

Jean Petermann Kemp Zimmer



Jean Petermann Kemp Zimmer, served as the fourth Curator of the A. E. Seaman Mineral Museum from 1975 to 1986.

Jean was born on December 24, 1917 to Philip E. and Myrna (Moss) Petermann. Her family figures prominently in the history of Michigan's Lake Superior Copper District. Her grandfather, Colonel John P. Petermann, served in the Spanish American War, and became a successful merchant, opening stores in Allouez, Gay, Kearsarge, Mohawk, and Phoenix. Jean's great uncle, Albert E. Petermann, was an attorney with and later President of the Calumet and Hecla Mining Company, the district's largest. He served on the Michigan College of Mining and Technology's (MCMT) Board of Control from 1927-1944.

Jean enrolled in the Michigan College of Mining and Technology in 1935 as one of a handful of female students in an approximately 800-man student body. She studied mineralogy and geology under Prof. Wyllis A. Seaman (son of museum founder A. E. Seaman) and Prof. Kiril Spiroff. She graduated with honors in 1939, with a B.S. in geology, and was awarded the Geology Key, the top departmental academic award, in 1939. In 1940, she received her Master's Degree in Geology from the University of Michigan. She taught mineralogy in the MCMT Geology Department from 1940 to 1943, but more importantly for her future career, assisted Spiroff in curating the A. E. Seaman Mineral Museum collection. Jean left the area, but returned in 1967 to serve as Kiril Spiroff's assistant curator, and succeeded him as curator in 1975.

Jean's curatorial style favored collection protection and preservation and collection management. While not a collection builder in the style of a Paul Desautels (former curator of the gem and mineral collection at the Smithsonian Institution), she was the right person at the right time for the A. E. Seaman Mineral Museum. Almost single-handedly, Jean protected the museum collection during a vulnerable period in its history, and ensured that there would be a collection and museum to serve a future audience.

In 1972, Jean was confronted with the impending demolition of the museum's existing home in the 1930-vintage Hotchkiss Hall, and the packing, storing and reinstallation of a 40,000+ specimen mineral collection into a more contemporary facility. Whenever an institutional mineral collection is "taken off display" and put into storage, it can be most vulnerable to intrusion and even elimination: "out of sight, out of mind." Jean understood this clearly, and zealously kept the collection and its relevance in front of Michigan Tech administrators and planners.

Jean quickly organized and supervised a select team of student aides to pack the collection, which included Marc L. Wilson, as of 2016 Head, Section of Minerals of the Carnegie Museum of Natural History and Dr. Theodore J. Bornhorst, as of 2016 Executive Director of the A. E. Seaman Mineral Museum of Michigan Tech's and Professor in the Department of Geological and Mining Engineering and Sciences. It is my understanding that few—if any—specimens were damaged during the packing process. The

collection was stored in a basement room of the Michigan Tech Library from 1973 to 1976, and during that period Jean hand-cataloged well over 25,000 specimens, writing entries into bound ledgers with a triple-zero Rapidograph drafting pen.

As a “break” from cataloging, Jean carved out time to design much of the planned museum facility, slated for the 5th floor of the “new” Electrical Energy Resources Center, herself. She picked the interior colors, designed new exhibit cases that optimized viewing and the specimen display environment, planned the display case arrangement and the exhibits they would contain, and personally installed at least 50% of those displays. Jean made the first serious attempt in the museum’s history to create aesthetically-pleasing displays, lightening the specimen density grouping specimens to highlight color and texture.

Her natural preservation and collection management abilities didn’t impede Jean from acquiring specimens for the museum’s collection. Like most curators, she was thrilled to purchase fine specimens whenever funds were available to do so, and she tried to keep up with what was current on the specimen market. I recall, with nostalgia, her excitement at acquiring one of the “new” Tsumeb diophtases from Prosper Williams at one of the Greater Detroit Gem & Mineral Shows of the 1970’s.

Jean thoroughly enjoyed attending the Detroit and Tucson shows, and basked in the collegiality afforded by the “mineralogical community,” as she put it. Some of her fondest career memories included participating in the first Mineral Museum’s Advisory Council meetings. She relished the company of mineral museum curators and was quite proud to be one of them. She took special delight in the panel discussions that included luminaries like Paul Desautels, Clifford Frondel, Peter Embrey, and Joseph Mandarino.

Jean took a personal interest in the museum’s donors. She was a close friend of Hazel E. Robbe, who donated the George B. Robbe collection in the 1960’s, and Joyce Burchenal who purchased an assortment of fine specimens for the museum’s collection in the late 1970’s and early 80’s. She cultivated museum visitors like Prof. E. W. Heinrich and Donald C. Gabriel, and it was Jean’s courtesy and kindness that laid the groundwork for their future major gifts to the museum.

Jean retired from her illustrious career as A. E. Seaman Mineral Museum Curator in 1986. That same year the Michigan Tech Fund established the Jean Petermann Kemp Endowment Fund with gifts from her former Michigan Tech classmates, A. E. Seaman Mineral Museum supporters and Michigan rock and mineral clubs. The endowment continues to provide unrestricted support for the museum.

Jean passed away on December 29, 2001 at the age of 84. She was posthumously awarded the Drl. Charles A. Salotti Earth Science Education Award by the Seaman Mineral Museum Society in 2002.

*Written by Stanley J. Dyl II
(April 2003)
Updated 2016*