

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.

Fig. 8. **Azurite** altering to **malachite** from the Bosch collection. 16 cm. Tsumeb, Namibia. Wendell E. Wilson photo.



Fig. 9. Martin Ehrmann (1904–1972) in Heidelberg, Germany, with German mineral author Werner Lieber and his wife Hedi. This photograph was taken in 1967 during my European trip with Martin as his driver.

Fig. 10. Martin Ehrmann with Dr. Gerd Wappler, curator of the mineral collection at Humboldt University, in what was then East Berlin in 1976.

Fig. 11. Martin Ehrmann with curators Prof. Csaba Ravasc and Antal Isztin Embey in front of the Natural History Museum in Budapest, Hungary, in 1967.



nitrogen from the air. He was the founder of the largest corporation in the world at that time, I. G. Farben (Roe, 1978). He assembled one of the finest private mineral collections in Europe, more than 25,000 specimens, plus some 3,000 gems and 600 meteorites. His company was taken over by the Nazis before WWII and as a result he tragically drank himself to death in 1940. After the war his family had the collection shipped to the U.S. where it was kept in storage at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut. In 1966 the Bosch family, now living in Florida, decided that they wanted to sell the collection and Desautels was able to manage the purchase for the Smithsonian. The original asking price was \$250,000 but Desautels persuaded the family to donate \$70,000 of that amount so the final cost to the museum was only \$180,000. Today there are several specimens in the Bosch collection that would sell for more than \$180,000.

Another such dividend was having the opportunity to develop a friendship with the most important international mineral dealer at that time, Martin Ehrmann (Smith and Smith, 1994) (fig. 9). Martin's modus operandi was to go to Brazil where he would acquire fantastic gem crystals (beryl and kunzite mostly) and these he would take to Europe to exchange with museums for old European classics which he would sell in the U.S. Martin was planning an extended trip to Europe in 1967 and

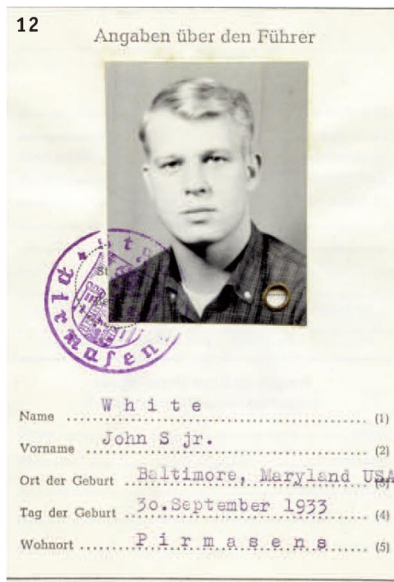


Fig. 12. My German driver's license.

Fig. 13. The 1950 Mercedes automobile that I owned while I was in the U.S. Army in Germany in 1957–1958.

he wanted to be relieved of the chore of doing the driving. He knew that I had extensive experience driving around much of Europe, as I had my own car while I was in the U.S. army in Germany (fig. 12 and 13), so he invited me to drive his new BMW rental car. This turned out to be the most fantastic experience a mineral lover could possibly have had. We covered most of Europe in over five weeks and some 5,000 km of driving. During that time we visited many of the major museums and private collectors in Germany (East and West), Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Italy, Switzerland and the U.K. I was able to meet many of the most prominent mineralogists in Europe, including Drs. Karl Hugo Strunz (1910–2006), the creator of the Nickel-Strunz classification of minerals (fig. 14), and Paul Ramdohr (1890–1985), the “father of ore microscopy,” (fig. 15). Martin and I always stayed in the best hotels and ate in the best restaurants. He usually invited the mineralogists he visited to dinner and it was always understood that it was his treat; that is, he would pay for everything.

The Smithsonian's gem hall housed the finest public collections of gems and jewelry of any museum in the U.S., perhaps in the world, a collection that was “anchored” by the Hope Diamond, the most famous diamond in the world. The minerals on display were in cases that by today's standards would be considered amateurish. The entire exhibit was dramatically upgraded in 1997 (six years after I retired from the museum) and today it is mostly state-of-the-art, at least it was when it first opened. Today changes in the exhibiting of minerals, especially lighting, have advanced spectacularly so this relatively new gallery is definitely showing its age. During my time at the museum all new collection acquisitions were entered by hand in catalogs and this is still true today, although computerized records are also maintained. New mineral and gem acquisitions of display quality cannot be immediately placed on exhibit, so they are housed in a special room, call the Blue Room, with limited access. Oversized specimens are in glass cases while smaller ones in are drawers in this facility. As such it had become a very popular place to bring important visitors, politicians, movie stars, royal families from other countries, and even cartoonists.

Another extraordinary experience for me occurred the same year as my European excursion with Martin Ehrmann. Paul Desautels had been persuaded to produce a coffee table book about minerals by one of the very best natural sciences photographers in the U.S., Lee Boltin. Lee, of course, was to take the photographs for the book, photographs of specimens from the Smithsonian's collection, and it became my responsibility and privilege to accompany Lee while he worked in the Blue Room. This was a rich experience as Lee was a great intellectual, a wonderful raconteur and an entertaining and very amusing companion. Additionally I learned a lot



Fig. 14. Dr. Hugo Strunz, the most famous German mineralogist of the 20th Century in the Hagendorf pegmatite mine, near Weiden, Germany.



Fig. 15. Dr. Paul Ramdohr, the “father of ore microscopy,” University of Heidelberg, Germany, also at the Hagendorf pegmatite, near Weiden, Germany.

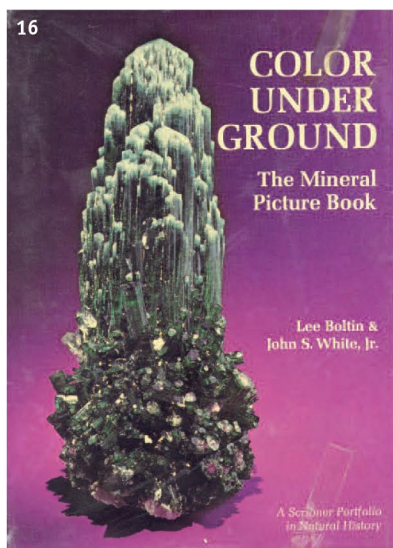


Fig. 16. The book that I wrote using photographs from the great mineral photographer Lee Boltin.

Fig. 17. Richard A. Bideaux. A Tucson, Arizona, native he was a famous mineral collector and author. His efforts to obtain financial support for starting *The Mineralogical Record* were essential to its beginning.



about photographing minerals in the process. This effort of Lee's resulted in the first really fine "coffee table" book about minerals, *The Mineral Kingdom*, published in 1968, with Paul Desautels as the author. There was yet another benefit that accrued to me as a result of this experience. Lee had many extra photographs that were not used in that book, so he asked if I could write text to go with some of those photographs for another book for which I would be the author. This I did, and the result was my first book, *Color Underground*, published in 1971 (fig. 16).

Just after finishing the text for *Color Underground* in 1970 I found that I was extremely frustrated by the fact that there was not, in my opinion, a really acceptable journal for mineral collectors in the U.S. *Rocks & Minerals* (long before Marie Huizing became its editor) was then embarrassingly awful. I volunteered to work with the people who produced it in an effort to improve it, but they were not interested in my participation. So, I decided that the only way to see the publication of a better journal would be for me to do it myself. This could be seen as a very foolish idea because I had no knowledge of, or expertise with, publishing or even editing at the time. I could not have been more ignorant of the entire process and I had done very little writing about minerals as well. Nonetheless, because of my museum position, I had the benefit of hundreds of associations and friendships with mineral people; academics, collectors and dealers. One of them was Richard Bideaux (fig. 17), surely the most famous private collector in Arizona and a very close friend of Prof. Arthur Montgomery, a professor of mineralogy at Lafayette College who had substantial personal wealth. Bideaux was able to persuade Dr. Montgomery to contribute start-up money so that I could initiate my dream. So, in 1970, I started my own mineral journal. It was to have been named *Mineral Digest*, but just as I was ready to go to press there suddenly appeared a new journal with that name. Therefore I was forced, at the very last minute, to come up with a different name, which was *The Mineralogical Record*. It first appeared in 1970 and there were only four different issues that year (fig. 18).

There was a hidden motive in my desire to start my own journal. From the very first day at the Smithsonian Museum it was made very clear to me that I could never become a curator because I did not have a PhD. For this reason I began a program of study at a local university in Washington, D.C. with the intention of acquiring a PhD, but then I was told that even with a PhD, if a curatorial position became open (highly unlikely) I would have to compete for it with others and there was a reasonable possibility that I would not win the position. So, after about a half-dozen years with the museum I decided that I would not be satisfied being a museum technician the rest of my professional life. It was then that I decided I would start my own mineralogical journal with the expectation that in a few years it could support me and I would be able to leave the museum. This resulted in the irony of ironies. After the first few issues of *The Mineralogical Record* were published, the director of the Natural History Museum was so impressed with the journal that he promoted me to a curatorship! Obviously then it was no longer necessary for me to consider leaving the museum, and that was when the current editor, Wendell E. Wilson (fig. 19), started working with me and within a few years he became the editor and took over most of the production responsibilities. As the founder I remained peripherally involved with the journal for quite a few years after that.

Of the many advantages of being associated with one of the world's great museums is having the opportunity to travel wherever exciting new mineral discoveries occur. One of the earliest and most exciting of these opportunities for me was in 1972 when I was invited to visit the famous Tourmaline Queen mine pegmatite, Pala District, San

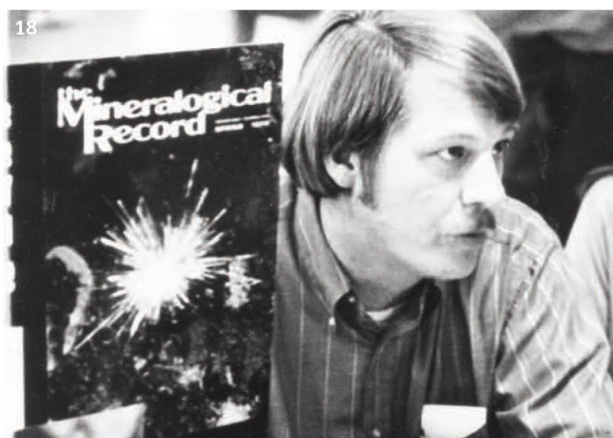


Fig. 18. John S. White with the first issue of *The Mineralogical Record* where it was being sold at the Tucson Gem and Mineral Show in 1971.



Fig. 19. Wendell E. Wilson, who became the editor of *The Mineralogical Record* in 1976 and is still the editor today. John White photo, 1974.

Diego County, California, just after William “Bill” Larson and his team discovered the fantastic “blue caps tourmaline” pocket in their mine. Not only was I allowed to explore the mine and see crystals still embedded in thick brown clay, but the entire contents of the discovery already removed and partially cleaned could be seen in Bill’s office. The Smithsonian selected what was certainly the finest specimen from the lot for the museum, named *The Candelabra* (fig. 20). Miraculously, in August of that same year at the very opposite end of the country, another major tourmaline pocket was discovered at the old Dunton gem pit, Newry, Oxford County, Maine. This was a huge pocket that produced literally tons of gem red, pink and green crystals of the finest color and many in very large sizes. I was able to remain in the area for nearly a week and was permitted to participate in the mining of the last of the pocket. The tourmaline from this mine is particularly famous for the excellent “watermelon” tourmaline slices cut from some of the very large crystals, several of which were acquired by the Smithsonian (fig. 21).

Fig. 20. The *Candelabra*, the finest blue-capped **tourmaline** group from the unique and famous pocket discovered in 1972 the Tourmaline Queen mine, Pala District, San Diego County, California, USA. Chip Clark photo.

Fig. 21. A selection of the **tourmaline** crystals found in 1972 at the Dunton gem pit, Newry, Oxford County, Maine, USA. Wendell E. Wilson photo.

While I was still the editor of *The Mineralogical Record* in 1975 I could not resist the temptation to try to include some humor in the journal. One of my efforts involved the advertisements of the wonderful gentleman dealer Prosper Williams. Prosper was an excellent artist and he usually illustrated his advertisements with his own sketches. In this case I chose one with an illustration of a South African springbok. In four subsequent ads I moved the springbok slightly to the left so that in the



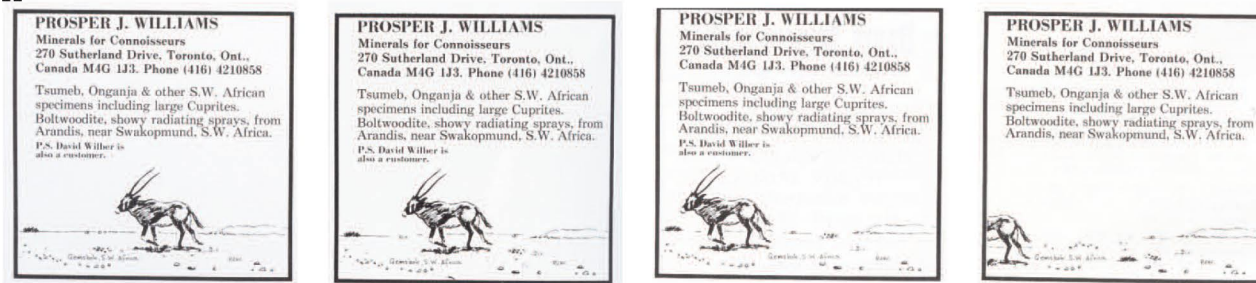


Fig. 22. The Prosper Williams advertisement in *The Mineralogical Record*. Prosper never noticed the movement of the animal that he drew.

fourth ad it was more than half off of the page (fig. 22). Prosper never noticed! In the same year I collaborated with Bill Larson, the owner of Pala Properties International Inc., to include the photo of a nude woman wearing a hardhat in his company's advertisement. The woman offered both a front view and a back view of her pushing the wheel barrow, and I chose the back view because I felt it might offend the readers less. At the last minute before going to press I got nervous and added the diagonal white bar across her rear end (fig. 23). Subsequent efforts at humor were less successful as they actually angered some readers who cancelled their subscriptions.

There are multiple advantages to being associated with such a magnificent museum as the Smithsonian. One is being invited to numerous social events, as at the White House. Another is hosting visits from famous or very well-known people. In 1986 I had the thrilling experience of hosting the visit of one of this country's most famous comedienne's, Joan Rivers. The following year came a visit from one of America's great cartoonists, Gary Larson, who complemented me afterwards by sending a personalized original cartoon of museum staff expressing their dislike for the federal taxing agency, whose building was just across the street from the museum (fig. 24).

Most know that the featured and most famous gem in the Smithsonian's exceptional gem and jewelry collection is the Hope Diamond. It is not only the largest faceted blue diamond known, but it is believed by many to carry a terrible curse, one that dooms everyone who has owned it or has worn it to die a miserable death. This "curse" is, of course, pure fiction and no reasonably intelligent person takes it seriously. Most of the staff in the Mineral Sciences Department of the Smithsonian have shown their disdain for this curse by posing for photographs while wearing the diamond necklace (fig. 25).

Fig. 23. The Pala Properties International advertisement in *The Mineralogical Record*. At the last minute I decided to add the diagonal white bar.

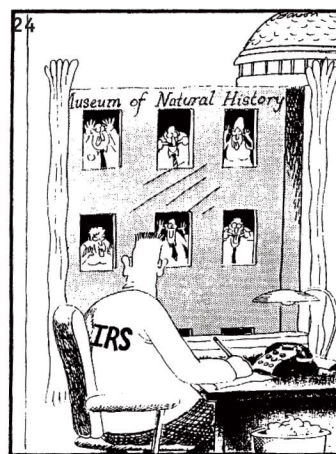
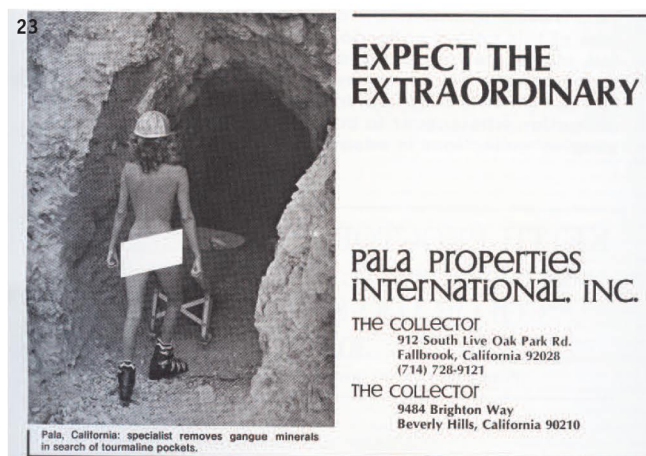


Fig. 24. A gift from the famous American cartoonist Gary Larson after I hosted his visit to the museum.
The Internal Revenue Service IRS (=the U.S. taxing bureau) is across the street from the Natural History Museum.

*To John
with many thanks,
Gary Larson*



Fig. 25. In defiance of the belief that the *Hope* Diamond carries a curse, everyone in the Mineral Sciences Department staff liked to challenge the curse by wearing the famous diamond. This was my turn.

Fig. 26. William Pinch.
Photo: John S. White, 1973.
I evaluated the Pinch collection in 1988. It contained 16,000 specimens and sold for 3.5 million U.S. dollars.

Fig. 27. **Pyrargyrite**
from the Pinch collection.
7 cm high. Fresnillo Mine, Zacatecas, Mexico.
xxxx photo.

Fig. 28. **Proustite**
from the Pinch collection.
5 cm high. Delores Mine,
Chanarcillo, Atacama, Chile.
xxxx photo.



Naturally, as a museum curator I had the opportunity to see many fine mineral collections, but the one that stands out in my memory most prominently is the first William Pinch collection. Pinch, who lived in the state of New York, assembled an extraordinary private collection of some 16,000 specimens. He decided that he wanted to sell the collection and the Canadian National Museum, in 1988, was interested in purchasing it. The price was 3.5 million U.S. dollars, a huge amount of money in 1988. So they contacted me and ask that I evaluate the Pinch collection in order to reassure them that it was worth that much. My opinion, after a detailed study of the collection, was that it was worth every penny, possibly more, and would represent an important purchase for the museum. I went on ever further and stated that I felt the Pinch collection was the finest personal mineral collection ever assembled anywhere in the world, and that it could never be equaled regardless of how much money another collector might have. To a large degree this was because when Pinch was collecting he had very little competition, either from museums or other private collectors. He had a great eye for quality, a deep knowledge of exotic minerals, in particular, and was extraordinarily dedicated to pursuing the very best. In fact, a significant portion of his collection consisted of the best of species or very nearly the best of species known to the mineral world. The quality of the minerals in the collection was uniformly very high, but the radioactive minerals from the Musonoi and Shinkobwe mines in the Democratic Republic of the Congo were particularly outstanding. The collection also contained a large number of type or cotype specimens because Pinch was excellent at discovering new species that had subsequently been unrecognized (fig. 26).

The year 1991 was a very important one for me as it was the year that I decided to retire from the Natural History Museum to pursue other activities. My first move was to establish myself in a business, "Kustos," a business that involved consulting for museums, appraising mineral and gem collections, and buying and selling minerals and gemstones, in partnership with my good friend Joe Nagel, from Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. Joe was a highly skilled computer expert who had written his own computer program for collection management, and he was a brilliant photographer. Sadly, our partnership lasted just ten years because Joe was killed in an automobile accident in 2001. Just before this partnership was created I was invited to appraise the Joaquin Folch Girona mineral collection in Barcelona, Spain. At that time the Folch collection was the finest private or public mineral collection in Spain and it still is. In fact, it ranks as one of the major European collec-

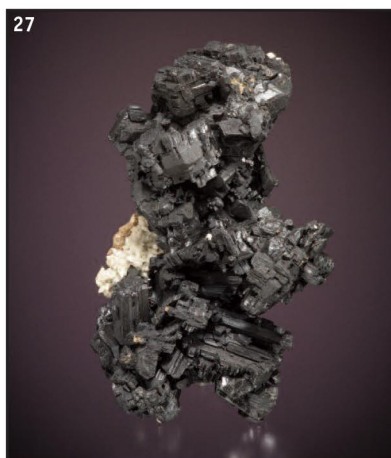




Fig. 29. Joaquín Folch Giron
In 1991 I appraised the
Joaquín Folch Girona mineral
collection, the best private col-
lection in Spain.

Fig. 30. A native **silver** from
Kongsberg, Norway. Folch col-
lection. Carme Gimeno photo.

Fig. 31. **Chrysoberyl**. 8 cm.
Espírito Santo, Minas Gerais,
Brazil. Folch collection.
Carme Gimeno photo.

Fig. 32. Miguel Romero.

Fig. 33. The "Aztec Sun," a superb
legrandite that was in the Romero col-
lection. 18.7 cm in size.
Ojuela mine, Durango, Mexico.
Wendell E. Wilson photo.
Now this specimen in Mineral Museum of
Beirut (MIM).

tions even today. This was an extraordinary experience for someone just starting out in a new venture (figs. 29--31).

At least as exciting, however, was when in 1994 Joe and I were hired to appraise the Miguel Romero (1925-1997) mineral collection which was then located in Miguel's office in Tehuacan, Mexico (figs. 32, 33). The Romero collection of Mexican minerals, some 6,500 of them, represented "*the best that Mexico has to offer to the mineral connoisseur*" (Meieran 2008) and it included "*several of the most wonderful Mexican mineral specimens ever dug out of the ground*" (Meieran, 2008). Miguel and his wife Margarita were wonderful people, dearly loved by all who knew them, so the experience for Joe and me of spending a week in Mexico with these great minerals and this fine Mexican couple was unbelievably precious.

So, looking back I have to marvel at the series of fortuitous events and coincidences that determined the course of my professional life and enriched my life to an amazing degree. And it all began when I was a teenage mineral collector and met Paul Desautels. Without that experience I am sure that none of the rest of this story ever would have happened.

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