

Profile Of The Chatham Company

by Linda Watt

Carroll Chatham's teenage attempts to synthesize diamonds in the basement laboratory of his parents' home caused more than one explosion before he turned his efforts toward creating emeralds.

By the time he was 21, with six years of home experimentation behind him, he had created his first crystal. It took another few years to determine how he had achieved his results and to control the process. When he was 25, Carroll Chatham had created an emerald so closely resembling its natural counterpart that even trained gemologists were not convinced it was a gem grown in the young man's lab.

The early years of Mr. Chatham's work must have required ingenuity and a determination to succeed despite his then full-time career as a food processing chemist for the company that is now Del Monte Foods. However, by the end of World War II, he was finally able to devote all of his time to developing and marketing his crystals. From the beginning, Mr. Chatham built and adapted equipment as his needs grew and changed.

Through the years, Carroll Chatham has found himself in the midst of legal controversy over his gems. The Jeweler's Vigilance Committee took him to task over

his use of the term "cultured emerald." In 1963, after several years of investigation, and paying legal fees approaching \$50,000, he was granted permission by the Federal Trade Commission to call his gems "Chatham Created Emeralds." The publicity surrounding this ruling, instead of creating a negative effect, served as a vehicle for letting jewelers everywhere know that the Chatham-created stones have the same chemical make-up as the natural ones, and that it takes an expert to tell them apart. They also learned that they could buy the new gems for one-tenth the price of a natural emerald.

Thomas Chatham, president of the family company, joined his father on a part-time basis in 1962, and moved into a full-time position in 1966. Focusing on the marketing end of the business, he has worked to broaden the market from a single customer who bought rough stones to a worldwide market of customers buying cut stones. Chatham customers today range from independent retailers to large manufacturers.

The elder Chatham determined early in his research that his work would be best protected by keeping his knowledge to himself, so he did not seek patent protection,

Nearly 50 years later, those secrets remain closely guarded in this family business. His other son, John, supervises the production of the crystals in the San Francisco laboratory.



Carroll Chatham, founder

Creation of a single crystal takes at least a year in conditions as closely paralleling nature as the Chathams have been able to achieve. While the conditions for growing the crystals are carefully orchestrated by man, the crystals themselves are grown by nature. Commenting on this phenomenon, Tom Chatham said: "Crystal growth is almost like living, cellular growth. Everything has someplace to go. It has a certain order, but we don't know what—all of a sudden—makes crystal growth stop here, turn an angle,

▶70

Profile of Chatham

Continued from page 69

then start growing this way. There is some ingrained, unexplained pattern that takes place that we control or cause to happen, but certainly aren't responsible for." While the Chathams claim little responsibility for these variations in growth, they are able to produce some unusual emerald clusters seldom found in nature.

Once the crystals are grown, Tom says, the greatest challenge is in cutting. Gem cutting, a centuries-old art, often takes years of apprenticing and an eye for determining just how to approach each rough stone. "Cutting economically, efficiently, accurately, to get what you want, is one of the biggest challenges in the industry," Tom says.

What is the future of man-made gems? Tom Chatham sees a

steady appreciation in value of his stones and an increased demand for them as natural resources decline. A high quality man-made stone, backed by a reputable company, is here today, and promises to be here for a long time. As for emeralds? Kurt Nassau (in *Gems Made by Man*) summarizes both their beauty and their promise of propagation:

"The color of emerald is unique among gems. We have no way of describing it except by reference

to the gem itself: emerald green. Over the years many attempts have been made to create imitations of exactly matching color, but none of these has been truly effective. Only with the successful synthesis of emerald itself was the color finally duplicated in a man-made gemstone material."

Those who derive personal satisfaction from adorning themselves with jewelry can be assured that gemstones are here to stay. ◇