The Washington Field Museum

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The Bug House Labaoratory, which later became known as the Washington Field Museum, was started in the summer of 1923 by four barefoot boys who were almost 14 years old—George Ross, John Ratcliff, James Braddy, and Dick Dunston. They formed a club so they could share the fun of collecting, studying, and mounting specimens of insects, reptiles, amphibians, and mammals. Their first laboratory was a burlap tent in one boy's back yard at Washington, Beaufort County, N.C.

When their collections outgrew the tent, the boys obtained permission to use an old, detached kitchen in a different back yard. It was here that the club received its name (Sterling 1985). A young lady who came to view the collections asked, "What is this, a bug house?" After she left, the boys decided this was a fine name and adopted it immediately. The Bug House Laboratory quickly outgrew the kitchen and, after a brief stay in a large, hard-to-heat building on Fifth Street, moved across the street into a two-room wooden structure adjacent to the campus of the John H. Small School. Within three years the collections had outgrown this place, and the young people began looking for larger quarters. In December 1929 the museum moved into rooms above the City Hall. Here it was open to the public at regular hours.

The Bug House members, some by then in their early 20s, took their work seriously. They drew up a constitution, elected officers, kept minutes, kept accessions records, obtained state and federal collecting permits, learned taxidermy, cared for the living animals they had on display, and accepted donations to pay for cabinets and other necessities. The way they assumed responsibility won the respect of adults in Washington and all across the country. Their knowledge of wildlife became an asset to the community. At least once, Bug House members were called to the local hospital to identify a poisonous snake that had bitten someone (Sterling 1985).

Membership in the Bug House had to be earned through service to the museum. No girls were accepted as active members until November 1933 (Sterling 1985). Between 30 and 40 people were at one time associate, junior, or full members. Young people in Washington, N.C., thirsty for knowledge and inspired by the group's determination, worked together to build and improve their museum. George Ross, one of the original four, was a human dynamo and kept things moving forward. B.B. Brandt, a high-school science teacher, was an inspiration and helped with scientific problems too difficult for the boys and girls to handle (Sterling and McLaurin 1976).

As the membership grew and the collections were viewed by visitors from distant cities, the Bug House name no longer seemed appropriate. The group decided the place where the collections were housed should be known as the Washington Field Museum, which was sponsored by the Bug House Laboratory. The Washington Field Museum became the largest amateur museum in the United States and was accepted as a member of the American Association of Museums in 1931.

Publicity in the state and national press attracted great attention to the museum founded and operated by young people. Several museums and many private citizens donated valuable items, artifacts of human history as well as fossils and zoological speci-

mens, to the Washington Field Museum. The Bug House members founded a newsletter called "The Reporter." It was published quarterly, beginning in October 1931, to give the public information on the activities of the museum, the donations received, and news in general. Blake Lewis, H.E. Yert, and Elizabeth Yert were its editors (Sterling 1985).

When WPA help became available, the city suggested construction of a museum building on city property situated on Jack's Creek. Money had to be raised. Members sold tags on Tag Day. A model of the proposed building was built with names of people who donated to this cause printed on the logs and roof. Special field trips were held to collect frogs to sell to Duke University for use in laboratory work. Frog legs were shipped to the House Restaurant in Washington, D.C., whenever enough were collected. A musical called "The Dixie Blackbirds" was sponsored, which proved profitable. Enough money was finally raised, and the log structure was built with WPA assistance (Sterling and McLaurin 1976).

It was a gigantic task to set up the new exhibits and organize the museum in an interesting and attractive manner. Parents helped, and there was no generation gap here; everyone worked to achieve the desired effect (Sterling and McLaurin 1976). Fish ponds were constructed, brick walks laid in the park, cages built for animals, and trees planted. The grand opening was on 12 November 1934. City dignitaries were invited, a banquet was held in the hall of the new building, and one of the speakers for the occasion was H.H. Brimley, director of the State Museum at Raleigh and a contributing or member for several years (Sterling 1985).

Among the other distinguished scientists who took an interest in the Washington Field Museum were Alexander Wetmore and W.M. Perrygo of the National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C.; Robert Cushman Murphy, curator of oceanic birds at the American Museum of Natural History and president of the American Association of Audubon Societies; William Vogt, editor of *Bird-Lore;* R.E. Coker, professor of zoology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; and C.S. Brimley, state entomologist. Roxie Collie Simpson, then of the North Carolina State Museum, spent two days at the Washington Field Museum helping the Bug House members lay the paper mache body for a model of an 8-foot Southern Ground Shark (*Carcharhinus commersonii*).

Thousands of people came to tour the museum and enjoy the surrounding park. Members of visiting scout troops sometimes stayed in the homes of Bug House boys and girls (William Craven, pers. comm.). Cages held various native animals, including the famous pair of Great Horned Owls. The museum had, at one time, North Carolina's largest collection of living reptiles, numbering 412 specimens. This remarkable assemblage was largely the work of Churchill Bragaw.

The Bug House boys and girls enjoyed showing their collections at the county fair and participating in parades and festivals. When Washington celebrated the Tulip Festival, the young people bordered the creek with huge candles in glass jars set on posts. These were lighted at night, making the park a fairyland to be enjoyed by all. A windmill was erected on rocks in the center of the creek, carrying out the Dutch theme. This was appropriate because the original name of Jack's Creek was Windmill Creek (Sterling and McLaurin 1976).

Reports from the Washington Field Museum quickly found their way into the pages of *The Chat.* "Some Nests and Eggs of the Loggerhead Shrike" (Anon. 1937) from the Spring 1935 issue of "The Reporter" was reprinted in the third issue of the newly founded bulletin. Three Bug House participants were among the charter members of the North Carolina Bird

Club—Joseph D. Biggs Jr., Churchill Bragaw, and Mary Shelburne. These three complied an annotated list of the birds of Washington, N.C. (Biggs et al. 1939). They reported faithfully on the bird life of Beaufort County and other places they visited (Biggs 1937, 1938b, 1938c, 1938d, 1939; Bragaw 1938; Shelburne et al. 1938). Biggs (1938a, 1938e, 1940) also took Christmas Bird Counts alone and on foot. Mary Shelburne (1938a) reported an instance of cannibalism in the Red-headed Woodpecker and what appears to have been the first recorded breeding of Great Horned Owls in captivity (Shelburne 1938b). The hatching of the owlet was publicized nationwide by the Associated Press (Sterling 1985). Sally Bogart (1940) made the last report on the Bug House that appeared in *The Chat.*

Perhaps the most significant contribution of the Bug House members was the discovery of a species new to science. The Brimley's Chorus Frog (*Pseudacris brimleyi*) was named in honor of C.S. Brimley (Sterling 1985). Its discovery was a result of the numerous frogging expeditions made under the guidance of Dr. Brandt. Altogether, the young people identified 22 species of frogs in Beaufort County.

When World War II began, the men of the organization were called to arms and the Washington Field Museum had to close its doors. During the war the city moved the entire contents of the museum into storage and used the cabin as a USO center. After the war, the Bug House Laboratory gave the collections to the City of Washington to be used to the best advantage of the public (Sterling and McLaurin 1976). The city disposed of all the materials that had been so lovingly and painstakingly collected and classified. The log, building, once a source of community pride, was allowed to fall into disrepair. In 1981 the cabin was bulldozed to prepare the site for tennis courts (Sterling 1985).

Although the Washington Field Museum is gone and the sponsors are now in their 60s or 70s, the Bug House Laboratory never officially disbanded (Rogers 1986). The fellowship of youthful experience still binds these friends together.

In his *News and Observer* column of 23 January 1986, Dennis Rogers interviewed Elizabeth Yert Sterling, who complied the *History of the Bug House Laboratory.* Edited by Cynthia Obrist, this book is a record of what small-town kids did on their own during the two decades prior to World War II. As Mrs. Sterling told Rogers, " It was a very special time and place."

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About the Authors. The Bug House fostered at least one romance. Elizabeth Yert, editor of "The Reporter," married Hugh Martin Sterling, a vice-president of the group. Both Elizabeth and Hugh have been active members of Carolina Bird Club for many years. Mary Shelburne, a director of the Washington Field Museum and a charter member of the North Carolina Bird Club, married James L. McLaurin, who shares her interest in the birds.

Cooperation

U.S. News and World Report says that an Ivory-billed Woodpecker has been seen 500 miles east of Havana, Cuba, and confirmed by Lester Short, author of *Woodpeckers of the World.* Cuba suspended logging and seems anxious to cooperate in saving the bird.

New Refuges

Mary and Maud Adams have given 628 acres of forest and lakes near Sioux City, Iowa, to the State for a nature preserve. The sisters will live on the property, which abounds in cormorants, pelicans and other birds, for their life-time. The world's first preserve for shore birds has been established in Delaware and New Jersey on both sides of Delaware Bay. It is said that 1 million birds of 20 species stop in the area every spring.

Big Money

The New York Times says that birding now attracts 21 million Americans and is second only to gardening as a hobby. "There are incredible bucks in bird feeders," said one retailer. Enthusiasm runs high. *Bird Watcher's Digest* started 8 years ago with 2,000 subscribers and now has 55,000. At Jamaica Bay Refuge, scores of watchers are on hand every day before 0700. Now *Birder's World* is offering its charter issue. Roger Peterson's field guide has sold 3 million copies, and 140,000 more are sold each year. Seven hundred people have taken Cornell University's course in bird biology at $140.