

NSW Regional Media Awards finalist & winner

Friday 14.08.2015 to Sunday 16.08.2015

DUBBO weekender

\$2

Incl. GST

LOCALLY OWNED & INDEPENDENT

www.dubboweekender.com.au



What a gem

A global reputation
to be proud of
PAGE 30

NEWS

No smoke, no fire as
prisoners butt out

LEGACY

Plea for help with Nolan
memorial team

Q&A

Pru Goward on
having a thick skin

FEATURE

Meet the foundation
that's kicking goals

Weekender regular Lisa Minner continues to highlight some of the faces, places and hidden gems along our own beautiful stretch of the Macquarie and into the outback.

WHAT A GEM

Australia's opal industry has a global reputation of which we should all be proud, but we should be doing more to promote it, according to Texan-based jewellery designer and opal importer, John W. Ford. Dubbo Weekender caught up with Ford and his son Christopher in Lightning Ridge recently where he addressed the who's-who of the industry about the importance of applying "country of origin" labelling to our national gemstone. **WORDS and PHOTOGRAPHY** Lisa Minner

HOW does a jewellery designer from Texas become obsessed with Australian black opal? It's a question John W. Ford is often asked during his travels and the answer is simple – he fell in love with the stone 30 years ago, and he says it was love at first sight. But the Texan jeweller is concerned with how the gem is being marketed and sometimes misrepresented around the world. He and others in the industry are keen to see "country of origin" labelling on opals so gem lovers know exactly what quality they're getting and from where.

Australia boasts some of the finest opal globally. Ford says it's the "gold standard", especially when it comes from Lightning Ridge, which is known for its unique and highly coveted black opal.

“Make no mistake, these privateers are doing this around the world and cumulatively it will affect demand and field prices here.”

It should also be noted that the opal was proclaimed Australia's national gemstone on July, 27 1993 by then Governor-General, Bill Hayden. Ford and his son Christopher were recently in Australia for the Lightning Ridge International Opal Jewellery Design Awards Australia, (IOJDA) where he was the guest speaker at the IOJDA Ball. The ball attracts anyone and everyone who has anything to do with alluring world of opal, from miners, to exporters to designers to people who just love the rare gem and want a top night of entertainment and networking. He was also

in town to catch up with friends and purchase black opal for next year's line of jewellery.

John's speech was impassioned – he wants gem labs around the world to use "country of origin" on Australian opal certification. He and many others believe it's essential to the integrity of the Australian opal industry. There is a great deal of misinformation when it comes to opal quality, where the average buyer may be paying top dollar to what Ford calls "gem privateers" or "pirates," for a stone they believe to be worth a substantial amount of money when in fact it's an inferior stone (or synthetic) masquerading as a solid Australian opal.

A large part of the problem is the increasing amount of Ethiopian Opal (or hydrophane) that's flooding the market, which Ford notes is also often unethically mined with "abuse of labour", with workers not properly compensated and the mining practices unsafe. It's a worrying trend, given Ethiopian opal is in much greater supply than the Australian gem and needs to be clearly differentiated because, in his opinion, it's inferior.

Australian opal is created via a sedimentary process where water seeps through layers of sandstone and clay over thousands of years whereas Ethiopian opal is created via a volcanic process.

It's sometimes similar in appearance to the untrained eye, but altogether different geologically. Australian opal is more stable and it's non-porous, whereas the Ethiopian equivalent is prone to cracking and colour loss due to being porous, unless it's artificially treated.

"If you put Ethiopian opal in jewellery cleaner and it

hasn't been treated it will lose its colour and it will look white and pasty and people will feel ripped-off, as they should."

He says unethical sellers are often pushing their stones as Australian opal and getting much more than it's worth.

The misrepresentation does the whole industry a disservice, according to Ford who says people feel duped; it ruins the integrity of those who are selling genuine quality stones and it creates distrust in the market.

"Make no mistake these privateers are doing this around the world and cumulatively it will affect demand and field prices here," he says.

"It's our responsibility to set an example in our business practices. Ethiopian opal has a place in the market as long as you know it's not treated and even if it is it should be disclosed upfront."

Ford says time and again people who have purchased Ethiopian, synthetic opal or opal backed with ironstone (doublets or triplets) – without realising it – seek him out when the flaws begin to reveal themselves and he says while it's sad for that person, it gives him an opportunity to educate them for their next purchase.

"Personally I feel black opal is currently underpriced; I think it will increase significantly over time only as demand in the United States, Europe, China and India increases because it's a 100 per cent natural gemstone.

"People want to invest their money in what they know is a true gem – that it's not been doctored-up to make it look good. We don't talk about it as much in the industry as we should but even diamonds now are being clarity enhanced; they're taking yellow diamonds and making them pink."



Ring image: This freeform opal weighing 2.91 carats, set in 18 karats white gold and framed by .61 carats of diamonds just screams sunshine and summer time.



www.rivertrails.com.au
download the App
follow us on Facebook

Relax Recover
Unwind Discover


Fishing


Nature


Produce


Cycle


Art


Heritage


River


Bird Watching


Education


Riverbeds


Tucker



John W. Ford

WHILE Ford's jewellery business is called The Lightning Ridge Collection by John Ford, he proudly calls himself a fifth generation Galvestonian. He graduated in international trade and finance from the Texan A&M Maritime Academy and was offered a commission in the US Navy when he graduated, but instead chose a very different path.

"When I was in school I started selling gold chains from Italy by weight. I was an entrepreneur even then, it was in my blood, so I decided I would give it one year and open up a brick and mortar storefront, where I could operate my business."

He says it was at this time he was first exposed to black opal and eventually ended up in the diamond business where he started manufacturing his own designs.

Entrenched in the world of precious gems, he became a diamond broker selling 10 to 20 carat diamonds for many years before eventually specialising in opal. Ford says he's now probably the largest importer of black opal in the US.

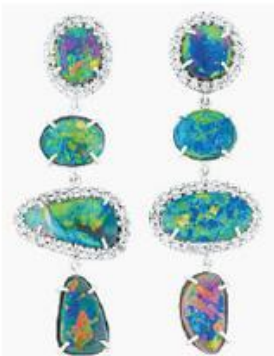
Asked why Lightning Ridge opal over other Australian opal like "boulder" – found only in Quilpie and Winton in Queensland – Ford says it's not only because he loves it but it's also easy for people to look up and research, as the region is so highly regarded in the opal world. That said, other Australian opal like white, crystal, "Yowah nuts" or boulder are also of incredibly high quality and well sought after.

"All opal Australian is the world-wide 'gold standard' and should be promoted much more by the Australian government," he explains.

"The government invests so much into tourism and marketing and should really be doing more to talk-up this country's incredible opal industry to the rest of the world; even the likes of Columbia 100 per cent value and promote their emeralds – the government here should be promoting what is their national gemstone, with far more vigour."

FORD and his son have both dug for opal in the Ridge, and this trip Christopher was given a lesson in cutting it from a rough "nobby" through to a finished opal. It's given them a greater appreciation and knowledge of the gem from the ground up, literally, which they then share with their customers in America and also via video on their website.

"I'm very lucky with the miners I work with; I have known them as friends from when I was working in the diamond business. They would often come over to Galveston and spend time here, have a few drinks and lock their goods in my vault."



Featuring four (4) freeform opals each, this pair of earrings has a total of 8.72 carats of black opals; .79 carats of round brilliant cut diamonds, and are set in 18 carat white gold.

All opal Australian is the world-wide 'gold standard' and should be promoted much more by the Australian government.



John W. Ford with his son Christopher Ford

"They're great people – Aussies and Texans have a lot in common. These miners know I am working on a long term project and they know I have the right idea of how the industry should be conducted."

He believes it should be conducted ethically and Lightning Ridge should stand behind the opal they sell while alerting people and educating them with regard to hydrophane opal.

"This is why I love the Lightning Ridge Opal Miners Association (LRMA) because they represent the miners to the government and work to ensure the rights of the miners to mine opal in an environmentally sustainable way and continue their generational mining in Lightning Ridge."

FATHER and son both agree opal is a magic stone. "People's eyes just light up when they see it for the first time."

"It's a very niche market, but if you see something you like buy it because you will never see that same

stone again, it's like a fingerprint, it awes people," Ford explains.

Major stores in the New York and Europe have always sold black opal but these are stores that only cater to a fraction of the jewellery market in the world.

The designer says his goal is to market his black opal to the American Gem Trade Association stores (AGTA) along with the American Gem Society stores (AGS), which are bodies that have a sound code of ethics.

Ford's jewellery line is carried in about seven different states in the US. He says it took him about three years to collect enough black opal to begin the line.

"We did really well at the Oscars this year and we will also have up to three pieces being worn at the Emmys in November – we don't know who's wearing the pieces yet, that's always the big question."

He's also confident that there is plenty more great quality opal to come from the Lightning Ridge opal fields in the years ahead.

"I really believe the best is ahead of us yet!"

