

1992

History of Iowa Natural History - A Symposium

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HISTORY OF IOWA NATURAL HISTORY — A SYMPOSIUM

To a person uninstructed in natural history, his country or seaside stroll is a walk through a gallery filled with wonderful works of art, nine-tenths of which have their faces turned to the wall. Thomas H. Huxley, "On the Educational Value of the Natural History Sciences". 1854.

In the early 1800's, Iowa was the western frontier for the young United States of America. The accounts of the early settlers described the land that they encountered in broad general terms, but their interest in natural history was largely consumer-based, not scientific. The early natural historians began to fill the void of knowledge through careful observations and investigations.

It is easy to dismiss the study of natural history as unscientific, trivial, or archaic. However, as I sit among my field guides and natural history books, I realize that these references have been available only recently. To the first scientists, Iowa's prairies, loess hills, effigy mounds, and glacial wetlands were unknown. While natural historians are often derided as "listers", I prefer to think of them as "compilers". In an area where little was known, the early natural historians pieced together the basics of the natural world, and, therefore, provided a base upon which hypothesis testing and modern studies could be conducted.

Several years ago, the Iowa Natural History Association recognized

the foundation laid by these early scientists. We began work on organizing a history of people who made major contributions to the knowledge of Iowa's natural history, and our efforts culminated in a symposium presented at the Iowa Academy of Science meeting in 1991. From the outset, we realized that some early natural historians would be excluded, however, we hoped that this would stimulate articles that detailed the work of natural historians who were not presented in the symposium. To an extent, this goal has been realized, and several papers are in progress on scientists whom we did not cover.

This issue of the *Journal of the Iowa Academy of Science*, presents the first written installment of our symposium: papers on the contributions of Keyes, Pammel, Bessey, and Hayden; the role of the Iowa Natural History Museum; and histories of both the development of early natural history studies and mammalogy investigations. More papers will follow in future issues, and new contributors are welcome.

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