

Minnesota Now (MPR) | Minnesota Now - Bell Museum History 01G7Q7X3KS930A63BQR3SBWR7C

INTERVIEWER: You know, a trip to the bell museum in Saint Paul is practically a rite of passage for many metro area youngsters. Long known for its dioramas, it's a place with a lot going on and a history that is more interesting and, well, weirder than you thought.

A new book is capturing that history. *A Natural Curiosity, the Story of the Bell Museum* tells the story of how this intriguing collection of Minnesota's natural history came to be. NPR reporter Tim Nelson spoke with two of the book's authors, both retired from the Bell museum, Barbara Coffin and Don Luce.

TIM NELSON: So the bell museum, this is a 150-year-old idea. But it wasn't really a museum at first. How did it start? And what did it do?

DON LUCE: Well, it started in 1872 with this idea of having a natural history survey of the state of Minnesota. This was not that long after Minnesota became a state. Like many states in this area, there was a lot of land that was taken from Native peoples. And the idea was that we ought to figure out what was there and document what was there.

Some of it might have been for economic reasons. Where is good soil for farms? Whereas some ore that could be extracted, timber that could be harvested, et cetera. But also unlike maybe some other states, the survey was part of the University of Minnesota. So it was headed up by scientists who really wanted to document the diversity of natural resources that were in the state and make a record of what the state was like at that time.

TIM NELSON: And Barbara, it sort of wound up at the U. I saw it initially started as a room at Old Main.

BARBARA COFFIN: Yeah, it was-- actually, basically, at first it was a cabinet of curiosities. The classic collections were displayed in little cabinets. And there is in the original legislation a statement that the collections were to be available and open to the public. So in a sense, it was a museum from the beginning.

TIM NELSON: But it became more of a formal museum early in the 20th century. Most Minnesotans the Bell for its dioramas. Sort of like the Instagram of the 1930s, they sprung up all over the place. You weren't really a major metropolitan area without a collection of dioramas. Why were they such a big deal?

DON LUCE: The idea of the diorama was a radically different way of presenting biodiversity, nature at that time. I mean museums and pass over these collections. And the survey, part of what their job was to do was to collect samples of all the plants and animals, minerals and rocks of the state. And so that was really the nature of the museum up until the early 1900s.

But what did they say about nature? It was just specimens lined up in a case. And so this was really the dawn of ecology. People were concerned about conservation of nature. They were really also concerned about how do you get people inspired to want to preserve nature.

And so the idea was let's show this diversity in a way that made a kind of ecological sense. So people could see this, imagine themselves being in this place, and seeing plants and animals arranged in their natural, ecological relationships.

TIM NELSON: And Barbara you talk a little bit about this in the book, particularly the Heron Lake diorama, and the sort of interplay between the diorama and the real location in Minnesota. The conservation efforts that happened out there really kind of became part of Minnesota regulations governing wildlife.

There's a lot going on here behind the scenes at the museum. Museum staff were pioneers in radio tracking the animals. Ornithologists developed DNA techniques that really sort of went back and looked at Darwin's landmark work on finches. I mean there's been some real science and conservation here.

**BARBARA
COFFIN:**

Well, yeah. I think a couple of things. One thing that's really unique about our dioramas is that they're all representing real places in Minnesota. You can go back to those places today and visit them. And so you can travel from the north shore where the wolf diorama is or out to the prairie where the sandhill cranes diorama is. So that that's unique.

But also, the dioramas, like you say, did really enter into a bit of public policy, given that out in Heron Lake where there is the Heron Lake diorama. And some of the very first game management laws were done by citizens. And so you're right, there is a cross between what the dioramas are saying and instilling and promoting conservation, which was certainly part of the intent.

TIM NELSON:

You've also worked in the education arm of the museum here. And I can scarcely think of anyone in Minnesota that's grown up in the last 50 years that hasn't been to the touch and see room at the Bell museum. You know, I think a lot of people take that for granted. Museums were look and don't touch institutions before that. How did the Bell change that?

**BARBARA
COFFIN:**

Well, that sort of started happening in the 1960s when there was exploration of a different way of doing public education. And much of the touch and see room concept can be credited to public education director that we had Richard Barthelemy, and the idea that you put bones out or you put skins out or have parts of plants and animals that people can touch, kids, adults.

And this is not a foreign idea anymore because we have lots of nature centers. But at the time, it was really a very pioneering concept.

TIM NELSON:

And Don, I was surprised to read what an odd collection the Bell can be as well. George Armstrong Custer's stuffed dog was once here. There was a collection of Filipino artifacts that wound up here after an 1890s real estate scandal, a sizable collection of Pacific Ocean algae. What surprised you most as you've combed through the history of the Bell?

DON LUCE:

I think maybe any museum, probably, from that time period that's old enough, gets some of these oddball collections coming in. I think people love this sort of curiosity story about these things that came in. For example, the algae-- why would a university in the middle of the continent have a world-renowned marine algae collection?

And it happened to be this woman, Josephine Tilden, who just who was the first female scientist on the staff of the University of Minnesota. She was a botanist. She actually started her career working for the natural history survey in the late 1800s. And she became fascinated with marine algae and ended up establishing a field research station on Vancouver Island in British Columbia.

And so for several years, she would take a whole group of students from Minnesota out to Vancouver Island, very isolated. You can only reach this by boat. And they actually lived in log cabins and explored the tide pools and the other diversity that's out there, marine diversity, on Vancouver Island.

It, of course, was not a very practical idea. And so eventually, universally said we can't maintain this out there. But it is one of these kind of really curiosity stories that where someone who just has this passion and can run with it and make some major impact from that.

TIM NELSON: And I think one of the themes that sort of runs through this book is just the constant change of the Bell museum. It's undergoing change all the time. And of course, the biggest, most recent one-- the bell got a new \$79 million home in 2018. Some of us remember the drama at the Capitol over the funding. And some of the good questions about its mission, with institutions like the Science Museum of Minnesota, the Children's Museum, and the History Center nearby, why did the bell survive?

BARBARA COFFIN: We're very fortunate here in Minnesota and the Twin Cities that we have a very rich cultural group of institutions. And they all fill a little bit different niche. And certainly the Bell museum, why has it survived? Well, it really focuses on Minnesota. And I think that's something different than any of the other museums. And that's important.

DON LUCE: But again, it was a struggle. It's trying to find our niche. And so there are certain many periods of time when the Bell museum looked like it was a place that never changed. And some people love that. But having worked here and realizing that the museum does need to change, does need to address what are the expectations of a museum goer today.

A fair amount of my career was spent trying to kind of find that answer. And I hope we have gotten an answer. But there was a lot of back and forth. The dioramas, which are kind of a hallmark of the museum, many people during my career thought, hey, they should go out in the wastebasket. These are something that-- this is an old fashioned museum. Why should the university be retaining something from the early 20th century, right?

But eventually, I convinced people it was one of the unique and irreplaceable assets that the museum had. And what we need to do is think about how do we reinterpret these for audiences today.

TIM NELSON: Now your book is ostensibly about the Bell museum. But it's kind of really a testament to Minnesota's abiding interest in the natural world. It shares, as you said, a founder with the University. It's named after a one-time General Mills president. The new building here is clad in Minnesota white pine. I walked in here and kids and their grandparents were getting out of their cars to come in here. What does it say about Minnesota?

BARBARA COFFIN: Well, I think it says Minnesotans love nature. And here we can go any time of the year and see a bit of Minnesota.

DON LUCE: And I think it's also, yes, some people might think that Minnesota's flyover land. But it's actually a really unique position in North America. It's a place where the three major biomes of our continent come together. And so in terms of the natural diversity, we really have a lot here that you wouldn't expect to have. And that's one of our goals is to kind of really get people to understand.

TIM NELSON: Well, thank you both. Congratulations on the new book. And good luck to you.

DON LUCE: Thank you very much.

BARBARA COFFIN: Thanks, Tim.

INTERVIEWER: That was NPR reporter Tim Nelson talking with Barbara Coffin and Don Luce, two of the authors of the new book entitled *A Natural Curiosity, the Story of the Bell Museum*. It has a nifty website, by the way. If you want to know more about the bell museum, its BellMuseum.umn.edu