

WE WELCOME LETTERS TO THE EDITORS. WE RESERVE THE RIGHT TO EDIT THEM FOR CLARITY AND BREVITY. BY WRITING A LETTER TO THE EDITORS, YOU GIVE *ELEMENTS* PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE IT. SEND LETTERS TO THE MANAGING EDITOR (TREMPLI@ETE.INRS.CA).

LACK OF FUNDING LEADS TO DEAD MUSEUMS

I was touched by Peter Heaney's Triple Point in *Elements* (2: 327). I am saddened and upset by the loss of the Levi Smith collection and, ultimately, the mineral museum.

I didn't receive any communication from the Geoscience Department at Penn State some years ago informing me that the department was considering divesting itself of the collection. Was any attempt even made to preserve the collection, or was there simply a decision to jettison it? It is my suspicion that there would have been a small cohort of alumni who would have been willing to contribute money toward preserving the collection, had there been a plan to do so.

For a museum's holdings to be a useful scientific resource, there needs to be ease of access, and this starts with an accurate and easily accessible collection inventory. Even in good museums, the collection inventory is not always accurate and is usually less than easily accessible. This defeats the purpose. Ultimately, a museum is not used as a scientific resource because its holdings aren't easily accessible, and because the museum isn't used, it doesn't deserve funding; without funding, its holdings can't be made accessible. Dead museum.

The funding issue also impacts another way. Looking at publications dealing with mineralogy, I see that there are relatively few American authors. NSF doesn't typically fund study of minerals the way that, for example, the Italian research establishment does. If I don't have funding to study a mineral from a museum collection, I won't use the museum. Dead museum. So it is not just the museum funding landscape that is at fault in this instance; it is also what our research funding structure considers worthwhile.

Private collections are at even greater risk. I have something in excess of 10,000 polished sections and 10,000 thin sections from ore deposits around the world, accumulated by my father in the course of his mineralogical consulting career. I don't have the time and

resources to preserve and organize the materials sufficiently to make them into a package that I can offer to a museum. This accumulation—not collection—of ore deposit research material ultimately will be lost because the resources for making it accessible and useful simply are not available. I think my wife is correct in saying that I should invest my time in the things that I want to do professionally, rather than in preserving what my father did professionally. So, ultimately, with a very heavy heart, I will probably also dump tens of thousands of samples into a dumpster, and slices of ore deposit history will be irretrievably lost.

At least the school board will get some money from Levi Smith's gift, and a few affluent collectors or institutions will get to enjoy these classic samples.

Dr. Francis Ö. Dudás
Massachusetts Institute of Technology,
Boston, USA

MINERALS UNDER ASSAULT

Congratulations to Peter Heaney on a fine article; I applaud the inroads he has made with this topic in the Earth sciences community. However, I must say, the article was a bit depressing. Particularly so in light of many similar articles in recent issues of *Mineral News* (regarding the Philadelphia Academy of Sciences, which sold an historic and irreplaceable mineral collection to three dealers; the collection is now in the process of being dispersed worldwide) and *The Mineralogical Record* (wherein articles and editorials have given an account of major museums and universities in England that have deaccessioned or removed systematic mineral collections from public view). It appears that minerals are under assault everywhere—apparently if it's not furry or Cretaceous, it must not be worthy of curating.

Dan Kile
Littleton, CO

HISTORY AND FATE OF THE RENSSELAER POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE MINERAL COLLECTION

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Rensselaer mineralogical and geological collections thrived, attracting visitors and students. After close to 200 years of geological sampling and preservation of precious samples (1824–2000), the collections were discontinued and the material was dumped, stored in basements, or donated to other institutions (Friedmann 2007)...

Peter Heaney's note (*Elements* 2007, volume 2, issue 6) on historic American mineral collections relates to three basic steps: "Step 1: Starve the beast, Step 2: Carve up the space, and Step 3: Box the minerals for 'safekeeping'." At Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI), one step included dumping minerals collected in the nineteenth and twentieth century on a university lawn. I spent years preparing the Accession Records of the 5960 items (as of the 1960s) in the mineral collection. The main collector was Henry B. Nason (1831–1895), the de facto curator of the vast mineral collections of Rensselaer. He acted as agent for Rensselaer in acquiring specimens, and with James Hall (1811–1878), arranged, and labeled them. Nason's interest in mineralogy had a profound influence on the scientific advancement of mineralogy. Washington A. Roebling (1837–1926) took Nason's course at Rensselaer. Inspired by Nason, he embarked on a study of systematic mineralogy. Later the Roebling collection was donated to the National Museum of the Smithsonian Institution, and his son, John A. Roebling (1885–1952), gave \$150,000 for its care. Nason's dedication to RPI was embodied in the donation of his private collection of 5000 minerals to RPI in 1883.

The alumni built a special building to house James Hall's fossil collection of 2000 specimens, which were recorded by H.B. Nason (Friedman 2007, Fig. 13). In 1999, part of the collection was donated to the New York State Museum in Albany, New York, together with the mineral collection.

Gerald M. Friedman
Northeastern Science Foundation, Troy, NY

Friedman GM (2007) History of the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI) geological collections. *Northeastern Geology and Environmental Sciences* 29: 34-48

FROM THE MANAGING EDITOR (cont'd from page 85)

In the grades 4 to 6 classrooms, I showed several large, eye-catching samples to introduce minerals, rocks, their properties and use. Questions were asked and answered. Then, the children worked in teams using a simple flow sheet to identify some minerals handed to them—the same approach mineralogists use. Classroom response varied a lot. In classrooms where teachers encouraged enquiries, we were deluged by questions from curious kids; in others, kids were silent and amorphous (guess how the teachers were.) But in short, we were amazed by the amount of information the children retained. No workshops were exactly the same, as they were led by the children. The main point I want to make is that, once I was encouraged to do so, it was relatively simple to change the way I presented the workshops: I did not need extensive training, just a willingness to experiment and try a new way to do things.

Pierrette Tremblay