

A DEFINITION OF A STATE MUSEUM

A. R. CROOK, STATE MUSEUM

Meager, ill kept, uninteresting collections of various sorts housed in some museums have so often made such a lasting impression upon visitors that those persons ever after have had an improper idea of what a museum in the proper sense should be.

Such has been the experience of the Illinois State Museum which for many years was so poorly cared for that the impression which it made upon legislators was an unfavorable one. The definition which these men would give for a museum is totally different from the one which I would emphasize. And since they never visit this museum now and are unacquainted with any other, there is no hope of their ever bringing out a revised edition of their definition.

I would define a museum as an "institution designed for the collection, preservation, investigation and display of objects which illustrate in concrete and tangible form the knowledge and skill that men have in science, in art, in manufacture and in business," and a State Museum is an institution which illustrates in concrete and tangible form the things that men of science, of art and of business in the State know and can do. Thus it is a repository of ideas and of deeds rather than simply of objects. It illustrates at every turn the knowledge that men have. Instead of being a collection of things it is a collection of thoughts.

The various departments in such a museum would be designed to graphically illustrate what men have discovered in those departments. The division of botany would be more than simply a herbarium—a collection of dead plants. Instead it would be so fitted as to point out what our botanists know about all kinds of vegetation in the State—what they have learned concerning appearance, life habits, relationships, noxious qualities, medicinal values and possible commercial utilities of the three or four thousand plants which grow in Illinois. Artists in glass and wax would build groups to depict the

leading regions of the State from sand dunes, lake shores, river bottoms, valleys, and prairies, to forest regions, and give tangible illustration of the excellent work being done by the Academy "Committee on Ecological Survey."

The tree exhibit would contain not only the trunks, leaves and fruit of the hundred and fifty kinds of trees growing in the State, but also fine illustrations of magnificent trees and samples of their products—boards, laths, shingles, clothes pins, wood pulp, paper and all the things made out of wood pulp even to car wheels. There would be a long list of things which illustrate what dendrologists know and what artists and manufacturers can do.

The zoological section would consist not simply of a great multitude of shells, insects, fish, birds and mammals, but would be a fascinating place where the visitor could delight in the varied and strange forms of insects and fish; the beautiful plumage of birds; the fine fur of mammals; the life-like groups, where artist and man of science combine to depict nature in her most charming and instructive forms and through cunningly devised arrangement of animal, flower, leaf and rock to explain what men know about the life habits, history, relationship and utility of the multitude of creatures which constitute the zoological world.

In the department of ethnology as well as that of zoology there is a great field for artistic group work. At the Illinois State Museum there is promise of remarkable work being done in the field of ethnology, thanks to a gift of three thousand dollars one week ago today by a generous friend of the museum and thanks also to the promise of another friend to give the museum in the near future one of the greatest archaeological collections of its kind in the country.

The amount of time represented by man on the earth is but a fraction of the years involved in the earth's history. If we go back of modern history, back of the art of writing, back of the stone age, back of the "psychozoic era"; back to reptiles, to fish, to the dim and nebulous times of gradual accretion of dust of the universe to form a world, each step is an interesting field not because of objects but because of what we know of them.

No department of the museum can exceed this in importance or fascination nor afford a better opportunity to show what men know and what they are discovering. These form the divisions of general geology, paleontology, mineralogy and petrography.

Similarly a successful museum represents what physicists and engineers know and can do. In such a museum instead of a constant repetition of signs reading "Hands off," "Do not touch the objects," etc., one reads such signs as this: "Turn on the light and see a magnificent spectrum," "Touch button to obtain view of axial figures," "When lighted these specimens show marked fluorescence," "Turn the button and start the machinery," etc.

No department of a museum could be more attractive than that which concerns itself with the knowledge and accomplishments of our physicists.

Very interesting, too, would be the departments of chemistry, of astronomy, of the manufacturing arts and of the fine arts. All of these and of those mentioned before have the common purpose of speaking in a voice perpetually audible and readily understandable concerning the ever increasing fund of knowledge of our investigators and artists in all departments of human endeavor.

A survey of these few points impresses us with the wealth of material upon which a museum can draw. If it is a poor uninteresting place it certainly would not be because of lack of subject matter but because of lack of energy, of imagination or of money on the part of the officers or workers in whose keeping the institution is placed.

A museum is then a voice announcing the valuable work of our men of science. It speaks with no discordant note, with no attempt to silence or minimize other voices, but to swell their volume and to add to them becoming an extra voice as of one crying in the wilderness, "Behold the attainments of science and the coming of the hosts of knowledge."