Windows on the World: Public Exhibits at the Museum of Natural Science at Louisiana State University

# A Semicentennial Tribute, 1936-1986

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DEDICATION

To the memory of George Hines Lowery, Jr. {1913-1978) scholar, visionary, founder and

Director of Louisiana State University Museum of Natural Science

and to

P. Ambrose Daigre, the master craftsman whose artistry immeasurably advanced the cause of museum ship at LSU.

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The following are excerpts from Windows on the World in order to detail some of the Museum’s history and exhibit construction of the Louisiana exhibits:

Hall of Birds (pages 77-79)

George Lowery knew exactly what he wanted Daigre to do. Daigre's preference was to start out by recreating an improved edition of the waterfowl exhibit he worked on in Shreveport in 1947. Lowery insisted that a gallery of Louisiana birds be given foremost priority. A compromise was effected in that Daigre would work on the gallery piecemeal over time and do the preliminaries on the waterfowl diorama simultaneously. Lowery's intention was to display as many of Louisiana's 378 species of birds as could be incorporated into a corridor of showcases. A walk down that aisle would afford viewers an opportunity to appreciate their State's ornithological treasures, all properly mounted and identified. Lowery believed that no aspect of natural history is more fascinating to a greater number of people than the study of birds. A gallery could serve as a medium by which that natural curiosity might be accelerated. Daigre and his assistants did the preparation and mounting of the specimens, constructed the display cabinets, painted a sky scene on the ceiling, and suspended severa1 in-flight specimens from the overhead.

There is no finite completion date for this beautiful exhibit. In a sense, as Robert Newman pointed out, the gallery was designed to remain unfinished, since Lowery expected new species of birds to be discovered (and officially approved) indefinitely. As of this decade, for example, the number of species has risen to 432, although they are not all represented in the showcases. In 1985-86 the blue identification cards were installed by Dr. John O'Neill . On September 9, 1986, in deference to the Museum's fiftieth anniversary and to the accomplishments of its founder and first director, the gallery was christened "The George H. Lowery, Jr. Hall of Louisiana Birds" during the second annual meeting of the Patrons Association.

WaterFowl in a Louisiana Marsh in Early Spring (1955) (pages 80-83)

In February, 1955, George Lowery told LSU's comptroller, Daniel C. Borth, that "the construction of museum exhibits is a slow and tedious business -- that is, if we are to achieve the goal of perfection that we have set for ourselves." When the Museum opened its doors to the public on Sunday, March 27, 1955, there was overwhelming agreement that the goal had been reached. The era of the diorama had dawned in spectacular fashion. Lowery hoped to delay the official premiere until more dioramas were completed but decided that it was politically unwise to wait any longer. Issues such as establishing a docent program, improving the appearance of the main exhibit hall, and planning for crowd control had to be subordinated to the need to show LSU, and the public, that something tangible had been achieved since 1950. If the Museum (as promised by Lowery) was to play an important role in the teaching of the biological sciences to Louisiana's school children then a beginning had to be made before people lost faith in the entire project .

Lowery was not disappointed in the initial returns. Between March 27 and May 9, over 4,000 citizens visited the Museum. At least thirty percent were pupils in local elementary schools. Popular reaction was very positive. Some observers thought that LSU’s Museum had "outdone every other museum in the country ..." insofar as dioramic presentations were concerned. Ambrose Daigre, who was not present for the opening, was the object of many compliments, and deservedly so. Lowery spoke for everyone when he wrote to a close friend, I do think that Ambrose Daigre did a magnificent job, and demonstrated beyond all question his ability to build a series of habitat groups of really fine quality.

Visitors and newspaper reporters were stunned by the size of the waterfowl exhibit. It was, thirty-nine feet by ten feet, which, Daigre said, made it "the continent’s largest habitat group devoted exclusively to birds. Behind the enormous glass front were sixty-two geese and ducks in various poses -- standing, flying, and landing. Observers were intrigued by the illusion that a number of the birds seemed to be "suspended in air without means of support, a piece of professional legerdemain devised by Daigre with the help of wire and tape. Many people wondered how the vegetation survived so well indoors. The answer, of course, was: most of it was not real. Some of the grass was dried and painted, but nearly all the vegetation was made from wax and cellulose acetate. The water in the diorama was plastic, conveniently rippled by hand at points where the waterfowl were touching it. The exhibit was meant to duplicate “an actual scene in Cameron Parish”, one of the “largest wintering areas for waterfowl in North America.”

The vast dome-shaped backdrop in the diorama was designed and engineered by Professors Ollie “O.J.” Baker (architectural engineering) and Wayne P. Wallace (civil engineering) of the LSU faculty. Daigre made Kodachrome slides from photographs taken in Cameron Parish, projected them onto the dome structure, and painted over the projections in oils (a practice he gave up thereafter in favor of spray painting). This was so deftly done that the diorama’s foreground blended with the “miles of lowlands” in perfect perspective. Astonishing also was the innovative use of recorded sounds. By pressing a button visitors were treated to a narration and the sounds of birds in their natural habitat. A reporter from the New Orleans Times-Picayune referred to this phenomenon in a short piece entitles “The Quack is Real” as follows: “The (bird) calls, recorded in the field… make you feel the mounted birds are in flight.” The consensus was that the addition of the recorded messages brought a degree of realism to the diorama that was lacking in most national exhibits.

(Pages 100-101)

 (Lowery) and Daigre were ably assisted by a cluster of female volunteers, some of whom prepared “artificial accessories” under Daigre’s supervision for upwards of four years. They made molds for (and painted) “leaves” and “flowers” for Daigre to affix to diorama foregrounds, gathered vegetation for the exhibits while on field trips, and performed other tasks for the Museum between 1954 and 1960 simply because they enjoyed making a contribution – and because Lowery was a very persuasive recruiter of free labor. It is not an exaggeration to say that Lowery’s schedule for completion of the exhibits would have fallen farther behind than it did were it not for the dependability of volunteers such as Barbara Bodman, Imo Brown, Majorie Duchen, Winifred Winfree, and Lowery’s daughter, Jeanette, the unsung herioines of the “dream plan’s” formative years.

Mike the Tiger (pages 93-95)

 When Mike died of old age and an acute kidney infection on Black Friday, June 29, 1956, the LSU campus went into mourning. By the mid-1950’s he had become living icon. Born on October 10, 1935, in the Little Rock (Arkansas)Zoo, Mike (originally, “Sheik”) was purchased with funds ($750) collected mainly by students. His arrival at LSU in November, 1936, was greeted with much “hoopla.” Over the next nineteen years his presence at football games was invested with metaphysical properties bordering on the evangelical. Mike was many things; a lucky charm, a sinewy manifestation of the gridiron prowess of his human namesake and, in time, so much a part of the campus ethos that he was bestowed with immortality by thousands of alumni. Suddenly, Mike was gone. An enormous vacuum was created overnight. His demise was heartbreaking enough, but – worse yet—what was LSU going to do without a mascot during the approaching football season? One does not sprint to the nearest tiger farm and rent a cub in haste. What to do? Call Lowery and ask for help? Perhaps a stuffed symbol was better than none at all.

 On Sunday, July 1, 1956 – twenty years to the day of his appointment to the LSU faculty – Lowery told a Daily Reveille reporter that the Museum would deem it a privilege to mount the late Mike’s pelt. He said that Daigre, “undoubtedly one of the finest taxidermists in the United States,” was up to the task. If a manikin could be found Mike’s reconstituted remains would be displayed in Foster Hall “temporarily” until the proposed “new field house” was ready for occupancy. Daigre was deeply involved in diorama production but he took five days away from his primary job to skin Mike. Lowery, anxious to dispense with this diversion as promptly as possible, began a feverish quest for a manikin. He wrote urgent letters to suppliers in Illinois, Nebraska, Colorado, Pennsylvania, and New York. No one had a ready-made manikin tailored for an 800-pound Bengal tiger. Making one would cost $2,500 and take five months, they told Lowery. At LSU money was scarce – and the first home football game was just twelve weeks off.

 Once again Lowery turned to Daigre for emergency assistance. Daigre dropped what he was doing and fashioned a manikin around which Mike’s skin could be fitted. The result was remarkable, as usual.

 When all was said and done, how did Mike the Tiger affair turn out? As visitors to Foster Hall can see for themselves, Mike’s “temporary exhibit” became permanent.

A Heronry in South Louisiana (1957) Pages 102-105)

 Shortly after Daigre’s waterfowl exhibit opened in March, 1955, Lowery established contact with the family of the late Edward A. McIlhenny, the “benevolent baron” of Avery Island. As we noted earlier Lowery and McIlhenny were close personal friends in the 1930’s and 1940’s. When they first met McIlhenny was nearly sixty and well known as one of Louisiana’s “highly competent naturalists.”

 In his memorial to McIlhenny in the Auk (1951), Lowery spoke of him with much affection, reminding us that “M’sieu Ned” was very influential in the development of wildlife management practices, and that he “contributed materially to Gulf Coast ornithology” in many ways – not the least of which was his founding of a rookery known as “Bird City” in 1895.

 Lowery told Simmons (McIlhenny’s daughters family) he expected the heronry diorama would be ready in two years—and it was. Before Mike the Tiger played havoc with Daigre’s schedule he went to Avery Island in the spring of 1956 to collect specimens and take the necessary photgraphs. He began work on the habitat group early in 1957 and completed it in June. It included “32 birds, an alligator, a bull frog, and a water moccasin, all appearing lifelike among water hyacinths and trees.” Daigre’s latest effort was a stunning success. Lowery was jubilant. “Bird City” still exists – a living monument to the cause of conservation and to its founder.” He told an interviewer. In the 1980’s more than 20,000 birds “use this area as a nesting site” each year, an ongoing phenomenon that would please both Lowery and McIlhenny, were they with us still.

Bird Life on a Coastal Island (1958) Pages 106-107

 During the period July, 1957-March, 1959, the “Coastal Island” grouping was the only new exhibit made available for public viewing. Financed in part by a grant from the Louisiana Ornithological Society, it depicted “a scene on a coastal island in the midst of a seabird nesting colony…”

 In the diorama it is mid-June, sometime during World War II. If one studied a current, full-sized map of Louisiana, the “barrier islands” would be seen to form a crescent extending from Isle au Pitre on the eastern tip to the Shell Keys on the west. As the eye moves along the crescent the Chandeleur and Breton islands appear to be fifty miles east of the Plaquemines Parish mainland. The diorama panel tells us that, “on these lonely, uninhabited islands are some of the largest sea bird colonies to be found in the United States or its territorial waters.” Daigre’s competence is clearly demonstrated in this exhibit, particularly in the blending of in-flight specimens with their smaller counterparts on the backdrop, and in the sumptuous gatherings of clouds on the distant horizon.

The Louisiana Prairie Long Ago (1959) Pages 111-115)

 The dubious distinction of being the diorama with the longest gestation period belongs to this exceptional exhibit. Early in June, 1954, Lowery visualized a display that would “depict a natural scene of the primitive era of southwestern Louisiana when Attwater Prairie Chickens and Whooping Cranes still nested there and when even herds of buffalo wandered into the area.” Procuring a buffalo did not interest him particularly but the Whooping Crane (Grus Americana) definitely did. Lowery announced in June that Dame Fortune had smiled on the Museum. He was able to obtain a mounted crane from the U.S. National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C. The accession of the crane filled out the Museum’s collection of Louisiana, which stood at 378 specimens at that time.

 In 1954 cranes were of special interest to ornithologists because it was estimated that there were only twenty-five of the “almost extinct and rapidly disappearing” birds in existence. Very few people had ever seen one of these lanky birds, alive or deceased. In 1940, observers counted thirteen cranes in the marshes and prairies of southwestern Louisiana, but storms and severe floodings in the area reduced that number to seven and the rest were slain by hunters – except for one female, “Josephine.” Thereafter, only one crane was sighted in Louisiana. Captured in March, 1950, it was taken to the Aransas Refuge in Texas. It did not survive captivity, which left “Josephine” to be mated with two males named “Pete” and “Crip.” In late May, 1956, “Jo” and “Crip” became parents of a rust-colored chick. The “little whooper” caused great but short-lived rejoicing among naturalists. To everyone’s sorrow the baby crane died in the Audubon Park Zoo in New Orleans of a lung infection on July 13, 1956. Stuffed and mounted, it was “loaned” to LSU by the Audubon Park Commission on December 13. “We have the only bird in the world in natal down,” Lowery reported with pride. Earlier that fall a local newspaper told its readers that the crane’s “showcase… will be completed within the next few weeks.” A prophecy that fell short of its mark by two-and-one-half years.

 The opening of the “Prairie” habitat group in March, 1959, was accompanied by much fanfare on campus and in the media. “Whoopers Now on Display at LSU,” one newspaper announced. Daigre was cited for his painstaking preparatory efforts and the careful way “the ecology was recreated….” Lowery was quoted as saying that the display was “the most unique of our six completed exhibits” which would “attract many more visitors to the LSU Museum.” It was conceded by all parties that for those people who would never see a Whooping Crane – and that meant almost everyone – “the next best thing” could be found in Foster Hall.

In Virgin Bottomland Forest (1960 (Pages 116-119)

 The Whooping Crane panorama was the first in a sequence of three displays Lowery and Daigre wished to do “on Louisiana wildlife habitats which no longer exist in their original form.” The “bottomland forest” was the second. It was completed in early October, 1960. The stars of the diorama were (a) a pair of White-tailed deer (Ododoileus virginianus), (b) two large Ivory-billed Woodpeckers, and (c) a truncated Nuttall oak tree. They were placed in a facsimile of a wooded swamp in Madison and Tensas parishes in northeast Louisiana. Until the early 1940’s the bottomland covered an area of approximately 81,000 acres. By 1960 that tract had been reduced to 150 acres.

 Lowery and Daigre selected the buck and the doe personally. During a visit to J.W. McLemore’s farm in Tensas Parish they scanned the local deer population with binoculars and targeted the pair they wanted. Photographs of the general environment and of “individual plants, trees, and ….branches” were taken for use as references. Daigre prepared the deer and supervised the reproduction of the flora. After the diorama was done and opened to public scrutiny, onlookers were struck by the realistic stances of the deer, the result of a finely-honed practice known to Daigre as “posing.” On that topic he once told a reporter that, “For posing, one must have a good knowledge of the animal in its environs. Good posing imparts the lifelike quality to the specimens which is needed to make it an integral part of the whole exhibit.” Popular reaction was proof that Daigre possessed that “good knowledge” and (as he one said) “a certain amount of artistic ability” to go with it.

 Daigre did not prepare the woodpeckers. They were collected in Franklin, Louisiana in 1899 and inherited by the Museum. Measuring about twenty-one inches long, the resplendent birds made their “last stand” in the State’s wooded swamps, Lowery explained to visitors. Addicted to a steady diet of “betsy-bugs”, the woodpeckers were in a gourmet’s paradise in a virgin forest, where the proliferation of dying and defunct trees provided “an ideal habitat” for the ravenous bugs. When the forests were decimated the woodpeckers were deprived of their main meal and became all but extinct. For example, between 1943 and 1960, Lowery said, there were no reports of these woodpeckers within Louisiana – nor were there enough specimens in national collections for ornithologists to study. Lamenting this disintegration in his Louisiana Birds, Lowery exclaimed: “I wonder what natural beauties we shall have, aside from the mountains and the sky, a hundred years from now!” It is very likely that the birds in this diorama will be the only specimens Louisianans will see in their entire lifetimes.

 When Daigre reminisced about the construction of the “bottomland forest” exhibit, he recalled that it was the amputated oak tree that “received the most attention” from sidewalk superintendents. The hefty red oak was taken from the property of Mr. Erle M. Barham of Oak Ridge, Louisiana – but not without a mighty struggle. Three feet in diameter at the chest-high level the old Quercus nuttallii stoutly resisted being removed from its arbor. Modern technology prevailed, however. The tree was cut off at a height of eleven feet, suspended with a block and tackle so its roots could be wrenched from the soil, loaded on a trailer, and delivered – with police escort – to Foster Hall. There it was hollowed out, sawed in half, and then made whole again inside the display cabinet. At no point did it weight less than a ton. The surrounding plants were artificially produced by Daigre and his team of assistants.

The Border of a Canebrake (1961) (Pages 126-128)

 To furnish this display, Daigre and several assistants traveled to an area near Tallulah, Louisiana. They collected and photographed samples of leaves of all sizes. As many as 20,000 leaves might have to be “made” for a single exhibit. How complex and laborious a task this could be was described by an interviewer who quizzed Daigre during the construction phase:

Keep in mind that each leaf is covered with beeswax to get an impression which is molded in plaster, cast in plastic, cut out and painted – all by hand—before being assembled on the homemade branch. To make the leaves more realistic, bug holes are made by burning holes in the plastic leaves with a hot wire. For blight spots, a toothbrush is used to splatter them with black paint. A plastic leaf held over a flame becomes a dead or wilted leaf.

 Following the taxidermic and vegetative preparation came the development of a suitable “background,” How did the Museum’s curator of exhibits accomplish that crucial task? Once again, the interviewer:

Mr. Daigre paints the distant background first by projecting slides taken at the scene. The painting is done in layers, ranging from the most distant to the point where the two dimensional and the three dimensional planes meet. These planes are fused by techniques such as real branches growing out of painted trees. The ‘sky’, which is painted with an air brush, is curved for additional realism.

 We get added insight into Daigre’s skills when the time to build the base of the diorama arrives. To quote the interviewer again:

The “ground” is made to follow the natural terrain. A special mixture of paper machete and water is troweled on screen mesh over a wooden foundation. The top layer is actually top soil collected from the scene. Small details are copied from the photographs and diligently reproduced.

 Daigre then placed the wildlife and the vegetation in the exhibit, taking care to maintain the natural perspective. Depending on what time of day he wanted it to be within the diorama, Daigre selected the appropriate lighting patterns. Once the interior was completed he then sealed his latest achievement behind a sheet of plate glass. When he stepped back a few paces to assay the “canebrake” diorama Daigre hoped (among other things) that it would enjoy a life expectancy of 100 years. He believed that as natural scenes such as the “canebrake” were swept away by urban-industrial growth his habitat groups might be “all that future generations have to tell of the wildlife and plant life that once lived in the vicinity.” Whether or not the dioramas will survive to 2060 A.D. no one can possibly say. But in the twenty-five years since Daigre glassed in his “canebrake” panorama the forces of “civilization” have cut such a wide swath through our natural environment that his concerns appear to have been vindicated.