

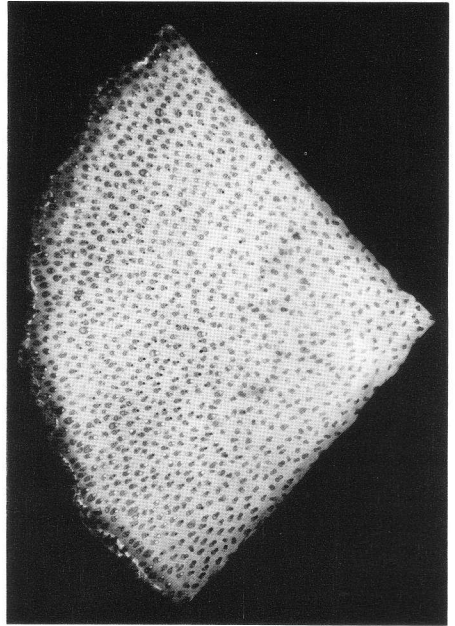
Principes, 31(3), 1987, p. 140

PALM BRIEF

Petrified Palm Wood

During the Miocene and Eocene epochs some 12 to 60 million years ago, palms represented, in contrast to the present, a much more important component of the vegetation of North America. As the earth's environment underwent slow but significant changes inimical to their continued growth, palms died out in most areas. Fortunately, in certain locations, parts of trees—roots, trunks, leaves, inflorescences, fruits, pollen grains—became embedded in sediments and were preserved by petrification. Infiltrating mineral matter replaced the plant tissue particle by particle and, in a very slow process, preserved not only the outward forms but also the minutest details of the internal structure. Fossil palms in general were the subject of an excellent illustrated paper by Tuta (1967).

Petrified palm wood may not be as familiar as the fossilized pines and cedars which abound in the Petrified Forest National Park in Arizona, but it has been found from New Jersey to California, and is common along the Gulf Coast. A major source of petrified, or agatized, palm wood is located about 60 miles southeast of Austin, Texas, in a cluster of counties centered on the town of La Grange. Although the best areas for rock-hounding reportedly have been either picked-over or are on inaccessible private land, gem and lapidary shops in eastern Texas sell petrified palm wood as uncut rocks, as thin slices across the vascular bundles, and as cabochons, stones which are cut and polished but not faceted. Large pieces may be squared and used as bookends or door-



stops; small pieces polished and fashioned into attractive cuff links, belt buckles, pendants, and so forth. It is the distinctive vascular bundles which make the stone easy to identify, and give to the various products their unique appearance. Texas officially recognized the beauty of petrified palm wood when it was adopted as the state stone in 1969. Anyone seeking information about palm wood in Texas should consult an article on the subject by Towner (1975), and a useful field guide to gems by Simpson (1958).

LITERATURE CITED

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