

MEMORIAL OF MAGNUS VONSEN¹

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The death of Magnus Vonsen on June 16, 1954, left a gap in the ranks of American mineralogists that will not soon be filled. Mineralogy was his avocation, not his profession. Even so, an unusually keen interest in his hobby over a period of forty years resulted in many important contributions to the science and won for him a position of highest esteem amongst both scientists and mineral collectors.

Vonsen was born in Petaluma, California, in 1879. His father, John Vonsen was a rancher, and Vonsen spent his early years on the home ranch near Petaluma. His career in the feed and grain business began in 1904 when he became part owner of a store in Petaluma. In 1913 he became sole owner and organized the M. Vonsen Company. Vonsen was a very able business man and under his direction the business prospered and grew to have several branch stores in nearby towns.

In 1906 Mr. Vonsen was married to Bertha E. Petersen of Petaluma. She and a daughter survive him.

Vonsen became interested in minerals during World War I when the demand for chrome, manganese and mercury stimulated mining activity in the vicinity of Petaluma. His mineral collection, begun at this time, grew to be one of major importance. At the time of his death it was generally considered to be the finest private mineral collection in the United States.

His collection was housed in museum-type cases in a special room in his home. It was a revelation to all who saw it, for every specimen was of superb quality and beautifully displayed.

The collection is especially noteworthy for its borate minerals, for Vonsen was particularly interested in this mineral group. He made twice-yearly collecting trips to Death Valley and nearby areas for more than thirty years. His knowledge of mineral localities in southeastern California and southwestern Nevada was unsurpassed. Specimens of borate minerals in his collection are the finest in the world.

Vonsen received no formal schooling in science. His mineralogy was learned by study at home and through a University of California extension course. He had a fully equipped home laboratory and developed great skill in qualitative chemical analysis and in the use of the polarizing microscope.

One of Vonsen's first contributions to the science of mineralogy was the discovery near Riverside, California, of a new iron magnesium borate.

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(Photograph by Tashio Asaeda)

MAGNUS VONSEN
1879-1954

It was named vonsenite in his honor by A. S. Eakle in 1920. He discovered a second new borate mineral at Borax Lake, Lake County, California, in 1934. It was named teepleite, and described in a paper which he co-authored with W. A. Gale and W. F. Foshag.

The California glaucophane schists attracted a great deal of Vonsen's attention. He was the first to discover pumpellyite as a constituent of these rocks. He also first demonstrated that in them lawsonite is widely distributed and occurs in a number of dissimilar forms and associations.

The saline minerals were also of particular interest to him. His col-

lections from Searles Lake, Borax Lake and many other similar areas in California and Nevada, are the most complete anywhere.

Mr. Vonsen was a close friend of Drs. Palache, Larsen, Schaller and Foshag. He derived great pleasure from visits to his home by these and other mineralogists, who came to see his collection and to accompany him on field trips. His finds on collecting trips were always shared with others. The collections at Harvard and the U. S. National Museum contain many outstanding specimens contributed by him.

In 1931 Vonsen became a member of the California Academy of Sciences, and a few years later was made Honorary Curator of Minerals of the Academy. In December of 1953 he donated part of his collection to the Academy and saw it installed in handsome new cases in the Hall of Science, in Golden Gate Park, San Francisco. In his will he provided that the balance of the collection shall go to the Academy, thus giving California its first outstanding public mineral collection.

Vonsen was a businessman, and his remarkable accomplishments in his hobby were made only in hard-won leisure time. Even so, he also found opportunity to take an active part in civic affairs, in particular the Red Cross and the Boy Scouts of America. He was also intensely interested in plans to erect an earth-fill barrier across a northern arm of San Francisco Bay, and he devoted much time and energy to this project.

I cannot conclude this sketch of the life of Magnus Vonsen without expressing my own great sense of loss in his passing. I grew up just a few houses down the street from Mr. Vonsen. He kindled my interest in mineralogy when I was twelve years of age, and during my junior and senior high school years, I spent countless fascinating evenings in his laboratory watching him work and listening to him talk about minerals and tell of his collecting experiences. Other times were spent studying his collections or accompanying him on collecting trips. In later years his help, advice, and constant encouragement proved invaluable to me. I am but one of many who mourn the loss of a dear and faithful friend.

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