

'Mystery' Metal

Fruit of Active Imaginations

By Russell Mitchell

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"Have you seen any of the mysterious white metal found in Oregon?"

This question has been asked me dozens of times the last five years. On several occasions some ordinary volcanic rocks have been given me with the assurance that all I had to do to get the metal was to heat it in the stove. So far none of them have yielded anything.

The qualities of this hypothetical element are truly marvelous. It is soft enough to cut with a knife; yet it will scratch glass. A thin plate of it can be beaten into any shape with a small hammer; yet a high powered rifle cannot penetrate it. It is easily obtained; yet its reduction is a secret to only a few men. And more marvelous than anything else, it cannot be named! No one has been able to classify and name it. Talk about this mysterious metal is too ridiculous for a sane man to have to listen to; yet a great many men seem to believe it.

Undoubtedly there are elements yet to be found. It is not beyond possibility that new metals with unusual qualities will be found. Indeed, if any are, they will have unusual characteristics, too unusual for the average man to discover. Some metals go in groups like aluminum. This group includes glucinum, thorium, yttrium, zirconium, erbium, terbium, cerbium, lanthanum and didymium. It takes an unusual knowledge of chemistry and a completely equipped laboratory to separate and distinguish these metals. But as unusual as they were when found, they were named.

Since a name gives no real clue to the physical or chemical properties, anybody who makes a discovery may give it a name. Certainly any new element or group of elements will have an atomic weight that can be ascertained sufficiently to distinguish it from other metals. Its boiling point, hardness, resistance to acids and many other characteristics will also be ascertained and catalogued and they will make up its determination. Once all those characteristics are known and a name is given the metal, it will take its place in the long list of elements that are not any more mysterious than say lead or zinc.

On one occasion a friend of mine obtained a specimen of this mysterious metal. It turned out to be aluminum. It is too bad that so many persons go about wanting to be fooled. Mysticism and ignorance are natural companions.

For the average prospector gold, silver, lead, zinc, copper, chromium, manganese, tungsten and other well known elements form life "mysterious" combinations to keep him busy the rest of his life separating and making them marketable. The mysterious white metal of Oregon exists only in the imagination.