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John Bechtel/Special to MDN

Inside the Paul Broste Rock Museum, rocks of all sizes and shapes can be seen.

Paul Broste: Parshall's (almost) forgotten man

By JOHN BECHTEL
Special to The Minot Daily News

If the town of Parshall is known at all outside of North Dakota, it is likely due to one of three things. The discovery of the Parshall Oil Field in 2006 that was the beginning of the North Dakota oil boom. On Feb. 15, 1936, Parshall set the state record, which stills stands, of the lowest recorded temperature of at a negative 60. Thirdly, Parshall is home to a massive stone monument honoring the achievements of what may well be one of the most eccentric farmers in American history, and his collection of rocks from every continent on the planet save Antarctica.

Since the completion of the Paul Broste Rock Museum in 1966, there has been a parade of visitors from around the world to view its remarkable rock, fossil, lapidary and art exhibits. And yet, an hour's drive from Minot, it is virtually unknown to many of the locals, not to mention the thousands of recent oil boom immigrants.

Paul Broste was no ordinary farmer. Farmers love dirt and they hate rocks. In Broste's day (he was born in 1887, two years before North Dakota became a state), rocks had to be hitched to horses or oxen and dragged out of the field, a lengthy and exhausting endeavor. But from anyone's earliest memory, young Paul had a fascination with rocks, filling his pockets with them, tearing the fabric and popping his suspenders loose, to his mother's exasperation.

Born to Norwegian first-generation immigrants at a time when Wisconsin was considered part of the western frontier, Paul, aged 5 and speaking no English, accompanied his parents through parts of northern Iowa looking for land to homestead on. His first school grades were all held in the same room. As Bill Schroeder, Minot resident and one of Broste's neighbors said about his own experience (some 30 years later than Paul's), "My school was composed of eight people, my six brothers and sisters, one German girl, and myself."

Paul had an early interest in the arts, showed some talent with drawing and painting, which met with quick disapproval from stern teachers whose main emphasis was on survival skills and religious formation. He attended three years at the St. Ansgar Seminary, the primitive equivalent of high school in a tiny northern Iowa community of the same name. He always regretted his lack of a better education, but never lost his appreciation for the aesthetics of life.

Paul's folks settled in Pekin in eastern North Dakota. At the age of 29 and unmarried, Paul took up residence in his own claim shack near Parshall. He was an able and innovative farmer with a knack for attracting and keeping competent assistants, which in time allowed him the freedom to pursue some of his more unusual interests. His small holdings grew as he acquired the claims of neighbors who found their plot of land was not big enough to sustain their family, and he ended up with nine quarters of land, over 1,400 acres. A bachelor and childless farmer, Paul invested in new equipment and tinkered with ways to improve production, and during the Dust Bowl years, conserving moisture in the fields. His young neighbor Schroeder remembers Broste was the first farmer in the area to have a shiny new yellow Caterpillar tractor.

Paul earned his living as a farmer, but without livestock to



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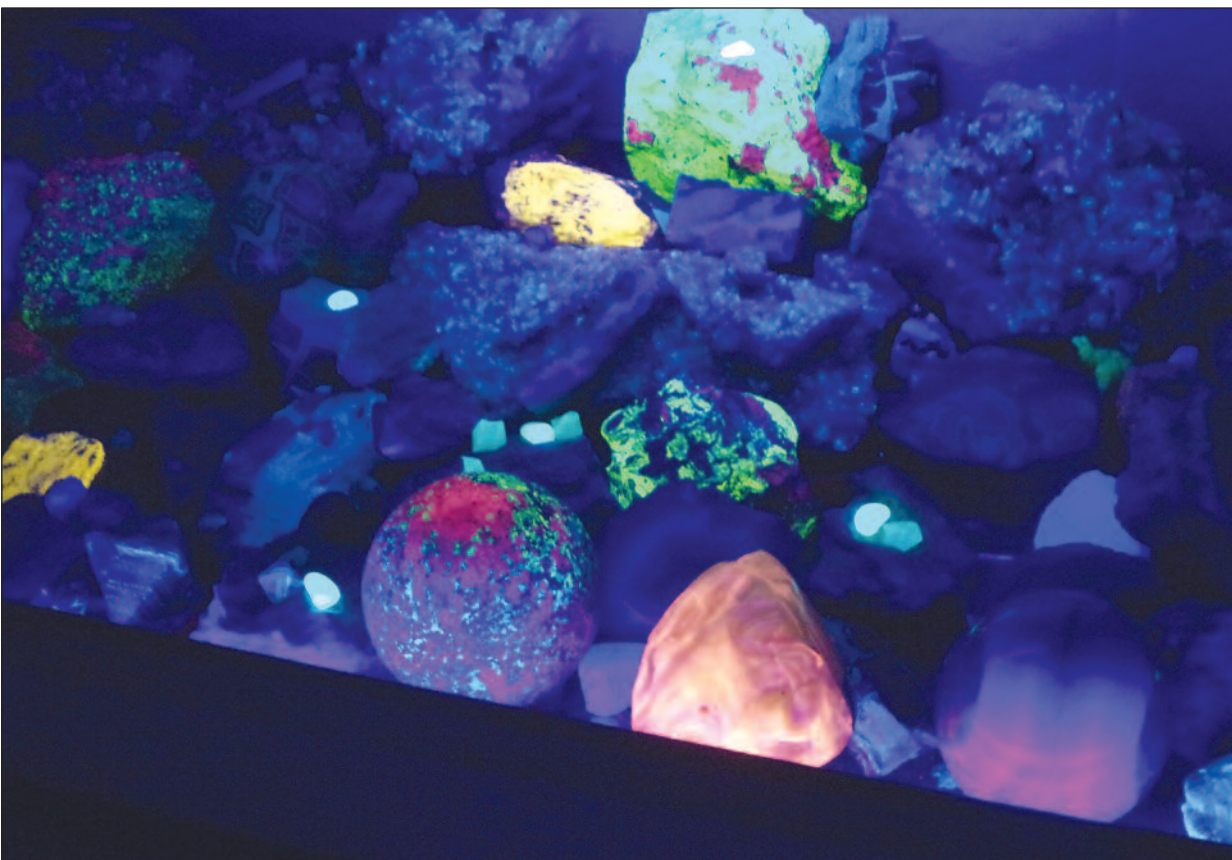
Some of the hundreds of spheres Paul Broste created and polished. The clear sphere at the top is one of the most valuable rocks in the collection.



Photos by John Bechtel/Special to MDN

▲ A portrait of Paul Broste, who gave up his farming career and sold his farm to build his rock museum.

▼ Inside the Fluorescent Room, standard looking rocks turn all colors when a black light is turned on.



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John Bechtel/Special to MDN

The Paul Broste Rock Museum is a highlight of any trip to Parshall.

Broste

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care for, and his winters free, he took up his childhood love of art and painting, and for three years, beginning when he was 38 years old, he spent his winters studying at the Chicago Art Institute. Discouraged because he felt he could not live up to his own standards, he became more focused on his rock collecting. He beefed up the shock absorbers on his Buick so he could haul rocks in it without being concerned about stopping at highway weigh stations. Over the next 25 years, Paul Broste traveled the country, buying rocks, some for immediate display; others he polished into shiny orbs, or near-perfect spheres. Pre-Internet, we have to wonder how he managed to learn what was for sale or auction, when, and at what locations. Collectors who had heard about him, as well as local school children, made the pilgrimage to Paul's small, simple farmhouse to see his treasures. In the early '60s, it was rumored that Disney had an interest in buying Paul's collection for exhibit at their planned Orlando park. Perhaps that is why the Parshall town officials discussed with Paul the possibility of keeping his treasures local, in Parshall. Other towns were also showing an interest in attracting Paul and his rocks to their location to encourage tourism. Paul had taken parts of his collection on tour to seven states over the years, all the while maintaining a 1,400-plus-acre farm in active production.

Broste didn't have rocks in his head, but he certainly had rocks on his mind, for over half a century. What others saw as a nuisance, he saw as objects of curiosity and beauty. He called crystals the flowers of the mineral world, and agate nodules the plums. He sold all of his land and farm business, and used it to pay for two-thirds of the total construction cost of his museum, which boasts two huge, 58-million-year-old petrified sequoia tree stumps, split off from the same tree, and discovered just 20 miles from

Parshall. There's a 30-million-year-old turtle fossil from South Dakota, a 12,000-year-old woolly mammoth tooth from Watford City and a 30-million-year-old lower jaw of a rhinoceros from Dickinson.

He left behind a museum filled with hundreds of rock specimens, many of Smithsonian quality (including quite possibly the only \$1 million rock you've ever going to see). With 680 of them to his name, Paul Broste is the undisputed champion of the sphere, ordinary rocks abraded and polished to a high, permanent luster, some as small as a golf ball or as large as a bowling ball, many of them balanced on metal "trees" of Paul's own creation, held in place with only balance and gravity.

The Paul Broste museum was built by volunteer work and contributions, without a dime of state or federal aid, and it looks to outlast the pyramids. With the exception of squared cornerstones and pilasters between the windows, the building is composed of uncut boulders; with the walls at the base of the building five feet thick and narrowing to about a foot at the top, the building resembles a medieval castle.

Paul Broste, farmer, businessman, innovator, collector, lapidarist, philosopher, writer (four books), poet (165 poems), artist (45 paintings and drawings), aesthete and homespun intellectual, designed and built his own museum in an effort to open minds, to see beauty and inspiration beyond the drudgery of hard labor. You might say Parshall had its own Renaissance man. Go to Parshall. Take a child. Be a child. Be filled with wonder. Contemplate infinity.

Call curator Doris Jacobsen at 862-3264 or 862-3352 to arrange a tour. For photographs, Google "Images for Paul Broste Rock Museum."

Contributions to the museum's operating fund are appreciated. Make your check payable to Paul Broste Rock Museum and mail to Kelly Woessner, City Auditor, P.O. Box 159, Parshall, ND 58770. Let's keep Paul Broste's legacy local.



▲ The Infinity Room inside the Paul Broste Museum showcases some of the hundreds of spheres Broste made on a hand-made platform.

◀ Doris Jacobson, the curator at the Paul Broste Rock Museum, shows some of the equipment Broste used to turn rocks into spheres.

Photos by John Bechtel/Special to MDN




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