The Five Phases of Mineral Collecting
By Mitchell Portnoy

Introduction

During my high school years in the 1970's, when I had the time and energy to read more than the daily paper, a trade paperback book entitled Passages by Gail Sheehy intrigued me. It seemed to be everywhere, at the front of every bookstore, drugstore and airport shop. What attracted me to it might have been its rainbow-like title surrounded by a variety of colored borders. More likely it was my youthful interest in personal pop-psychology and a desire to know what the future had in store for me.

Sheehy’s book, which is still in print, attempts to provide a road map of adult life and shows the “inevitable” personality changes we go through in our 20s, 30s, 40s, and beyond. Each chapter, which focuses on a single decade of life and divided by gender, tells us what to expect in life, both good and bad. Sheehy hopes to show the reader how to use each life crisis as an opportunity for creative change. But there is one other important theme: knowing the future will not prevent it from happening or for the personal changes from occurring in each decade as outlined in the book.

Recently, it struck me that mineral collecting has similar stages. Like Sheehy’s decades, they seem universal and “inevitable.” In addition, knowing what these phases will be in advance will neither stop you from going through them nor allow you to skip over a step. You have to enjoy the gains and experience the pains of each.

Phase 1: The Age of Innocence

Description. This, the first phase of mineral collecting, is the one which we all remember most fondly. Here, at the beginning of what will potentially be a lifelong hobby, everything is fun and glitter. There are few questions or traumas because you really don’t know any better.

It is not an age-based phase. It may occur when you are quite young as it did with me when my father would take me, brimming with the enthusiasm of a child, to a rock shop near our summer home in Maine. It could occur in high school or college when, after taking a “rocks-for-jocks” course to fulfill an annoying science requirement, you realize you love the stuff. Another scenario is that a good friend in their 20s-40s, who is already a collector, introduces you to their collection at their home or by specimens displayed in their office. Or, irony of ironies, your child may spark your interest by an afternoon excursion to the mineral galleries at a museum or dragging you to a meeting of a local mineral club or a weekend mineral show.

You begin to see that other people share this interest and may be amazed at how many attendees there are at a local show. You hear that there are mineral clubs. You see that there are mineral dealers. You are astonished that minerals can cost more than five dollars and that people are willing to pay for them.

What You Collect. In this phase you will be attracted to the colorful and the sparkling; it is the aesthetics of minerals that will most draw your eyes to them. You are amazed that these crystals are a natural product of Mother Nature and not stones cut by man.

You will likely purchase an attractive, if common, mineral specimen or two, most likely a piece of white quartz, amethyst, pyrite (a.k.a. fool’s gold) or a “really cool” calcite-lined geode. They will be neither too small nor too large and of either inexpensive or moderate price. Condition is not much of an issue and location totally unimportant. The label accompanying the specimen, if indeed there even is one, will not survive even if the dealer suggests you save it. At this time you will buy your “number one” specimen and it is the one that you hope will always keep (I did!).

You put these minerals almost anywhere and don’t take great care of them. The thought of a list or inventory of your collection is nonexistent. To learn a little more, you might treat yourself to a simple mineral guidebook which will ultimately be of little help. Your spouse is not much involved in this phase. For Christmas or your birthday, however, you may get given a coffee table book with beautiful pictures.

Warnings. The good news is that not much can go wrong during this phase since there is little risk taken. You may have gotten a dinged, common specimen with no label but you didn’t spend that much in the first place. You hopefully are introduced to pleasant, more advanced collectors and honest dealers who will ease you through the
pains of the next phase. If not, the next phase could be your last.

**Phase 2: A Comedy of Errors**

**Description.** This, the second phase of mineral collecting, is the most comic or dangerous one, depending on how you later look back at it or how your hobby turns out. This is the time of the “compulsive collector” (see related article on this subject in the Bulletin of the New York Mineralogical Club, July 2001), when great amounts of energy, enthusiasm, time and money are first directed to mineral collecting. A challenging time for all, it is, unfortunately, unavoidable.

The allocation of how time is spent in your life changes. You likely join your first mineral club during this phase, maybe even several of them (one person told me he was a member of 22 clubs). You attend many mineral shows over a wide geographic area. You eagerly fly to Tucson for your first time. You go on every field trip you can, buy the best tools, talk about them constantly and keep every grain of every mineral you find. Other hobbies in your life may become less important at this time.

You are hungry for knowledge. You subscribe to every possible mineral and gem publication although many will go unread and unopened when they arrive. The same is true for mineral books. The quantity you have grows and grows although the quality and usefulness remain uneven. A *Dana* may find its way into your collection at this time. You hopefully are being advised by wiser collectors and are even reading some of the books. It is hard to stop buying those attractive coffee table books!

You develop new relationships and current ones are modified. You begin to hang out with other mineral collectors and talk about the hobby. The more sensitive ones will recognize what stage of collecting you have reached and advise you accordingly; the others will give you premature suggestions based on their more advanced level of collecting. Depending on your degree of psychological security, you may pretend to know much more than you actually do or see yourself as a major field collector (you are not) and swagger around with the far more seasoned rockhounds in your club (men more than women do this). At this time dialogues with a variety of mineral and gem dealers begin with all their potential for being pointed in the right direction or, unfortunately, for abuse.

Your spouse, children, significant others, friends, etc. now begin to see now that this interest in rocks is more than just a passing fancy. The more supportive ones will attend meetings with you and be seen strolling by your side at mineral shows. Others will resent the time and money spent for mere rocks. Friends at work or in your home start commenting on the specimens they see displayed around you. You may spark an interest in minerals in your children or they may be seen nearly comatose with boredom, watching you pound your hammer during a field trip. You may even propel a friend or two into the earlier Phase 1 of mineral collecting.

As the number of specimens in your mineral life begins to grow, this is the best time to begin a catalog or inventory of what you have. A computer database or spreadsheet is ideal. Regrettably, only about half of everyone will do this. The importance of a specimen’s location becomes important and labels are now kept. You can hopefully recreate the labels you discarded from the minerals you obtained in the earlier phase but, again, this is a 50/50 proposition at best. You may take the plunge and design your own specimen label.

Storage, care and display of your specimens become as issue. You might dedicate a shelf or two in your home to put out your more attractive specimens. I was lucky to be well advised about an Ikea drawer system that is ideal for specimen storage and industrial glass cases for display. (They function well to this day!)

**What You Collect.** You want and need instant gratification. At this time your collection has no real form or limits and you have not yet established any identifiable collecting goals or specialities. And you want everything! Fossils. Gemstones. Lapidary work. Large minerals. Small minerals. Cabinet-sized minerals. Thumbnails. Micromounts. (A microscope may enter your home office at this time, displacing something else.) Rare species. Multiples of each. If something appears on the cover of the *Mineralogical Record*, you want one. If you hear about a new find, you want some immediately for fear of losing out. Mineral-related ephemera may begin to enter your collection at this time. You will be seen running around mineral shows, panting, sweaty and breathless. You engage in the greatest number of mineral transactions during this phase. You might begin to be somewhat more discriminating about quality but don’t really have the experience or knowledge to always make good choices.

**Warnings.** As stated above, this is the pivotal stage in mineral collecting. What you do here will likely govern the future of your hobby if you continue at it at all. You are now at your most vulnerable and impressionable. Good friends and dealers will pleasantly indulge you and guide you. Unscrupulous dealers will take advantage. Beware
the use of any superlatives or imperatives — “rarest,” “best,” “must have,” “biggest,” “very important,” etc. — for these are adjectives worthy of caution. Don’t believe everything you hear for mineral collecting is a very personal hobby and there are limitless variations to it, each style as valid as the other. This is a time to have fun and learn and make inexpensive mistakes. Rules, better applied to collectors in a later phase (like buying fewer, but more expensive minerals or only buying the “best”) are not relevant here. You do not need to be the first at a mineral show. There are plenty of minerals and gems for us all.

Unfortunately, some collectors do not survive through this stage, having been made a fool by an evil dealer or through some reckless personal behavior. They put their unopened packages in a box in a basement, let their magazine subscriptions expire and stop attending mineral club meetings or mineral shows. Others, however, lick their wounds, laugh a bit at their past behavior and can look forward to reaping the rewards of the hobby in the next phase.

**Phase 3: The Embarrassment of Riches**

**Description.** Wow, you made it through the trials and tribulations of Phase 2 and have arrived at Phase 3 of Mineral Collecting which for reasons that will become apparent, is the one with the longest duration. You now have a good idea about what you want to collect (and what you don’t want to collect). The collection takes form and you develop a goal or several specialties. Your personal collecting “canon” is established.

You are much calmer with regard to the hobby and can relax and have fun at mineral shows. In fact, you go to far fewer of them, probably only 3 or 4. You have learned from the mistakes (mostly financial) in the previous phase. Dealers can no longer take advantage of you and will likely not even try since you are clearly as capable as they are at evaluating a piece. You know prices and locations and species.

You now make targeted purchases, can tell a dealer or dealers what you want and the cost per purchase ratio increases. You make fewer purchases or trades although you may buy whole flats or entire collections at this time. You can spend with intelligence and confidence and you so do.

If you have not already done so in the previous phase, you certainly begin an inventory of what you have and make a want list of what you need and you bring it with you to mineral shows. You have too large a collection now to remember what you already have. The collection’s storage system and organization are made more uniform and are usually wholly revamped to accommodate an ever-maturing collection. How your collection is displayed and lit begins to take on an artistic and creative bent — you may even re-curate your home displays from time to time.

As you evaluate your collection during this reorganization, you remove items and discard them for the first time. Some are no longer good enough; others are simply not what you once thought they were. Most of the specimens you saved from earlier field trips will go at this time. Here and there you will notice something that you have that would be better situated in a buddy’s collection and you give it to him. You simply no longer need everything.

The quest for knowledge grows in the phase and you may finally read those books sitting on your shelf or the articles in the periodicals arriving at your home. For the first time you may actually examine your collection and make surprising new discoveries about the very specimens you have owned for years. Using atlases and other sources you correct the spelling on labels and make sure the localities given are correct. You visit museums more frequently and the displays, which you used to quickly pass, are more closely examined.

Mineral club participation develops. The lectures, rather than the selling before the meeting become more important. You might write your first article for your club’s bulletin. You spend more time with the academics in your club and ask sensible questions. You no longer embarrass yourself by confusing the pronunciations of “ wolframite” with “wulfenite.” For the first time you offer to do an exhibit at your club’s mineral show.

**What You Collect.** This is a time when your collection is enriched. You fill in the gaps (as you have defined them) and concentrate on building up the specialized areas. The interest in obtaining mineral ephemera or mineral-related items which you had mildly begun in Phase 2 increases. You upgrade pieces in your collection for the first time or buy several of the same things perhaps because you see interesting differences or, more likely, because you like what you see.

**Warnings.** The good news is that there are few things that can go wrong now. You are deservedly confident but try not to become too cocky. This is the time to “go for it” — you will “regret the minerals you don’t buy” (R.
Phase 4: Now, Voyager

Description. You have arrived. Your collection is mature and “complete.” This phase may be thought of as the final stage of previous one but I think there are enough distinct behavior changes to identify it in its own right.

This is a time of extreme specialization. Your broad collecting days are over. Perhaps one of your former specialties becomes primary — or you only are interested in the materials once considered on the fringes of your collection.

This is a time of conceptual collecting. You attend mineral shows as you always have because they give you a lot of pleasure but you may buy absolutely nothing. Not a single piece. This occurs because (1) you find nothing meeting your arcane collecting interests; (2) the quality you see is below what you now demand; or (3) even if you see something you want, the price goes way beyond your limit even though you are not afraid to spend some money. Like seeing a masterpiece in an art museum, just seeing the piece and learning about it from a dealer or knowing of its existence is actually enough! Scholarship has surpassed ownership.

All of the people in your life know that minerals are a part of you. Some may be slightly envious that you have such an emotionally rewarding hobby and can fill your time accordingly. (They have begun to worry how they will spend their time during retirement.) Friends ask to see recent acquisitions knowing that they will be of extreme beauty, rarity or interest.

The newer people in your mineral club see you as someone who knows what he is talking about. Some of the “phase-2ers” pretend to be one of you and tell you about everything they have in their collection that would meet your collecting needs/standards. (They are usually wrong.) You club’s president practically insists you do an exhibit at the next mineral show.

Generous gifts emanate from you to friends, fellow collectors, and to your club’s raffles, auctions and special fund-raising sales. (Sometimes whole flats at a time are passed upward and onward!) Those lavish picture books of earlier years make terrific donations as you begin to clear your bookshelves for the more targeted books you want now. This is the phase in which your interest in antiquarian books about minerals and gems emerges strongly.

What You Collect. Few new pieces arrive in your collection during this phase since you are only adding items matching your arcane mineralogical interests. Those that do enter will be of high quality or really, really odd or rare. In general, more pieces will be leaving than arriving.

This is the phase when not specimens, but “other” mineral-related collectibles and ephemera are paramount — coins, medals, bronzes, catalogs, pamphlets, photographs, letters, postcards, autographs, antiquarian books, hand-colored etchings, patches, etc.

One collecting irony, however, that occurs during this time is that you may buy something that fits NONE of the above criteria: you simply purchase something because you like it. You come full circle in a way back to the behavior that was shown in the Phase 1. The difference is that now it rests upon a foundation of mineral knowledge and experience, not upon the haphazard energy of a beginner.

Warnings. Try not to drive other mineral collectors to tears of boredom as you talk incessantly about your highly defined collecting areas. I got caught on a train with one once; I almost jumped off while the “loco” was going! (Note the quite intentional double entendre.) Remember, this interest may thrill you but others are under no obligation to have equal enthusiasm.

Also, do not get upset or depressed when you find nothing you want or need for a long while. That’s part of this phase. Mineral collecting should remain a pastime and not a frustrating chore. Continue to have fun!

Phase 5: Twilight of the Gods

Description. A time will come when your collection needs to go elsewhere, either in pieces, larger groupings or in its entirety. This could be because of advancing age but this is far from the only reason. You might need some money and your collection may have some convertibility to cash. Perhaps your interest in minerals has declined and you are moving onto another hobby. A modification in the circumstances of your life, both good and bad — a smaller house/apartment, a marriage or a spouse dying, a divorce, children arriving, job change, health decline, etc. — could convince you to end your collecting of minerals.
If conditions are forcing you to divest yourself of the collection at too early a time, there is no need to despair. Do what you need to do and realize that you can always cycle back in the future to either Phase 3 or Phase 4; keep one or two of your favorite pieces as a reminder. On the other hand, since you are controlling the pace and disposition of the collection, I suggest you enjoy yourself and feel good with the command you have over your property.

You might be selling your collection, to friends, dealers or the public. Dealers, auction houses, ebay, private sales, or advertisements in your club’s bulletin might be helpful. Some collectors set up a table at the Franklin Mineral Show to sell their collection — this is a great way for newer collectors to get classic pieces!

You also might be giving your collection or segments of it away to family, friends, or an institution like a museum, university or club. This can be quite rewarding and give you a good sense of inner peace since you have some idea what will happen to your collection in the next generation (and maybe longer). Recently, for example, a member of my mineral club divided his collection into three units — Domestic materials, international specimens and micromounts — and saw that each of the thirds found a good home. He knows that his multi-decade labors of collecting will not be forgotten.

The last alternative is that you might be keeping your collection around, either stored away or out on display, until it becomes someone else’s property and responsibility. Just be sure that they know the value, locations and nature of what you have. Please remember that a mineral’s “value” is a very complicated concept, worthy of a full article in and of itself!

**What You Collect.** Little enters your collection at this time. You obtain, however, some good will, inner peace, interesting stories, and more information. You also might get given a testimonial object or display piece from respectful club members and friends who have known you and appreciate what you have done.

**Warnings.** Regardless of what your religious beliefs are, if you have them at all, you cannot “take it with you.” Planning is important. Don’t delay or procrastinate. Make sure your intentions are made clear either on paper or verbally. Beware the greed factor that can show up here either in yourself or in those around you. Remember that minerals are questionable as an investment (another topic worthy of analysis). A good idea is to separate the person who does the evaluation from those involved in a sale. Most important, if needed, get professional advice for reasons of taxes, estate planning, language in your will, etc.