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Uncovering a Natural History Mystery at the University of Akron

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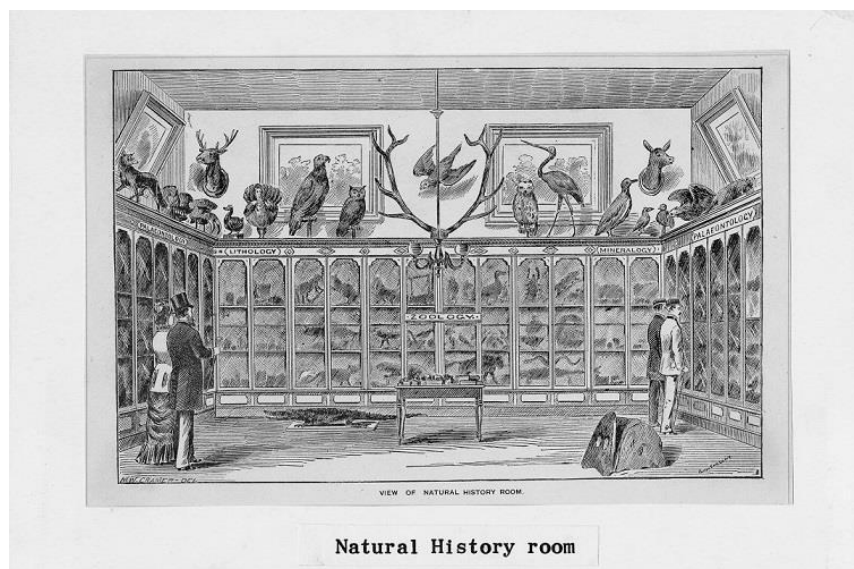
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The story begins with a copy of a lithograph (see Figure 1) dated to 1882 from the University of Akron (UA) yearbook called the *Buchtel* (pp. 68–69). It depicts a natural history room housed in Buchtel College, the precursor to the University of Akron in Akron, Ohio. The large display cases feature a wide array of mounted mammals and birds with distinguished people of the time contemplating the wonders of the natural world.

But, we wondered, where is this natural history room now and where are these important scientific collections?

Figure 1

Natural History Room lithograph from The Buchtel (1882, p. 69, Courtesy of The University of Akron Archives and Special Collections).



The following text provides another perspective of this fascinating image:

We herewith present a view of our Natural History Room. A few words in connection may not be out of place. The McCollister Cabinet, presented by ex-President McCollister, constitutes the chief part of the room's contents. The Mineralogical specimens are especially valuable and have recently received a very desirable addition in the gift of Mr. L.V. Pierce, Hot Springs Arkansas. The collection of marbles is much more than an ordinary one. The departments of Palaeontology [sic] and Zoology, are both well equipped. In addition to the contents of this room the college possesses a valuable cabinet given by the late Gen. R.V. Bierce, of Akron.

Presents are frequently being received, making the collections more complete and increasing the efficiency of the Scientific department. We feel that these collections are such that the college has every reason to be highly gratified with them” (The Buchtel, 1882, p. 68).

The University of Akron Natural History Room is very reminiscent of Wunderkammers. These “wonder chambers” or “cabinet of curiosities” first began to appear in the homes of royalty in 16th century Europe, where collections of curiosities and rarities from the natural world or otherwise were exhibited (see Figure 2). These private collections often became the basis for many of the Natural History Museums that exist today (Lubar, 2018).

Figure 2

Ole Worm’s Museum Wormianum, 1588-1654 (Photograph: The Smithsonian Libraries).



Another example can be found at the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, in Northeast Ohio, nearby. The museum was established by Cyrus S. Eaton to perform research, education, and development of collections in the fields of anthropology, archaeology, astronomy, botany, geology, paleontology, wildlife biology, and zoology. The museum traces its roots to The Ark, a gentlemen’s natural history club formed in 1836 on Cleveland's Public Square by William Case and Jared Potter Kirtland. From this somewhat informal gathering of amateur scientists, the Cleveland Academy of Natural Science and the Kirtland Society of Natural History

were established in 1869 and the museum was formally established in 1922 by the trustees of the Cleveland Museum of Natural History (Hendrickson, 1962).

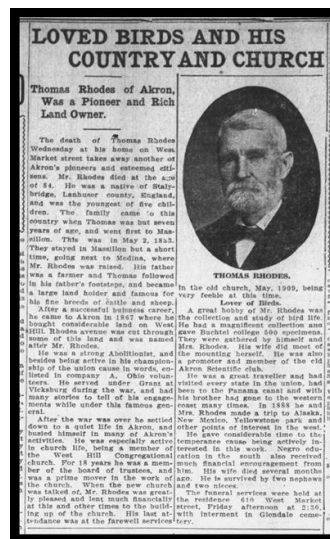
We learned that a local ornithological collection was in its development around the same time. Thomas Rhodes II was born in England in 1826 and his family settled in Sharon Township, in Medina County, Ohio. His father was a farmer and Thomas followed in his footsteps, becoming a large landowner and famous for his fine breeds of cattle and sheep. Thomas moved to Akron in 1867 and married Sarah B. Garside in 1876 (Doyle, 1908).

A great hobby of Thomas was the collection and study of bird life. He had a magnificent collection and gave Buchtel College somewhere between 500 and 600 specimens. They were collected by himself and Sarah, who did most of the mounting herself. Thomas was also a promoter and member of the Akron Scientific Club and the Summit County Horticultural Society, hosting several of their meetings at his home. Several of his presentations were printed in various journals around the country. We learned that the “valuable collection” of birds was gifted to the Buchtel College (now the University of Akron) in 1904 and that “the value of the collection cannot be estimated.” Also, it was the wish of Mr. And Mrs. Rhodes to keep the collection in Summit County (where Akron sits) since it was made in Summit County (see Figure 3). Mr. Rhodes passed away in 1910 with Mrs. Rhodes dying several months prior to him (see Figure 4).

Figure 3
Buchtel Gets a Valuable Present
(Akron Beacon Journal, 1904).



Figure 4
Thomas Rhodes II Obituary (Akron Beacon Journal, 1910).



Buchtel College was founded in 1870 by John R Buchtel and the citizens of Akron. “Old Buchtel Hall” was completed in 1871, was five stories high and contained administrative offices, classrooms, dormitories (West Hall for women and East Hall for men), labs, an art studio, library, chapel, kitchen, dining room and gymnasium. It burned to the ground in 1899 (Figure 5) and Ira Priest (University president at that time) wrote “students who lived in the Old College Building dorm rooms helped save as much of the library and other materials” by bringing them over to Crouse Gym nearby (M. Bloom, personal communication, December 19, 2019). However, it is unclear whether the Rhodes collection was part of those materials. Classes resumed January 4, 1900, in Crouse Gym and other buildings. The new Buchtel Hall was rebuilt on the same site and dedicated in 1901. Buchtel Hall was again plagued by fire in 1971 (Figure 6) and was quickly restored.

Figure 5

*Ruins of Old Buchtel After Fire – 1899
(Photograph: The University of Akron
Archives and Special Collections).*



Figure 6

*Buchtel Hall Interior After Fire – 1971
(Photograph: The University of Akron
Archives and Special Collections).*



At the University of Akron today (jumping ahead 120 years or so), [Un]Classes are offered through the Ex[L] Center for Experiential Learning and are cross-departmental both in instructor and student make-up, interdisciplinary, and allow for small class sizes and active student involvement on topics that would not be normally found in the university’s course catalog. In addition, students play a large role in how the course is structured and unfolds. One author of this paper is from the Department of Biology at UA and the other is in the School of Education and decided that this “natural history mystery” would make a great [Un]Class. We decided to look further into the collections, with a focus on the birds from the

Rhodes Collection for the time being, and had the following goals for an [Un]Class offered in Spring 2022:

- Uncover the historical significance of biological collections;
- Learn about and use proper preservation protocols;
- Begin digitizing the collection and utilize archival practices;
- Educate students about the urgency of science education and communication for a public audience.

This interdisciplinary, student-centered course presented the dilemma to 13 students majoring in biology, biomedical science, education, environmental studies, history, nursing, or museum and archival studies. They worked together to determine how best to work with the collection and then how to bring it back to the public for the first time in possibly over a hundred years. Students began by learning about the history of natural history museums, talking with experts about conservation and taxidermy, visiting the Cleveland Museum of Natural History (which was coincidentally celebrating its 100-year anniversary!) and learning a bit about what was going on in Akron in the late 1800s. They then were able to interact with the collections (in proper personal protective equipment (PPE) of course, due to the nature of the materials being examined), and then photographing most of the easily accessible mounted specimens in the closet where they were being stored in the UA Biology Department (see Figure 7). Those photographs and associated metadata were then uploaded into a new digital repository on CONTENTdm (a website for digital collections) which can be found here: [UA Museum of Zoology – University of Akron Digital Collections](#).

Figure 7

Bird Collection in UA Biology Department (Photograph: Lara Roketenetz).



From there, students chose specimens that they wanted to investigate further and pulled those birds for cleaning, restoration, conservation, or exhibition. One bird, the ivory-billed woodpecker (see Figure 8), was restored by a professional taxidermist. The remaining birds (around 45) were prepped for their big reveal to the public at two exhibition spaces – The Cummings Center for the History of Psychology Institute for Human Science and Culture and the Akron Summit County Library Main Branch Special Collections. Given the various stages of disrepair and neglect of birds over the many years, the task was not a small one (see Figures 9 and 10).

Figure 8

Ivory Billed Woodpecker Prior to Exhibition (Photograph: Lara Roketenetz).



Figure 9

Students Cleaning Birds (Photograph: Lara Roketenetz).



Figure 10

Class Participant Cleaning a Bird (Photograph: Lara Roketenetz).



At the same time as the [Un]Class, Matt Kolodziej, Distinguished Professor of Art in the Myers School of Art at the University of Akron was teaching a seminar in Abstraction.

The [art] class is charged to look at both the form and function evident in the natural world. With a combination of studio work, research, and discussions with subject matter experts in the sciences, students learn to think abstractly, problem solve and consider how art and design is integral to the intellectual and material processes of looking at the natural world.

Students are charged with working with the bird and vertebrate/invertebrate collections to develop a series of studies that explore form and ways of describing those observations in drawing. Augmenting this work, students visit labs, go on field trips to the biology field station in Bath, art museums and conduct their own research to develop final projects.

The final projects involve asking students to look at function rather than form and use the models in the natural world to consider how these compare to human social and environmental challenges (M. Kolodziej, personal communication, September 21, 2022).

The final exhibitions, called “Cabinets of Curiosities: Natural History Mysteries,” opened to the public with great fanfare and highlighted the final projects of the [Un]Class students as well as the contributions of the art students to create modern day cabinets of curiosity (see Figures 11, 12, and 13). Furniture and walls were covered with mounted taxidermy birds under glass cloches (see Figure 14); other natural history objects like skulls, shells, and minerals; 3-D scans of a selection of mounted birds; art of all types of media; and ephemera and other historical objects mined from the UA archives and the internet that were reflective of the time period of the original bird donation in 1904 (see Figures 15 and 16).

Figure 11

A Section of “Cabinets of Curiosities: Natural History Mysteries” Exhibition. (Photograph: Lara Roketenetz).



Figure 12

A Section of “Cabinets of Curiosities: Natural History Mysteries” Exhibition. (Photograph: Lara Roketenetz).



Figure 13

A Section of “Cabinets of Curiosities: Natural History Mysteries” Exhibition. (Photograph: Lara Roketenetz).

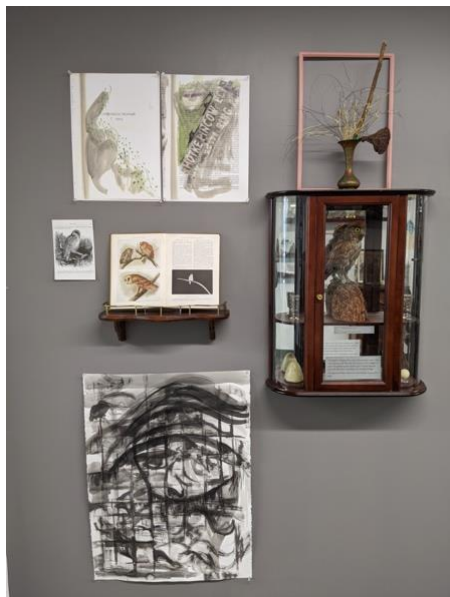


Figure 14

Owl Under a Cloche. (Photograph: Lara Roketenetz).



Figure 15
Ivory Billed Woodpecker on Exhibit
(Photograph: Lara Roketenetz).



Figure 16
Student Created Diorama Shown at
the Main Library. (Photograph: Lara Roketenetz).



Much ado was made by many who saw the exhibitions, who delighted in the mix of science and art (Ashworth, 2022a, 2022b). It truly was a community collaboration, including the great, great, grandnephews of Thomas and Sarah Rhodes (see Figure 17, on the next page). The authors of this paper hope that this is the beginning of a series of adventurous investigations into hidden closets, cabinets, and collections at the University of Akron that help connect people to place, and place to people. Through this unique collection, we were able to tell the story of local natural historians and philanthropists from over 100 years ago and connect them to our students, the University, and Akron today.

Partners and Collaborators

- Jodi Kearns, Director, Institute for Human Science and Culture & Manager, Digital Projects
- Rhonda Rinehart, MLIS Cummings Center, Special Collections Manager
- Victor Fleischer, University Archivist; Head, Archives & and Special Collections; Assoc. Prof. of Bibliography
- EXL Center, especially Dr. Christin Seher, Co-Director and Associate Professor of Instruction, Nutrition & Dietetics and Sociology
- Mark Bloom, Senior Archives Associate

- Francisca Uvalde, Curator and Instructor, Institute for Human Science and Culture
- Jay Musson, Akronite – Thomas Rhodes ancestor and expert
- Carrie Elvey, Naturalist at The Wilderness Center – Taxidermist
- Maria Burke, Artist – Taxidermist
- Skye Powers-Kaminski, Manager of Educator Engagement, Cleveland Museum of Natural History, Educator Resource Center
- Gil Nelson, Florida Museum of Natural History, Director of Integrated Digitized Biocollections
- Markus Vogl, Professor in Graphic Design at the Myers School of Art
- Matthew Kolodziej, Distinguished Professor in Painting and Drawing at the Myers School of Art
- Akron-Summit County Public Libraries
- Dean Mitchell McKinney, Faculty Innovation grant

Figure 17

The Musson Brothers, Great, Great, Grandnephews of Thomas and Sarah Rhodes, at the “Cabinets of Curiosities: Natural History Mysteries” Exhibition - 2022. (Photograph: Lara Roketenetz).



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