

*By Jeff Miller*

# A GEM OF A GEM

**JOHNSON'S ROCK SHOP IN LIVINGSTON HAS BEEN A FAMILY TRADITION FOR ALMOST A HALF CENTURY**

Johnson's Rock Shop, hidden in the Piney Woods about 10 miles east of Livingston in Indian Springs, is literally hidden in the trees, and not only is it a gem of a find, it's home to thousands of actual gems.

And while it may be a bit difficult to find (although GPS helps immensely), it hosts thousands of visitors every year, and it has been doing so for the past 40 years. School groups, college archaeologists, retirement community outings, families passing through, metaphysical folks looking for healing stones, and rock hounds from all over the globe make their way to the quaint, yet sprawling complex of buildings that make Johnson's Rock Shop a go-to destination.

The shop started out simply enough, as the personal rock collection of Otis and Margie Johnson, the patriarch and matriarch of the operation. When Otis' collection got too big for the living room of the home they had built on the site, Margie had other ideas.

"The collection started out growing in the living room, but my mom said 'this has got to get out of the house,' so my dad built the first of the buildings here," said Linda Johnson Sexton, one of the Johnson's many children, and the one who took over the day-to-day business of running the complex after Margie passed away in September 2016.

The Johnsons started with just that one building, and then Margie wanted a workroom where she could make jewelry from some of the stones they had collected and polished.

"After that," Linda said, "people just started coming to the shop to buy jewelry. No advertising, just word of mouth. Then my parents started going to the big lapidary show in Tucson every year, and at least one or more Johnsons have gone every year since."

The Tucson show is where dealers from all over the world come, and that's how they replenish their inventory annually. They return with rocks and gems from around the globe. They also sell some of their unique-to-Texas rocks like the petrified palm wood, which is the official state rock of Texas (and Louisiana, too).

"This was actually my mother's dream," Linda continued. "She visualized this whole place, and then Daddy got into it as well. They started figuring a way to construct these buildings. He wanted everything to look rustic . . . most everything used to build this was given to them to be repurposed. For example, much of the wood came from old barns, and most of the doors are old discarded doors from Houston. It's truly a family affair, all of my brothers, my parents, and my husband and I have all played a part in the construction and operation of the shop, but my mother was truly the matriarch of the operation."

Between all the donated wood, the kids helping, and the yearly trips to Tucson, their one little shop has become a village. Currently, 10 buildings make up the Rock Shop. Each building has a name and a purpose—the onyx building, the crystal building, the

silversmith shop, the museum, and of course the music room, which is also a makeshift recording studio for Otis.

Now 90 years old, Otis is not only the patriarch of the operation, but he's also the poet laureate and resident musician. You'll find him most days in his music studio, which houses autographed photos of many old-time country stars, including Jimmie Rodgers, one of Otis' favorites.

"He sang about railroads and life on the rails," Otis said. "I've got every song he ever recorded here either on tape or CD."

Visitors don't have to ask Otis twice to have him sing a Jimmie Rodgers song for them, or recite one of the hundreds of poems he has written over the years, many dedicated to Margie.

So how did they meet?

"I was 18 years old, just out of the Navy and went to Port Arthur to visit family," Otis said. "I went to a restaurant and saw Margie mopping the floor and fell in love immediately. She saw me and ran in the back and changed clothes right quick."

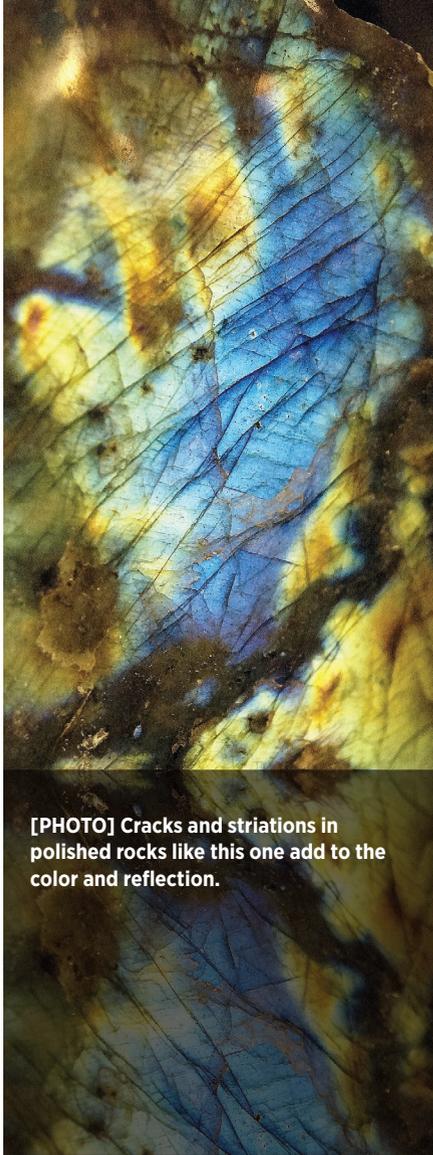
After a short courtship, they married.

"We were married for over 71 years until she passed," Otis said. "People used to ask me what it takes for a marriage to work so well for so long. I just tell them you have to have a perfect wife and a trainable husband."

And it helps to have the kids around, too, especially when running a business.

And while the family is the heart of the operation, the real stars are the rocks and gems from all over the world.

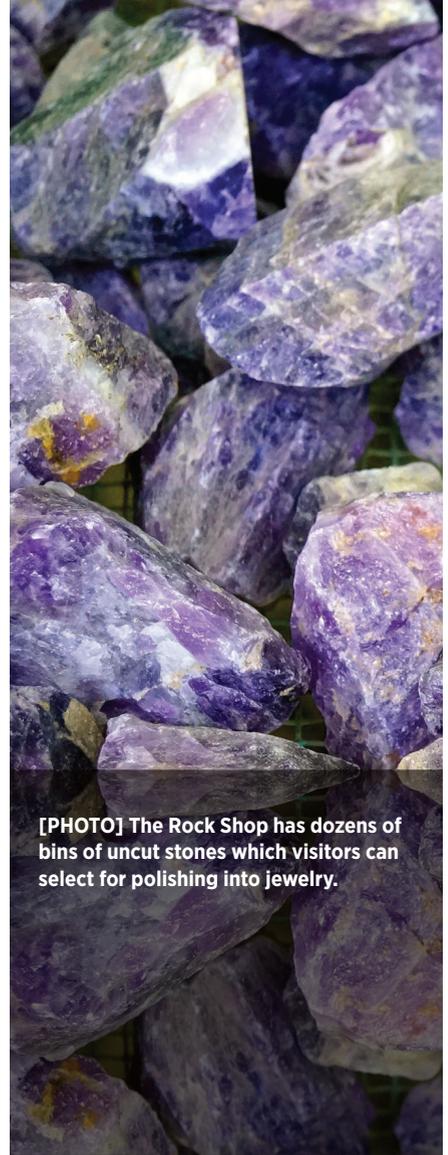
"We have one of the biggest collections and varieties of petrified palm wood in the world," Stephen Johnson said. "Much of the palm wood is between 50 and 60 million years old. People come here not only to see the large pieces, most of which were brought in by logging trucks, but also the smaller pieces to take home and put in their yard or garden. Imagine having a 50-million-year-old piece of history in your front yard."



[PHOTO] Cracks and striations in polished rocks like this one add to the color and reflection.



[PHOTO] This striking stone has the appearance of a painted chrysanthemum on black rock but it is in fact entirely nature's own work. It is native to China, Japan, and certain areas of Canada, and is also the official symbol of the Chinese imperial family.



[PHOTO] The Rock Shop has dozens of bins of uncut stones which visitors can select for polishing into jewelry.

The main shop is where much of the precious gemstones and jewelry reside. Visitors can see (and purchase) virtually any size, shape, or color of stones that are already hand-crafted into rings, necklaces, bracelets and pendants. *The price for much of the merchandise is far less than you might expect.* And they are handmade with love that can only come from a family that has been doing this for nearly a half century.

For instance, one of Margie's favorite stones was turquoise.

"We have lots of different color turquoise from many Native American tribes," Linda said. "Most people don't know this, but not all turquoise is turquoise, it comes in many colors depending on where it comes from."

Margie would take the stones, highly polished by her son Stephen, and make them into necklaces, rings and other

jewelry. Another son, Johnny, was a silversmith, and would fashion some of the larger pieces into pendants and bracelets.

"Our brother Johnny was self-taught in silversmithing," Linda said. "He actually taught it at a college in Missouri, but we have the silversmith shop here onsite and he makes some of the jewelry we have here. He also taught Stephen and my husband, John, how to do jewelry repair, and the basics of silversmithing, so we try to do as much of that in-house as we can."

The family also has a large collection of loose sapphires and other stones and gems that can be used to replace lost stones in customer's jewelry.

"Jewelers from all over the area will send customers to us if they need replacement faceted stones that they may have lost," Linda said. "We always tell them to bring the piece of jewelry with them so they don't have to guess about size and color. As much as we love to have them here, we don't want them to drive an hour and a half from Houston only to get the wrong size stone."

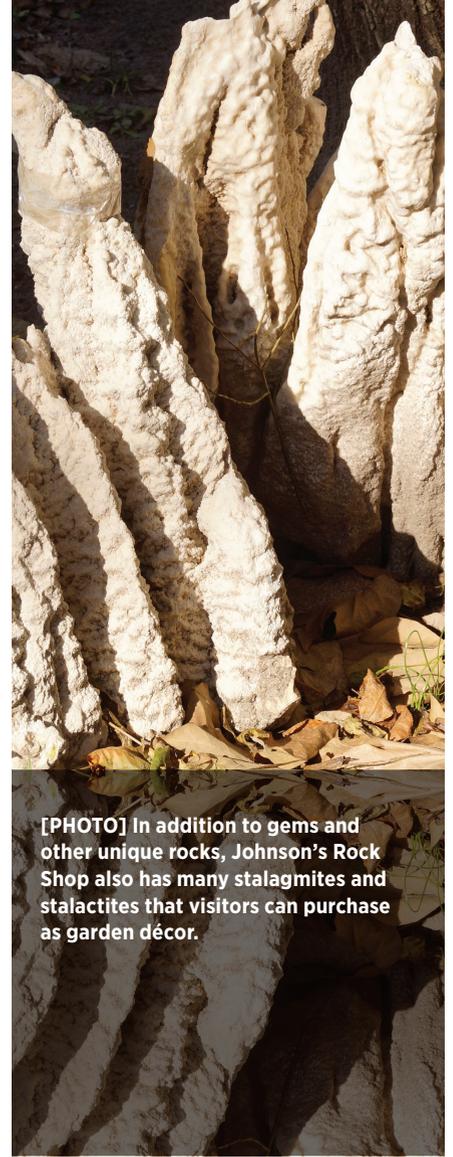
The Johnson family also sells the equipment to make faceted stones, as well as tumbling equipment, tools, saws, grit, and everything else that has to do with lapidary. And they carry



**[PHOTO]** This piece of raw agate, once polished, shows dramatic colors and patterns.



**[PHOTO]** Sea creatures from over a million years ago, such as this early form of crawfish, have been petrified in stone and recovered from the bottom of lakes.



**[PHOTO]** In addition to gems and other unique rocks, Johnson's Rock Shop also has many stalagmites and stalactites that visitors can purchase as garden décor.

virtually any type of rock, stone, or gem you could imagine, including fossils.

“We even have items made from water buffalo bone and shark’s teeth,” Stephen said. “But you won’t find any ivory here, it’s illegal to buy or sell. Our inventory comes from everywhere in the world. Most of the amethyst comes from Brazil, the quartz from Arkansas, and the lapis from Pakistan and Afghanistan.”

They also carry healing stones for customers who are looking for the metaphysical stones. They generally bring a list or a book of what types of stones they will need for a particular healing.

Geodes are among the items most popular with the hundreds of children that visit each year. The shop features large bins of geodes that kids can pick out and have cut by Stephen. They never know what’s inside until it is sliced.

“Geode is an old Greek word for ‘earthlike.’ You don’t know what’s inside,” Stephen said. “If it is a round rock, and it weighs less than another of the same size, chances are it’s hollow and filled with crystals, like amethyst. The solid round stones are called agates, and can be cut and polished into big slabs or small.

We make wind chimes out of them, and they are one of our top sellers. They’re hard to keep in stock.”

Seeing a child’s eyes light up when they find amethyst inside a geode is one of many simple pleasures the Johnson family enjoys at the village.

“This was never meant to be fancy, but it was meant to be the kind of place that when you come here, you enjoy yourself,” Linda said. “You can spend hours here. It’s like taking a trip back in time, but also seeing rare and precious rocks and stones from all over the world.”

JOHNSON'S ROCK SHOP IS LOCATED 10 MILES EAST OF LIVINGSTON, JUST OFF US HIGHWAY 190.

238 NORTH LINCOLN WIGGINS STREET  
LIVINGSTON, TX 77351  
(936) 563-4438

THE SHOP IS OPEN MONDAY THROUGH SATURDAY, 9 A.M. TO 5 P.M. CLOSED DURING THE MONTH OF FEBRUARY, AND EASTER AND CHRISTMAS DAY AS WELL.