

'Wabasha is the right place...'

\$2 million eagle art collection donated to National Eagle Center—a 'first class home'

by Michael Smith

Wabasha and the National Eagle Center will soon be home to a one-of-a-kind, 20,000 piece eagle art collection valued at over \$2 million that will transition Wabasha's non-profit interpretive center into a world-class destination and make it "the place to come to for anything eagle-related and encompassing of the eagle's symbolism in American history."

Choosing the National Eagle Center over eagle-related museums in Alaska and Tennessee to donate his incredible, jaw-dropping eagle art collection, part-time Wabasha resident Preston Cook said simply, "Wabasha is the right place."

Eagle Center Executive Director Rolf Thompson announced the donation last Tuesday during a stop here by 13 Minnesota senators who were on a bonding bill informational tour around southeastern Minnesota. He was obviously delighted with this news, as the center makes plans for expansion.

"The biggest thing for Wabasha to understand is that Preston has chosen us—Wabasha—to house his vast and amazing collection after looking all over the world for a suitable and representative site.

"This will really help us earn our standing as the NATIONAL Eagle Center and solidify Wabasha's standing as a true 'destination city,' as more and more people will want to come here to visit us and to see this unique and valuable



Preston Cook stands with this historic and valuable painting, considered "one of the most important oil paintings of an eagle ever done," titled "Death of a Warrior." This will likely be one of the centerpieces of the Eagle Center's gallery featuring Cook's recently-donated collection of 20,000 eagle-related art pieces.—Photo by Michael Smith

collection."

The Eagle Center has already begun studying proposals, with varying options, for that expansion (see related story and stories in past *Heralds*) to accommodate its large number of visitors, which average 80,000 a year. In the meantime, the new collection may be housed in quarters in Main Street's downtown buildings. Cook is currently looking at three downtown properties for that use.

Wanting to keep this collection of original oil paintings, flags, military medals, advertising displays, movie posters, coins, stamps, and other items in some 60 categories in all, gathered over a 40-year period, together, Cook said that he

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'This will really help us earn our standing as the NATIONAL Eagle Center.'

National Eagle Center Executive Director Rolf Thompson and eagle art collector Preston Cook stand beside two patriotic posters with eagles depicted on them. The two are among the 20,000 items Cook is donating to the Eagle Center Museum.



Eagle Center

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would donate it to the Eagle Center "because Wabasha is a wonderful community and I see the professionalism of the Eagle Center. It's first-class. This is the right place. Wabasha is the right place."

Cook, 69 and a native of Evanston, Illinois, retired five years ago and has been a part-time Wabasha resident since then, spending his summers and early falls here and then retreating with his wife, Donna, to sunny California, where he spent 45 years of his life, for the winters. He said he believed the collection could be rotated for display "endlessly"... "to keep it fresh" and that it would make the Eagle Center "a place where people from all over the country would want to visit and keep coming back to. It would extend their stay, as well."

"There has never been a museum featuring this type of collection. Some items date back to the 1700's. There are art lovers and historians who would stop here just to see one particular or rare item of interest to them," he said. "This will become the information center for the American Eagle."

Cook, who was in real estate development in California, began collecting items relating to eagles and their role in American history and culture, as noted, some 40 years ago after seeing a movie called "A Thousand Clowns" in which the words "You can't have too many eagles" were spoken. That inspired him. He began collecting.

"I literally took that seriously and started collecting memorabilia of all kinds. As long as there's an eagle or the word 'eagle' on it."

He said people don't realize how huge a role the eagle has in our country's culture.

"When you start paying attention to how eagles are used in our culture and in marketing, you are almost overwhelmed. There are hundreds of companies that use an eagle in their logo or as part of their trademark. There are cities named for the eagle, there are cars, trains and ships that utilize the eagle in their design. It goes on and on."

The eagle is on the flag of every branch of the military, is on all American currency either by itself or as part of the Federal Reserve logo, is used on buttons for political parties, and is used by many fraternal and religious organizations in their representations... just to name a few examples.

It is also the highest Boy Scout rank and one of his most prized possessions is a Norman Rockwell painting of an Eagle Scout, a less-valuable poster of



Wabasha collector Preston Cook points out some of the detail on one of the poster paintings that is among his vast collection of 20,000 items that he has just donated to the National Eagle Center. Every one of the items has either an eagle on it or the word "eagle." This is a copy of an original Earth Day painting/poster.—Photos by Michael Smith

which is displayed in his home.

Among Cook's original oil paintings is his magnificent Robert Havell Jr. (see sidebar) piece, "Death of a Warrior" depicting two canvasbacks protecting their young from an invading, a dramatic photo that Cook was finally able to obtain after years of dogged pursuit and negotiations and then only after it's auction buyer couldn't come up with the cash for it.

"It took years to get this piece, considered one of the most important oil paintings of an eagle ever done. I really wanted it and was finally able to."

Another prized possession that will become part of the Eagle Center collection are the flags that flew on Ronald Reagan's limousine. He showed us a picture of them.

Another is a Robert Roschenberg painting of the country's first Earth Day. An eagle is prominently featured.

You don't run into things like these every day.

Or, as Preston would say, "You can't have too many eagles."

But Cook knows that after he's gone, if he didn't find a place for his extensive collection, it could be auctioned off and scattered about all over the world. He wanted it to be together in a museum setting, but to do that, all items would have to be catalogued. He's doing that and has about 13,000 of the 20,000 items logged.

"To be displayed at the Eagle Center or other such 'museums' or in the interpretive centers,"

the works have to be of museum quality and standards," Thompson noted. "Each individual item has a history."

Cook is compiling a book featuring some 1,300—less than 5%—representative items from his collection, each with a caption explaining its role in society and/or history. And naturally, any such book has to be reviewed for accuracy, another extensive and time-consuming process.

As for his immediate plans,

once arrangements are made for the transition to the Eagle Center, if he is able to purchase the buildings on Main Street, and

obtain the necessary permits, etc., he would begin converting the spaces into galleries and start displaying some of his works

there. Eventually, they would be transferred to any new gallery space the Eagle Center will have, yet some could or would remain in the downtown galleries, as a kind of "bonus," you might say.

"There has never been a museum featuring this type of collection."
—Preston Cook

"What's interesting about this is that very few people, if anybody, have come close to what I've done in terms of acquiring a collection of how the eagle is integrated into the American way of life and then added the information necessary to substantiate it. The chronology of the symbolism and use of the American Eagle through the years is the most extensive study ever done."

"The other part is, Preston has a 1,500-book library with in-depth information about eagles, any information you would ever need," Thompson added.

Eventually, as soon as the pieces in this process start to fall into place, a curator will have to be hired for the Eagle Center staff," Thompson pointed out. "He or she will be responsible for planning each of the displays, learning about them and making the physical changes that would come with each rotation."

For now, the Eagle Center is focused on its need to grow to accommodate its thousands of visitors—space would include a larger classroom for programs and larger eagle viewing areas for up to 10 eagles, as well as additional storage space (detailed below). But the addition of this collection would require the further addition of larger gallery areas, as well, a growth spurt that Thompson welcomes and eagerly anticipates.

Eagle Center Expansion

"It occurred to me recently that we haven't done a good job communicating why we need to expand," Thompson commented. "This isn't just about 'storage' as some have alluded to."

"To begin with, "We really need space for about 10 eagles to meet the demands we have here for viewing and programs the eagles are involved in.

"But we also need additional space for Outreach at the VA hospitals and at schools throughout the region we visit now. We can't take Angel out of the building now, with Harriet's retirement, because that leaves us with two empty perches, diminishing our visitors' overall experience here, something we have to avoid.

Harriet is currently "retired" at her new home in the former Treasure Chest store building, and additional space for future eagles may also be needed.

"Plus, the demand for program and educational space is there. We cannot meet the demand we have now for these programs with the space we have. Our classrooms are full all summer and many have to be turned away (from participating in the programs). What we envision is a 100- to 125-seat auditorium-style theater.

"What we're trying to give here is a first-class experience, since we get visitors from all over the world.

"So I hope Wabasha realizes that to sustain what we have here, we have to grow."

Thompson said the opportunity provided by Cook will help in this process since it provides options for the short- and long-term plans.

"This is such an incredible opportunity," Thompson concluded, literally gushing. "We are so very, very fortunate."

"We" in this case, we presume and likely should come to understand... is all inclusive.