The Denver Museum of Nature & Science inspires curiosity and excites minds of all ages through scientific discovery and the presentation and preservation of the world’s unique treasures.

Our vision is to create a community of critical thinkers who understand the lessons of the past and act as responsible stewards of the future.
DENVER’S NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM: A History

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Preface

As we work diligently to create a museum for the 21st century, it is all too easy to forget our past. Yet as a museum established more than century ago by the very community in which it thrives, it is essential that we stay connected to our deep roots. We must remember our dreams, commitments, and values. We must learn from our mistakes and our successes. We must honor both our prehistoric and historic ancestors.

This history—the first comprehensive volume written about the Museum’s core areas of education, exhibits, and scientific research and collections—will help ensure that as the Denver Museum of Nature & Science continues to grow and expand, we will stay connected to what came before.

Several themes in this compelling history resonate with me. For one, although this story is basically about things and ideas, it is really about people. The Museum was made from the sweat and tears, passions and convictions of the thousands of workers who have committed countless hours to furthering the Museum’s mission. Their joy and zeal is rivaled only by members of the public who have visited by the millions and by the stream of donors who have helped create one of our country’s leading museums. Without such enthusiasm, the Museum could not have survived the Great Depression a generation ago or the Great Recession today. In most every way, this Museum belongs to the people who have made it their own.

A second observation is that in reading this history, you will learn how the Museum has constantly and tremendously changed, yet has not really changed at all. The building today looks nothing like it did in 1908, when it opened to the public. Only a small wall of the original structure exists, in the basement below the IMAX Theater. And still, amid a century of astounding change, the Museum’s core mission has not veered from its course. We have adapted to a changing city, changing technology, changing societal values, changing sciences—but the belief in the power of a natural history museum to collect, study, interpret, inspire, and speak to the wonders of our universe has not changed at all.

A third theme is that this institution has balanced the goals of world-class collections, education, exhibitions, and research. This is much harder than it sounds. There is inevitably the tension among those who individually advocate using constrained resources for caring for specimens, educating the public, building more exhibits to attract visitors, or conducting research to advance science. Despite potential conflict, the Museum’s leaders have unwaveringly understood that these goals are not distinct but complementary. These aims work together to make a place that values the objects of science, the need to share and inspire, and the authority and knowledge that arrives with original scientific exploration.
When we developed a strategic plan for a new century, we embarked on a multimillion dollar project to build the Education and Collections Facility to feature state-of-the-art collections preservation, education classrooms with technology for today’s learners, and a new exhibition gallery. Why make this ambitious investment?

The answer to this question lies within these pages. Once you read about our exceptional science collections, you will understand why we need world-class storage and places to study. Once you read about our innovative education programs that have reached millions of children and adults, you’ll understand why we need more room to inspire the next generation of scientists. Once you read about the dioramas and exhibitions that have inspired generations of Rocky Mountain residents, you’ll understand why we must build another great exhibition hall.

In other words, once you read this volume, you’ll better understand the Museum’s great past and you’ll also understand our vision for the years ahead as we continue to serve our community and strive to nurture the inherent curiosity of everyone who walks through our doors.

George Sparks  
President and CEO  
Denver Museum of Nature & Science  
December 10, 2013
Foreword

The Museum of Wonder and the Wonder of Museums

Patricia Nelson Limerick
Center of the American West, University of Colorado

In the early 1970s, I went to see a memorable play called *The Emergence*. In one scene, several characters were exploring a cave when their lantern went out. In darkness, they wandered into the theater's aisles where they paused, lit matches, and gazed in wonder at the audience. "Look," the explorers said. "Stalagmites! They've been here for thousands of years!"

It was wonderful to see actors take the abstract idea of "a fresh point of view" and demonstrate it as a direct action. It was also wonderful to be mistaken for a stalagmite, and wonderful to contemplate the longevity that these explorers attributed to me and my fellow theatergoers. After I saw this scene, it was hard to think of the world in conventional, predictable, taken-for-granted ways.

Reading this history of the Denver Museum of Nature & Science delivered a booster shot that measurably renewed my sense of wonder. It is true that if a person wanted to help a friend sunk in ennui and tedium, that helpful person would not instantly think to prescribe an institutional history as a way to reignite vigor and delight. But, as this book makes clear, there is much to lift the spirit in the story of the creation of an institution that has stimulated and enriched the minds and souls of millions.

More than a century ago, some people, who had plenty of other things to do with their time, decided to prepare an enormous gift for representatives of posterity, humans who would be born long after the founders had themselves died. This was a wonderful project for these people of the past to undertake, since those distant members of posterity (that would be us) were not at that point even a twinkle in anyone's eye. And there was no guarantee of success in this enterprise, since a skeptic of the time could (and probably did) find the ambitions of the founders to be implausible and impractical.

Several chapters in this book end with an entirely appropriate expression of wonder over the fact that the Museum realized its creators' hopes. As Kristine A. Haglund writes at the end of chapter 1, "The Museum had clearly, unquestionably, become everything its founders dreamed it would one day become." Describing the traveling exhibition Imperial Tombs of China, chapter 2 offers a thought-provoking characterization of some people from a very different place and time (and social class!): "Early Chinese emperors spent much of their lives getting ready for their deaths." Although these would not be precisely the words to describe the conduct of Denver's civic leaders a century ago, the people who gave the Denver Museum of Nature & Science its existence did "get ready for their deaths" by purposefully creating an organization that would outlive them. For all its generosity, this legacy also puts us on the spot, asking us the tough question "If our predecessors did this for us, what comparable gift are we preparing for our successors?"

When it comes to inspiration, it is an unquestionable advantage that the people who created, built, expanded, and protected this Museum and its collections were not saints. We do not, in other words, have to intimidate ourselves with the idea that our predecessors were so superhuman that we dare not attempt to...
live up to their example. On the contrary, a few pages into the book, an imaginative reader may be tempted to begin designing lively dioramas that would portray some of the episodes in this book that feature human complexity. Consider the diorama-design opportunities presented by a passage like this: “Soon after Jesse D. Figgins was named director of the Museum in 1910, he locked horns with William Ward [who had the enviable title of “curator of mineralogy and art”], whom he considered to be incompetent, intransigent, unprofessional, and lazy.” Or consider the wild scene in 1971, at “the U.S. premiere of a much-touted Planetarium show called The Beginning and the End of the World,” a title that would seem to have given fair warning to all involved. When the early computer technology malfunctioned on the preview night, Museum Director Roy Earl Coy “stopped the show” (or, from another point of view, began a different, but still riveting show!), cleared out the audience, and “fired at least three employees on the spot.” But then the trustees soon reversed the situation, firing Coy and rehiring the fired employees. If fiscal arrangements had made it possible to provide, years ago, for the appointment of a curator of the human ego and a collections manager for interpersonal sensitivities, the Museum’s history might have been smoother, but also much less inspirational. The fact that the principal figures in the Museum’s history were, unmistakably, real human beings, and not particularly promising candidates for beatification, actually increases their power to inspire their fellow mortals. These people worked hard at building an institution that would anchor their community and endow its future, and every now and then they took a break from this high-minded undertaking and walloped each other (metaphorically speaking). This episodic feistiness did not jeopardize the existence of the Museum, but it unmistakably adds to the interest of this book.

Inevitably, a few passages of an institutional history must submit to the literary model of the biblical interludes of “begats,” with a sequence of names of the people who held particular offices and jobs. But readers should realize that these texts are, in their every syllable, gestures of respect to people who worked hard, persisted in spite of obstacles and dilemmas (and personality conflicts!), and assembled achievements that, when mobilized in common cause, made a lasting difference to thousands of visitors.

In truth, some of the most enjoyable tidbits in this book allow readers who have never been behind the scenes in a museum to glimpse the distinctiveness of that world. In their essence, these are stories in which the Museum appears almost as its own ecosystem, a place of feedback loops, symbiosis, and interdependence. Consider, as one telling example, the popcorn policy for the IMAX Theater: “Offering popcorn was debated but finally decided against because of needed precautions.” It is tempting to interrupt the quotation at this point and ask, “Needed precautions against what?” The trivialization of serious science by the snack most associated with light popular entertainment? The much-lamented national epidemic of obesity? The possible, inadvertent acquisition of genetically engineered corn? The actual concern was down-to-earth and beyond debate: the popcorn policy was a “needed precaution against insect infestations that might threaten the zoological collections below the theater.”

This same complication of interconnected space amplified the discomfort of a memorable episode in which “volunteer vertebrate preparators made a mistake while dissecting a striped skunk in the prep lab.” Here was the problem in spatial relations: “Unfortunately, at this time the Zoology Department sat right next to the T-Rex Cafe, the Museum’s eatery, and directly below the IMAX Theater.” Very soon after this misfortune in dissecting, “many complaints were lodged,” providing a rich data set to support the idea of the Museum as almost its own organism—a smaller, but at the time of the skunk incident, very compelling manifestation of
the GAIA hypothesis (by which the earth itself is conceived of as an organism). And yet my favorite example of the analogy of the Museum as interconnected ecosystem involves more physics than biology: “In 1926 the Museum’s woodworking shop was ‘reconditioned because of excessive vibration’ that caused objects in the Art Gallery to walk off their shelves.” Here, surely, is a compelling demonstration that no man (whether carpenter or exhibit curator) is an island, and no art object on a shelf is in any meaningful way separate from the saws and hammers that make possible the structure for that object’s display.

If we think of the Museum as an ecosystem, then the volunteer is its keystone species. All of the chapters offer striking testimony to the crucial contribution of these good souls to the well-being of the Museum, from the bravely named HAGS (“Honorary Association of Guide Services”) to the even more bravely named Galaxy Guides. The tributes to the volunteer bring us back to wonder. The fact that so many people have donated their limited time on this planet to stimulating and responding to the curiosity of their fellow human beings is wonder enough. As this book tells us, “The Museum as a whole could not function the way it does without its 1,800-plus volunteers.”

But the history of the volunteers also offers a tale of causality and connection over the vast reaches of time that knocked me for a loop (i.e., sent me into a feedback loop, or maybe just rendered me “loopy”). “In 1987–1988,” readers of this book will learn, “the Museum hosted its first major blockbuster exhibition, Ramses II: The Great Pharaoh and His Time.” Ramses II was on the planet 3,300 years ago; one would not expect him to be much of a benefactor of the Denver Museum of Nature & Science. But this assessment underestimates the factor of wonder at work in the history of this Museum. When Ramses II came to Denver in 1987–1988, the numbers of visitors and scale of revenue climbed, but most striking was the impact of the show on volunteerism: “More than 1,000 new volunteers were recruited” for Ramses, and “The volunteer program burgeoned.” So here we have a fellow who, despite the handicap of having been dead over the very long haul, excels in the biggest way as a recruiter of volunteers. The passage of time has a way of fragmenting the human community and making us strangers to each other, but Ramses II still got to work recruiting volunteers like a house afire.

Repeatedly, this book leads us deep into the mysterious workings of time. In its exhibits and programs, the Denver Museum of Nature & Science studies and interprets the passage of time, in areas ranging from the origins of the universe to the strata of geology, from paleontology to the evolution of the human organism. But the Museum must itself navigate through time. Museums live at the intersection of tradition and innovation. No traffic light, no stop sign, and not even a caution sign regulate traffic flow through that intersection, and an institution situated at such a site is not in a restful position. “Times change, expectations change, demographics change, and opportunities change,” the authors of chapter 2 on exhibits tell us, and a museum must change “to remain relevant.” “The Museum staff” must constantly work “to blend respect for tradition . . . with the latest exhibition techniques and educational philosophies.” Or, to quote from chapter 8 on space sciences, “The successful present will not likely lead to a complacent future” as the Museum pursues its really quite breathtaking mission to “decipher and convey past and present planetary processes.”

And this brings us to the meteorites. I found it wonderful to learn that the Museum “became the first institution in the United States to espouse collection and study of meteorites.” This gave the Denver Museum of Nature & Science a big advantage. Meteorites may well be the most effective material objects for teaching human beings that there is a world far beyond our familiar boundaries, a world we can learn of but never master. If meteorites are relentlessly “other” instructors that reach us after an astounding journey through
space, fossils—“messages from past worlds,” as Kirk Johnson and Richard Stucky characterize them—perform as excellent team-teachers with meteorites. If we become complacent, if we lose sight of our place in a vast universe, if we turn the setting down of our sense of wonder, the meteorites and the fossils—and the multitudes of artifacts and objects in the Denver Museum of Nature & Science—are there to reawaken us.

Let’s say the soul and the mind are susceptible to the equivalent ordeal of a body weakened by a nutritional deficit. The debilitating deficit for a soul and a mind is a shortage of wonder. Even under desperate circumstances, wonder acts as an antidote for cynicism. In the soul and the mind, wonder pits itself against indifference, fatalism, and drift, awakening curiosity even in people who seemed to be fully and lastingly bogged in inattention.

To return to the play in which I made my debut as a stalagmite with a wonderful duration, the energy of discovery and fresh perspective is the name of the game at the Denver Museum of Nature & Science. At the “Museum’s opening exercises on July 1, 1908,” John F. Campion said that “a museum of natural history is never finished.” Consider these definitions of what it means to say that an institution or person is “finished”: “Having no more use, value, or potential” (American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language; “without further hope of success or continuation” (Collins English Dictionary).

The Denver Museum of Nature & Science is never going to be “finished.”

This is a source of wonder in itself.