The Bloomington-based Funk Gem and Mineral Museum provides visitors a solid understanding of Illinois' geologic resources.

A Gem of a Museum

Story and Photos
By Holly Schurter

The entrance to the Bloomington-based Funk Gem and Mineral Museum is lined with geodes and petrified wood, giving visitors a taste of what is in store.

Most of us have bent down to pick up an interesting rock, but rarely does that curiosity translate into a collection of more than 4,000 specimens.

If a rock collection sounds dusty and dull, you probably haven't toured the Funk Gem and Mineral Museum yet. Filled with rocks, minerals and gems collected by Lafayette Funk II, this museum inspires wonder and excites curiosity—and it all began with a rock Funk picked up on a field trip with his son at the University of Colorado at Boulder.

Something about that experience excited this businessman's curiosity. He began to collect rocks, minerals, gem stones and other specimens locally and on his travels throughout the world as an executive with Funk Bros. Seed Company. As others became aware of his enthusiasm they began setting aside interesting specimens for his collection.

As his interest—and his collection—grew, Funk began sharing what he'd collected with like-minded enthusiasts. He and his wife Cleda established small, permanent displays at both Illinois State University in Normal and Illinois Wesleyan University in Bloomington.

Even then, the collection at Funk's home kept growing as he continued to find new, intriguing specimens. In 1973, after consulting his brothers Eugene and Ted Funk, the 75-year-old collector built a museum next to the stately Victorian Prairie Home (now also a museum in its own right) of their grandfather, Marquis De LaFayette Funk.

The Gem and Mineral Museum that Funk constructed is a concrete block building, the front wall swathed in 30 tons of black North Carolina hornblende and white stone containing mica. Geodes and specimens of petrified wood line the entrance, hinting at the geologic treat within.

Once inside, visitors find an extensive display of geologic specimens diverse in form, color, texture and size, as well as information from tour-guide Bill Case about geology, geography and natural history, and the industrial and business applications of the rocks, minerals and gems on display.

Everything from dry-head agates to zoisite from Africa is on display in a spacious room filled with 30 free-standing display cases. The walls of the room are lined with display shelves fronted with sliding glass doors. Smaller rooms opening off the main room—the fossil room, the black-light room and the Indian room—supplement the display of Funk's collection, while another larger room at the back of the museum holds an additional 18 free-standing display cases of rocks, minerals and gems. A variety of other displays, including a large sea turtle shell, coral and starfish are included in this area. A historical area of this back room changes the subject, displaying carriages, wagons and other artifacts belonging to the Funk family.

One doesn't need to be a trained geologist or historian to enjoy this museum. Lafayette Funk educated himself about rocks, gems and minerals, but this collection is not a dry display of facts and figures about the specimens he collected. Instead, it reflects his relish for variety in form, color and texture, as well as his interest in everything related to the natural sciences.

(Photo by Illinois State Museum courtesy Doug Carr and Megan Newell.)

Wulfentite is a minor source of molybdenum.

As a result, cases and shelves may contain several different specimens of a particular type of rock or mineral displayed together, reflecting how geography and the circumstances of nature affect form, color, texture and use. These groupings make it easy to notice details that might go unnoticed in a single specimen.

Rather than a simple recitation of a specimen's original location, Case is likely to spin a story of when and how a saber-tooth tiger skull preserved in asphalt pits east of Los Angeles ended up here; why fluorite helps keep the cost of aluminum cookware down; or what the space program can do with titanium.

Smaller specimens are kept safe behind glass, but throughout the museum, some specimens are displayed in ways that invite visitors to examine them more closely—even to touch them, or pick them up. Larger examples of many specimens line the aisles, tucked under display cases but easily examined by anyone willing to bend down.

Although Funk's collection includes rocks, minerals and gems from around the world—including quartz, agates, wulfenite, vanadium and selenite—the museum also displays many specimens found in Illinois. Fluorite, the Illinois state mineral, is displayed as large and small specimens, cut and uncut, polished and unpolished. Although some of Funk's fluorite specimens were found internationally, most are from southern Illinois.

Children visiting the museum are often surprised, then delighted to learn that the large purple fluorite specimen they are touching could become an ingredient in the toothpaste they use each time they brush their teeth. They listen attentively as Case explains that fluorite is heated to make fluorine gas, which is then bubbled through water to make hydrofluoric acid, which later is the raw material for the fluoride in toothpaste and the clear polycarbonate plastic used in making the lenses of eyeglasses.

Case goes on to list some other uses for fluorite, including attractive settings in metal buckles or jewelry. Illinois fluorite is most commonly found in two places in southern Illinois: Rosiclare and Cave-in-Rock.

Another mineral on display, sometimes found in Illinois, is barite, used in drilling oil wells, making fireworks and in making glass and ceramics. Barite also is processed into barium for use in medical testing.

Illinois barite is displayed near a rose-colored, jewel-like barite, commonly found in Oklahoma and South Dakota, known as "Oklahoma roses" or "desert roses."

Fool's gold from Galena is on display, as well as pieces of lead mined there. Marcasite "suns" light up one display case. These medallions, shaped a bit like sand dollars, are sometimes found in Illinois coal mines.

Specimens of millerite, a rare form of nickel ore which Funk found in Illinois, came from a small gravel pit near Streator. Millerite also can be found in geodes, which are usually found in Illinois near rivers or creeks. Geodes, round rocks that often look like someone's brain, can seem light for their size when picked up. When opened, geodes may contain perfectly formed crystals of different sizes and colors growing into an open cavity inside the shell.

Visitors to the museum also can see several other minerals sometimes found in Illinois: strontianite, a mineral used in fireworks and sugar production; witherite, another type of barium ore; and smithsonite, a minor zinc ore named after James Smithson, the founder of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D. C. Smithsonite also is used as a pastel-colored stone in jewelry.

Sphalerite, a mineral found in southern and northwestern Illinois that is the main ore of zinc, also is on display. Zinc is used to make flashlight batteries and paint; medically as zinc oxide and zinc tablets, and for galvanizing steel to prevent rust.

(Photo by Illinois State Museum courtesy Doug Carr and Megan Newell.)

Copper impurities in this sample of smithsonite are responsible for its green-blue color.

The Lafayette Funk residence, Prairie Home, is next door to the Funk Gem and Mineral Museum, and is also open to the public for tours.

The Prairie Home was built by the first Marquis De LaFayette Funk for his wife Elizabeth. He began building in 1862, and continued through 1863. While exterior work was mostly finished by then, in January 1864 the Funks moved into the house, and continued work on the interior finishing. Visitors can see most of the original furnishings of the home as well as family artifacts.

Operating hours, driving directions and contact information are the same as the museum.

(Photo by Illinois State Museum courtesy Doug Carr and Megan Newell.)

Another mineral commonly found in Illinois is calcite, the second most common mineral on earth after quartz (silica). Calcite, seen in the museum in several different sizes and forms, is used in paint, concrete, lime, fertilizer, as a filler in rubber and as lithographic stone powder for polishing.

Garnets, tourmalines and jade are some of the gem-quality minerals visitors will see. Funk collected carved soapstone figurines from China as well, and many of those carved pieces are on display in the museum.

Funk's interest extended to fossils. The fossil room contains everything from woolly mammoth teeth to dinosaur bones from Colorado. Shark teeth, petrified myrtle wood and a mastodon tusk are on display, as well as petrified fish and an ammonite, the fossil of a snail-like animal from ancient seas that covered what is now Oklahoma.

In addition to world-class gems and minerals, the Funk Museum contains fossils and other natural artifacts.

Visitors can stroke a "dinosaur rock," an aid to dinosaur digestion, or touch the results of the digestion, a coprolite—petrified dinosaur droppings. Coprolites sometimes are polished and used for jewelry.

The black-light room, filled with rocks that react to ultraviolet light, is a favorite with visitors. When the regular lights go out, the rocks light up, showing vivid colors normally hidden to our eyes. This room illustrates the fluorescence of many otherwise ordinary-looking minerals.

Funk also collected Indian artifacts, most from along the Sangamon River between Springfield and Decatur. Visitors can see part of Funk's collection of arrowheads, small stone fish hooks as well as a bone fish hook, stone spades, tomahawks, axes and grinding stones.

The Funk Gem and Mineral Museum is open to the public March through December, every Tuesday through Saturday from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Visitors must call (309) 827-6792 and book a tour in advance. The guided tours are free, usually last about one hour, and can include from 1 to 50 people. When you book a tour, you receive directions to the site, off I-55 near Shirley.

One of the most abundant minerals on earth and used in the production of fertilizer, paint and rubber, calcite crystals take many shapes.

As you take the tour, you'll find yourself bending down to discover the treasures hidden in and around Lafayette Funk's display cases. Perhaps, just as he did, you'll also find yourself heading home with an interesting new hobby, your curiosity excited and your sense of wonder inspired.

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Funk Minerals Exhibited at the Illinois State Museum

In May, the Illinois State Museum in Springfield opened a special exhibition featuring minerals originally collected by LaFayette Funk. The exhibition includes spectacular, large specimens of tourmaline, calcite, pyromorphite, wulfenite, native cooper, quartz, smithsonite and gypsum. This exhibition is the pilot for a larger exhibition that will feature collections developed by Illinoians. Also on exhibit are scale models of coal mining and processing operations in Illinois. The models were producd by the Illinois State Museum for use in educational programs given by the Department of Natural Resources, Office of Mines and Minerals.

The Illinois State Museum is located at Spring and Edwards Streets, just south of the State Capitol in Springfield. For additional information visit www.museum.state.il.us or call (217) 782-7386.