

SORRY, LEVI, BUT THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES: AN ELEGY FOR A HISTORIC MINERAL COLLECTION



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The Columbian Exposition of 1893 celebrated the discovery of the New World four centuries earlier, and many regard it as the greatest of the World's Fairs. Sited on 700 acres in the burgeoning metropolis of Chicago, it showcased America's natural and technological bounty just as the United States was emerging as a dominant global power. This was the place where Aunt Jemima syrup, Cracker Jacks, Juicy Fruit gum, and Pabst beer were introduced to the public. Ninety-nine foreign countries participated in the event, and 27 million people—a quarter

of the US population at the time—attended the fair over its six-month duration. Because the mineral discoveries of the American West were a continuing source of wonderment and pride, an entire building dedicated to the mining industry was included for the first time at an international exposition. It was an unprecedented opportunity for the population to admire prime examples of the nation's mineral wealth, and Henry Ward (of Ward's catalog fame) displayed his vast collection over an area of 5000 square feet.

Other mineral enthusiasts paraded their specimens alongside, and the top prize for beauty went to a spectacular set of nearly 700 minerals that had been assembled by a mineralogist at Colorado State University. This suite contained some of the finest examples of velvety azurite and malachite from the Copper Queen Mine in Bisbee, Arizona. Levi Smith, a driller of oil wells in western Pennsylvania, purchased this blue-ribbon set, and before his death in 1917, he donated the collection as a memorial to the local high school in his small town of Warren in northwestern Pennsylvania. The Warren County school district lacked the financial means to exhibit the minerals properly, however, and in 1935 the school loaned the suite to what was then the Pennsylvania State College to assist in the education of prospective engineers enrolled in the School of Mines and Metallurgy. The faculty installed the Levi Smith collection in the Mineral Industries building, where it became the centerpiece of the Earth and Mineral Sciences Museum at Penn State for over half a century. There it served as an integral laboratory component for budding geoscientists, materials scientists, mineral engineers, and chemists, and thousands of school children and tourists visited it each year.

By the time this article is published, the Levi Smith collection will no longer exist. On December 3, 2006, in Los Angeles, Bonhams and Butterfields will auction it piecemeal for an estimated \$250,000 to \$350,000. How can this have happened?

Well, it happened at Penn State in the same way that it is happening to historic mineral collections at innumerable universities and small museums throughout the US. What follows is a fairly typical recipe:

Step 1: Starve the beast. Considerable financial resources initially were directed towards the creation and curation of the Earth and Mineral Sciences Museum at Penn State. Wood and glass cabinets lined nearly every inch of the spacious hallways in the Steidle Building, and a large room with a security system was designed to highlight the more valuable members of the collection, particularly the Levi Smith specimens. A full-time curator was hired to maintain the cases, design new exhibits, and provide a bridge that linked the museum to the faculty, the surrounding schools, and the general public. Guards were paid to maximize museum hours, especially on Saturdays to take advantage of football traffic.

Over the last decades, however, the museum budget shrank to nearly zero; the college allocated no funds for new acquisitions or for updating old displays. The full-time curator retired and was replaced by a graduate student still working towards his doctorate. Support for security drastically decreased, and the museum had to close on Saturdays. Inexorably, the museum adopted a forlorn and bedraggled character as the broken fluorescence booth remained unattended for years, the displays grew grimmer, and the number of visitors diminished.

Step 2: Carve up the space. The 1970s launched a steep decline in the US mining industry, and student enrollments in economic geology dropped concordantly. As schools of mining and metallurgy struggled, healthier programs grew at their expense and out-competed them for resources. Materials science long has been a juggernaut in Penn State research, and the materials group steadily engorged the laboratories and offices once occupied by faculty in mining and metallurgy. The space occupied by the aging mineral collection was unable to withstand the pressing tide. And so it was that three years ago the EMS gallery was formally ceded to the materials science department.

Step 3: Box the minerals for "safekeeping." No administrator worth his three-piece suit will look a geology professor in the eye and admit that a historic mineral collection is a logistical headache he could happily do without. And so promises are made, sometimes benevolently, that a new and better space will be created for the display of the prime specimens. In the meantime, however, the minerals have to be packed into boxes and stored until the arrival of the big donor who will resurrect the museum. This, of course, is the tipping point at which the deterioration has become terminal.

Penn State did renovate a smaller space on the ground floor of the geology building for a new museum, but this will be a museum about ideas and not objects. The space will focus on the processes that govern Earth systems so as to highlight the diverse interests of all faculty. Video and computer graphics are a versatile and efficient means of conveying such information, and three such stations already have been installed.

Inanimate mineral specimens are anachronistic in this reconception of the Earth sciences museum, and nearly all of the EMS collection was sealed in cartons. Finding secure and climate-controlled storage space has proved to be devilishly difficult. The Levi Smith collection alone filled 65 boxes. For reasons that remain between him and his god, the former curator suggested to his recently arrived successor that he could ameliorate this problem by returning the entire set to the Warren County school district. Not realizing the historic and scientific value of the collection, and without asking the questions that might have been asked, the new curator agreed. The Warren County school district was delighted. They contacted Bonhams and Butterfields and eagerly await the financial windfall from this forgotten asset. The *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* reports that the Levi Smith income will allow the school district to "maintain and update its buildings."

Just as the loss of a loved one sensitizes a person to the distress of others in a way to which no other experience is commensurate, my anguish over the destruction of this unique and beautiful collection forces me to ask whether we are doing enough to preserve our mineralogical heritage. In the words of Jeff Post, curator of the mineral collection at the Smithsonian Institution, "Once a collection is treated as a commodity rather than a scientific resource, then the scientific community has abdicated its responsibility to the donors who have endowed museums to safeguard their collections and to future generations of scientists who may require that collection for ground-breaking research."

Perhaps it is time for mineralogical societies to join together in a formal effort to prevent the repetition of this sad story. We are all aware of academic collections that are currently at risk. We must make it a priority to educate our colleagues and their administrators at those institutions

Cont'd on page 328