
The Paul Broste Rock Museum Reopens

By John W. Hoganson

On May 1, 1998 the Paul Broste Rock Museum in Parshall, North Dakota reopened. The museum was built in 1966 to house Paul Broste's incredible collection of rocks, minerals, and fossils that he had accumulated after more than 25 years of collecting. The museum was eventually turned over to the city of Parshall after Broste's death in 1975 but had to be closed in 1997 because funding was not available for needed repairs. Last spring, the Broste Museum committee contacted the North Dakota Geological Survey for help in evaluating the collection and advising the committee regarding their plans to reopen the museum. In April, Dr. George Lammers, retired curator of geology at the Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature, Chris Lammers, an expert on fluorite minerals, and I spent several days at the museum identifying and evaluating the rock, mineral, and fossil specimens in the Broste collection.

Paul Broste

Most of us in this state who are interested in geology had probably visited the Paul Broste Rock Museum at least once before the museum closed. I for one, however, really did not know much about the interesting and eccentric man who built this unusual museum until I spent time in Parshall and spoke with many of his acquaintances. Paul Broste, farmer, philosopher, poet, painter, and rock hound was born September 4, 1887 to emigrant Norwegian parents in a log house located along the Sheyenne River in Nelson County, eastern North Dakota. (Figure 1) Broste, known "as quite a character," once wrote:

"I can take a lot of credit myself for being born. There was no doctor for forty or fifty miles by oxen and lumberwagon, and only an obliging neighbor woman for midwife. It is probably the greatest thing I have ever done in my life, and with a soft screaming voice I let them know I was here. The rest of my life was quiet and uneventful."

When he first entered school as a young boy he could not speak English. Later he attended St. Ansgars Seminary for three years. During these early years, he gained an appreciation for the fine arts, which became a major influence throughout his life.

In 1916, at the age of twenty-nine, Broste homesteaded near Parshall and lived there the remainder of his life.

Although he depended on farming for his livelihood, Broste pursued his interest in oil painting during the winter months and attended the Chicago Art Institute in the winters of 1924, 1925, and 1926. Broste's artistic talents were also expressed in writing poetry, and he also wrote several books of poetry and fiction. After establishing a viable farming operation, Broste began developing his interest in rocks and minerals, a hobby that he had since he was a young boy. As a lad, according to his mother, his pockets would often be so full of stones that his suspender buttons wouldn't hold. His interest in rock and mineral collecting and lapidary work, particularly making spheres, soon superseded his interest in painting.

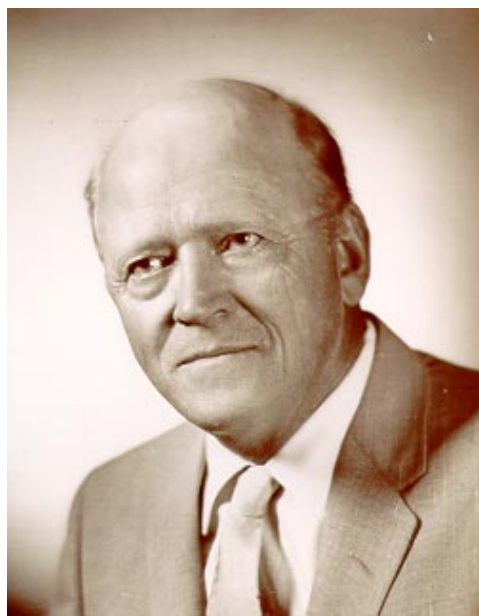


Figure 1. Paul Broste

Broste, over a span of about 25 years, amassed a huge collection of rocks, minerals, and fossils from around the world. Most of the specimens were bought from dealers where he felt he could select the very best. From some of the finer specimens, Broste created lapidary spheres of all sizes, about 600 of which are on exhibit at the museum. Broste retired from farming in 1956, and in the early 1960's business people from Parshall began discussions with him about building a museum in town to exhibit both his rock and mineral collection and his paintings. A museum board was established with Herb Geving from Parshall as president, and a fundraising campaign was begun (Figure 2). Enough money was raised by 1964 to begin construction and ground breaking took place

on the first of April. The museum was built entirely with volunteer labor. The cost of the building was underestimated, however, and the project was not completed until 1966. About two-thirds of the \$100,000 cost of the building was provided by Broste. Dedication of the museum was July 3, 1966, 50 years after Broste had built his homestead shack. Living quarters for Broste were provided in the museum. He resided there until moving to a nursing home prior to his death in 1975.



Figure 2. Left to right: George Lammers; Herb Geving, former president of the Broste Rock Museum committee; Bob "Jake" Jacobson, Broste Rock Museum curator; and George Rudd, current member of the Broste Rock Museum committee.

The Museum Building

This wonderful museum building (shown on cover) was Broste's architectural design. It is situated on a hill on the northeastern side of Parshall. Broste referred to this hill as the "Parshall Acropolis." The outside walls of the museum are constructed with field stone, glacial boulders (called erratics) that were transported to North Dakota by glaciers during the Ice Age several thousand years ago. These granite boulders, some several feet in diameter, were all hand picked and collected by Broste and his museum colleagues from within a 20 mile radius of Parshall. The boulders are their natural shapes except for the split and squared up boulders used on the corners of the building and the pilasters between the windows. The outside walls are tapered from 5 feet wide at ground level to the width of one boulder at roof level. A stroll around the outside of the building is a must for any museum visitor interested in viewing ancient, beautiful, and unusual rocks.

The entrance to the museum is from the south through two gothic doors. These doors open to a foyer where the floor is constructed of cut and polished local field stones of several shapes and lithologies. The beautiful floors in the remainder of the museum are surfaced with 12-inch square, one-inch thick, eight pound tiles made of Mexican onyx that were handpicked by Broste. The original specimen exhibit cases, specially designed by Broste, are still highly functional and provide the visitor with easy viewing of the specimens. Many of Broste's lapidary saws, polishers, and other equip-

ment have been refurbished and are exhibited in the rock laboratory part of the museum. Some of the living quarters have been converted to office space for the museum curator and additional exhibit space.

The Broste Collection

Broste traveled the country to assemble his collection of thousands of rock, mineral, and fossil specimens now exhibited in the museum. During our inventory and evaluation, we cataloged several hundred of the finer individual rock and mineral specimens, nearly 600 lapidary spheres, and 95 fossil specimens. Several thousand cut and polished agate slabs and raw agate specimens, including Fairburn, Lake Superior, Yellowstone River, Montana Moss, Texas Plume, Oregon Thunderegg and specimens from many foreign countries including Brazil, Germany, Formosa, and Mexico were not inventoried simply because of the enormity of the task.

It is difficult to describe the rock and mineral collection other than to say it is spectacular. Many of the specimens are Smithsonian Museum-quality because of their size, perfect condition, and rarity. Several of the specimens are extremely rare because the mines and localities where they were collected simply do not exist anymore, or the minerals are no longer found there. The following is a list of some of the most spectacular rocks and minerals that a visitor can see at the museum:

- Quartz crystal clusters (some crystals are one-foot long and four inches in diameter) from Arkansas (*Figure 3*)
- Amethyst quartz from Brazil
- Fluorite/sphalerite/quartz clusters from the Illinois, Kentucky, Missouri area
- Wulfenite crystals from Mexico (*Figure 4*)
- Wavelite crystals from Arkansas
- Malachite/azurite crystals from Arizona
- Ruby corundum from Norway
- Gypsum curl crystal clusters from Texas
- Native copper from Michigan
- Galena/calcite/dolomite clusters from the Illinois, Kentucky, Missouri area (*Figure 5*)
- Barite roses from Oklahoma
- Calcite crystal clusters from the Illinois, Kentucky, Missouri area
- Calcite sand crystal clusters from South Dakota
- Gold bearing quartz from Arizona
- Fire opal from Australia
- Tiger's-eye from Africa
- Many cut and polished slabs of varieties of agates
- Many cut geodes from several localities
- Meteorite from Arizona

The museum also has a room where fluorescent rocks and minerals can be viewed under ultraviolet light where they "glow in the dark."



Figure 3. Cluster of quartz crystals from Arkansas. Specimen is 18 inches wide.



Figure 4. Wulfenite crystals from Mexico. Specimen is 5 inches wide.



Figure 5. Galena/calcite/dolomite cluster from the Illinois, Kentucky, Missouri area. Specimen is 6 inches wide.

Certainly the most unusual, and many visitors would think the most spectacular, exhibits in the museum are Broste's lapidary spheres. Broste himself probably had no idea how many hours he devoted to making the nearly 600 spheres in the museum. These lapidary art forms were undoubtedly the pride of his collection. Lapidary spheres are created by a mechanical process of cutting the rock and polishing it with special equipment to form spherical specimens. Broste made these spheres out of every imaginable material including granite, tiger-eye, agate, rhodochrosite, lapis lazuli, petrified wood, jasper, bloodstone, amethyst, epidote, gabbro, Petoskey stone, obsidian, hematite, malachite, labradorite, *Turritella* agate, and many other rock types. The spheres range in size from less than one-inch in diameter to an unbelievable sphere made of gneiss that is 17 inches in diameter. The most spectacular and most valuable sphere is 6 3/4 inches in diameter and made of a large piece of rutillated quartz from Brazil.

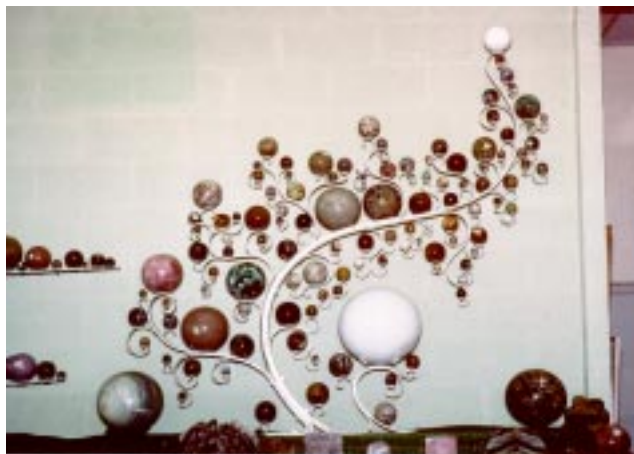


Figure 6. Lapidary sphere "tree".

Broste constructed metal "trees" to display many of the lapidary spheres (Figure 6). He exhibited the sphere trees at many mineralogy conventions around the country winning several ribbons for his lapidary skills. Broste also designed a special sphere exhibit in a separate room in the museum. The walls of this 17 foot by 17 foot room are covered with mirrors. In the center of the room Broste created a spiraling stand for 231 spheres (Figure 7). As Broste put it, the exhibit

"is an abstract conception of cosmic space." Broste called this room the 'infinity' or 'astronomical cavalcade' room. This sphere exhibit in a room of mirrors does give the visitor a sense of infinity.



Figure 7. Infinity room sphere exhibit. George Lammers is examining one of the spheres.

Broste apparently did not develop an interest in fossils until later in life. Consequently, we cataloged only 95 fossil specimens in the collection. The most interesting fossil specimens include: huge, 58-million-year-old petrified tree stumps collected 20 miles southwest of Parshall (Figure 8); trilobites from Wisconsin; a 40-million-year-old fish fossil from Wyoming (Figure 9); a 30-million-year-old turtle fossil from South Dakota; specimens of North Dakota's state fossil, 60-million-year-old *Teredo*-bored petrified wood; insect fossils in amber; a 12,000-year-old woolly mammoth tooth from Watford City, North Dakota; and a 30-million-year-old lower jaw of a rhinoceros found near Dickinson, North Dakota.



Figure 8. Fifty-eight million year old petrified tree stump found near Parshall. Volunteers are cleaning the exhibit case.

Renovation and Reopening

Through local fund raising projects, selling life memberships, and by obtaining grants, the Broste Rock Museum committee was able to raise enough money to repair the museum roof and broken windows, as well as to clean, paint, re-insulate, and update lighting in the building. Many of the repairs and cleaning were done by community volunteers, including high school students from Parshall (Figure 10). At our suggestion, the rock and mineral collection was arranged by mineral classification. For example, all the silicates are now located in one area. We also provided museum quality labels for the specimens, thanks to the State Historical Society of North Dakota. The fossils were all grouped together and labels were provided for them too. In addition, a museum curator, Bob “Jake” Jacobson, was hired by the committee (Figure 11). Jake is a retired telephone cooperative worker from Parshall and an avid, knowledgeable, rock, mineral, and artifact enthusiast.



Figure 10. Student volunteers from Parshall High School and Herb Geving.

The Broste Rock Museum opened its doors again on May 1, 1998 and there was a grand opening ceremony on June 20. Since the reopening about 1,750 people from 39 states, 5 Canadian provinces, and 7 foreign countries have visited the museum. Visitors have included 8 public school tour groups,

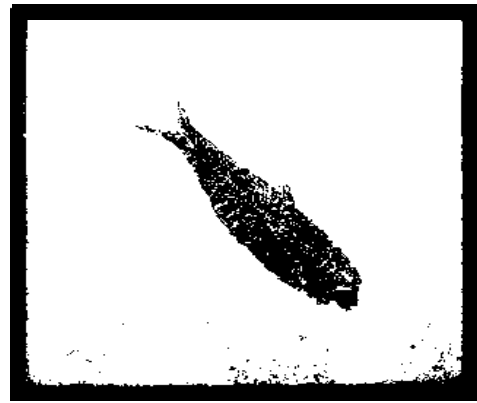


Figure 9. Forty-million-year-old fish from Wyoming. Fish is 3 inches in length.

5 home school groups, and 3 seniors bus tours. We suspect that this interest will continue and increase as more people become aware that this unique museum, containing so many, beautiful and educational geological exhibits, is open again. A visit to the Broste Museum is a must for anyone interested in viewing so many wonders of the natural world gathered all in one place.



Figure 11. Bob “Jake” Jacobson, curator of the Broste Rock Museum.

To Broste the completion of this museum was a “beautiful dream.” He once wrote that upon entering the museum “there is something you feel—it goes into your system and quickens your pulse, and you feel a thrill that lifts you.”

The Broste Rock Museum is located in Parshall a few miles east of Lake Sakakawea’s Van Hook Arm in southeastern Mountrail County, North Dakota. It is on the Old West Trail, the Lewis and Clark Trail, and the Sakakawea Trail. The Three Affiliated Tribes Museum is 20 miles west of the Broste Museum. The museum is open daily from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. Admission is \$4 for adults and \$2 for children.

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or visit the Broste Museum web site at:

<http://tradecorridor.com/parshall/rockmuseum.html>