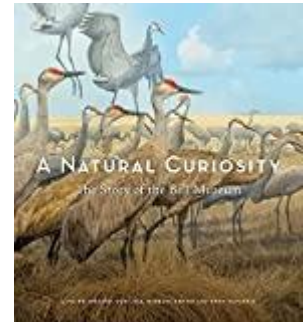


Lansing Shepard, Don Luce, Barbara Coffin, Gwen Schagrin. *A Natural Curiosity: The Story of the Bell Museum*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021. Illustrations. 400 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-5179-1036-5.



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The University of Minnesota's Bell Museum began as the repository for specimens collected by a state-mandated geological and natural history survey, which was enacted in 1872. Known first as the "general museum," it opened in 1875 in a modest, two-room space on the third floor of the university's Old Main building. In 1889, it moved to Pillsbury Hall, and then, in 1916, to the Zoology Building. During the Great Depression, James Ford Bell offered to match funds from the Public Works Administration to construct a dedicated museum building on the Minneapolis campus, which opened in 1940. In time, the growing collections, which surpassed 1.1 million specimens by 2020, coupled with the demands of the museum's evolving mission, outgrew the building. In 2018, therefore, the museum opened a new, state-of-the-art facility on the university's St. Paul campus. Packing and moving compelled museum staff to take stock of everything that had accumulated in the old building, including dusty ledgers, photographs, and correspondence. Some of these records probably had not been seen in decades.

In 2022, the museum celebrates its sesquicentennial. If the move was a chance to peruse old records, then the 150th anniversary was the perfect opportunity to use those records to look back on the museum's long history. Thus was born the excellent and attractive book *A Natural Curiosity: The Story of the Bell Museum*, by nature writer Lansing Shepard; curator of exhibits Don Luce; former head of media productions Barbara Coffin; and Gwen Schagrin, who has worked on exhibit design and production at the museum since 1992.

The book—nearly three hundred pages long—was beautifully produced by the University of Minnesota Press. It is jam-packed with illustrations and photographs, many in color. There is a handy six-page timeline of major events and persons in the museum's history. There are three appendices: the first lists and illustrates the Bell Museum's dioramas, the second is a list of selected exhibitions at the museum, and the third is a list of selected museum publications. There is a thin but useful index.

The book is divided into six chronological (but overlapping) chapters. Within the chapters are brief unnumbered stories usually arranged around a person or a theme (or both). For example, there are stories on the museum's third director, Thomas Sadler Roberts; on milling magnate and museum benefactor Bell; on the University of Minnesota's first female scientist, Josephine Tilden; on the talented diorama artist Jenness Richardson; and on the animal behavior studies of Frank McKinney, among others. Likewise, there are stories on the development of a museum program for public education on the mystery of the disappearing Canadian toads, on the DNA revolution at the museum, and many more besides. Maybe the best vignette in the entire book is a brief account of the whirlwind wedding and Arctic honeymoon of future museum director Walter J. Breckenridge and his adaptable bride, who went from managing a tearoom at the First National Bank in St. Paul to running trap lines and shooting grouse like a veteran field hand. This story is called: "The Bride Wore ... Boots?"

The last chapter of the book focuses on the new building, yet much herein will interest anyone who works in a small natural science museum—especially one affiliated with a college or university. It begins with an interesting essay on the museum's struggles to stay relevant and to attract sufficient funding in a university setting. It includes an account of the museum's new and mutually advantageous partnership with the Minnesota Planetarium. There are two interesting stories on planning and designing the new building. The highlight of this chapter, though, is "Moving Minnesota," the story of the great challenge of physically moving the museum. To its credit, the institution employed a small army of artists, conservators, preparators, and engineers to carefully take apart its old dioramas, move them across town, and then painstakingly reassemble them in the new building. The dioramas were designed and built to be permanent installations, so moving them safely required some ingenious problem

solving. Anyone facing a similar dilemma with their dioramas should read this story for inspiration. The chapter ends with a photo essay on the new Bell Museum's flagship exhibition, *Minnesota Journeys*.

This book is not a comprehensive history of the Bell Museum nor was it intended to be. The stories included in the book have clearly been selected (although what the criteria for selection might have been is impossible to know). There are gaps in coverage. And even where there are stories devoted to a particularly interesting subject, some of them are so brief that they left me with as many questions as answers. "The Heyday of Dioramas," for example, about the fruitful collaboration between taxidermist Breckenridge and peerless background painter Francis Lee Jaques, tells the story of the creation of some of the Bell Museum's largest dioramas in a stingy eight pages, which makes this one of the *longest* stories in the book. Moreover, the text fights a losing battle with a crowd of beautiful images, including a few very interesting photographs of the dioramas under construction. A wealth of visual aids makes good sense, as these are some of the finest dioramas in any museum anywhere. Yet one senses that the story behind the dioramas could have been more thoroughly told.

Like nearly all institutional histories produced in-house, the tone of this one is a touch triumphalist. There are many success stories herein, and rightly so. But where are the failures, the dead ends? There are a few tantalizing hints, as when Richardson, the secretive and prickly diorama artist, was forced out by Director Roberts in 1926. Yet even this story snatches victory from the jaws of defeat: "It didn't take ... long to find a replacement," the authors write. "The replacement, Walter Breckenridge, would ... go on to make his mark on the museum and on wildlife conservation in Minnesota" (p. 39). Surely a museum with 150 years of history has some dirtier laundry than this.

A Natural Curiosity serves as a well-written and abundantly illustrated introduction to the history of the Bell Museum, but much work remains to be done on the gritty details. This book is never-

theless a worthy example of home-cooked history, a genre that varies from abysmally bad (you know who you are!) to excellent.

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