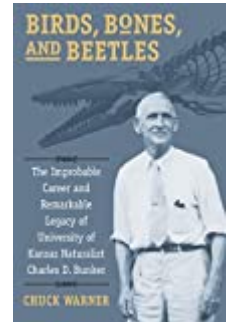


Chuck Warner. *Birds, Bones, and Beetles: The Improbable Career and Remarkable Legacy of University of Kansas Naturalist Charles D. Bunker.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2019. 232 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-7006-2773-8.



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Published on H-Environment (June, 2021)

Commissioned by Daniella McCahey (Texas Tech University)

Drawing from a collection of his subject's field notes and other manuscript materials, as well as a small number of primary and secondary sources, author Chuck Warner reconstructs the life and career of his maternal grandfather, naturalist Charles Dean Bunker, in this slim, entertaining, and well-written biography.

A previously unsung *invisible technician* of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century science, "Bunk" labored in relative obscurity for four decades (mostly) at the University of Kansas Natural History Museum. He worked originally for the gifted but somewhat diva-like professor and curator, Lewis Lindsay Dyche. Having had little formal education or training, Bunker started at the museum as an assistant taxidermist. With quiet persistence, he ultimately rose to become curator of modern vertebrates. He was one of a group of technicians who built and installed Dyche's famous Panorama of North American Plants and Animals, an iconic exhibit at the museum in Lawrence, Kansas. Bunker later turned his attention to fieldwork. Using Bunker's field notes,

Warner provides an authentic account of several low-budget, hardscrabble expeditions to collect birds and mammals for the university. Indeed, the best section of the book is its detailed narrative of Bunker's months-long horse and wagon trip with his friend and colleague Theodore Rocklund through western Kansas, in 1911. Bunk's greatest find that summer was neither bird nor mammal; it was the fossil of a spectacular, 45-foot mosasaur later identified as *Tylosaurus proriger*.

Bunk's most important achievement as a curator of recent birds and mammals was the invention and refinement of a much-improved method for cleaning flesh from vertebrate skeletons using dermestid beetles. The previous method of boiling or macerating skeletons and then scraping them clean by hand was slow, tedious, unpleasant for the technician, and often damaging to the skeletons. Bunk's insight was to take advantage of a natural process by letting flesh-eating beetles do the work for him. Through trial and error, he arrived at an ideal process that required relatively minimal human intervention. In time, he found that not

only could the beetles clean more than one skeleton at a time—thus increasing productivity—but they did no damage to the bones. According to Warner, “the museum collection of skeletal remains drastically increased [after] 1921 from 3-4 per year to an astounding 324, indicating the success of Bunk’s new process” (p. 165). Bunk’s method spread from Kansas to other natural history collections in Berkeley, CA, and Washington, DC, when his museum protégés, known affectionately as “Bunk’s boys,” moved on to graduate appointments or jobs at other institutions. This important method is used today in virtually every vertebrate zoology collection on the planet.

One shortcoming of *Birds, Bones, and Beetles* is the dearth of footnotes—there are certainly some passages that cry out for a helpful citation. But what the book lacks in scholarly accoutrements it makes up for with good narrative. Professional historians might decry the book for being too narrative and therefore analytically lightweight. Yet I give a lot of credit to someone who can tell a good story and hide the analysis where academics can’t find it.

Birds, Bones, and Beetles is a Kansas Notable Book. It won the Martin Kansas History Book Award, the Looks Like a Million Award, and was a finalist for the High Plains Book Award. It serves as a solid biography of an interesting man who made important but largely forgotten contributions to natural history. Students of Kansas history, history of the US West, and history of American science will find this book most useful.

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Citation: Paul Brinkman. Review of Warner, Chuck. *Birds, Bones, and Beetles: The Improbable Career and Remarkable Legacy of University of Kansas Naturalist Charles D. Bunker*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. June, 2021.

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