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THE BUILDING AND FUNCTION OF THE COLLEGE
MUSEUM.

B. H. BAILEY.

It is with a keen sense of how far short of the real mark he shall come that the writer aims at the center of this target. It is also with an appreciation of the situation in the average college with regard to meager funds, limited space, lack of appreciation by the authorities as well as the public, and the frequent unpreparedness along museum lines and the overworked condition of the professor of natural sciences.

Few of our Iowa colleges are without some sort of a museum. The catalogs either list the museum under that name in the index or mention is made of it in connection with the courses in Biology. That there has been at some time or other a person, or persons, in all these places who have spent time and money in the collecting of objects of various sorts which appealed to them, or to others who have donated them, our college museums attest. That this spirit of collecting and preserving objects of natural history is worthy I think no one will deny, but the present condition of the average college museum leaves open to serious question whether the time and effort required are worth the candle, and the question may well be asked what real purposes do they serve.

May I say, too, that the acquaintance of the writer with college museums has not been gained by a mere perusal of the catalogs of these institutions, else I might be of the opinion that there was left little to be desired in them but that the alumni and friends should add to their volume.

The actual inspection is made with difficulty in some cases after the janitor has been located, after the proper apologies for dust and evident lack of care have been made, and the statement that really very few visitors are admitted and the department makes little use of the material for teaching. Sometimes, however, one's pilot points with evident pride and volubility to the sorry row of "stuffed" objects hanging from perch or stand, the remains of what might be mistaken for a "shredded wheat biscuit" meal in evidence through some crack or seam, and a label scarcely more definite than the conception of a lifelike pose in

the mind of the taxidermist whose work they are. Now it is not my purpose to ridicule such exhibits for I have been guilty of all the above and our institution still contains specimens of the above type, but I have tried to see what better things may come to us all in the effort to get away from these travesties on the most beautiful of created things, these "museums of unnatural history," as they have been called.

The primary function of a college museum, as I understand it, is its utility as an agency for illustrating what is taught in the curriculum. This at once limits the field of the college museum. In general, articles of virtu and mere curios are not desirable, and other limitations may suggest themselves according to the range of the subjects taught in the institution. A knowledge of what to keep out of the museum is quite as necessary as what to admit and feature, and the common practice of turning over to the college museum the curios of the "what not" or the accumulations of the garret, while it yields an occasional good and useful specimen, generally should be discouraged unless one is allowed a free hand in augmenting the dump with much of this rare (?) junk. Another bugbear is the collection which widow so and so wishes to leave to the college as a memorial to her husband on condition that it be kept intact in its own case as presented. Unless such collection can be distributed, of course, with the donor's name on each specimen, the collection is a nuisance, and only if large enough to be separately housed or, in case it is a special collection along some one line is it worth admittance. Imagine a library made up of Smith's or Jones' or Brown's private book collection each ranging all the way from the works of the immortal William S. to the Tip Top Weekly and each housed in its own peculiar case with a label indicating why its owner had no further use for it! I am convinced that the college museum may well keep within the bounds of the subjects of the departmental curriculum and that all the material admitted be available and free for such disposition as in the curator's judgment seems best.

With a view then to its usefulness in teaching, I strongly favor the placing of emphasis on local collections. The local flora and fauna, geology and mineralogy, should receive first consideration. To a large degree this material can be secured with comparatively little expense, and in the course of years the collections for that locality made by carefully directed students,

as well as by people of more scientific attainment, may become fairly complete.

After the local collections I would place the purchase of typical specimens from foreign parts, which will supplement the local material and be useful as illustrating more completely the subjects taught. The matter of exhibiting in a college museum striking or extraordinary objects of any kind merely because they attract attention is to be discouraged.

Unless funds are available to purchase occasional supplementary specimens there will be a lack of balance. This can be helped by exchange with other museums, but one is sadly handicapped without funds for this purpose.

After the question of what to exhibit comes the question how to exhibit. This is difficult to answer or even discuss because of the varying conditions in colleges, but I do not refer now so much to the room or space available, as to the method of display.

The conception of a museum as a "series of carefully written labels each illustrated by a good specimen" is to my mind close to the mark. A carefully labeled specimen though not so perfect may be and often is far more valuable than a more perfect specimen poorly labeled or with no label at all. The thousands of unlabeled or poorly labeled specimens in our Iowa collections is enough to make one's heart ache (and one's head ache if he is searching for information). Too often also is it true that "out of sight is out of mind" and unlisted material that is stored in drawers is forgotten just when most needed for the class room. A card index and catalog of accessions will prevent this. The usefulness of a museum is directly in proportion to its accessibility.

Another function of the college museum should be to save in as nearly perfect condition as possible and permanently, such specimens of our vanishing life as may come to hand. This brings up the question of modern taxidermy. Even the best museums of the east are finding the methods of a few years ago utterly failing in their durability and permanency. Skins cured with alum and stretched over clay manikins, like Hornaday's Giant Ray, apparently "get mad and tear themselves to tatters." The methods now followed however seem to promise better things and I believe are permanent if skillfully done. Specimens will always require care but once thoroughly prepared the necessary attention is reduced to a minimum.

Faithfulness in mounting and permanency should be our aim. There is no more reason why we should put up with the painful and grotesque stuffed birds and mammals that stock our college museums than that we should be satisfied to draw our ideas of art from a few cheap chromos, or that our notion of music be obtained from instruments out of tune. The best in taxidermic art today stops in birds just short of the song, and in mammals just short of graceful motion. A few well mounted and carefully labeled birds and mammals would be far more attractive than and fully as useful as the scores of poorly stuffed specimens now to be seen everywhere. The cabinet or closet might better hold the rest in the shape of skins, where they are just as useful and look far better.

May I lay especial emphasis on the saving of species that are destined to speedy extinction. In the Coe museum a Whooping Crane has occupied a conspicuous position for years though poorly mounted and with feathers stained with grease. Dr. Hornaday most emphatically advised its preservation and it was recently remounted by an expert at the Carnegie Museum. Today it is a thing of beauty and promises, with reasonable care, to be a joy forever. There are many specimens in all our museums that are worthy of similar treatment. If not given attention, a few years at most and the grease, if not the insects, will put these specimens forever beyond recall. It is truly startling to find how little of Iowa material is in the largest and best museums of this country and it is distressing to note the shabby condition of that within the museums of our own state. I read with peculiar pleasure the words of Prof. Henry Osborn, the first President of this Academy, in his address to the newly organized society, (P. 35, Iowa Academy Proc., 87-88-89; Pub. 1890) in which he says, "The principal means at present existing for the illustration of the fauna, flora, geology and mineralogy of the state are connected with educational institutions. The State University, Agricultural College, Iowa College at Grinnell, Cornell College at Mt. Vernon and possibly some others possess collections of some extent. In all of these, however, and necessarily from the educational standpoint, it will be found that much space is given to foreign animals, and that our local fauna is meagerly represented. In none of them is there anything like a comprehensive exhibit of the state fauna. The State University is rich in mammals from the Hornaday collection, and will

doubtless have a good representation of the mammalian fauna of the State. The Agricultural College has a fairly complete series of the birds of the State, either mounted or in skins, also considerable collections of reptiles and insects. The museum of the Davenport Academy has a more local object and its museum is especially rich in anthropology. It will be seen that in no place in the State is there a collection especially devoted to exhibiting the resources of the State," etc.

While some institutions have made strides in the direction suggested twenty-five years ago by Professor Osborn, the colleges of Iowa have lagged sadly behind and some college museums have deteriorated rather than improved. May not the coming twenty-five years mark a distinct advance in the development of the museum as an educational factor in our colleges, and an attractive as well as valuable center for the dissemination of the truths of nature.

BIOLOGICAL LABORATORY,
COE COLLEGE.