

Lignite, Petrified Wood, and Cactus Flowers

by Sigrid Stewart

2006 Show Committee Chair

Rolling plains dotted with oak trees and ponds is not what you usually visualize in connection with strip mining, but Alcoa is out to change that at their Rockdale Lignite Mine near Elgin, Texas. On April 22, twenty-six Society members traveled to the facility not far from Austin for a tour of the pits, an overview of operations, and a chance to hunt for petrified wood from the Wilcox formation on the company's acreage. Coal mining in the past has often had disastrous effects on the environment, but corporations now desire to be good citizens, and of course federal legislation has led to reclamation efforts that restore usefulness and ecological diversity to the landscape while satisfying the nation's appetite for energy. Geologist Frank Witzel of Alcoa Rockdale Operations took HGMS members on a bus tour of the mining operations, first showing the reclaimed areas that had already been strip mined, then the open pit area where the overburden is first stripped away before the lignite itself is mined.

Power generated onsite is used in the area and in



Alcoa's aluminum smelting operation, located in Rockdale due to Cold War strategic directives, away from the vulnerable coastline. No, no aluminum ore is found locally—it's shipped in! Although we were not allowed to leave the bus while in the pits, everyone was impressed with the size of the pits and the huge scoops used to mine the coal. After a video highlighting Alcoa's operations, everyone headed for an area nearby where the geologist said petrified wood could be found. It was a beautiful day out, and prickly pear was blooming all around us. Everyone found a least a few pieces of the reddish-brown wood Scott identified as cypress, and many filled up their buckets. I believe Adrianna Weathers found the prize piece—a branch with several distinct knots. Most of the group headed back to Houston or to rockhound at other favorite sites after that, but some opted for a late lunch at the historic City Café on Main Street in Elgin. I would definitely do it again! Many thanks to Joan Riley for her perseverance in setting this trip up for us with Alcoa.



For more information, check out http://www.alcoa.com/locations/usa_rockdale/en/home.asp

Juniors Write About Their Alcoa Field Trip

by Phyllis George, Editor

This issue of the BBG is the first one to have so many juniors turn in articles. Three juniors wrote about their Alcoa field trip experience. My thanks to Anna Campbell and Scott Singleton for their encouragement. These three articles will be entered in the 2007 Bulletin Editors' Contest next year in the Junior category.

Lignite Mine Fieldtrip

*by Jerdahn Campbell
Age 6 (birthdate 6/1/99)*

I really enjoyed riding on the bus and finding many rocks with pretty crystals in them. I was expecting to see caves with coal in them, but instead it was exciting to see the large machines digging huge holes into the ground.

I loved sitting with my friends and touching the coal. I felt the most boring time during the field trip was watching the movie at the very beginning.

I learned that all kinds of rocks can have crystals, and it was neat in the movie when

they told us about the huge cranes and how much dirt the scoop could hold. I really liked seeing all the dirt and coal come pouring out of the scoop in person.

Nature Rocks!

by Samantha Roquemore, age 7

I didn't know what a mine was. I learned that coal is used for electricity. I learned that lots of machines work at a mine to make electricity with the coal. I got lignite coal and found lots of petrified wood.

Petrified wood can be sparkly and lots of sizes. I like rocks.

I also saw lots of interesting bugs like a big rusty red ant and cows. It was my most favorite field trip I ever had.

Field Trip to Coal Mine

by Lorraine Singleton, age 7

Samantha and I went on a trip to a coal mine and we found petrified wood and coal.

First we saw cows in the distance and went a little towards them. They stayed there. Then Dad left to find more rocks. While he was gone we found some barbed wire and saw people in it. We walked a little and found a big hole with branches in it. Then Samantha and I begged Mom to let us go in the barbed wire. We walked past some mud and found the people and then a big hole and went in it. Then we went out of the barbed wire and went on the bus to cool off.

Then we went to the coal mine. We were in a big ditch. A man went out and got us a piece of coal. We went out of the ditch and saw where they were digging up the coal and where the real coal was. Then he brought us back and congratulated us for coming on the trip. Then we went home. The end.