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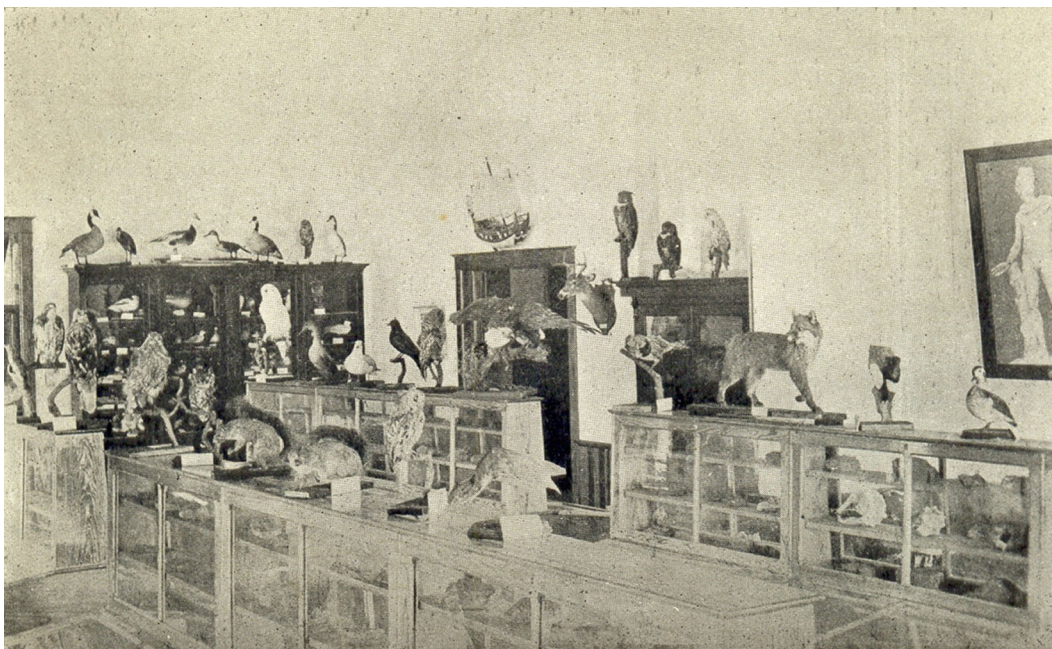
The Hope College Museum: A Cabinet of Curiosity

by Michael Douma

Van Raalte Hall, an imposing red brick building, once stood guard on Dimment Chapel's eastern flank. And in a hidden corner of this building, Hope College housed a *Wunderkammer*, that is a wonder cabinet, or cabinet of curiosity. The antecedent of modern museums, *Wunderkammern* began in sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe when the previously closed-in continent attempted to showcase the flood of items coming in from around the rapidly expanding known world. In particular, it was the wonders of the North American continent that filled the shelves of these old world educational displays. In a similar manner, the Hope College museum sought to educate through amazement with interesting items gathered from far away lands.

The story begins as early as 1896 when Hope College President G. J. Kollen noted that the college could use a place for the "safe-keeping of curiosities." A new college building was proposed in 1897, but it wasn't until 1903 that the building, Van Raalte Hall, was finally completed. Kollen

reported in 1904, "as we now have magnificent rooms for museum purposes, we should before long begin to collect specimens." A room on the third floor of the new building was indeed set aside for a museum. Conscious of the wave of historical sentiment that followed the city's 50-year anniversary in 1897, Kollen hoped for donations of items from the city's pioneer days.



The collection began with a few items already in the college's possession, such as the stuffed remains of the last eagle to roost at Point Superior (Waukazoo Woods). Soon added was the expected array of pioneer farm

implements and furnishings, as well as more exotic objects brought back from Reformed Church missionaries. In fact, the missionaries were prolific in their donations, and they even formed a society for the purpose of collecting and returning specimens. By 1915, the museum, in true *Wunderkammer* fashion, boasted weapons, shields, shells, and animal skulls, as well as botanical specimens from around the world. It also housed replicas of some of the world's

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From the Director



In this issue you will learn about the long-lost Hope College Museum from former Joint Archives of Holland archival assistant Michael Douma. Before Michael returned to his graduate studies at Florida State University, he wanted to share what he's learned about Holland's other museum. It was quite a spectacle at one time and drew many visitors while housed at Van Raalte Hall, Voorhees Hall,

and lastly, the attic of Lubbers Hall (formerly known as the Science Building). Some of its contents are in storage at the Van Wylen Library awaiting a new display venue.

The Association for the Advancement of Dutch American Studies (AADAS) will be meeting at Hope College in June 2007 for its biennial meeting. The Joint Archives of Holland and the A. C. Van Raalte Institute will be serving as your hosts for two open houses, as well as coordinating many of the venues, food, and programs. More information and a call for papers will follow in the *Quarterly*, as well as on our website: www.jointarchives.org.

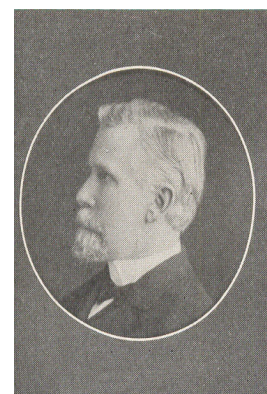
Geoffrey Reynolds

Hope College Museum (continued from page 1)

greatest statues and one of the world's largest collections of moss, over five thousand specimens. One local man also donated his coin collection, including a rare coin dating to the 3rd century B.C. Despite this wealth of giving, the college was unable to afford cases for most of its exhibits. All the while, the collection began to outgrow its third floor quarters.

By 1905, Rev. Dr. Paul F. Schuelke had become the unofficial and unpaid curator of the museum. It seemed fitting, considering the European origin of the *Wunderkammer*, that this German-born professor of modern languages became the caretaker. He was also well fit for the position. Schuelke was considered, even by the Smithsonian Museum, as an authority on ferns and mosses. Principally interested in the sciences, he added to the botanical and taxonomic collections. Under Schuelke's oversight, the museum held regular hours, being open on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday afternoon from one to three o'clock. In 1916, Schuelke first asked for a stipend for his work in preparing the exhibits. He also purchased padlocks to lock the few exhibit cases. The museum had become well-known to a regional educated elite,

and while some students remained unaware of its existence, others took advantage by stopping by to learn about all the amazing things never before seen on the childhood farm or even in their adopted, modernizing city. Schuelke, the wise old educator, lurked around the museum a few days a week until his departure from the college in 1917. After he left, the museum would never hold such an honored place again.



Dr. Paul F. Schuelke

The museum's next caretaker was Frank Norton Patterson, Hope College professor of biology from 1909 to 1926. Educated at Harvard and the University of New Brunswick in Canada, Dr. Patterson worked shortly for the Carnegie Institute before his arrival at Hope. As a professor dedicated to his students, he soon became well-known and well-liked. And like his predecessor at the college museum, the friendly "Pat" could discuss equally well the realms of literature and general knowledge, as well as the mysteries of science. Yet, because he was busy raising two children by his second wife, whom he married in 1916, Patterson did not take over responsibilities at the museum directly after Schuelke's departure. Only later, in 1922, Patterson wrote President Dimment, "I should like your permission to hold a key to Van Raalte Hall during the summer as I should like to work there a good deal, both with laboratory and museum. I usually sleep in the mornings and it is not always convenient for the janitors to let me in during the afternoon. The janitor says he can let me have a key if you are willing." For the 1926-27 school year, his last on the faculty, Patterson was paid \$100 for the supervision and care of the museum, which had new acquisitions including a suit of nineteenth century Chinese armor. Although the museum was open infrequently and by appointment only, Patterson invited the college's biology classes to visit each semester. Students were requested to schedule an appointment in the spring, since the quarters, now on the fourth floor attic of Van Raalte Hall, were not heated in the winter.

Struck with a lung disease, Patterson left his post in 1928 and retired to Phoenix, Arizona, where he died of tuberculosis in 1931 at fifty-four years of age. After his departure from the college, the museum room was used as a theatre, but because the room and its contents were considered a fire hazard, its use was discontinued and the room locked up. Behind the attic door, the collection was largely forgotten for over a quarter of a century. After World War Two, Van Raalte Hall showed the signs of structural problems and underwent significant reconstruction. An added bathroom on



Van Raalte Hall [1903-1980]

the third floor necessitated the replacement of the large, open stairway leading to the museum with a steep, narrow emergency stairway, which further isolated the hidden treasures.

In the 1960s, the museum, which had never truly been lost, was “rediscovered.” Some of the displays were found broken and the collections unprotected and covered in dust. It was in a state of utter disarray and neglect. In 1963, a project to renovate the fourth floor museum was undertaken in the hopes of maintaining these “valuable but unusable” collections. Some cataloging of the collections was accomplished, and faculty members, including the Sociology Professor Earl Hall, were put in charge of caring for the museum. Since the work was on a volunteer basis, there was little incentive to do more than dust the artifacts and compile an inventory list.

The museum was still crumbling when respect for the collection had reached a new low in 1968. In that year, a stuffed orangutan was stolen from the museum and hung from a beam in Dimnent Chapel. In one of the primate’s hands was a pair of women’s underwear. To many it was a surprise that this orangutan had been found somewhere on campus; most students were unaware of the “secret museum” up in Van Raalte Hall.

Some students and professors had indeed heard about the museum, and had been “borrowing” or pilfering from the ever-dwindling collection. In the *Anchor* of 20 Feb. 1970, in an article entitled “Secret museum houses past,” Hope student Dave Thomas related the suspenseful story of climbing the dark stairs and sneaking into a room where he found himself “surrounded by animals frozen in their tracks, peering into the darkness.” Stepping gingerly around the poorly lit chamber Thomas caused the wooden floorboards to creak, which alerted a janitor. The janitor, Thomas writes, “sounded a

little scared and looked relieved when I appeared at the top of the stairs.” After this discovered intrusion, the door to the museum remained locked, at least for a time.

Professors could obtain a key to the room. By 1974, the biology and geology departments had done their own scavenging and retrieved some valuable items that were brought to the Peale Science Center for safekeeping. What remained included the head of an elk, a forty-foot python, and a twelve-foot dugout canoe. Pigeons had also found their way in through the roof and left plenty of droppings.

The disregard for items donated to the college helped spur the attempts of Dr. Elton Bruins and others to begin a college archives. The third floor of Van Raalte Hall was evacuated after the 1974 school year and was considered as a location for a college museum. The committee in charge noted that the museum would be “an asset for the college in recruiting new students and also in enhancing alumnus’ donations. It will also bring artifacts, some of which are already in a semi-organized circulation, back into a centralized area under a serviceable inventory.”

However, in 1975, the museum found itself under a different roof for the first time as the collections were taken by members of the Alpha Phi Omega service fraternity to the basement of Voorhees Hall where five rooms were used for storage. John Smith, a Hope student who had argued for preservation and re-opening of the museum, was placed in charge of the operation. While Voorhees was a location not particularly immune to theft – nor was it climate controlled – the building had one important advantage over Van Raalte Hall: it was not about to come down. Structural problems may have spelled the end of Van Raalte Hall had not a fire taken it down first. Much was lost in the blaze, but the old museum collections had been remarkably and quite unintentionally saved.

In the last few decades, the collections have found more suitable homes. The Hope College science department managed to save and protect a sizable portion, while other objects went to the Holland Museum or the Joint Archives of Holland, which in 1988 was founded as a repository for college, seminary, and city collections.

Hope College was chartered all the way back in 1866, but it is not an old college, not at least in comparison to the established colleges and universities on America’s east coast, where legends of influential secret societies, underground tunnels, forgotten treasures, and the like, are as regular as day and night. But for a midwestern college, Hope’s museum has few contenders so interesting.



The Hope College Museum