



The Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History

Perseverance pays with a dream realized

In 1988, Michael A. Mares, director of the then Oklahoma Museum of Natural History at the University of Oklahoma, wrote a book. He had been in this position for five years. Five years of coming to know and revere the remarkable collections in his charge, to appreciate their history. Five years of frustration at an inability to adequately exhibit these treasures, to maximize the research potential lurking just beyond reach. And, most of all, five years of concern, bordering on fear, for the safekeeping of Oklahoma's heritage.

Mares' book, *Heritage at Risk: Oklahoma's Hidden Treasure*, articulated a vision for a new museum and appealed to the citizens of the state to join this effort to preserve their priceless legacy. As we know now, Mares and the legion of supporters who adopted the museum's cause finally got the job done. But they were not the first to have made the attempt.

The Territorial Legislature created the "Territorial Museum" in 1899 with the stroke of a pen and \$200 a year. Appropriating storage facilities wherever they could, a succession of curators built the collections over time, and then watched helplessly as they were totally or partially destroyed by fire three times before 1918. On three other occasions a new building seemed assured only to see a 1929 allocation disappear in the Great Depression, 1945 funds reallocated for World War II veterans' housing, and a multimillion-dollar pledge die with the well-meaning benefactor in the 1960s.

Still, the small, dedicated staff persevered. An amazing number of specimens and artifacts were added to the collections, to total more than six million by the end of the century. Ironically the biggest boost to the collections came during the Depression, when Works Progress Administration labor made practicable excavations the University otherwise never could have afforded—at 1930s' prices or today's.

In 1947, the University did find "temporary" quarters for a museum, the converted ROTC building and its adjacent horse barns. The first museum director, J. Willis Stovall, set up shop, hoping for a "real" museum to follow—as did his successors for nearly half a century. Ralph Shead. Stephen F. Borhegyi. William Mayer-Oakes. Marion T. Hall. J. Keever Greer. Gary D. Schnell (interim). Bruce M. Bell. And finally, Mares.

Stovall Museum, so named in 1953,

some doubters thought an adequate facility never would be built—and if that were the case, the collections should be given away rather than further risk their destruction. This premise was totally unacceptable.

In 1987, the museum was designated the state's official natural history museum by the state Legislature. Then Mike Mares wrote his book, making the museum's case so well that the Friends in 1991 decided to force the issue by circulating petitions for a successful \$5 million bond election in the city of Norman. A \$15 million state bond issue followed.

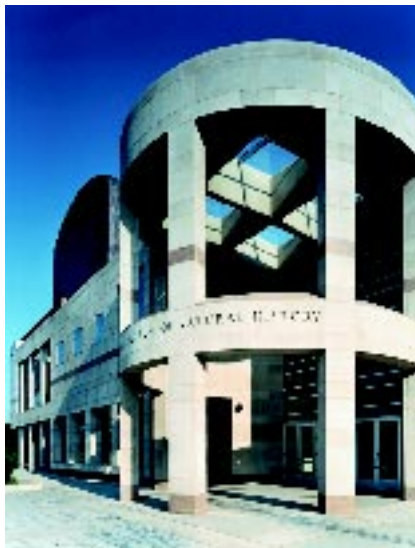
Visitors to the new Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History are surrounded by the results of a \$17.5 million private funding campaign to complete the facility. The name on the museum itself, of course, but donors are recognized also on halls, exhibits, balconies, plazas, even the elevator lobbies—and less obviously on the research features and collections away from the public eye in the Preservation Center.

The SNOMNH as it stands today is a happy result—but not the ending—to a long-running saga. The preparation of this special issue of *Sooner Magazine*—which began more than a year ago before the museum's May 1, 2000, opening—illustrated, if nothing else, that museums are always a work in progress. Since inaugural day, a new exhibit hall opened; the bronze Mammoth acquired new tusks; and the *Apatosaurus* got a new head. One Sutton exhibit was exchanged for another. The Native American art came down, and cradleboards went up. Curators and other staff have been added, new discoveries made.

The ghosts of those determined museum pioneers must have been nearby when the ribbon was cut a year ago. And they might have been whispering to the celebrants, "See? We told you. Never give up; never give up; never give up."

— CJB

Timothy Hursley



occupied a beloved place on the campus and in the community. School children bicycled across town to gaze at the totem pole in front and the Columbian Mammoth skeleton inside. Football crowds ambled through on their way to the stadium. The Sequoyah Club held all-night, pre-Homecoming bonfires and dances by the teepee behind the building.

A small but devoted band of supporters called the Friends of the Museum were among the few non-staffers who realized the extent of the museum's holdings, scattered and unseen in 10 different University buildings. They realized that