

Steeles have seen some rocky roads over 59 years of marriage

By CANDY PUTERBAUGH

GARDEN HOME — After 59 years of marriage, Glenn and Isolda Steele still don't take each other for granite. They've been down some rocky roads together but that's to be expected of rockhounds.

The Garden Home residents have lived in the area since 1923 and have been rock lovers since 1948.

"When I was a kid, I used to go to the Willamette River and pick up Carnelian agate," Steele said. "I practically lived there. After the war I didn't know what to do so my daughter told me to get a hobby. That's when the bug bit me."

Steele then joined the Oregon Agate Club which he says is the oldest rock club in Oregon. Now the Steeles belong to the Tek Rock Club and PESO (Portland Earth Science Organization).

"We used to take a couple of weeks every so often and go with friends to collect rocks," Steele said. "Or sometimes we'd go in a caravan with the club. We've collected in Washington, British Columbia, California, Oregon, Idaho, Arizona and Montana. We don't go collecting anymore though. We stay home."

If you don't know from the outside of a rock whether it's good, you chip it with a hammer, Steele said.

"Some rocks don't look like anything from the outside," he said, bringing out a big rock. "From the outside this looks like nothing." He chipped it, licked the inside, and showed a beautiful pattern.

"When you lick or wet the rock with a sponge, the pattern shows up better."



Sanding board

Rockhounds Glenn and Isolda Steel of Garden Home show

process of sanding rocks on homemade machine.

When Steele gets the rocks home, he saws them in half with his diamond saw. He pointed out boxes full of thousands of rocks he hasn't sawed yet.

"Then after I saw them, I sand and polish them with cerium oxide." He demonstrated the sander and polisher that he built. Close by was another invention, a machine to sand several rocks at once which he made out of a Maytag washer. Steele also built his shop full of cupboards, shelves and boxes, all full of rocks.

He even has a collection of old Singer sewing machine drawers to hold rocks. "You won't see those drawers very often," he said. He pulled out one of them to reveal smooth and shiny "tumbled agates."

"The tumbler is a water-tight barrel. I put up to 30 to 40 pounds of rocks in silicone carbide grit and tumble them for six weeks. The grit takes

off the roughness. Then I wash and polish them."

Steele also makes bolo ties and bookends out of rocks.

He pointed out a beach agate he'd found. "These are easier to find after a storm has stripped the beach of sand and left only rocks.

"I have mostly agate and petrified rocks. In Oregon you find mostly petrified wood and thunder eggs. Ilwaite crystal is probably the rarest rock I have. I found it in Idaho. This Laguna agate from Mexico is also rare. I traded something for this petrified coral from the bottom of Tampa Bay in Florida."

According to Steele, one of the oldest agate diggings in the state is a Priday Ranch in Madras. "You have to pay to dig thunder eggs there. They bulldoze an area to loosen the soil and then the collectors dig for them. You may have to dig 12 feet. Sometimes dealers get there first

and clean everything out."

Rock collecting is commercialized now, Steele said. "It was simple when I started out. You could go to almost any ranch in Eastern Oregon and collect. Now you can't get on the ranches. The ranchers don't trust people anymore. The people tore up fences and shot cattle and sheep. Everyone's after the dollar now.

"It's harder to find beautiful rocks today. Years ago they were on the surface but now you have to dig for them. The older rockhounds can't dig."

Steele used to paint houses and his wife was cook and manager in the Garden Home School cafeteria. "Now we putter around the garden, sit by the fire and work on rocks."

The Steeles will display their minerals and crystals Oct. 16 through 24 at the Tek Rock Club's annual show at OMSI.