

A Gift of Antiquities The Darby Collection

By Mary McMahon

Photographs courtesy of Davis & Elkins College



For more than seven decades, The Darby Collection remained one of Davis & Elkins College's best kept secrets. The collection of nearly 10,000 North American treasures is now on display for public view in its new permanent home, The Stirrup Gallery of the Myles Center for the Arts.

Dedicated in early 2013, the 2,600-square-foot gallery is home to artifacts representing everyday items used by mankind from the Stone Age through the early twentieth century. The Darby Collection was bequeathed to the college in 1942 by prodigious collector Hosea M. Darby. The Elkins architect, building contractor, and businessman was fascinated with the "rare and unusual," and he was inspired, over

a period of four decades, to acquire a vast array of American, European, Inuit, and American Indian artifacts.

Just one month before his death, the collector deeded "Darby's Prehistoric and Early Pioneer Art Museum" to the college and entrusted its care and management to the institution. In his last will and testament, Darby stipulated that the collection be used for the education of college students and public school children, and for the enjoyment of the general public.

"Students enrolled in college history and art classes will find valuable resources for study, and Davis & Elkins professors are eager to incorporate these resources into the curriculum," says former curator Gilbert F. "Bud" Rexrode.

Though it isn't known what initially piqued Darby's interest in objects of antiquity, he dedicated the last years of

his life to their acquisition. Darby was born in 1866 in Preston County and moved to Elkins with his wife, Susan, in 1896. Around 1902, Darby's profitable business enterprises allowed him to build his dream home, a large Victorian-style residence on the northeast corner of Diamond Street and Randolph Avenue. The couple had no children to share their spacious home. Thus, Darby may have envisioned the property as a private museum in which to display his treasured collection. For nine years, from 1933 to 1942, all four floors were strewn with antiquities and Darby proudly opened his home to the public.

In addition to the collection, Darby's bequest to D&E included his home and two other residential properties—the still-occupied Darby Apartments on Fourth Street and another similar complex in South Elkins—as well as 2,500



The Darby Collection includes many American Indian implements: basketry dating from 130 BC to the early 1900s (left), tools (center), and pottery dating from AD 700 to the 1800s (right).

acres of coal land in Randolph and Preston Counties. Darby's residence was used for many years as the D&E College president's home. All of the Darby properties were eventually sold.

Cataloguing the Artifacts

The collection, however, remained in Darby's home until the 1960s, when it was moved to the campus. For nearly 35 years, beginning in 1969, Elkins resident Dorothy Lutz, now deceased, dedicated countless hours to organizing, researching, registering, and cataloguing the artifacts. She sought advice and guidance from a number of museum professionals, including those in Williamsburg, Virginia, and at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., regarding exhibit design, interpretation, preservation, appraisals, and management.

In the early 1990s, Lutz was joined

in her efforts by Rexrode, an Elkins pharmacist with a keen interest in the artifacts. Together they adopted a system to catalog and number the items according to museum practices. A year later, then-D&E president Dorothy I. MacConkey designated two rooms for exhibition and office space on the third floor of Halliehurst Mansion. Soon after, a representative portion of the collection was opened to the public by appointment.

While unpacking items for the display, Lutz and Rexrode discovered a trove of archival treasures: decades-worth of Darby's correspondence with dealers and collectors, including hundreds of letters and other meticulously filed documents reflecting efforts to build his collection. Among these was Darby's correspondence with a member

of the Catawba Indian tribe, Chief Blue of Rock Hill, South Carolina, which revealed that he had commissioned the chief's wife to create original pottery to his specifications. These are the only made-to-order objects in the American Indian pottery collection. All others are original pieces made and used by various Indian tribes.

The colorful Indian pottery

A clay human effigy bottle from the Mississippian culture, circa 1400s





Visitors can peruse a number of matchlock and flintlock rifles and blunderbusses (left), as well as an array of Early American metalware.

collection includes pieces of Mexican origin dating from 100 BC to AD 200; items from the Mississippian culture, which existed in the eastern United States from AD 900 to 1650; and objects of the Southwestern tribes, which date from 1800 to 1900.

Art, history, and function are also evident in Darby's collection of some 300 Spanish, French, English, and American powder horns, considered by experts to be among the top five collections of powder horns in the country, aside from those displayed at the Smithsonian Institution. Dating from the early 1600s to the early 1900s, many are artfully incised (engraved) to reveal bits and pieces of historical data, as well as evidence of a life's journey and experiences along the way.

From Tusks to Tableware

Other highly valued items in the Darby

Collection are six-foot-long narwhal (a small Arctic whale) tusks, stone and clay ceremonial effigies, all-purpose baskets, stone grinding tools, pre-Columbian spear points, Neolithic stone bowls, magic cult objects, and even an American Indian drum fashioned from a turtle shell.

"American Indians were the original 'green' people," Rexrode says. "They didn't waste anything."

Visitors to the gallery will also find approximately 90 guns, including rifles and pistols, dating from the 1600s to the Civil War era. There are myriad other fascinating objects on display, among them fish-oil and grease-burning lamps, battle axes, swords, daggers, spears and knives, war clubs, firearms, old glass bottles, and handmade tools. In addition, there are spinning wheels; sausage stuffers; coffee grinders; strings of trade beads; delicately-carved ivory Inuit boat

hooks and scrapers; pewter, copper, and iron tableware; and cooking utensils.

Another fascinating display among items used by the early settlers is a huge, sturdy rope bed dating back to 1795 and acquired by Darby in Indiana. As was the practice in those days, the bed was strung with rope, upon which a "mattress" of straw or leaves was laid.



Clay figure from the Mississippian culture, circa 1400s



Among the Americana items are a beaver top hat, basketry, a spinning wheel, and a chair with a woven seat.

Periodically, the ropes would become stretched as a result of body weight and would then be tightened to increase firmness and improve comfort. The straw mattress often attracted insects, thus the origin of the old saying, "Sleep tight and don't let the bedbugs bite."

In 2007, following his retirement as a pharmacist, Rexrode was appointed curator of the artifacts after volunteering some 2,600 hours to the project. He has since stepped down from the position and relocated to South Carolina with his wife, Ann, to live closer to their children.

Mark Lanham, a D&E graduate and 25-year veteran of the United States Marine Corps, was named coordinator of The Darby Collection.

Dedicated in early 2013, the gallery was named in honor of D&E Board of Trustees Chair Paul Stirrup and his wife, Karen, who have provided support and

encouragement for assembling the collection in one location. In early 2012, with assistance from a team of D&E students and the maintenance staff of carpenters, painters, and electricians, the large music room in the Myles Center was converted into a secure, practical, and attractive museum space.

Not all items in the collection are yet on display; some await repair. In the future, Lanham says an area of the museum will be designated for rotating displays, where certain items, such as powder horns, pottery, and arrowheads will be displayed in their entirety.

Lanham notes he can accommodate tour groups of up to 40 people. He is also willing to incorporate an interactive tour upon request.

The Stirrup Gallery also houses five other collections in addition to the Darby. These include The Foster Collection, which features 1500 BC pot-

Other highly valued items in the Darby Collection are six-foot-long narwhal (a small, Arctic whale) tusks, stone and clay ceremonial effigies, all-purpose baskets, stone grinding tools, pre-Columbian spear points, Neolithic stone bowls, magic cult objects, and even an American Indian drum fashioned from a turtle shell.

tery; The Swezey Collection, composed of mezzo-American pottery and Egyptian figurines; The Eleanor Gay Collection, which consists of Wedgewood pottery; and The Kendig Collection, representing tribal artifacts of the Amazonian Canibo Indians.

The Stirrup Gallery is open from 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM Monday through Friday, and on weekends by appointment. For more information, or to arrange a group tour, call Lanham at 304.637.1980 or e-mail lanhamm@dewv.edu or museums@dewv.edu. There is no admission charge. 🌿

Mary McMahan of Elkins is a freelance journalist and former director of public relations at Davis & Elkins College.