

THE PALIMPSEST

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The University Museum

To the thoughtful person, scientist or layman, the Museum of Natural History at the State University of Iowa is an important institution. It is not only a place where natural objects are assembled to show the relation of man to the lower forms of life, but it is also a dynamic expression of the marvelous and manifold works of Nature. Children love animals and other natural objects, and unless their interests are turned aside and crowded out by other things, they will have their lives broadened and enriched by visits to the Museum.

The Iowa Museum of Natural History was established by an act of the state legislature in the year 1858. It was housed in the Old Capitol building for the first 28 years of its life. It seems very fitting that a department which has contributed so much to the development of the University had its start in Old Capitol. The Museum was first called a "Cabinet of Natural History," a term that was applied to collections of that day, although they were actually museums in our modern sense.

The Museum differs from most of the departments in the University in that its collections were obtained through expeditions which were financed by friends of the University rather than by state appropriations. It has also benefited by many invaluable gifts.

Theodore S. Parvin, professor of natural history, had charge of the Museum from its beginning until 1870. He was succeeded by Dr. Charles A. White, who resigned in 1873. Professor Samuel Calvin came to the University in 1873 as acting professor of natural science and curator of the Cabinet of Natural History. In 1886 Charles C. Nutting was appointed curator of the Cabinet and instructor of natural history. Three years later the Cabinet (now called Museum) and systematic zoology were made into a new department under Nutting, and in 1891 Henry F. Wickham was appointed assistant curator. In 1906 Homer R. Dill came to the University as taxidermist and assistant professor of zoology. In 1908 he became director of the vertebrate section of the Museum, still under Nutting as curator. In 1926, when Nutting resigned on account of failing health, Dill became director of the Museum.

At this time the Museum was separated from the department of zoology. From 1926 until 1949 the Museum was a separate Division of the University. At the time of Dill's retirement, the Museum was made a department in the School of Fine

Arts under Dr. Earl Harper. Professor Walter C. Thietje, who had been Dill's assistant for over twenty years, was appointed curator of the department. Thietje's fine taxidermic work has done much to put the Museum in the high standing it has today.

During the early years the Museum was used only by scientists who were classifying and naming different natural objects pertaining to the field of work in which they were employed. There was no attempt to exhibit this material other than to make it available for their use. Although people could see the collections on request, the Museum was not open to the public.

In 1886 the Museum was moved from Old Capitol to the old Science Building, now known as the Geology Building. Here the collections were housed, and much valuable material was assembled through expeditions and gifts. By 1905 the department had grown to the point where it needed more space. Plans were made for a fine stone building for the Museum, which would also house laboratories for the departments of zoology, botany, and geology. A committee was sent East to visit a number of the larger museums to get plans for the museum rooms and cases.

Just as this beautiful dream was about to come true, two very unfortunate things happened. A fire burned old North Hall, leaving what was not burned of the library without a suitable home. A

part of the Museum building had to be used to house the library. And that was not all. The President wanted an assembly; so another slice was taken out of the middle of the building to make what is now known as Macbride Auditorium. Making the best of what was left, the zoology department and the Museum used the two ends of the building, while the other science departments had to remain in their old quarters. In the north end on the top floor was Bird Hall, while Mammal Hall was in the south end on the same floor. Directly under Mammal Hall was Invertebrate Hall, which contained all of Professor Nutting's collections of sea life, beautifully displayed in alcove cases.

By the time that Professor Nutting resigned in 1926, the study of systematic zoology was being replaced by morphological and experimental studies, and the man who was to take his place as head of zoology had no use for the Museum. The cases in Invertebrate Hall were moved into the corridors in order that this space could be cut up into small rooms for the new work in zoology. Many boxes of fine specimens were also packed away in the attic. At this time it was definitely understood that the Museum would have space for this material when the library moved out. A year later zoology moved into the building vacated by the Medical College. To see his lifetime work torn apart and wrenched away was heart-breaking indeed for

Professor Nutting. He died a very unhappy man less than a year later.

At the time the new science building was completed, Professor Nutting had realized that he must have a trained museum man to take charge of the modern exhibits such as he wanted in the building. With the appointment of Homer R. Dill, Nutting turned over to him virtually all of the responsibility of collecting the material and making the habitat groups in the new building. During the forty-three years of active work that Dill put in with the Museum, he raised money for many expeditions to various parts of the world, collected thousands of specimens, and executed a large number of habitat groups, including the unique and famous Laysan Island Cyclorama.

First organized by Professor Dill in 1910, courses in museum training have been one of the features which have made this Museum unique, as the University of Iowa is the only institution offering such work as regular college training. The courses are designed to take care of a number of different groups of students: first, to train students as expert museum workers; second, to teach them how to prepare scientific skins in the field; third, to give science teachers a knowledge of preparing natural objects to be used in teaching. The core courses in science, recently introduced into the University curriculum, have found the collections in the Museum of incalculable value for their work.