



What a gem!

*There may be no gold
in them thar hills
but the rocks
sure are pretty*

Story & photos by Graeme Stemp

When Mark and Sandra Bramham bought their property on the Essonville Line near Wilberforce, they had no idea what they were getting into.

"I'm happiest when I'm in the bush," said Mark. And that's all the property appeared to be to them, just a lot of bush.

But the 300 acre property held a secret beneath the surface. That secret was blown wide open in the 1980s when the road was improved.

"The road was blasted through the hill," recalls Mark. "They destroyed a huge deposit of fluorrichterite and now all that's left are some small rocks with holes in them."

Fluorrichterite is a rare mineral. Geologists have identified it in possibly another three sites worldwide but by far the largest deposit is in Wilberforce. It

Mark Bramham (above) and his wife Sandra lead individuals on two hour walking tours of their over 300 acre property. The tour is unique in that participants literally stumble upon discoveries of rare minerals.

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Mineral looks like a marshmallow with Pez

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looks like a large mass of marshmallow with hard, black, Pez candies sprinkled throughout. The marshmallow is a well-known mineral called calcite, which melts relatively easily and allows other minerals to crystallize within it. Such is the case of the diamond-shaped cross sections of fluorrichterite, which have actually "grown" within the calcite blob.

But it was all destroyed or so the Bramhams and geologists thought. Then, one fateful day when the Bramhams were showing some visitors the property, they happened upon a little stream. There are lots of little streams that appear and disappear out of nowhere on the property, but this one was unique because in the streambed was a rich deposit of fluorrichterite.

That was just the beginning though. During a geological assessment, the Bramhams were informed that they had a huge diversity of rare minerals on their property. "None of the minerals are worth very much in our tiny quantities," laments Mark, "but they are really neat to see."

To show people the rich geological resources of their Greenmantle Farm, the couple learned as much as they could about the rocks of their property. They also explored the property and built new trails through the heavy bush.

Now, after a few years of development, the couple is offering walking tours of the property to small groups of people. "We give people a firsthand experience of the Earth," said Mark. "They walk along and then stumble upon an outcropping of minerals; there's a sense of discovery not found when you are looking at something under glass in a museum."

And, it's true. The two-hour walk through part of the Greenmantle farm is a more of nature discovery walk than a tour. You almost trip over deposits of green, pink, black, and grey crystals. Taking the tour, I found myself caught up in learning about the history of the one-billion-year-old rocks that were underneath my feet.

"You could spend your entire lifetime in this bush



This rare gem of a mineral is found in only another three places, with the Wilberforce area having the largest abundance of fluorrichterite. Mark and Sandra Bramham work ceaselessly to protect this natural treasure after watching previous outcroppings destroyed by development.

and still not know all its secrets," said Mark. "We only see what nature allows us to see, and she takes her sweet time."

Mark is referring to the discovery process for them. Every season the couple walks the bush checking streams and overturned trees since these are the best spots to find the rocks below exposed. The result is a slow accumulation of mineral deposit sites, but it's a far better way to find minerals than mining or blasting.

After two hours in the bush, I feel like I know a little bit more about the rich mineral history of the area. More importantly, I feel a greater appreciation for nature. "It takes a lot of time and energy to maintain our property," admits Mark. "But it's future generation's inheritance, and it's more precious than money."

For anyone interested in taking a tour, contact Mark and Sandra Bramhams at (705) 448-3948 or you can check out their website for more information at: www.mineraltours.net. Tours are informal and kept to small groups to not disturb the natural environment. A guided tour costs at least \$30, or \$10 per person to a limit of eight people.

Also, the Haliburton Highlands Stewardship Council will be taking a tour of Greenmantle Farm as part of its Discovery Days. The tour will be led by geology expert John Etches and the Bramhams from 1:30-4:30 p.m. on July 20. The cost will be \$8 for adults, \$5 for children, or \$20 for a family of four. To register, people should call (613) 332-3940 or check out their website: www.ontario-stewardship.org/haliburton.