

## PROFILE: GARY BOWERSOX, GEM HUNTER AND TRADER

Brecken Branstrator, GIA GG

*Ahead of his retirement, industry veteran Bowersox spoke with GemGuide about his adventures in the business and what he's learned, and what he has to offer in the very vast inventory he's looking to sell.*

**G**ary Bowersox, gem hunter and dealer as well author and documentarian, is known in the industry for his many adventures abroad, sourcing gemstones in remote parts of the globe to bring them to the trade.

Now, after decades gathering and selling gemstones and educating the trade on these source regions, Bowersox will hang up his hat, just as soon as he can sell his multi-million-dollar inventory of gemstones and mineral specimens.

*GemGuide* recently caught up with Bowersox about the lessons he's learned on his many adventures and his hopes for the gemstones industry's future.

**GemGuide:** What got you into the gemstone business?

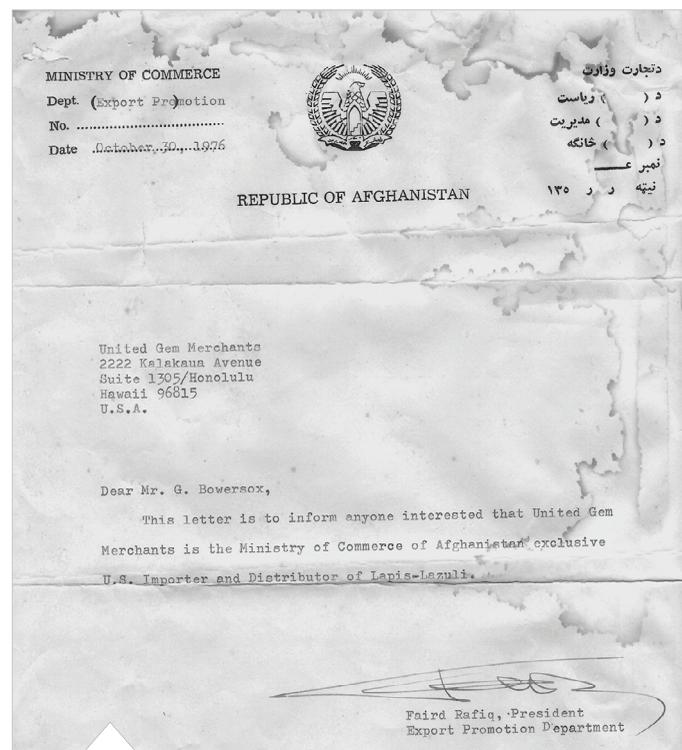
**Gary Bowersox:** In 1969, I resigned my commission as a Major in the U.S. Army and Chief of Operations of the U.S. Army Pacific. I partnered with another military officer to purchase The Gem Tree jewelry store in Waikiki, Hawaii. Over the next four years, we added three additional stores and built the business before selling all the stores at a substantial profit.

In 1971, I entered the gemstone wholesale business, which became Gem Hunters Corporation. I took courses in gem identification and gem cutting, then began traveling to gem mining areas around the world and establishing outlets with retail jewelers across the U.S.

I made my first trip to Afghanistan in 1972 and continued returning to purchase rough gemstones and gem mineral specimens until the Taliban takeover in 2021. My purchases and sales grew rapidly after 1989, when I started showing at the Tucson gem and mineral shows and holding in-store shows with more than 50 jewelry stores across the U.S. After Afghan trips, I would return to America with suitcases full of gems and gem specimens, often weighing several hundred pounds.

**GG:** Can you tell us a little more about how traveling to Afghanistan and eventually Pakistan to source rough gems came about and the current status of those two markets?

**GB:** I assisted the U.S. Department of Commerce with a promotional tour of Japan to expand the export of American goods, including jewelry. Then in 1972, the Commerce Department provided me with letters of introduction to the new president of Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, I immediately began purchasing lapis lazuli from the government-controlled lapis mines. In 1976, the Ministry of Commerce granted me exclusive rights to import and distribute lapis lazuli in America.



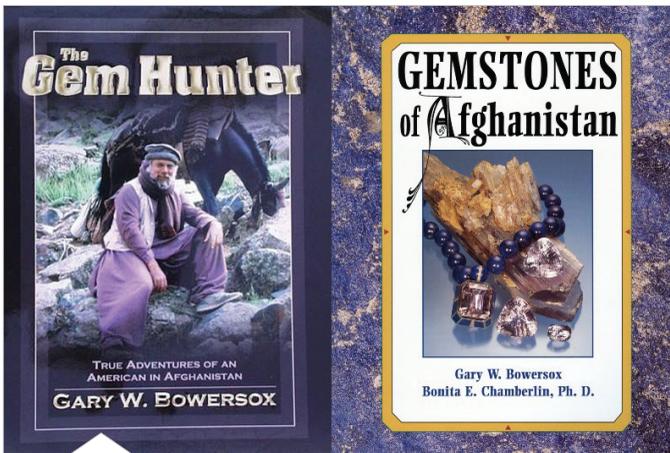
*In 1976, Gary Bowersox became the exclusive importer and distributor of Afghan lapis lazuli in America.*

I was in Afghanistan when the Soviet Union invaded the country in 1979. At this time of turbulence, I agreed with the Minister of Mines to purchase the rough lapis, tourmaline, and kunzite held by the government. This project would not have been successful if I had not made friends with V. Prokofiev, a Russian assigned to the United Nations in Kabul. It was six anxious months before my shipment arrived in Honolulu.

After that 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, I began purchasing Afghan gemstones in Pakistan. However, in 1989, I was able to continue my trips into Afghanistan by crossing the border from Northern Pakistan disguised as an Afghan. That same year, I started training Afghans selected by tribal leaders in gemstone exploration, extraction, gemology, and marketing. My purchases and sales of gems increased by promoting Afghan gemstones in Tucson and in jewelry stores across the U.S. My first book, *Gemstones of Afghanistan*, was published by Geoscience Press in 1995. I continued training the Afghan miners, traders, and gem industry workers with the support of funds and contracts from USAID, World Bank, and the German government. I am still able to purchase gems from Afghanistan.



Gary Bowersox is pictured here (at left, facing the camera) in Pakistan in 1983.



Gary Bowersox has authored several books, including *The Gem Hunter* and *Gemstones of Afghanistan*.

**GG:** You also went to Tajikistan in the past few years on gemstone business. Tell us about that project and its present status.

**GB:** After the Taliban took control of Afghanistan, I returned to my past gem activities in Tajikistan, purchasing spinel and ruby rough. Unfortunately, on my 2023 Explorers Club Flag Expedition to explore the gem mines of Tajikistan, our team discovered the Tajikistan government had closed the gem mines.

**GG:** What are some of the things you are working on that you hope carries forward in the future?

**GB:** The recognition and promotion of the quality and value of gemstones and gem mineral specimens from Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Few jewelers and gem dealers realize the quality and future potential production from these two countries.

**GG:** What do you think was the number one lesson you learned when it comes to traveling to acquire gemstones?

**GB:** Buying directly from the miners is possible and allows for a higher profit margin, however, it takes years of patience to build trusted relationships with local miners and traders. Beyond profits, it provided me with memorable adventures and many local friendships.

**GG:** After decades of being in the gemstone business, what are some of the biggest changes you have noticed in the colored stone world since you started?

**GB:** The increased volume of colored gems available worldwide and the growth of internet sales has changed the pattern of business opportunities. Increases in cost of travel within the U.S. and declining storefront outlets has largely eliminated door-to-door gem sales opportunities.

**GG:** What makes you optimistic about its future?

**GB:** Gemstones have been traded and sold since the beginning of mankind. The number of sophisticated gem buyers is increasing along with internet sources of educational material and price information for buyers. Gems will remain an integral part of the lives of people around the globe.

**GG:** What worries you about the gem business?

**GB:** Tariffs! Currently I have \$200,000 in gemstones waiting in Pakistan. As of today, I would have to pay a 19% tariff to have my company-owned goods returned to the U.S.

The good news is that I have over \$4 million of gemstones and gem mineral specimens at wholesale valuations here in the U.S. Selling my inventory is my retirement goal. It is important to note that my entire inventory is paid for, and that provides greater room to negotiate with buyers. I'm looking forward to negotiating favorable terms with serious buyers.

**GG:** Give us a sneak peek of what's included in your inventory.

- GB:** My inventory is in three categories:
1. About 100 quality gemstones with laboratory reports indicating no treatment. (An inventory list will be emailed upon request.)
  2. About 50,000 loose gemstones ranging in size from melee to 500 carats, 97% of which are untreated. (A list of most of this inventory will be emailed upon request.)
  3. Over 3,000 gem specimens priced at market prices prior to 2010. (An inventory list has not been produced.)



His extensive inventory that he's selling includes a wide variety of loose faceted goods.



The inventory for sale also includes more than 3,000 gem specimens.

**GG:** Where should we direct trade members interested in purchasing?

**GB:** Ideally, serious buyers should visit me in Waikiki, Hawaii, for a few days to review the one-of-a-kind inventory. Discounts below wholesale prices will depend on the dollar value of purchases. Currently, my gemstones are mostly priced at 2018 price levels, and my gem minerals are at their original prices set two decades ago.

**GG:** What makes your collection a unique opportunity for buyers in the gem business?

**GB:** My collection contains gems collected over half a century and includes rare gems from sources no longer available. It would be costly and risky to acquire such a collection

today. Indeed, it is virtually impossible to duplicate my collection at my prices by attempting to go to the mines in Burma, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and several other gem-producing countries.

**GG:** What advice would you give trade members who may be going through the challenge of trying to sell inventory and don't know where to turn?

**GB:** Closing a jewelry store or just selling inventory has been a serious problem for the jewelry industry for decades. I'm in the same predicament. I'm marketing my sale to as many store owners, collectors, investors, wholesalers, and auctioneers as possible. The owner must determine a lower sale price versus time to sell out and close down. That is what I'm attempting to accomplish. Will it be a success? Time will tell!

**GG:** Why have you decided to retire?

**GB:** While I remain passionate about the gem business, at 85, it's time to pass on the gem business to a younger generation and spend more time enjoying life in Waikiki, Hawaii.

**GG:** And finally, what about your retirement plans?

**GB:** Of course, I enjoy living in tropical Hawaii, and am planning on enjoying more leisurely cruises with my wife, Kay. ♦



Gary Bowersox and his wife, Kay, at a show.

*(Editor's note: to contact Bowersox, email him at [mrgary77@aol.com](mailto:mrgary77@aol.com) or visit his website at [TheGemHunters.com](http://TheGemHunters.com). For photo and videos of his inventory, visit [YouTube.com/Gary-Bowersox](https://www.youtube.com/Gary-Bowersox).)*

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