

REMINISCENCES OF A VERY OLD FORMER CURATOR

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Fig. 1. John S. White.
Anne P. Hawthorne photo.

This is a story about remarkable serendipity, or extreme good fortune, and how it appears to have dictated the course of my professional life. In retrospect, good fortune has rained down upon me in many ways, but the one event that stands above all others is that while I was a teenage mineral collector I discovered that the man who was to become one of the most famous mineral curators of all time lived but a very short bicycle ride from my home. It is very frustrating to me that I cannot recall how I discovered that Paul E. Desautels (fig. 2) was teaching chemistry at a small college less than a mile from where I then lived. I do remember, however, that I rode my bicycle to that college one day and introduced myself. We became good friends and shortly thereafter we became founders of the Baltimore Mineral Society; he was the first president and I the first treasurer. At that time Paul Desautels was a micromounter and he often hosted visits from prominent micromounters from New York and New England. I was very privileged to have been included in these meetings. In 1957 he was hired by the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. as a curator in the Mineral Sciences Department.

After high school I left the area to attend college. I graduated from college in 1956 and was drafted into the U.S. Army and, again, was very fortunate because I was sent to Germany for nearly two years. After that I taught in a high school for two years then began graduate studies in mineralogy at the University of Arizona in Tucson in 1960. During this interval I had little or no contact with Desautels. When my formal studies were completed at the university I was hired by the American Smelting and Refining Co. (ASARCO) to do field work in ore exploration, which included for some months logging drill core at a site near Casa Grande, just 70 miles north of Tucson (fig. 3). Here, good fortune smiled upon me again as one of the most famous mineral collectors in Arizona, Dick Jones, lived in Casa Grande. We quickly became friends and I was invited to collect with him. One of our excursions involved spending an entire night underground at the Glove mine, Santa Cruz County, my first experience collecting in a wulfenite locality in Arizona. The air in the mine was heavy with manganese oxide dust and it took nearly a week for me to get clean again (fig. 4).

I was still employed by ASARCO when I received a letter from Desautels informing me that there was an opening for a technician's position in Mineral Sciences at the Smithsonian and he urged that I apply. I did, and I got the job in 1963 (fig. 5). There is no doubt that my friendship with Desautels greatly influenced my prospects, another example of my extraordinary good fortune. Working at the Smithsonian, the world's greatest museum complex and possessor of the world's greatest public mineral collection, was of course a dream job. Not only was I immersed in a wealth of wonderful minerals, but I also had the opportunity to meet and develop friendships with most of the prominent mineralogists, private collectors and mineral dealers of the day, something that paid immeasurable dividends for me down the road.

One of the earliest and most memorable experiences involved the acquisition of the Carl Bosch mineral collection. Carl Bosch (fig. 6) was a famous German scientist who was given the Nobel Prize for his role in developing the Haber-Bosch process for extracting



Fig. 2. Paul E. Desautels (1920–1991) while a professor at Townson Teacher's College in Maryland (circa 1956). *He was my friend and mentor and was responsible for my being employed by the Smithsonian Institution.*



Fig. 3. The drill rig where I logged drill core near Casa Grande, Arizona, in 1963 while working for the American Smelting and Refining Company. We located a copper deposit here which became a very large mine. John S. White photo, 1962.



Fig. 4. This is what I looked like after collecting wulfenite underground all night in the Glove mine, Santa Cruz County, Arizona, with famous Arizona collector Dick Jones. Dick Jones photo, 1962.



Fig. 5. The Natural History Museum, Smithsonian Institution, in Washington, D.C., where I began working in the Mineral Sciences Department in 1963. Russell Feather photo.



Fig. 6. Dr. Carl Bosch, Famous German physicist and Nobel Prize winner. *His mineral collection of some 25,000 specimens came to the Smithsonian in 1966.*



Fig. 7. **Proustite** from the Bosch collection. 3 cm. Chanarcillo, Chile. Wendell Wilson photo.