

PRESERVING A PRICELESS PAST

ASIATIC
TAPIR
SKULL



by Eve Sandstrom

In 1897, 10 years before statehood, the Oklahoma Territorial Legislature charged the University of Oklahoma with a special mission: to collect and preserve geological and natural history artifacts for the entire state. Today staff and supporters are moving to update that mission and to take the University's museum into the 21st century as a vital part of Oklahoma's cultural life.

Continued

The signposts along the path to the future are clear:

- The 1987 Oklahoma State Legislature gave the former Stovall Museum a new name, the Oklahoma Museum of Natural History, which declares its importance statewide.

- The University of Oklahoma Board of Regents in February 1989 selected a site for a new museum building at the corner of Timberdell Road and Chautauqua Avenue near the OU Law Center and Lloyd Noble Center.

- Within the past two years, the regents also approved moving the Oklahoma Archaeological Survey and the Western History Collections to the proposed new building complex.

- Spearheaded by a \$25,000 grant

from the University of Oklahoma Foundation, a group of the state's private foundations and benefactors raised \$150,000 for planning and design of the building. Participants included the Samuel Roberts Noble Foundation Inc., the McCasland Foundation, the Robert S. and Grayce B. Kerr Foundation Inc., the Merrick Foundation, the Kirkpatrick Foundation Inc., Oklahoma Museum of Natural History discretionary funds, and an anonymous donor.

- A master plan for the new facility, including blueprints, a model and color renderings, has been completed by the architects and approved by the regents.

- The new OMNH facility is listed

as a major priority for private fund raising as the University of Oklahoma enters its second century.

In its 90-year history, the museum has built a collection that far surpasses the holdings of the official museums of most other states. The University's plans for the second century call for facilities designed to properly display and protect those artifacts.

Michael A. Mares (pronounced Mahf-iss), director of the Oklahoma Museum of Natural History, sees more than a scholarly function for a new museum building.

"We'll draw more people annually than OU football," he predicts. "It will be the biggest tourist attraction in the state of Oklahoma."

Mares wants to increase the museum's service to the public and the public's interest in the museum, but he is more concerned with the responsibility of caring for a collection of five million artifacts, the value of which has been estimated at more than \$100 million.

These irreplaceable items now are stored in 10 inadequate buildings, threatened by heat, cold, humidity, leaking roofs, fire and even theft. Only a tiny portion of the collection can be shown to the public in the museum's one display area in the building at 1335 Asp, which once housed the Uni-

The old Stovall Museum building, top photo, is destined to be replaced by the ultra-modern facility in the architect's drawing below.



IMAGE IS NOT AVAILABLE ONLINE DUE TO COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS.

A paper copy of this issue is available at call number
LH 1 .O6S6 in Bizzell Memorial Library.

versity ROTC's horse-drawn artillery.

Mares expressed his concern in *Heritage at Risk: Oklahoma's Hidden Treasure*, published in 1988. Illustrated with dozens of dazzling photographs of museum artifacts, the book is available in the museum gift shop or by mail.

"We want to build a museum worthy of these wonderful collections," Mares says. "These priceless materials belong to the people of Oklahoma, and they deserve to have their treasure cared for properly."

A native of Albuquerque, New Mexico, Mares is also its curator of mammals and an OU professor of zoology. He holds a Ph.D. from the University of Texas, a master's degree from Fort Hays State University in Kansas and a bachelor's from the University of New Mexico. He taught at the University of Pittsburgh and has extensive experience in South America, both as a lecturer and as a collector of mammals. His bibliography of academic publications runs 10 pages, and he has presented papers at more than 50 scholarly meetings.

His academic specialty drew him to museums, he says. "Part of the work of mammalogy is collecting, so there's a natural link."

The OU museum's history records the movement of the collections from one end of the campus to another. At various times parts of the collections were housed in the first administration building, the Old Science Hall, the OU football stadium, the new administration building, DeBarr Hall, the basement of the old law building and the old journalism building. On several occasions large portions of the collection were destroyed by fire.

Among the outstanding early-day figures associated with the museum were Albert Heald Van Vleet, a zoologist who as museum director built an impressive collection of birds and mammals; H. H. Lane, head of the department of zoology and embryology in 1906, who oversaw the expansion of the museum through purchase of important private collections; and Edward Drinker Crabb, a Yukon farm boy whose taxidermy display at the 1913 Oklahoma State Fair won him a job at the museum and a chance to become a zoologist. Crabb went on to earn his Ph.D. at the University of

Michigan and was a professor of biology at the University of Colorado.

Others influential in building the early museum included A. I. Ortenburger, who built the first reptile, amphibian and fish collections; and Charles N. Gould, Charles E. Decker and A. J. Williams, all of whom collected geological specimens for exhibits. Pioneers in the collection of Indian artifacts included Joseph Bradfield Thoburn, the first OU scholar to investigate the Spiro Mounds; E. E. Dale, famed western historian and OU professor; and Forest E. Clements, who worked with a WPA project that further probed the Spiro Mounds.

In 1930 J. Willis Stovall joined the OU faculty as a paleontologist. His

"We want to build a museum worthy of these wonderful collections.

These priceless materials belong to the people of Oklahoma, and they deserve to have their treasure cared for properly."

work collecting, classifying and displaying vertebrate fossils proved to be a powerful influence on the museum. From shortly after Stovall's death in 1953 until it was renamed in 1987, the museum was officially the "Stovall Museum of Science and History."

Stovall led summer field expeditions in Oklahoma, Colorado, Wyoming and Texas, collecting thousands of fossil specimens of dinosaurs, elephants, horses, camels, fish and reptiles. During the years between 1935 and 1941, he directed WPA projects that employed workers to help with the digging.

"These things could not possibly be collected today," Mares insists, noting that the cost of labor, supplies and equipment simply would be prohibitive for any private foundation or government agency.

Unfortunately, Stovall's work was not completed before his death. For a number of years thousands of his specimens, some still resting in protective plaster casts, were stored in an unused section of the Cross Center dormitories. Museum curators now are continuing the work. New fossils are being discovered regularly in the field as part of the research of the museum's current curator, Richard Cifelli.

The mounted mammoth fossil that has been the most dramatic paleontological exhibit at the museum for many years was one of Stovall's specimens. And recently, Mares says, that exhibit was improved.

The skull that for years was attached to the shoulder bones of the mammoth was not the correct one, he explains. "The original was too large for the display space, so a smaller skull was used. The actual skull has been on display at the Pink Palace Museum in Memphis for 40 years. We got the skull back, and it is now on exhibit here."

Stovall's work as a collector and museum director gave the museum the basis for a paleontology collection that is 15th in size in the United States.

Paleontology is only one of the collections that is considered outstanding. Asking Mares to discuss the institution's holdings leads him to muse aloud.

"The archaeological collection is important—the Spiro Mounds artifacts are worth tens of millions of dollars. They also were collected as a WPA project.

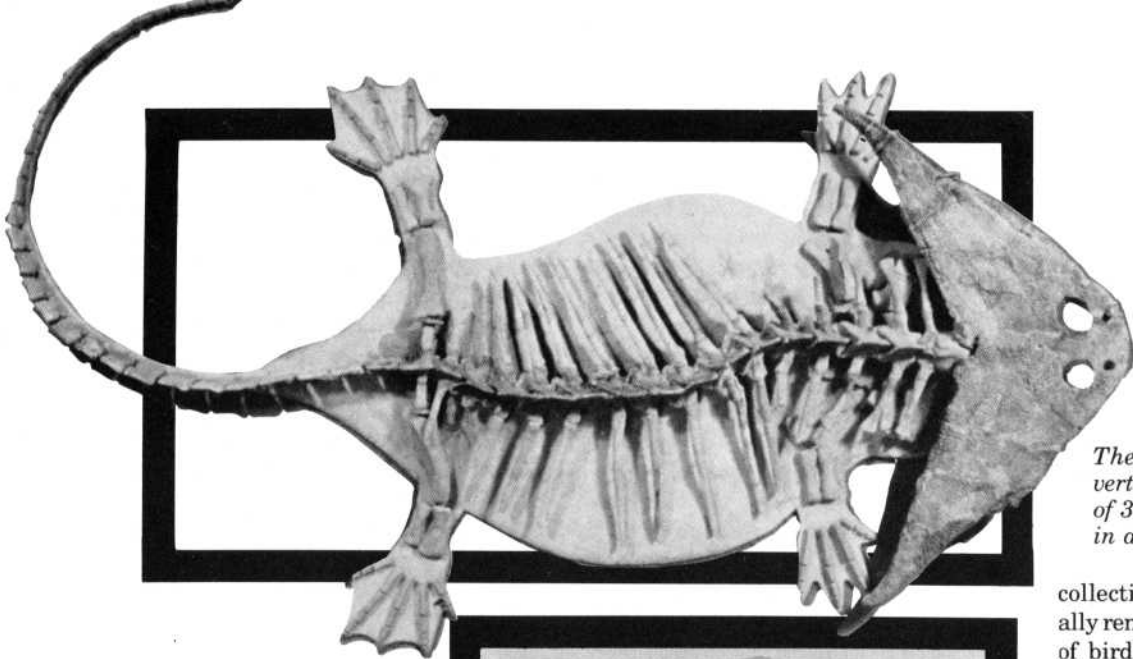
"The classics collection contains world-class pieces, and these items no longer can be taken from their countries of origin.

"The ethnology collection contains thousands of Indian artifacts from all over the Americas, as well as items from Africa, Europe and Asia.

"The vertebrate paleontology collection is very, very important.

"The paleobotany collection is the finest in the world. Included in this is a micropaleontology collection of pollen and plant remains. This reveals, for example, that giant redwoods once grew right on this spot.

"The bird collection not only includes the skins collected by George M. Sutton, but also a large skeleton



The 280-million-year-old vertebrate fossil at left is one of 30,000 specimens in a \$20 million collection.

A Cheyenne woman's buckskin dress, ca. 1890, is part of an ethnology collection vital to preservation of North American Indian heritage.



Even with limited facilities, the museum still draws 100,000 visitors a year, with educational programs for 30,000 school children.

collection by Gary Schnell.” (A nationally renowned ornithologist and painter of birds, the late Sutton was an OU professor for many years. Schnell is now director of the Oklahoma Biological Survey, OU professor of zoology and curator of birds for the Oklahoma Museum of Natural History.)

All these objects are irreplaceable, Mares emphasizes, and the museum’s inadequate resources for storage, research and preservation places them at risk of damage or destruction.

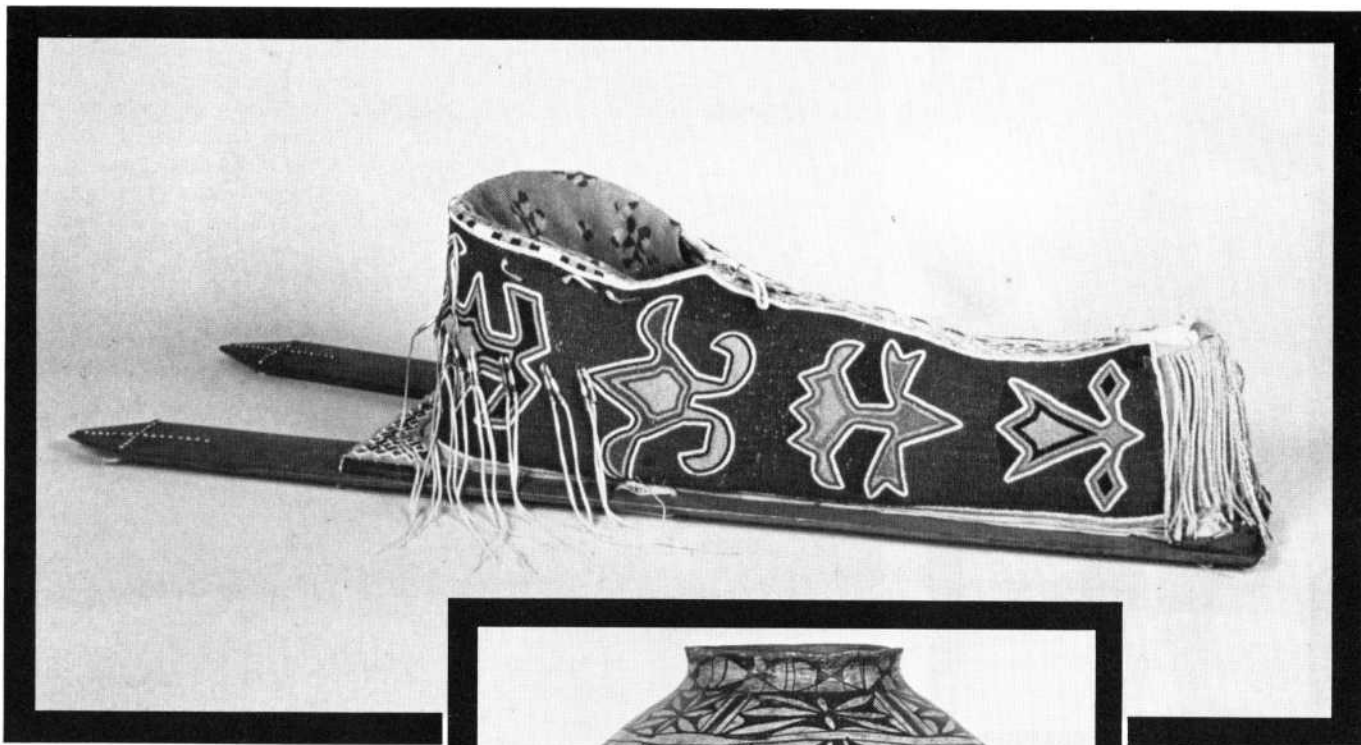
The collections now are scattered throughout buildings on the main and south campuses. Approximately 800 Indian baskets, for example, some more than 100 years old, are stored in buildings that were once stables for horses used to pull ROTC artillery. The irreplaceable Spiro Mounds artifacts also are stored in a former stable.

The bird skins collected by Sutton are in old gunsheds, buildings similar to garages. This area is weatherproof and partially climate controlled, but it offers limited facilities to the researchers who come from all over the world to study the Sutton collection.

The Oklahoma Archaeological Survey now is housed in a wooden building on OU’s north campus, and the Western History Collections are in Monnet Hall, one of the campus’ oldest buildings.

The limited facilities have not kept the museum staff from performing its mission—which a museum publication defines as “to preserve, increase and disseminate knowledge of the natural and cultural history of Oklahoma and the world.”

The museum currently has only 50,000 square feet of space, with only



Though the Kiowa infant who slept in it is long forgotten, the cradle above is preserved for the ages.

4,500 available for public displays. Even so, the museum draws 100,000 visitors a year, Mares says.

Only one staff member works part-time on educational programs, but 30,000 school children tour the museum each year. These visits are good not only for the students involved, Mares points out, but also benefit the University by bringing youngsters in contact with the Norman campus.

"These kids are going on to college some day," notes Mares.

The museum is a leader in the preparation of traveling exhibits, with such displays now serving a 10-state area. "Our people attend national meetings to tell other museums how to do it," Mares says. "With a bigger staff, we could do even more. Our traveling exhibits have opened in over 300 sites in almost every county in Oklahoma and in 70 sites in 14 other states. These informative and attractive exhibits have been viewed by more than 2½ million people."

The campus-museum link is mutually beneficial, he believes. "The museum is a tremendous advantage in what OU can offer in training and



The ceramic storage jar at left dates from 1860 and is either Santo Domingo or Cochiti in origin.

experiences for students. They can see the actual item."

An example, Mares says, is ledger book art. On the frontier, ledgers used by bookkeepers were one of the first types of paper available to Indians. They used these books to draw colorful depictions of their lives and their tribal history. The ledger sheets now are collected as both art and for their insight into a culture whose form has changed drastically in the past 100 years.

"These are now worth three, five—seven thousand a sheet," Mares says. "These are things people in most universities cannot see." The OU museum has two complete books—more than 100 sheets.

Only one room in the museum is available for classes and meetings, and it is used by as many as 17 OU classes and several community organizations each semester. In addition, many graduate students conduct research projects at the museum each year. Again, lab and work space for these students is extremely limited.

"The advantage of the university connection to the museum is that our curators are scholars," Mares says. "This keeps our collections active. Our staff members produce from 40 to 60 publications yearly.

"Students in classes as varied as classical history, art, interior design, geology, biology, botany or anthropology can see actual artifacts, specimens



The Etruscan bronze Apollo above is from the 4th century, B.C. Below, 100-year-old Indian baskets stored in the former ROTC stables are protected by plastic bags.



or other materials that help them to appreciate and understand better their course work," the director adds. "Reading about Greek civilization is one thing; seeing pottery, coins, statues and other items made 3,000 years ago is another. It brings them in direct touch with cultures from the past or from other parts of the world."

Mares' ambition for the Oklahoma Museum of Natural History is simply stated. "I'd like to see it be the finest state museum in the country—and that's something that's attainable."

The collections, which Mares calls "the heart" of the museum, are already outstanding. The proposed building is the next step, he says.

The present main building has 4,500 square feet of display space, located on a side street just south of the Oklahoma Memorial Stadium. Visitors must compete with students for the few on-street metered parking spaces.

The proposed building would have 300,000 square feet of display, office, classroom, lab and storage space on a major street only a few blocks off a

four-lane highway, State Highway 9. And it would have parking lots.

Today graduate students rub elbows in tiny, unheated, uncooled research facilities. In the new building, space would allow these programs to be expanded and also would permit staff members to undertake more research.

"If we can increase the number of curators, we'll get grants," Mares reasons. "Our present curators' research programs are very well funded. Within 10 years we could be one of the major grant-receiving divisions in the University."

The greater amount of display space would be the most dramatic change to the public.

"Now, not a hundredth of one percent of our artifacts are on display," Mares says. "The new facility could show 100 times what we show now."

Won't that require more staff?

Mares nods. "Right. The staff is now around 30, and the new building would require a staff of around 100. It will take more budget, true, but it will partially support itself, because we'll be able to charge an entry fee."

He smiles. "Now we don't have enough on display to justify charging people to see it."

Estimated cost of the new building is between \$30 million and \$34 million.

To Mares' way of thinking, it is well worth the investment. In New Mexico, a new state museum of natural history opened approximately five years ago. ("They have no collection—they tried to borrow part of ours," Mares says.) State officials in New Mexico figure the return in economic benefits from tourism is \$4 of new money for every \$1 of tax money invested.

OU museum supporters hope to raise the construction funds from foundations, private donors and state appropriations.

"This is not an OU project, not a Norman project, but a project that serves the entire state. This is *your* stuff we're protecting," Mares points out. "Not supporting this is a vote against mom and apple pie."

This project not only preserves the past, he contends, but also builds for the future. "In 200 years, the people of Oklahoma will be even more interested in these things than they are now."



Oklahoma Museum of Natural History Director Michael Mares, left, is determined to preserve the priceless collections under his care. But he also intends to make them more useful to scholars and more accessible to the public.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE COLLECTIONS

The collections of the Oklahoma Museum of Natural History fall into the broad categories of social sciences, earth sciences and life sciences. Contained therein are five million items conservatively valued at a total of \$100 million.

The museum does not compete with institutions with other specialties, director Michael A. Mares says. Art is not collected, for example, unless it is part of an ethnology collection or is related directly to a collection area. While some historical items are held, that field is left to OU's Western History Collections or to the Oklahoma Historical Society. All museum collections are available for use by OU classes and researchers.

A brief overview of the museum's holdings follows:

ARCHAEOLOGY—More than four million artifacts related to Oklahoma's native Americans, spanning the range from prehistoric to modern times. Valued at \$60 million. (Storage of Oklahoma artifacts at the museum is mandated by state law.)

INVERTEBRATE PALEONTOLOGY—250,000 specimen lots of Oklahoma invertebrate fossils and an important collection of trilobites, a marine arthropod, from the Silurian and Devonian geological periods. Valued at \$4 million.

PALEOBOTANY AND MICRO-PALEONTOLOGY—The largest fossil pollen collection in the world, more than 100,000 lots. Valued at \$2 million.

VERTEBRATE PALEONTOLOGY—With 30,000 specimens, the 15th largest collection in the nation. Valued at \$20 million.

BIRDS—25,000 Oklahoma specimens, one of the largest regional bird collections in the United States. The skeleton collection is 17th largest in the nation. Valued at \$2 million.

CLASSICS—2,000 items, one of the largest in the central United States. One piece, a Greek eye cup, is one of only four in the world. Valued at \$3 million.

ETHNOLOGY—8,000 North American artifacts and additional items

from Asia, Mexico and South America. Valued at \$6 million.

FISH—250,000 specimens, including examples of 97 percent of Oklahoma's 169 species. Valued at \$1.5 million.

INVERTEBRATE—132,000 specimen lots of freshwater and land species from Oklahoma and marine species from throughout the world. Valued at \$150,000.

MAMMALS—26,000 specimens of Oklahoma mammals and other species from throughout the world, the 25th largest collection in the United States. Valued at \$1.5 million.

REPTILES AND AMPHIBIANS—80,000 specimens of Oklahoma species, plus extensive foreign specimens. Valued at \$600,000.

HISTORY—Approximately 2,000 articles used by Oklahoma pioneers. Valued at \$100,000.

MINERALS—1,000 specimens, including Oklahoma's largest collection of meteorites. No value has been estimated.

