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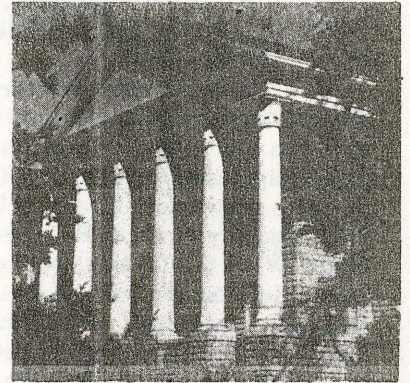
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UNIVERSITY FORUM

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FORT HAYS STATE UNIVERSITY

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The Fort Hays State Museums

by Jerry Choate

A person who visits a museum and examines the exhibits therein is like a seaman who views an iceberg from a safe distance—in both instances what can be seen is but the visible tip of a larger entity. Exhibits play an important role in the functioning of museums, but they constitute little more than an imperfect reflection of what happens (or has happened in the past) behind the exhibits in the core of the museum facility. The objectives of this article are to describe both the visible and the behind-the-scenes aspects of the Fort Hays State Museums, to review their history, and to relate plans for their future development.

Fort Hays State University is unique among institutions of its size in that it has two nationally-recognized museums. Moreover, the two facilities at Fort Hays State University are the only academic museums in Kansas not associated with the University of Kansas. One of these,

the Sternberg Memorial Museum, is best known for its exhibits, whereas the other, the Museum of the High Plains, has developed its reputation primarily through research and other professional activities.

HISTORY OF FORT HAYS STATE MUSEUMS Sternberg Memorial Museum

Collections of objects that eventually would be housed in the Sternberg Memorial Museum were being amassed even before the University opened its doors in 1902. Before the turn of the century a local real estate dealer and former federal officer of the General Land Office, C.W. Miller, Sr., purchased bird specimens mounted by eastern taxidermists and learned the art of taxidermy. Soon many of his specimens were displayed in local stores and banks as well as in offices and departments of the

newly established Western Branch of the Kansas Normal School. The first major contribution to what would become the Sternberg Memorial Museum was the mounted bird collection presented by Miller.

The first printed record of interest in a museum for the Normal School was indicated in the floor plan when the two end additions were made to the Academic Building (Picken Hall). A copy of that floor plan, with all rooms numbered, was included in the Western Normal School catalogue for 1907-1908; the legend revealed that room 15 in the basement was to be the museum, but room 15 was not shown on the drawing. The drawing was published in several subsequent catalogues, but room number 15 was never assigned, and most of the early collections were exhibited in the library room on the second floor of Picken Hall.

W.A. Lewis became President of the college in 1913. He was enthusiastic about developing a museum for the students and people of western Kansas and in 1914 formally appointed Miller as Curator of the museum (records show that Miller had been serving informally in that capacity since 1910). Lewis also encouraged Professor Ward Sullivan to develop a collection of historical items. Sullivan responded by sending letters to influential Kansans, soliciting donations of historical objects, diaries, and stories to be maintained in the museum.

In 1926 the original Forsyth Library (now McCartney Hall) was completed. President Lewis provided space for the museum in that building and gave formal recognition to the museum. Lewis then encouraged George F. Sternberg (Figure 1), an internationally known paleontological



Figure 1

collector living in Oakley, Kansas, to move to Hays and assume responsibility for development of the museum. Sternberg, who had been trained in paleontology by his famous father, Charles H. Sternberg, arrived in Hays in 1927 and was assigned an office adjacent to the museum but was paid little for his efforts. Consequently, he continued selling some of the fossils he discovered to large museums as a means of supporting himself.

Sternberg was given the title of Curator of Geology and Paleontology, and an exhibit of fossils and rock specimens was developed. His enthusiastic work resulted in acquisition of some of the most complete and unique specimens of fossil reptiles and fishes to be found in any museum in North America. Many of these materials (Figure 2) remain on display today in the Sternberg Memorial Museum.

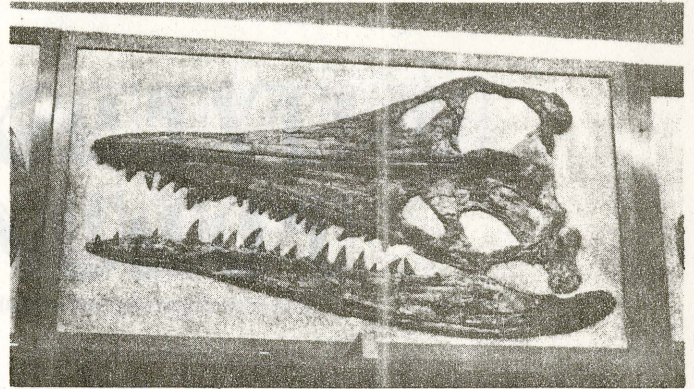


Figure 2

Both Miller and Lewis died in 1933. C.E. Rarick became President of the college and appointed Sternberg as Curator of Museums (the only staff position in the museum program). Sternberg was joined in 1955 by Myrl V. Walker, who was appointed Director of Museums by President M.C. Cunningham. Walker continued in this capacity until his retirement in 1973. In 1967 Forsyth Library moved to a new building and the museum expanded to fill the first floor of the old library. After Sternberg's death in 1969, the museum was formally renamed the Sternberg Memorial Museum to honor the contributions of the Sternberg family. The building was remodeled in 1970, and Dr. Richard J. Zakrzewski was appointed Director in 1973.

Museum of the High Plains

The history of the Museum of the High Plains is relatively short and uncomplicated in comparison with that of the Sternberg Memorial Museum. The former developed as an outgrowth of a collection of plants established in 1929 by Elam Bartholomew. The resulting herbarium was curated by Bartholomew until his death in 1934, at which time Dr. Fred W. Albertson (who was best known as a plant ecologist) became Curator. The present Curator, Dr. Howard C. Reynolds, has been in charge of the herbarium, which eventually was named the Elam Bartholomew Herbarium, since 1957.

The herbarium is noteworthy for its original set of exiccatti of rust specimens collected and prepared by Bartholomew, who was one of the world's authorities on this type of parasitic fungi. Many of Bartholomew's specimens were deposited at Harvard University, but the herbarium retains more than 5000 packets of rust in addition to its other plant specimens.

Administratively, the Elam Bartholomew Herbarium is one of several divisions of the Museum of the High Plains. In addition to the herbarium, the museum includes collections of arthropods, fishes, amphibians and

reptiles, birds, and mammals. These divisions began as collections amassed by the Department of Biological Sciences, some primarily for use in teaching and others as a result of research projects. The individual collections grew rapidly during the 1960's, in part as a result of expeditions to New Zealand, the Pacific Northwest, and the American Southwest, but especially as an outgrowth of increased zoological work on the Great Plains. Drs. Charles A. Ely and Eugene D. Fleharty were instrumental in much of the growth of the collections at that time. The name "Museum of the High Plains" was first informally applied to the collections during 1965-66, and the Museum of the High Plains (including the Elam Bartholomew Herbarium) was formally recognized as a functional entity of the University by President J.W. Gustad in 1973. The first and current Director of the Museum of the High Plains is Dr. J.R. Choate.

President G.W. Tomanek merged the Sternberg Memorial Museum and the Museum of the High Plains, retitling them as the Fort Hays State Museums, for budgetary and planning purposes in 1980. Each facility retains a separate Director, but Choate administers programs and manages the budgets of the museums.

OBJECTIVES OF FORT HAYS STATE MUSEUMS

The objectives of the Fort Hays State Museums are:

1) to collect and properly maintain scientific collections of plants and animals (both living and extinct) and of historical and ethnological materials and archeological objects to serve as the focus for other activities of the museums;

2) to serve as an educational resource for students and the general public by means of exhibits and other educational programs;

3) to conduct scholarly research, both applied and pure, based on the collections of the museums;

4) to employ the collections as a teaching resource in graduate and undergraduate education;

5) to offer training programs for students who wish to pursue careers in preservation, maintenance, exhibition, and administration of museum resources;

6) to provide services to the citizens of western Kansas and to society in general based on the collections and the expertise of their Curators and staff members.

These objectives fall into the broad categories of education, research, and service, all based on the collections of the museums, and they correspond closely to the stated objectives of Fort Hays State University. The collections and how they are employed in education, research, and the provision of services to society are examined in greater detail below.

The Collections

The Sternberg Memorial Museum houses important collections of geological objects, natural history specimens, and historical, archeological, and ethnological materials. It is best known, however, for its paleontological collection, which consists of several thousand "lots," including 18 specimens designated as "primary types" because they were the basis for the original scientific descriptions of those extinct animals. The size of the holdings of the Sternberg Museum is deceiving because of the manner in which certain materials are catalogued. The O.R. Brittain collection of

shells, for example, consisting of more than 12,800 shells of hundreds of different animal species from all over the world, is catalogued as one lot. A conservative estimate of the size of all the collections maintained by the Sternberg Memorial Museum is two million specimens. Included in this number is one of the finest assemblages of Cretaceous fossils in North America (the collection of "flying reptiles," for example, is the third largest in the world), an outstanding assemblage of Cenozoic fossils, one of the finest collections of weapons in Kansas, and an exciting array of meteorites (at least part of 85% of all the meteorites that have been found in Kansas is on exhibit). The historical and natural history collections are especially important within the immediate region from the standpoint of the region's Volga German heritage.

The Museum of the High Plains has no exhibits, and all specimens are prepared so as to be most useful in teaching and research. The collections consist of perhaps 75,000 specimens, not counting the nearly one-quarter million acarological specimens maintained in the private collection of Dr. N.A. Walker, who serves the museum as Curator of Arthropods. The collections are world-wide in nature but are especially representative of the fauna and flora of the Great Plains of North America. As such, the Museum of the High Plains is the largest natural history museum in the world whose geographic focus is the Great Plains Physiographic Province.

Educational Functions

The collections of the museums are employed as an invaluable resource in at least 30 undergraduate and graduate courses offered by the Department of Biological Sciences, 20 courses in the Department of Earth Sciences, and occasional courses offered by the Departments of Art and History. The roles, both actual and potential, of the exhibits of the Sternberg Memorial Museum in courses taught by various departments on campus are grossly underestimated.

Numerous undergraduate students each year receive their introduction to scientific research through part-time employment in the museums. In fact, the sense of responsibility some students develop as a result of independent study in the museums contributes nearly as much to their future lives as do courses taken for academic credit. Few departments on campus offer opportunities for "hands-on" experience comparable to those available in the Fort Hays State Museums.

Graduate education is an especially important role of the museums. Theses involve research; research in the biological and earth sciences often involves use of specimens and results in acquisition of additional specimens; acquisition of specimens stimulates new research; and active research programs result in recruitment of additional graduate students. Accordingly, the use of museum resources in graduate education is an accurate measure of the "health" of the museums. In this regard, well over half of the graduate students in the biological and earth sciences in recent years have conducted thesis research involving at least indirect (and usually direct) use of the resources of the Fort Hays State Museums. In 1979-80, 13 of 26 graduate students in the Department of Biological Sciences were involved directly in the acquisition and study of museum specimens (Figure 3). Much of this type of graduate education ex-

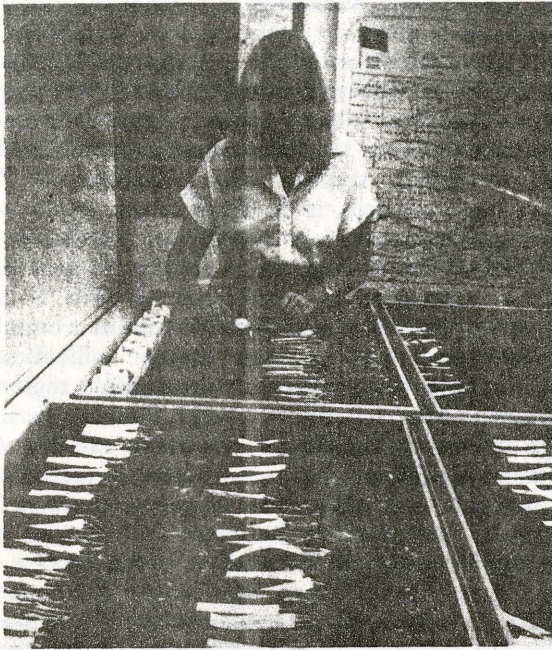


Figure 3

tends beyond the classroom and places extraordinary demands on the time of museum personnel, but the value of these activities to the University and to the museums justifies the extra effort.

Research Functions

Research conducted in the Fort Hays State Museums is of three kinds: individual research projects; long-term research programs of Curators; research conducted by persons from other institutions. The first often is a result of graduate education and culminates in the production of M.S. theses, most of which eventually are published. The second are major undertakings to which graduate students often contribute but which represent the research specialty of a Curator. The products of these two kinds of museum research, averaging more than 20 scholarly publications per year, represent an appreciable percentage of the research output of Fort Hays State University.

The third category of research illustrates the excellent reputation of the Fort Hays State Museums as a scientific repository. Scientists from other universities, museums, and state and federal agencies visit the museums at Hays each year to use our facilities and study specimens in the collections. Moreover, the two museums receive dozens of requests each year for specimens, numbering in the hundreds, to be loaned for study at other institutions. These visits and requests for loans place additional demands on the time of Curators, but serve to enhance further the standing of Fort Hays State University in the scientific community.

Service Functions

Public service and education often are difficult to distinguish. The Sternberg Memorial Museum houses outstanding exhibits in its Hall of Paleontology, Hall of Natural History, Hall of Archeology and Ethnology, Hall

of History, Hall of the Pioneers, and geological display cases. These exhibits are used widely in education programs. Additionally, they are viewed by more than 70,000 visitors from around the world each year. Obviously, the development and maintenance of these exhibits represent a service to the citizens of western Kansas and to society in general. Other services commonly provided by the museums include responses to queries from the public regarding animals: "How can I get rid of the bats living in my attic?" "Is this bone I found on my land from a mammoth?" "How can I discourage sparrows from eating all the seeds in my bird feeder?" Agencies of various kinds also request information: "Is this animal an endangered species?" "What species are represented in these eagle pellets?" "What species occur on this federal land?" The answers to such questions must be based on extensive knowledge developed through field investigations and museum research.

Another category of service to society relates to the application of professional expertise in environmental assessment. A museum collection affords the best means of assessing changes in the fauna or flora of a site after that site is "developed" or otherwise modified. For example, three curators of the Museum of the High Plains, together with another professor in the Department of Biological Sciences, recently were contracted by Sunflower Electric Cooperative, Inc., to conduct a biological inventory on land owned by the Cooperative near Holcomb, Kansas. The Cooperative then will construct a coal-fired generating plant on the site and, after a period of years, monitor any changes that take place in the vegetation and animals near the plant. Use of museum collections facilitates positive identification of species and will enable data subsequently collected to be compared with base-line data obtained prior to operation of the plant.

PROSPECTUS FOR THE MUSEUMS

The Fort Hays State Museums, in this period of declining enrollments, afford opportunities to enhance the image of the University throughout western Kansas and the nation. These opportunities are based on development of improved programs of education and service both for visitors to the museums and for persons who ordinarily might not visit them. Examples are given below.

Several years ago a museum employee hired with federal funds established a computer file of educators in western Kansas and queried them regarding museum services they would like to see available. Of those persons who responded, 49 percent said they would appreciate museum materials which could be borrowed for use in their classrooms; 47 percent stated that they would like lecturers to visit their classrooms; 46 percent noted that they wanted interpretive tours of the museums for their classes; 15 percent requested evening films, lectures, or demonstrations at the museums during the school year; 10 percent specified the need for summer youth programs (ages 8-14) in the museums; 6 percent preferred youth programs on Saturday mornings during the school year. These data suggest that about half of the respondents (generally those living nearest Hays) would appreciate improved museum programs and would bring students to campus if such programs were available. Conversely, about half of the respondents (generally those living farthest from Hays) would incorporate museum services into

their educational offerings "if the campus could be brought to their schools." Plans for development of expanded programs by the Fort Hays State Museums could serve both of these needs.

On campus, interpretive tours and lectures relating to museum resources will be scheduled and publicized. Special programs will be planned for vacation periods and at other times (such as Homecoming and Senior Day) when visitors are on campus. An effort will be made to coordinate activities with the performing arts and to cooperate fully with the University's Center for High Plains Studies so as to maximize the number of visitors to campus. Youth classes and docent training programs will be developed. A museum newsletter detailing activities of the museums and their personnel will be produced and mailed to persons who pay dues as members of a Fort Hays State Museums Association.

For off-campus use, traveling exhibits with accompanying educational information will be constructed. Whenever possible, these will be delivered to schools by an interpreter who will spend the day and present educational programs based on the exhibits. The recruitment of students will also be one of the objectives of many such visits.

Other long-range plans for the museums are intended largely to facilitate more effective use of museum resources. For example, Fort Hays State University needs an archivist, and the Sternberg Memorial Museum needs someone to curate the historical collections; these two needs can be fulfilled by employing one person, possibly in combination with a part-time teaching appointment in the Department of History. The proposed educational programs will place even greater demands on the time of the Curators in the future, and this will require the hiring of Museum Specialists to develop these programs and ease the workload of the Curators.