

The treasure chest architectural design is a fitting metaphor for what the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History holds inside—Oklahoma's priceless past.



Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History

OU's Treasure Chest Turns 21

Sam Noble Museum enters its third decade as educator and guardian of Oklahoma's heritage.

BY SUSAN GROSSMAN

For two decades, priceless treasures from Oklahoma's past have been protected inside the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History (SNOMNH). That's long enough for a generation to grow up thinking that its favorite fossils, dioramas and artifacts have always been safeguarded inside the nearly 200,000 square-foot, climate-controlled sanctuary on Timberdell and Chautauqua Ave.

And while 20 years is a milestone worth celebrating, it is a nanosecond in the lifespan of not only the museum's inhabitants, but also the small army of dedicated staff, volunteers and local citizens who spent decades advocating for a building worthy of these priceless pieces of history.

The building, which fittingly resembles a giant-sized treasure chest, houses a dozen collections and five exhibit halls, as well as laboratories, classrooms, libraries, storage areas and administrative offices. The 10 million artifacts inside help tell the story of Oklahoma's natural history. Gallery spaces are filled with towering dinosaur skeletons and other objects of the ancient past, the animals and ecosystems that represent the wonder of nature, and Native American and world cultures.

While the ultimate goal of safekeeping and showcasing these treasures was achieved when the doors opened in spring 2000, the museum continues to grow, evolve and educate.

"A lot of university museums don't do what we do," says Michael Mares, SNOMNH director emeritus. "We protect the heritage of the state and the university. Our curators conduct research, produce scientific papers, write books and teach across all spectrums from toddlers up to the highest levels of academia."

Now recognized as one of the top museums of natural history in the nation, its beginnings were humble. One hundred years before the Sam Noble Museum was built, a territorial museum was created with an annual state appropriation of \$200. Storage for the fledgling collection of specimens was a hodgepodge of available space on campus. While there were promising starts for a new building throughout the 1900s, plans evaporated during the Great Depression, again during World War II, and yet again in the 1960s.

Meanwhile, specimens and artifacts continued to grow. Labor provided by the Works Progress Administration helped with excavations across the state. By 1947, a converted ROTC building housed the museum while nearby horse barns held its collections. Director, paleontologist and OU professor J. Willis Stovall moved into what he thought was a temporary home. It would take another half-century and seven successive directors before ground was broken for the

permanent museum.

The person behind that successful mission was Mares, who arrived on campus in 1981 as associate professor of zoology and curator of mammals at the then-Stovall Museum. He was stunned by the hazardous state of buildings housing the state's historical collections. Many leaked and had no windows, much to the delight of squirrels and birds who took up residence there. The dilapidated buildings were even used by firefighters for training.

"I walked in and remember thinking, 'Geez, what a dump,' and I knew right then that something had to be done," he recalls. "There was nowhere to safely keep all of our artifacts. We needed a new building big enough for the museum and the collections. It would take a long time and a lot of work to accomplish what we had to do."

By 1983, Mares was director of what was soon designated as the official state natural history museum by the Oklahoma State Legislature. He made the case for a new museum in his book, *Heritage at Risk: Oklahoma's Hidden Treasure*. He appealed to citizens across the state to preserve their priceless legacy. Friends of the Museum, a local, non-profit, formed to promote the effort and successfully petitioned for a \$5 million bond election in the City of Norman in 1991. That was followed by a \$15 million bond issue by the state, and momentum for the new building never stopped.

A years-long fundraising campaign raised scores of major gifts for the \$42 million structure. Schoolchildren across the state collected pennies, nickels, dimes and quarters in signature DinoBanks. When the new museum's doors opened, it was truly a moment for all people in Oklahoma to celebrate their momentous accomplishment.

Since that time, the museum has grown its collections and programming in the fulfillment of its mission to "inspire minds to understand the world through collection-based research, interpretation and education."

Mares says that inspiration takes place on multiple levels.

"Our curators hold academic appointments in disciplines related to the museum, such as archeology, biology, anthropology and botany," he says. "We produce scholars at the highest intellectual levels. And, with more than three million visitors to date, we also educate the public, and we do this very well. When people come here, they are getting an education in a friendly, beautiful and interesting manner."

The museum also maintains robust outreach programs for school-age children. ExplorOlogy® is a series of programs designed for students, as well as teachers, to experience science

through doing. During its first five years, more than 50,000 schoolchildren participated in field-based research. Teachers have access to hands-on curricula endorsed by the Oklahoma State Department of Education through free workshops.

Such programs are important to inspire the next generation of scientists.

“Something happens to students, particularly in middle school, when science becomes more about memorization of facts,” says Danny Mattox, newly appointed head of education for the museum. “We want students to see that science is about doing, and it is fun. So, we are about having experiences and teaching them to ask questions, be detectives, and learn how to think critically.”

Although suspended during much of the COVID-19 pandemic, the museum also regularly offers a variety of summer programs, family learning days, discovery kits, field trips and programs for adults throughout the year.

Programs draw upon the museum’s permanent collections, ranging from archeology to vertebrate and invertebrate species, ornithology to mineralogy. In 2002, the museum established a collection to preserve Native American languages.

The collection includes materials not only from Oklahoma tribes but also more than 175 languages in the central part of the United States, explains curator Raina Heaton.

“There are centers around the country that collect and preserve Indigenous languages, but there was nothing in Oklahoma, or in the central part of the country, to collect language materials representing this area of the United States, so that is how ours started,” she says. “We have about 8,500 materials, including recordings by elders, manuscripts, posters and hymnals. There is so much need to preserve these languages and provide access to them, but there wasn’t anywhere to put them.”

The collection actively takes deposits and, currently, there are references for 1,300 languages available. This includes all languages of Oklahoma’s 39 federally recognized tribes and recordings of the last Osage and Wichita speakers.

“Our focus is on revitalization, but access is the main goal,” Heaton says. “We want to get our materials into the hands of people who can do something with them.”

To that end, the museum conducts outreach programs like the annual Oklahoma Native American Youth Language Fair. First held in 2003, the fair has grown into a two-day event with more than 3,000 attendees giving more than 1,000 presentations in their native languages. Four concurrent stages offer opportunities for young people to perform in a variety of categories.

“Indigenous languages are an important part of tribal sovereignty, cultural heritage for the tribes, and a part of Oklahoma history, which is what the museum is all about,” Heaton says. “We see approximately 1,000 children each year who are learning these languages and it is our job to make these materials available to them.”



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Michael Mares, SNOMNH director emeritus, was the driving force behind the new museum building and twice served as museum director, first from 1983 to 2003 and again from 2008 to 2018.

Then, there are the dinosaurs.

Informally known as “the dinosaur museum” by children and adults alike, the SNOMNH lives up to the hype. A glass elevator allows museum-goers to see eye to eye with the world’s largest *Apatosaurus* skeleton, posed forever in battle with a fearsome *Saurophaganax*. The museum also boasts a *Pentaceratops* skeleton whose 10-foot skull holds the Guinness World Record for largest in size. Other dioramas feature a mother *Tenontosaurus* protecting her young from a pair of bloodthirsty *Deinonychus*. Throughout five permanent exhibit halls, more than 500 million years of Oklahoma’s history are displayed, including a bison skull that is the oldest painted object in North America.

This focus of the museum is what first got the attention of longtime volunteer Mary LeBlanc. She has donated thousands of hours to various departments since 1994, when she took a fossil preparatory class as an OU employee.

“We learned how to open the jackets that fossils are in after they are excavated and I thought, ‘Wow!’” she says. “Being there encompassed everything I had studied in college: history, anthropology and art history. I started volunteering in the paleontology lab, then helped prepare exhibits, and also assisted with the move to the new building.”

Since 2012, LeBlanc has served as a docent, leading tours and teaching visitors in the Hall of Ancient Life.

“Visitors are surprised that the dinosaurs in our museum were found in Oklahoma,” LeBlanc says. “I love explaining



how all of our collections relate to Oklahoma and seeing people get excited about learning the state's history. I feel so lucky that I get to do this.”

In addition to its permanent attractions, the museum regularly hosts temporary exhibits such as the recent *Guatemalan Textiles: Heart of the Maya World*; a contemporary exhibit featuring Native American skateboards; and interactive displays like *In the Dark*, about creatures who only come out at night.

Discovery remains at the center of the museum's mission. Although funding for expeditions is currently difficult to secure, earlier this year, longtime curator Nick Czaplewski made one of the largest finds for the museum in more than a century—a giant tortoise shell and a rhinoceros skull, both from the late Miocene epoch, which makes them somewhere between 5 and 11.5 million years old.

The curator of vertebrate paleontology has been with the museum for 30 years and is nearing retirement, yet this discovery underscores the ever-evolving work of the museum. Once excavated, a team at the museum isolated the fossil and placed it in a plaster jacket to kill anything that might have been inside. It will likely be months before it will be available to view.

As the museum moves into a new decade of operation, Mares says the people of Oklahoma have one of the finest



TOP - To encourage more Native speakers, the museum hosts an annual Native American Youth Language Fair, which recognizes the efforts of students and teachers to revitalize Native American language and heritage. **ABOVE** - The Sam Noble lives up to its nickname, “the dinosaur museum,” with exhibits of fossils, some of them the largest of their kind in the world.



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museums of natural history in the world. After years of stress and worry, the new building was designed to withstand the extremes of weather while protecting what was inside. What they could not anticipate, however, was the toll a global pandemic would take. When the museum closed with the rest of the university, it lost substantial revenue and there are maintenance issues, including a new roof, that need attention.

Despite these issues, Mares believes that people love the museum and it will prevail and continue to meet its mission to the university, the community, and the people of Oklahoma.

“This is your heritage and we do our best to not only take care of it but to study it, preserve it and teach others about it,” he says. “We have extraordinary curators who have dedicated their lives to these collections. The museum is a gem for the state of Oklahoma, and a dynamic, evolving research institution that protects the history of our state.”



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TOP - “Science is doing” is the theme of Explorology®, a program designed to let students, as well as teachers, participate in field-based research. **ABOVE** - Education is behind everything the SNOMNH does. The museum provides a viewable, touchable link to Oklahoma’s past that was on the verge of being lost to neglect just 20-some years ago.