

Star Sapphire

Tales concerning three rogues and their stars

Faith, Hope & Destiny. The three crossbars in a star sapphire represent these three concepts according to George Kunz in "The Curious Lore of Precious Stones". In spite of the lofty concepts ascribed to them, star sapphires seem to bring out the rogue element in people. The following three tales are all true stories pulled from the main-stream news media.

The most famous story is the theft of the *Star of India*, a 535 carat blue star sapphire, from the Museum of Natural History in New York. In 1964 a beach bum known as Murph the Surf teamed up with Allan Kuhn to pull off a gem heist worthy of the big screen. Murph and his buddy sneaked into the Museum on Halloween eve and discovered that security was almost non-existent! It seems they spent hours in the Museum ducking around display cases to stay out of sight. In an interview with Spin magazine, Murphy said he even dropped a dime out of his pocket once as a museum guard walked by! Alarms on the cases were non-existent and they eventually made off with \$400,000 worth of jewels and the priceless Star of India. In classic fashion, the thieves then decided to party for a few days at the Cambridge House Hotel in Manhattan. Predictably, someone at the hotel got suspicious and notified police. Shortly thereafter the famous sapphire was recovered from a locker in the Miami bus depot.

Our next story starts in Australia where a 14 year old working the sapphire fields found a big black rock and used it for a doorstep for ten years. Eventually a jeweler who was buying the local blue sapphires recognized the stone as a black star sapphire and brought it to the US for polishing. The 733 carat gem was tucked away in a safe and shown on occasion to special guests. In 1971, the *Black Star of Queensland* finally made its public debut. Sonny &

Cher were starting a TV variety show and wanted some eye-popping jewelry for Cher to wear during an opening comedy sketch. That was the only time the stone has ever been worn. But wait – it's just getting interesting! A one-time male model named Jack Armstrong fell in love with the stone and pressured his girlfriend at the time, Gabrielle Grohe, to purchase it. Grohe who lived in Switzerland put up the money for the sapphire, with the agreement that Jack would pay part of it back. Eventually the relationship soured and Ms Grohe bought Jack a plane ticket to the US. In 2007, the stone was on exhibit at the Royal Museum of Ontario. Grohe went to meet a potential buyer, but Armstrong was able to foil the attempt. After the exhibit, Armstrong who was listed as co-owner on the museum's records, had the stone shipped to LA in care of Harry Winston Jewelers. However, by the time he showed up with a buyer, the manager had learned of the dispute and refused to release the gem. The case went to court and was settled with Armstrong reportedly agreeing to pay \$500,000 for his share of the stone. His check arrived on the last possible day, and bounced. Since then the *Black Star of Queensland* has returned to obscurity in Switzerland.

The final tale begins in 1986 when Texas gem broker Roy Whetstine was supposedly digging through a box of agate rough at the Tucson Gem Show and negotiated on one piece to get the price reduced from \$15 to \$10. He had the stone cut into a whopping 1900ct burgundy colored star sapphire named the *Life and Pride of America*. He returned to Tucson the following year to sell it armed with an appraisal for \$2.25 million by Fallbrook, CA jeweler Lawrence Ward. The story started to fall apart when gem experts examined the stone and declared it nearly worthless, and people discovered that Ward had lost his membership in the American Gem Society for inflated appraisals. Then an intrepid reporter discovered an appraisal by Ward for a star sapphire of the exact same weight several years before the supposed "discovery". The stone is still for sale today, but the price continues to drop!

