Guest Column: The Triumvirate That Launched the Arizona State Museum

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As the Arizona State Museum approaches the 125th anniversary of its founding in 1893, it is appropriate to look back over the years and pay homage to the triumvirate who set ASM on the path to become one of the nation's leading university-based anthropology museums.

The first person to come to mind is, of course, George Wylie Paul Hunt, who came to Arizona from Missouri, settled in Globe, was successful in business, and in 1893 was beginning his long political career as the representative to the Territorial Legislature from Gila County (and later served as the first state governor). He introduced Bill 42 in the 17th Territorial Legislative Assembly to establish an Arizona Territorial Museum of natural history housed in the Territorial Library with a board of its own, according to ASM archives and "Anthropology for Arizona," a 2017 book by retired ASM curatorial specialist Alan Ferg.

Just as important as Hunt, although often overlooked, is Nathan Oakes Murphy, who came from Maine to join his brother in business in Prescott and had served as the territorial secretary and often as acting governor during frequent gubernatorial absences, according to Jay Wagoner in his 1970 book "Arizona Territory, 1863-1912: A Political History." He was appointed territorial governor from 1892 to 1893 when his predecessor resigned (and again from 1898-1902). He suggested that it would be more appropriate to place the new museum in the also new (1885) University of Arizona under its already existing Board of Regents. Murphy signed the amended bill on April 7, 1893, just a few days before the end of his term.

The resulting Hunt-Murphy Act means that the museum, like every other unit of the University, is subject to all of the rules and procedures of the University and that the Board of Regents is its governing authority. The fact that the museum is legislatively chartered (a matter of pride to some) does not give the museum the authority or the freedom to bypass the University and the Board of Regents to present its problems directly to the Legislature, as some supporters and critics of the museum occasionally suggest.

Murphy's amendment put the museum in a position to survive at a time when many new natural history museums did not. During the late 19th century, many communities in the Trans-Mississippi West, proud of the unique characteristics of their homelands and eager to fully participate in the economic and cultural life of the nation, created natural history museums. However, it was one thing to envy the comprehensive museums in eastern cities and another to be able to marshal the considerable resources needed to convert the desire to reality. A few of these institutions prospered, many lowered their goals, and others failed. As David Wilcox points out in "Creating a Firm Foundation: The Early Years of the Arizona State Museum," an article in a 2005 edition of Journal of the Southwest, those new museums based in universities, like the Arizona Territorial Museum, were better positioned to succeed because they could share responsibility for some of the natural history subjects with specialists on the
university faculties.

The UA placed great emphasis on two subject areas—mining and agriculture. When the first classes were taught in 1891, the mining and agriculture faculties began using geological and botanical specimens in their teaching. For example, the first botany faculty member, James A. Toumey, established a herbarium "housed in two large cabinets for easy viewing by students," according to a 1985 article by Margaret Mitchell published in Arizona and the West, the journal that later became Journal of the Southwest. That herbarium now houses more than 430,000 specimens. In other words, the natural history faculty of the UA had already begun collecting the mineral wealth and flora listed in the Hunt-Murphy Act before the Territorial Museum was established. This situation confirmed the value of both Murphy's placement of the museum in the University and Wilcox's assessment of university-based museums of natural history.

By 1904, the fledgling museum had accumulated a small and eclectic collection of birds, eggs, animals, minerals, prehistoric relics, recent Indian artifacts and more, housed in the new Museum and Library building, which is now known as the Douglass building. When the first curator, amateur ornithologist Herbert Brown, died in 1913, he was not immediately replaced. The rapidly growing library took advantage of the situation and expanded into the space occupied by the museum. The collections of the museum were packed up and stored in the new Agriculture (now Forbes) building under the nominal care of botanist John James Thornber, Wilcox writes.

In 1915, visionary educator Rufus Bernhard von KleinSmid, the third member of the triumvirate, became the new president of the barely 30-year-old University of Arizona. He reorganized its administrative and academic structure along more modern lines, as detailed by Douglas Martin in his 1960 book "The Lamp in the Desert: The Story of the University of Arizona." Inasmuch as the natural history disciplines had already assumed responsibility for the collections in their fields, von KleinSmid was able to assign archaeology and ethnography (that is, anthropology) to ASM as its share of the natural history subjects listed in the Hunt-Murphy Act.

There were many ramifications of this wise decision. For example, American Indians had long been offended by being lumped by researchers with plants and animals as part of the natural landscape instead of as human beings with distinctive cultures of their own to be studied by anthropologists. Designating the prehistoric and present lives of Arizona's native people as ASM's main focus put ASM in an excellent position to develop the cordial and productive relationship with its tribal colleagues that it has enjoyed for many decades.

Von KleinSmid charged pioneer Southwestern archaeologist Byron Cummings with reviving the museum located on the second floor of the Agriculture building, Wilcox wrote. He also asked Cummings to establish a brand-new teaching department of archaeology, thereby creating a long-term and productive partnership that continues to this day as a major center of excellence within the University of Arizona. The wisdom of both von KleinSmid's mandate to Cummings and the success of Cummings' enthusiastic embrace of it were confirmed by the 1922 U.S. Department of Education survey that described the archaeological activities of ASM as "exemplary," according to Martin.

Although von KleinSmid left Arizona at the end of 1921 to become the president of the University of Southern California, he maintained contact with Arizona for many years, according to Rockwell Hunt's 1963 book "The Von KleinSmid Years." In 1927, he responded
to the invitation of Cummings (then the UA president) to be the guest speaker at the dedication of the new University Library, detailed in "A Photographic History of the University of Arizona," a 1987 book by Phyllis Ball, and "Byron Cummings, Dean of Southwestern Archaeology," Todd Bostwick's 2005 biography. He returned to Tucson in 1951 to speak at the inauguration of UA President Richard Anderson Harvill. The highlight of the inauguration was an exhibit in ASM based on the archaeological collections of the Gila Pueblo Archaeological Foundation that had been donated to ASM, making it the largest and most comprehensive museum of Southwestern archaeology in the nation. He did not mention, of course, that it was his timely action almost a half-century earlier that made it possible for ASM to earn his praise, Martin wrote.

The contributions of that early triumvirate of ASM patrons — Hunt, Murphy and von KleinSmid — launched the fledgling Territorial Museum of 1893 on the path to become the nationally admired ASM of today. They deserve full recognition and lasting appreciation for their vision and their timely actions of long ago.

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