

Chicago Natural History Museum

FOUNDED BY MARSHALL FIELD, 1893

Roosevelt Road and Lake Shore Drive, Chicago 5

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Members are requested to inform the Museum promptly of changes of address.

A CHAPTER FROM HISTORY OF MUSEUM'S EARLY DAYS

THE EXHIBITION of animals, especially of mammals and birds, in family groups or natural aggregations in museums of natural history was a revolutionary innovation in its day. The techniques involved had a multitude of origins. It was the late Carl E. Akeley who initiated the program of such habitat groups in this Museum when he joined our staff in 1894.

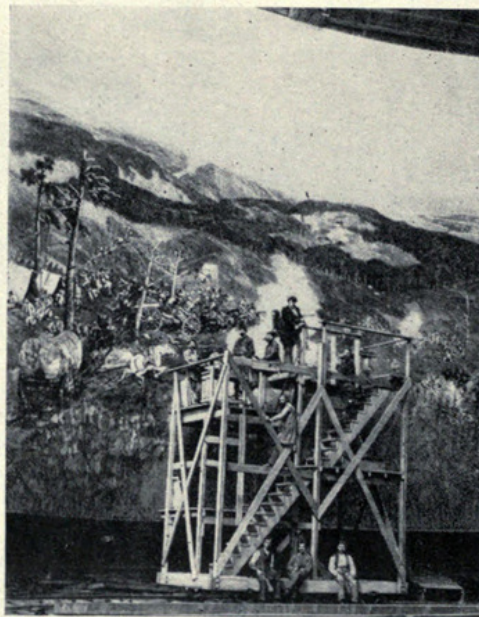
Akeley for some years had a private studio in Milwaukee and, by the success of his invention of the method of mounting animals by a process of sculpture (instead of by stuffing them), had gained the reputation of being the leading taxidermist in America. On the invitation of Sir William Flower, who was Director of the British Museum (Natural History), in London, Akeley was about to go to England to undertake an exhibition program in the then still new London building. But he was irrevocably diverted by the even greater challenge to his abilities presented by the empty halls of the still newer Field Columbian Museum, as the Chicago institution was known at the time. In 1894 this Museum's nucleus of collections, assembled by the great Chicago World's Fair the year before, seemed lost in the spacious halls of the fair's

Fine Arts Building in Jackson Park into which the material had been moved.

Akeley's first habitat representations of African antelopes were consciously statuesque groups, with a minimum of vegetation and groundwork. The next major step was the representation of the backgrounds by a landscape painting in combination with the life-size foreground accessories.

The enormous success of the "battle panorama" or "cyclorama" in the post-Civil war era in American cities provided an impressive example of exactly this combination of modeled foreground and painted background. In the 1880's Chicago had at least two such panoramas of the largest size, "The Battle of Gettysburg" and "The Battle of Missionary Ridge." The domed structures for these spectacular creations quite dominated Wabash Avenue. The vast circular paintings of the cycloramas were 60 feet high and hung on the walls of circular buildings 130 feet in diameter.

Akeley found one of the artists employed on these extraordinary landscapes to be exactly the man who could adapt this exhi-



SOURCE OF MUSEUM TECHNIQUE

Scene in a Chicago institution of the 1880's. Artists on a movable platform are shown painting one of the huge "battle panoramas" or "cycloramas" that drew crowds to two domed structures on Wabash Avenue before there were movies. One of the artists, the late Charles Abel Corwin, later came to the Museum and adapted the circular-wall painting technique for use in backgrounds of animal habitat groups.

bition technique to the Museum—Charles Abel Corwin, whose name came to stand next only to that of Akeley in the annals of American museums. Corwin combined realistic detail with a flair for large-scale painting. His work was in convincing perspective and always adjusted or adjustable to the planned foreground and the dominating "real" animal figures. A census of the halls of Chicago Natural History Museum shows that Corwin, in his two periods of employ-

THIS MONTH'S COVER

(Photo courtesy of Herbert Knapp)

The gigantic figure that appears on our cover represents a spirit-guardian of a temple in Siam. It sets the tone of the color-film of that fascinating country which is the subject of the opening lecture, March 7, in this year's Spring Course in the James Simpson Theatre of the Museum. Herbert Knapp, of Los Gatos, California, well-known traveler and producer of documentary motion-pictures, will be the lecturer. Other lectures on far-off places will be given each Saturday afternoon through April 25. The titles and speakers for each date are on page 4.

ment here, finished no less than sixty-three backgrounds before his death in 1938. In addition, he helped to train an able successor, the late Arthur G. Rueckert.

The reader further interested in this bit of Chicago history should refer to "How a Great Battle Panorama Is Made," by Theodore R. Davis, in *St. Nicholas* (December, 1886, vol. 14, pp. 99-112).

KARL P. SCHMIDT
Chief Curator of Zoology

Spring Visiting-Hours Begin

Visiting hours from 9 A.M. to 5 P.M. will go into effect at the Museum from March 1 through April 30, an extension of one hour beyond the 4 o'clock closing time observed during the winter months. A further extension to 6 P.M. closing will be made on May 1, to continue in effect through Labor Day, September 7.

Technical Publications

The following technical publications were issued recently by Chicago Natural History Museum:

- Fieldiana: Zoology, Vol. 34, No. 6. *Secondary Sexual Characters and Ecological Competition*. By Austin L. Rand. November 12, 1952. 6 pages. \$.10
- Fieldiana: Zoology, Vol. 34, No. 7. *More New Species and New Records of Fishes from Bermuda*. By Robert H. Kanazawa. November 20, 1952. 30 pages. \$.50
- Fieldiana: Zoology, Vol. 34, No. 8. *On the Mollusk Fauna of the Land-locked Waters of Bermuda*. By Fritz Haas. December 18, 1952. 5 pages. \$.10
- Fieldiana: Zoology, Vol. 34, No. 9. *South American Non-Marine Shells: Further Remarks and Descriptions*. By Fritz Haas. December 29, 1952. 26 pages. \$.60



Schmidt, Karl Patterson. 1953. "A Chapter From History of Museum's Early Days." *Bulletin* 24(3), 2-2.

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