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Jul 25, 2019

Billion Dollar Boxes (Photo Essay)

One of the assets of a large research university is its ability to store the objects, treasures and memories important to the society it serves.

By: Sara Robberson Lentz. Photos by Maisha Miller.



The new Sammons Row 57, Bay H, Shelf 4 at the Bureau of Economic Geology, held the samples that led to the Eagle Ford discovery.

Photo by Maisha Miller.

Why would someone hold on to a cardboard box of dirt and rock for more than half a century? Because what might look like plain dirt to one person is treasure to another. That was the case for the famous Eagle Ford discovery. Buried within the cavernous hallways of UT's Austin Core Research Center were three boxes. Largely forgotten for more than 60 years, these unassuming packages sat among thousands of other small tan boxes stacked up to 15 feet high. Inside was a sample that led to the discovery of South Texas' Eagle Ford Shale, one of the most prolific hydrocarbon-producing fields in the world.

Just one aisle of the Austin Core Research Center holds more than 2 million vials of cuttings for use in geological research by anyone, public and academic alike. It is maintained by the Bureau of Economic Geology in UT's Jackson School of Geosciences.

"It is the Library of Congress of rocks," says Scott Tinker, state geologist and director of the Bureau of Economic Geology.

The University of Texas at Austin's collections are of discoveries yet to be made. Here is a look into the halls and drawers of the Austin Core Research Center. Who knows what will be found next.



Wiklander and Jackson School alumnus Gregg Robertson analyzed samples from three boxes of cuttings that had been collected from a dry well in La Salle County in 1952. These samples were used to confirm his belief that the Eagle Ford Shale would be worth exploring. Photo by Marsha Miller.



From left to right: This drawer of vials has newspaper packing material dating from 1938, when President Franklin Roosevelt was in office. The State of Texas authorized funding for the core research archive in 1937. Each drawer along the aisle holds vials of well cuttings used during the past 80 years by UT and industry scientists to characterize rock formations at great depth. Photo by Marsha Miller. This collection of vials of tiny shreds of rock called "cuttings" was the first acquisition by UT's Bureau of Economic Geology. Photo by Marsha Miller. It is the Library of Congress of rocks."


—Scott Tinker, state geologist and director of the Bureau of Economic Geology





Boxes of cuttings have been carefully labeled, some with the name of the well, location, depth and other information. Photo by Marsha Miller





The core and cuttings collection is housed in a 2-acre warehouse at the Bureau of Economic Geology. These drawers contain approximately 2 million vials of cuttings. Photo by Marsha Miller

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