

Talc

By Lee Ebling

There have been recent inquiries regarding the use of talc by Lewis and Clark and the natives of our area. Several re-enactors have inquired about where to get some talc for making pipes, bowls and carvings, etc.

There are considerable deposits of talc in southwest Montana; two major ones. One is the Yellowstone mine near Cameron, south of Ennis about twenty five miles. This mine is owned by Rio Tinto Minerals. The other deposit is located in the mountains just east of Dillon and owned by Barretts Minerals. Both the mines are private working entities and are not open to the public. They do not allow visitors to go up and pick rocks. That would violate their safety protocols.

Talc is an important industrial mineral. It's resistant to heat, electricity and acids; it is very hydroscopic (adheres to water) and has many industrial uses as a filler for paints, high quality paper, ceramics, electrical switchboards, rubber products, roofing and baby powder. Talc is a magnesium silicate hydroxide, commonly called soapstone, and because it is soft it is easily carved. The talcs in Montana is highly sought after because it does not contain and tremolites (asbestos) as most other deposits in the world do.

The journals contain several references to talc. It is listed on the navigation supplies in Jackson (4 oz. talc). Jackson also lists isinglass in the writings for the artificial horizon. Isinglass is any sheet material that passes light and is a mica class mineral. It is thought that it may have been used as mirrors in the sextant.

Talc is easily worked and can be carved to make pipe bowls. The Shoshone used it for this purpose and would have had easy access to it because of their proximity to the deposits in southwest Montana.

As several of you have asked about getting some, I have picked up a five gallon bucket full during my recent trip to the mine. I will bring it to the next Honor Guard meeting for anyone that wants some. It makes very nice pipe bowls. I hope to see some great products made from this talc.