to begin an ever increasing momentum. As awareness and thus interest in lapidary work increased, so did advertisements. By 1934, a full page per issue was devoted to ads related to this field, which, in turn, made it easier for a hobbyist to become involved. Already, an ad for the primitive Dixon-Howard # 2 Faceting Device had appeared in the December, 1932 issue. Above all, though, 'The Amateur Lapidary' made others realize that not only was lapidary a worthwhile topic but that there was a tremendous need for more information about it. As a direct result of 'The Amateur Lapidary', **Scientific American** began to occasionally include lapidary articles starting in 1932.

Zodac, however, was unwilling to expand the space devoted to 'The Amateur Lapidary'. This may have been because, as a former mining engineer, he had a bias towards other subjects. It also could have been because of his erroneous perceptions of the marketplace for more articles on lapidary. The result was that Dr. Henry C. Dake, an honorary President of **Rocks and Minerals** itself, began a competing magazine in June, 1933 called **The Oregon Mineralogist**. It attracted a following and had a similar impact upon our community's early development.

This increased interest also led Harry Howard to publish further outside the magazine in book form. He became the first person to have written a book in English on the subject of lapidary during the twentieth century. Although it was general in nature, it was still an adequate introduction to faceting.

Howard had publication experience before his book, but it was not a real help to faceters.. In 1931, he published **The Working of Semi-Precious Stones**. It was a small booklet, only 34 pages in length, 3000 copies in total and solely about non-faceting lapidary. It was based upon his own experiments and the knowledge from his correspondents since 1929. To say the least, it was basic and incomplete. However, this booklet is what convinced Zodac to create a lapidary section in his magazine with Howard as its editor. For the lapidary community, if members were able to get their hands on a copy, it was a solid help. One can only conclude that by giving readers encouragement and confidence to begin or continue non-faceting cutting, some may otherwise not have tried their hand at faceting later if it had not been for this booklet. The fact that it was well-received indicates its value at that early time to the general lapidary community, but not for faceters.

Howard's stint as editor of "The Amateur Lapidary" made him able and aware of the need to expand his early work. His **Handbook for the Amateur Lapidary** resulted in 1935. What is important about this book is that 38 of the 141 pages were devoted to faceting. While, according to today's standards, it would appear to be simple and too general, it gave a complete basic overview of the faceting process with a helpful but general degree of detail. The North American amateur faceting community, still in a nascent form, now had a foundation in print on which to develop further. The fact that the book was reprinted in 1940 not only indicates that the amateur community had grown but that the book had a definite influence upon its growth.

It is the interpretation of this author that Howard was most important in the dissemination of basic information. He acquired success and fame in part because he was the one who took the first step forward in using print to help his community. However, it is the further view of this author that Howard did not make great discoveries of lapidary knowledge nor did he make substantial original contributions to our faceting knowledge specifically. Many of the articles in "The Amateur

Lapidiary' were by others, and his own articles were not often detailed but were of a general nature. The faceting section in his **Handbook for the Amateur Lapidary** was not original in nature, either. It was drawn from articles in "The Amateur Lapidary" of **Rocks and Minerals** and from the pages of **The Oregon Mineralogist**. In fact, in a private letter written years later, Dr. Dake, the publisher of this latter magazine, wrote that Howard had used too much material from his magazine resulting from its researchers' own efforts. Dake felt that Howard did not give proper credit in his book to his magazine as to the large extent from which Howard drew material it had researched.

The revised edition of Howard's book, printed in 1946, indicates his limitations too. The revision came in the form of an additional chapter, entitled "Advanced Facet Cutting". In 22 pages, it gave specific detail about the use of angles and bearings, index wheels, dopsticks. It also gave information about different types of gem designs, although it provided very sparse data on the angles and bearings about these designs. The important point to note was that the chapter was written by Grant Waite, not Howard. The reason is perhaps best found in a letter to Dr. Fred Pough, then a curator at the American Museum of Natural History. In his December 28, 1947 letter, Howard confessed that he knew nothing about gem shapes. We all have strengths and weaknesses in our knowledge and abilities. Howard did play a very important part in the initiation of our community's momentum. One has to respect him for that.

There is a great deal more that one can write about our community's history, and not just North American faceting history. One can indeed focus upon the history of development in faceting designs, machinery and accessories, techniques of cutting and polishing, the growth of our community as a community, and the roles of individuals such as Fred S. Young, Arthur Knapp, Lewis Renton, Oscar Smith, particular of William B. Pitts, J. H. Nelson, the Maine cutters, and so on. The writing of this history has contemporary problems, though. These deal with the awareness about the value of historical material, its discovery, its

collection and storage, as well as publicity of its location and accessibility to it. This author still has to find a complete set of **Rocks and Minerals, The Oregon Mineralogist**, among other magazines, and then there are the letters if they exist of Zodac, Howard, Dr. H.C. Dake and many others.

A question to ask is "As sophisticated as our machines, techniques, and knowledge are today, is our faceting community at that level of maturity where its history is important enough for members to pursue, no matter where they are?" This writer believes so. May the reader of this short article ponder what they can do and how they can help, and then act on the conclusions.

Note: The author first had an earlier version of this article printed in the newsletter of the **North York Faceting Guild** and the **US Faceting Guild**, Permission was granted to Peter Collins and John Broadfoot to use portions of that version of the article in the first chapter of their book, **Cutting Gemstones; A Beginner's Guide to Faceting**, 2001.

Unfortunately, the McKissick Museum of the University of South Carolina to which Howard's world class gems and personal papers were given in 1962 may not have cared for his documents very well. In fact, due to structural deterioration and budgets, boxes of Howard's papers were given for safe keeping to the **Columbia Gem and Mineral Society** affiliated with the museum. This society was contacted during the late 1990s. They had the boxes but no inventory of their contents had been made. I reached out to them again in 2018; sadly no one remembered the boxes.