He has a real eagle eye — Wabasha man’s collection is the largest in the country

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“This is a magnificent eagle,” Preston Cook says, patting the grayish head of a plaster of Paris bird measuring 3 feet tall by 3 feet wide. “It was used on a viewing
stand in front of the White House during Franklin Roosevelt’s third inauguration in 1941.”

Cook is showing visitors around his warehouse in Wabasha, Minn., temporary home to his American Eagle collection of 25,000 eagle-related items. It is the largest collection of its kind in the country, including paintings, textiles, works of art on paper, photographs, magazines, books, toys, jewelry, sculpture and stamps. Even hockey pucks.

Now, after 50 years of collecting, Cook has donated his unique collection to the nonprofit National Eagle Center in Wabasha, a Mississippi riverfront town of 2,500 about 80 miles southeast of the Twin Cities.

On this weekend before July 4, what could be more appropriate to celebrate than the iconic eagle that has been a national symbol since it was adopted by the newly formed Congress in 1782 to grace the Great Seal of the United States?

The Founding Fathers chose the bald eagle because it represented everything the young nation admired; strength, courage, freedom and majestic grandeur, and because it was then believed to exist only on this continent.

If the Preston Cook eagle collection has a theme, it’s history-meets-art with a thread of American patriotism through the decades, in war and peace.

Cook is in the process of cataloging the collection, which will be exhibited in a few years at the Eagle Center after completion of an $18 million expansion that will double the size of the 15,000-square-foot building. For now, selected items from the collection will rotate at the existing facility every six months.

“We will have the only eagle museum in the United States,” says Cook, a slender man dressed in khaki with an easy manner. “I find it fascinating and perplexing that we have the bald eagle – this magnificent symbol of our country – but nobody has accumulated a large collection. There are no major exhibits, no eagle collectors club.”

Cook has also compiled a handsome new coffee table book, “American Eagle: A Visual History of Our National Emblem” (Goff Books, $75), that is a survey of his collection. Published in celebration of the Eagle Center’s 30th anniversary, it is the only book covering the eagle emblem in American life and culture in such detail.
There couldn’t be a more perfect place for Cook to donate his life’s passion than the Eagle Center, which was filled on a recent weekday afternoon with adults and the energy from enthusiastic kids.

Some 80,000 visitors from the United States and more than 100 countries make their way annually to the Eagle Center’s two-story building, an airy place filled with light from lots of big windows. From those windows or the deck, visitors watch eagles swoop and soar above the confluence of the Mississippi and Chippewa rivers. These days, parent birds are busy feeding their rapidly-growing chicks, who are getting ready to leave their nests.

At the Center, Cook leads his visitors to the room where several of the Center’s five bald and golden Eagle Ambassadors are on display, living proof of why so many are captivated by these birds that at one time were threatened with extinction. Cook has donated a nearby rehabbed building for the birds to live in until they move into their new quarters in the planned expansion. (None of the eagles can be released into the wild because of physical problems.)

YOU CAN’T HAVE TOO MANY EAGLES

Settling at a table near a couple of foreign visitors, Cook talks about being the son of a collector and how he began his eagle collection while he was in college.

Born in Evanston, Ill., he graduated in 1964 and spent 13 months traveling around the world, visiting 40 countries on six continents. Then he was drafted, serving in the Army from 1966 to ’68 at Fort Gordon in Georgia.

Before Cook went into the service, he saw the movie “A Thousand Clowns,” in which Jason Robard’s character says, “You can’t have too many eagles.”

“I took that literally, and began to acquire as many eagle images as possible,” he says.

Cook explains that, unlike some collectors who spend millions of dollars on a few high-end pieces, he opted to concentrate on things that represent everyday use of the eagle image.

In just one glass case in his windowless warehouse, eagles are depicted on a late 19th-century American officer’s plumed hat, a package of coffee, a rubber eagle, spurs, a saber in a scabbard, an Eagle Bombsight child’s game, and a cookie jar, toy pistol and picture frame.
Among the items that mean the most to Cook are gold-plated brass buttons with eagles stamped on each one from his Army dress uniform.

“Those buttons have graced at least six or seven blazers through the years that I wear when I give presentations,” he says. “They mean a lot to me.”

Using the GI Bill to pay his tuition, Cook attended Evanston Kendall College and Lone Mountain College, now a part of the University of San Francisco.

“When I was in college I had no money,” he recalls of his early collecting days. “I went to flea markets, junk stores, garage sales and picked up inexpensive eagle postcards, buttons, pins. I didn’t think of tracking what I was doing.”

Cook stayed in San Francisco 45 years, serving in state government and starting a real estate investment firm. He was 40 years old in 1986 when he married his wife, Donna, who had five children and two grandchildren. Now they have eight more grandchildren and five great-grandchildren.

The couple moved into a condo next door to the Eagle Center three years ago, although they return to the West Coast in winter. Preston jokes that “I am really permanent here in Wabasha. I just bought a gravesite at Riverview cemetery.”

Through his collecting years, Cook would go most anywhere to find eagles, many with interesting backstories.

Remember that plaster of Paris eagle from FDR’s inauguration? A worker had been told to get rid of it after the ceremony. But he kept it, along with 150 other inaugural items, including the coveralls he wore that historic day.

“I drove to Washington State to get this great piece of American history,” Cook recalls. “It took six years of negotiating with the man’s family.”
WABASHA WAS THE PLACE

Cook, who retired eight years ago, spent more than a decade looking for a permanent home for his valuable collection.

“It was important to me that the collection be kept together in a lasting way,” he says quietly. “And I was dead-set on establishing a museum.”

There was interest in Philadelphia, that town filled with history, and in Alaska, where Cook was on the board of the American Bald Eagle Foundation. But neither place felt quite right.

Then Cook heard about the National Eagle Center.

“My Midwest roots brought me to Wabasha 15 years ago,” he recalls, and he knew he’d found a home for his eagles. He fell in love with watching the birds in the wild. He liked the friendliness of Wabasha’s people, and he believed in the Eagle Center’s three E’s – eagles, education and exhibits – and its mission to connect people with eagles in nature, history and cultures.

Seven years ago, Rolf Thompson took over as Eagle Center executive director, overseeing a staff Cook calls “a great group of people.”

When Cook shared his vision about donating his collection to the Center, Thompson was enthusiastic. He knew what he was being offered.

“I have had museum professionals down here, people like the retired director of the Winona County Historical Society, people who know collections and worked with them,” he said. “When I take them into the archives their eyes get huge and they say, ‘Wow. This is amazing.’ ”

Still, Thompson and the board of directors had to ask themselves hard questions about the responsibility of taking Cook’s life’s work.

“This is a museum-quality collection, not a bunch of boxes from someone’s attic,” Thompson says. “We wanted to be sure we had the wherewithal to appropriately steward the collection with the right kind of storage and display. We knew it would take money.”

The Eagle Center received $8 million from the State of Minnesota for the expansion project. (“It was a bipartisan effort,” Thompson proudly points out.) They have
raised $ 2 1/2 million of mostly private money and the rest will be raised through a capital campaign.

THE PRESTON COOK COLLECTION IN PRINT

About 7 1/2 years ago, Cook realized he needed a way to show what he had accumulated to potential donors and others who hadn’t visited the Eagle Center.

The result of a lot of hard work with “great researchers and editors” is a 145-page, over-sized hardcover that includes an 18-page chronology detailing history, legislation, research and cultural ideas involving the bald eagle. There are 1,349 images, color and black and white, each with an information-packed caption.

The fierce-looking eagle on the cover is a 1983 color screen print by Andy Warhol, one of 10 prints in Warhol’s Endangered Species portfolio.

Because the collection is so varied, Cook organized the book by themes – The Official Eagle, Military & War, Politics & Protest, Culture & Entertainment, Art & Decoration, Commerce, The Natural Eagle, and Travel & Transportation. (It is available wherever books are sold, including independent bookstores, Barnes & Noble and Amazon.com.)

HOW MANY EAGLES?

Looking back over a half century, Cook admits that his collection became “a more personal thing than I thought it would be.”

Now that his collection has a permanent nest, he can retire his mantra, “You can’t have too many eagles.” And wife Donna won’t have to reply “You can have too many eagles.”