



The Okoboji Lakeside Laboratory

by Thomas H. Macbride

The following material has been drawn from Professor Macbride's article published in the *Proceedings of the Iowa Academy of Science* for 1909. It is an important article for the information it conveys about the new lakeside laboratory's purpose and Macbride's plans for it in the year of its creation.

The establishment of the Okoboji Lakeside Laboratory, founded by the alumni of the State University of Iowa, promises to affect so deeply the future scientific work of our state that some account of its beginning and especially its raison d'être may rightly claim the attention of the Academy. The laboratory has been located on the west shore of Lake Okoboji in Dickinson county for the reasons following:

In the first place the topography of Dickinson county is peculiar, unique. Situated on the western border of the Iowa Wisconsin drift, the region illustrates, as possibly no other equal area in the state, the special characteristics, not only of glacial moraines in general, but in particular the very expression of the Wisconsin moraine. In fact, I think that it must be admitted that the Okoboji lakes and their encompassing hills do indeed form the finest bit of morainic topography to be found on our

western prairie. . . .

Secondly, the region having Okoboji for its center is, by reason of the peculiar topography just mentioned, the field of a special floral display difficult to illustrate anywhere else within such narrow limits. We have a forest flora and a prairie flora; and neither in this part of the world has ever been adequately studied. It is believed that the fungal flora of the region, for instance, is especially rich and interesting. We have all kinds of habitat conditions, from aquatic to xerophytic. We have deep water, shallow water, but permanent; marshes, springs; and xerophytic [sic] slopes and hill-tops, some so dry as to offer home to the vegetation of the higher western semi-arid plains. The plankton of the lakes is filled with desmids and diatoms and all manner of algal flora, during July and August rich beyond comparison in all that makes up the tide of life for these simple but fascinating forms.

. . . the factors of ecology and distribution are all here, in large part so far, unexplored and certain to interest for centuries generation after generation of Iowa students.

For similar reasons, the fauna of the lake district will reward our constant study. The varied flora, just described, insures a varied fauna. The waters teem with animal life. Probably the protozoa of the whole valley will be found hiding on the vegetation of these [quiet] lakes and pools. Of course, the avian and vertebrate aquatic fauna are rich, and even the terrestrial vertebrates are likely to prove more than commonly worthy of investigation. While this is writing the papers tell of a mountain lion shot in one of the near-by marshy lakes! It is not believed that carnivores of size are likely to abound, not to such extent at least as to warrant a future visit from our nimrodic ex-president, but it is believed that natural science, in all its branches, entomology, ostracology, ornithology, will be greatly enriched by using such opportunity for research as Okoboji may afford.

(Left) Thomas Huston Macbride, the dreamer whose tireless efforts sustained the laboratory in its first twenty-five years. Just two days before his death in 1934, he completed an article for the *Des Moines Register* describing the laboratory. His support of the research station continues, even from the grave. Recent bequests from his estate will be used in the fall of 1985 to enlarge the laboratory library, construction which will include "pillars [which will] shine among [the] trees . . ." (courtesy Iowa Lakeside Laboratory)

Again, Okoboji as the world knows is already a place of resort, thousands of people find summer habitation on its shores. So that we find here unequalled opportunity for bringing scientific work to the attention of people of every class and kind, and confessedly natural history work in all our schools, colleges and universities is too formal, too artificial, too much based upon material specially prepared, laid up in herbaria, or conserved in cases and bottles; the lakeside laboratory offers an opportunity to correct this, at least in some small measure. Ever since the immortal Agassiz stood bareheaded with that famous company on the rocks of Pennikese, the naturalists of the world, at least, have realized that the proper and reverent place for the study of natural objects is in their natural surroundings. Dry dead fungi are dusty labelled things, as meaningless as the stuffed skin of mammal or bird, or a fossil in a box; better than no exhibit at all, to be sure, but poor indeed as compared with the natural world, where the fungus starts in the forest shade, the wings of bird or insect fan the sunny air, or the fossil speaks its significance from the stony pages of the riven quarry stone. The lakeside laboratory shall afford to all interested, for once at least a chance to see the real world, nature alive, accomplishing her miracles in their own silent

splendor, often needing not, for the student's appreciation, the voice of interpreter or teacher. . . .

The classes sought to be accommodated are; first, all students of nature competent to enjoy the laboratory method of instruction; the laboratory shall be open to anybody capable of using its privileges; second, teachers of biologic subjects in academies and high schools everywhere, who may desire to combine recreation with work and who may find in the service of the laboratory occasion to acquaint themselves with Iowa conditions and thus better equip themselves for serving the children of the schools; third, graduate students who may desire to perfect themselves in some line of research preparatory or introductory to an advanced degree. Such students are presumably competent to conduct work for themselves, needing simply a place at table and such suggestions as occasion may develop.

. . . the laboratories for use are to be open to the world, students enrolling in the order in which application arrives. It is hoped that the open door may be thronged and that the enterprise may not only serve those already engaged in scientific work, but may reach and influence thousands and make real all natural science to the upbuilding and quickening of every school, college or academy within the borders of our state.



(David Boot Album, SHSI)