



precious color.

"In the end, it's better for business to have the bigger stones leave with the customers," Thompson said. "It brings the people back each year. They'll leave here to tell their family and friends."

The process of mining gems here at the Spokane Bar has gone unchanged for decades.

The material, dug from the alluvial of an ancient river bed, is poured into a trammel. The giant machine sorts the aggregate by size. Rocks fall from one side of the machine while sand spills from the other.

The remaining gravel — the good stuff, Thompson said — washes into a sluice box with a screened bottom.

Thompson climbed upon the machine, explaining how the heavy material gets trapped behind the first few ribs of the sluice. Because sapphires and gold are so much heavier than water, they sink quickly and are easily plucked from the sluice's screen.

But it's knowing where to dig that separates successful prospectors from the rest. The heavy gems and bits of gold sink over time, coming to rest upon the bedrock.

That, Thompson said, is the best place to look.

"That's where the heavies are," Thompson said. "The bedrock is Mother Nature's sluice box. If you really take the time and put forth the effort, that's where you'll get the payouts."

In the nearby Gold Fever Rock Shop, the fruits of the family's knowledge sit under glass. Gems of all shapes and colors sparkled on display. There's even a vial of gold nuggets and other precious stones, like blood-red garnets and smoky topaz, that have been locally mined.

"There are about 495 variations of color in a sapphire," Russ Thompson said. "There are only a few places in the U.S. where you can mine for gemstones, and this is one of them."

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