

Mineral collection disposition

Tom Mortimer

A question facing many of us, but few have likely resolved is: What is my desire for my mineral collection when I am no longer here to care for it?

- Do I have children or grand children to leave my collection to? Do any of these family members have an interest in minerals? Even with an interest, do they have space to store it?
- Is my collection in a well identified location, or is it spread out over multiple rooms?
- Have I provided written direction for the disposition of my collection?
- Are there other hobby related items to be dispositioned? (Microscopes, trimmers, ultrasonic cleaners, books, magazine sets, photography equipment)
- Is there a catalog or software database that goes with the collection?
- Micro mineral collections are particularly problematic. Their beauty and value is lost to the casual observer.
- Several case histories show that donating a collection to a museum or educational institution has been a poor choice.

Case Study 1: The Phillip Foster micro-mineral collection

Philip C. Foster (1892 - 1974) lived much of his life in Dover, NH. His well documented (card catalog) collection consisted of about 3600 mounted micro specimens. These were donated to the UNH geology department on his death. In spring 2008, UNH “de-acquisitioned” the Foster collection. Former UNH geology graduate Dana Morong, aware of the importance of the collection, agreed to save it from ignominy. Dana invested hundreds of hours restoring the collection. In 2016, Dana loaned the collection to Tom Mortimer to photograph notable NH specimens in the collection. Impressed with the collection, Tom gave a talk on the collection at a Micromounters of New England Symposium and nominated Phillip Foster to the Micromounters Hall of Fame, (inducted 2018). Dana expressed a desire for Tom to take the collection, but with its large size and only 15% from New Hampshire, Tom “took a pass.” As of 2020, this collection resides in Dana’s barn.

Case Study 2: The Janet and Steve Cares Collections

Steve (first) (1909-2006) and then Janet (1921-2011) donated their principal micromount collections to Harvard University. Their combined collections (estimated in the thousands of mounts) are housed in the top floor of a Harvard annex house, several blocks from the campus. Tom Mortimer, accompanied by then curator Carl Francis, viewed New Hampshire specimens in the collection in the fall of 2007. There are some outstanding NH specimens in this collection. How many even know of the existence of these collections? I [tm] suspect that I am one of the very few who have even looked at some of these mounts since they were donated. I believe the John Reiner micromount collection is also stored here. An on-line catalog of these collections may be available.

In 2019 the Micromounters of New England was fortunate to acquire a collection of TN-sized Janet Cares specimens, numbering about 1000 samples. These are being auctioned to MMNE members at a rate of sixteen a month. The auction price on some of these specimens is surprising some older, long-time, micro-mineral collectors. This is most welcoming. Those who pay good money for specimens will value them and will care for them in the future.

Case Study 3: The Mike Swanson collection

The Mike Swanson (1942-2018) principal-core mineral collection remains in the custody of Mike’s daughter, (12/2020). The collection is estimated to be well over 1000 boxed specimens. Mike was

a most meticulous collector. His collection is believed to have outstanding specimens from Mt. St Halaire and Palermo. Scott Rielly is in discussion with Mike's daughter, Martha, on the possibility of the MMNE acquiring this collection. The MMNE also acquired Mike's polar scope and extensive set of accessories.

The MMNE was successful in acquiring Mike's secondary micro-mineral collection of approximately 2000 boxed specimens in 2019. These specimens are being (pre-Covid) individually auctioned at MMNE meeting in batches of about 100 per meeting. About half are finding new owners, most at the minimum bid of \$2.

Case Study 4: The Forrest Fogg collection

I [tm] have one report that the Forrest Fogg (1920-2000) boxed micro collection was "not large" and acquired by Harvard University. Gordon Jackson acquired "what was left." Gordon has passed along many duplicates from this collection to MMNE members.

Case Study 5: The Gene Bearss collection

Gene's principal-core mineral collection was donated to the Maine Mineral and Gem Museum, (MMGM). It is believed the Maine Museum Bearss collection is predominantly micros (by specimen count), however some larger specimens were likely donated. Carl Francis stated the collection needs to be entered into a spread-sheet/cataloged. It is doubtful anyone other than Carl has looked at any of these micro specimens since they have disappeared into the bowels of the MMGM.

Case Study 6: The Ivan Robenson collection

I learned of this collection via a 2019 email dialog with Carl Francis. Ivan lived in Salem Depot (NH?) and collected mostly in New England. He is reported to have collected at Parker Mtn. Strafford, NH on many occasions. Carl reports a 1300 card catalog for the collection. Once again, who knew of this collection? He may have been a member of the MMNE.

Case Study 7: The Walter Lane collection

I believe the mounted portion of the Walter Lane collection was acquired by Gene Bearss. These specimens were then passed along to the MMGM with the rest of Gene's collection. A great quantity of un-sorted, "mine-run" Walter Lane material was acquired by Gene and passed along to the MMNE. A large quantity of this material has been dispersed to MMNE members as "give-aways."

Case Study 8: The Marcelle Weber collection

Little is known by the public concerning the Weber micro mineral collection. All that can be said is that surviving family members probably preferred it this way. It was rumored that much of the unboxed material Marcelle kept in her basement in flats was simply disposed of. Otherwise, in dribs and drabs an occasional boxed Weber specimen shows up on local dealer tables. A random specimen or two show up on on-line websites like Arkenstone.

Case Study 9: The Bill Henderson (1932-2014) collection

I have little information... although some un-mounted and boxed Palermo micro specimens have been acquired by Joe Mulvey. Bill's Micromounters Hall of Fame write-up states Bill "accumulated about 13,000 micromounts (some 1,200 species)." This collection was eventually recovered from a purported buyer that could not afford full payment. We can only assume that it was subsequently purchased by another private collector.

Case Study 10: The Clayton Ford collection

The Clayton Ford collection was acquired by Gordon Jackson and "numbered around 325+/- boxed specimens." Gordon and Vince Valade bought his "in the garage stuff and there was a lot of micro material better than what he boxed for his coll." Gordon has shared much of this secondary Clayton Ford material with other Micromounters.

Final thoughts:

The advent of digital photography, image stacking, and the internet have greatly increased the interest in micro-mineral collecting and in the value of micro-mineral specimens. This trend is likely to continue. The (inflation adjusted) cost of good quality stereo microscopes is coming down, making the hobby affordable to a wider audience. The principal headwind for the hobby is likely a general decline in “collecting things.”

As the recent acquisition of many specimens from the Cares and Swanson collections demonstrates, a positive outcome of gifting a micromineral collection to the MMNE for auction, or other disbursement, is that those who pay good money for the specimens are certain to value and preserve them.

Bob Wilken provided a thoughtful review of this article and added some of his knowledge to the dispositions of the Webber and Henderson collections. Bob also gave his thoughts on this topic, which I have included below.

[bw] “This is a tough subject to tackle. For sizeable collections there is no substitute for clear written instructions in a will of some kind. Lacking that leads to an uncertain end.

Without clear instructions, attitudes of familial heirs are not always in line with those of the now-deceased collector. Sometimes there is a misconception that such a collection is very valuable and can be “cashed-in” on by family. The hard reality is that such specimens are only valuable to those who have an interest in them. So, unless a suitable private purchase is arranged for in advance, collections are often sold by an heir for “pennies on the dollar” to dealers who will more likely be the ones who eventually profit. Nevertheless, this is a more tortuous route to get valued specimens back to those who value them.

It's within human nature to want to preserve what has been so carefully tended...perhaps for as long as a lifetime. Attempting to preserve that legacy through an institution such as a museum is a fool's errand if that legacy sits in drawers in the dark for eons into the future. I hate to think that my collection will be split up and “scattered to the winds” among many collectors after I'm gone. And, no doubt, little by little a part of that will be lost over successive generations. But, there is no other better alternative. We can't guarantee anything about the future. MMNE and other similar organizations are the best instruments we have to pass on collections with a modicum of certainty that they will be valued and appreciated by future generations.”