I have always been intrigued by the concept of “sense of place,” both from an historical perspective and also from a human evolution basis. When I was asked to give the Hoslett Memorial Lecture for Homecoming, 2012, investigating the history of Luther’s biology department had great appeal to me. I had participated in this history for forty-six years, first as an undergraduate and then as a member of the biology department faculty until my retirement in 2013. In addition, the year 2012 marked the centennial of biology in the curriculum at Luther College. The resulting “treasure hunt for material” was immensely enjoyable and satisfying to me.

Determining the actual beginning of biology at Luther College is not as easy as one might be led to believe.

Andrew A. Veblen was the first to teach a biological science at Luther College. He was not hired to teach biology, however. Veblen was hired in 1877 to teach English, Latin and Penmanship, but two years later, in 1879, he added physiology to the curriculum. He proposed to the entire faculty at the time, all eight of them, that the first piece of lab equipment, a microscope, be purchased in April 1880. [Incidentally, Veblen was a brother of Thorstein Veblen, author of The Theory of the Leisure Class (1899).] When Veblen left the next year, physiology was replaced by zoology until the 1890s when it, too, disappeared from the curriculum.

A 1911 Chips article argued that a well-planned and thorough introduction to biology would be of interest and advantage to all students giving a clearer insight into the significance of the developments in this science. Chips also mentioned that a biology course would “aid in driving out quackery and humbug” attributed to misinformation presented by newspapers.

So the next fall, 1912, Hans Hilleboe was hired to teach eight credits of biology and education courses. This biology course was part of the preparatory department, three years of high school curriculum for students coming to campus without sufficient academic background. However, this was the first time a faculty member was hired to teach biology, and biology entered the curriculum as a permanent course. It is this date, fall 1912, upon which I'm fixing the beginning of biology at Luther.

The first year the biology laboratory budget was $2.00, but this was increased to $505 the second year to purchase needed equipment and supplies. For perspective, tuition, furnished room, electricity and use of the library plus gymnasium was $62.50 for the year for a preparatory student, $42.50 for a college student. Meals were not included in these fees, but the Boarding Club, managed by students, provided “good, wholesome food” for a cost of $2.53 per week.

By 1916, biology was offered as a college course on a par with the other two sciences, chemistry and physics. Students now paid a lab fee of $5.00 per semester to take biology.

What type of lab work was done back in 1916? Several laboratory hours were spent studying, identifying, and drawing various stuffed animals from the museum collection. Students also did angleworm dissections and drew plates of the various organs. They also studied living angleworms as to their habits and adaptation to environments. And the fern was dissected and drawn.

Yes, Luther did have a museum. In 1877 President Larsen received a collection of 600 birds’ eggs to form the nucleus of a museum. More specimens arrived and in 1890, $50 was allocated to provide display cases. By 1912 the museum was housed in the old “Chicken Coop,” a two-story building northwest of Old Main. It was originally a barn, then remodeled as student housing, and finally thoroughly renovated in the summer of 1922. It contained the museum proper: the pioneer collection, Indian artifacts and the natural history collections.

Also by 1922 the biology offerings had increased from one course to four: elementary zoology (intensive study of the frog), embryology (chick and pig embryos), invertebrate zoology (angleworms), and vertebrate zoology.

In 1927, a new biology faculty member, William L. Strunk, was hired. That first fall Strunk enlarged and renovated

Wendy Stevens graduated from Luther in 1969 with a degree in biology and certification to teach high school biology, but after earning an MS in zoology, she was invited back to Luther to oversee labs and teach general biology. Later she was made an assistant professor of biology, and retired in 2013 after serving for forty-two years. In addition to teaching parasitology, physiology labs, nutrition, histology, human anatomy, and human dissection, Wendy is known for spearheading the establishment of the Russell R. Rulon Endowed Chair in Biology and also for establishing a fund to support the human dissection experience—now named the Wendy Stevens Human Anatomy Lab Endowment.

by WENDY M. STEVENS
the biology lab that was located in the basement of Old Main. Additional lighting was added and one side of the room had recitation chairs, charts and blackboard space for lectures. The center of the room contained glass cases for specimens, from the Natural History Museum. The other side was the “true laboratory itself” equipped with microscopes, slides and models, valuing over $4,200.

Strunk also brought new courses into the curriculum including Organic Evolution in 1929. This totally surprised me. Offered annually, it was a “critical study of the theory of organic evolution.” The purpose of this class was to give the student a thorough understanding of the course and cause of evolution, taking up without bias the arguments for and against the theory of evolution. Texts included Organic Evolution by Lull; The Origin of Species and the Descent of Man by Darwin.

The Evolution course was taught for five years, until in 1933-34 when two courses, Genetics and Eugenics and Human Heredity replaced it in the catalog.

During the spring and fall semesters of 1930, Strunk took a one-year leave of absence to complete his PhD. Taking his place was an alumnus who had just graduated from Luther, Sherman Hoslett. Sherman was well liked by the students as noted by the student-drawn caricature of Hoslett in a 1930’s Chips. He maintained a flourishing guinea pig colony in the biology lab where the students enjoyed watching the males as they defended their territories.

In February of 1931, Strunk returned with doctorate in hand. The students welcomed Doctor Strunk back with a “festival board set up in the biology laboratory, prettily decorated with skeletons of a cat, a chicken and so on. Brigham Young, our favorite guinea pig, was at one end of the table and Professor Sherman Hoslett, as toastmaster, sat at the other. It made a delightful scene. Included in the evening’s festivities was awarding Brigham Young a diploma and the D.A.H.—Doctor of Animal Husbandry.”

When Hoslett left to pursue his master’s degree, Strunk was still the only biologist professor, but more courses were added: a total of fourteen biology courses offered annually or in alternate years plus seminar and special problems. The biology lab in Main was expanded to include a storage room with a “good collection of alcoholic and other illustrative material, and a considerable collection of charts and lantern slides.”

By 1921 Luther had acquired a human skeleton that can be seen in a photo in the 1921 yearbook. Luther also purchased a complete life-size human manikin in 1932. Made of plaster of Paris mache, it had plaster of Paris organs that could be removed, including a brain that was “dissectible” into six parts.

Another teaching aid was the Body Scope (copyright 1935). By turning the cardboard discs the viewer gets an introduction to all body systems including most of the external features. However, only the female internal “generative organs” are depicted with the male reproductive system (both external and internal) remaining a mystery.

Student research was prominent on campus during the 1930s just as it is today. One student planned to “scour the territory of Winneshiek and Allamakee counties in search of all the different species of native plants including lichens, mosses, ferns and mushrooms to be dried, mounted and classified for an herbarium.” When this Chips article was written, he had already collected 1,000 different species and hoped to approach 2,500 species by the end of the summer.

Another student did physiological experiments on white rats, counting their corpuscles and hanging weights on them to see how strong their muscles were. He also prepared slides of crow embryos, first collecting the eggs and incubating them to the proper stage of development and then sectioning the embryos with a microtome and mounting them on slides.

In September of 1932, forty male students gathered in the biology laboratory in Old Main to organize a biology club called the Linne society. The group was organized to meet once a month to hear lectures by outstanding men in the field of biology.

The first meeting of the Linne Society was a rather colorful start. A local surgeon, Dr. Svebakken, spoke on life and customs of the Mexican people illustrated by the physician himself dressed in native costume. He brought a pair of fleas also dressed in native costume preserved in a walnut shell, a sample of a highly intoxicating beverage made from the cactus plant, and 3,000 feet of film that he had taken while in Mexico. Other well-known speakers included Dr. Charles Mayo from Rochester, MN, and Dr. Gundersons from La Crosse, WI, speaking on their medical specialties.

The decade of the 1930s was, of course, during the Great Depression. Starting in the fall of 1932, biology majors who “lacked sufficient funds to complete four years of training at Luther College” could attend for only two years during which time they could take practical course work that would prepare them to enter a variety of areas such as medical school, conservation fields, or research in different zoological fields.

Also in 1932, women were allowed for the first time to take classes on Luther’s campus. Women were not yet allowed to attend Luther College—Luther was still a school exclusively for men, but they were members of the first class of the Decorah Junior College for Girls. These female students had their own
professors and classes, but they were allowed to register for biology at Luther and also use Koren Library.

In the fall of 1933 Sherm Hoslett returned with his master’s degree. Hoslett taught the introductory and general coursework while Strunk was a powerhouse, teaching all of the other biology courses in addition to becoming the Health Director for Physical Education and teaching six courses in that department, setting up a health service on campus, and directing the activities of the college radio department.

Then after spring semester 1939, Strunk disappeared. He was such a popular professor, but even Chips did not mention his leaving. I finally found an article in Luther Alumnus, August 1939, to discover that Strunk had gone to St. Olaf. What a loss for the biology department! His legacy was huge including sixteen biology majors graduating in 1939 out of eighty-seven graduates.

It was a time of starting over as Sherm Hoslett returned after getting his PhD to become head of the department in 1940.

On May 31, 1942, a bolt of lightning struck the attic of Old Main, and in a matter of hours, the building had burned. Volunteers assisted faculty and students in removing valuable biological equipment from the basement of Old Main. The basement of Larsen Hall was designated as a temporary classroom. The large center room where health service is now located was divided in half from east to west with the south room for the biology department and the north half forming two classrooms for the college in general.

It was also wartime and Luther went into an accelerated program, lengthening summer school to twelve weeks and conferring degrees on students who completed three years and two summer sessions. The number of biology majors decreased with only one to three biology majors graduating each year until 1948. It was a difficult time.

By the late 1940s the north-south divider was removed in Larsen Hall and two more laboratories were added. This picture [above right] is of Sherm Hoslett teaching in the north lab of Larsen, 1947–48. There were practically no storage facilities—only a few cabinets and a curtained area containing shelves for several rat cages. Frogs and turtles were kept in wire cages, outdoors in a cold-water area near the river. There was very little office space. More faculty had been added during the 1940s, with two faculty and a teaching assistant often sharing one nine-by-six-foot office in the basement of Larsen Hall.

Botany was re-introduced into the curriculum in 1946 when Gene Goellner was hired. There were regular Saturday classes until noon, and in courses such as field biology the catalog advised students that “laboratory work will consist almost wholly of field observations and surveys. It is advisable to leave Saturday afternoons open for this purpose.”

By 1957, there were four members of the biology department: Hoslett; Frederic Giere (physiologist); Louise Ambuel (botanist), the first woman professor in the biology department; and Vernon (Bud) Bahr (teaching assistant). A photo [page 16] of Hoslett and Bahr confessing in the laboratory where upper level biology courses were offered shows skulls that are still in the field museum and skeletons that are still used in the anatomy lab. All biology faculty were Luther alumni, and they were all still crammed into the so-called “temporary” quarters of Larsen Hall that had been used for fifteen years so far.

However, plans were being made to build a new science hall. By May of 1959, plans neared completion with the east wing of Valders to house chemistry and physics and the west wing to house biology on the first floor and mathematics on the second floor. The concourse would have ramps leading to the second floor. There would be a greenhouse with a sunken pool for aquatic and amphibian life forms, a seventy-seat planetarium with twenty-four-foot projection dome, and a lecture hall-auditorium seating 300. The total cost of the new science hall was estimated at $1,322,000 with additional contracts for science equipment.

Although biology faculty had a lot of say in planning the biology wing of Valders and the space was provided, still the money had run short and equipment was scant. For example the faculty research lab had a hood and one lab table. That was it. There was an elevator shaft but no elevator and distilled water from Chemistry was dispensed into a carboy and carted down the ramp to the biology labs.

While Valders was being planned and built, an internal controversy arose in the late 1950s. Sometimes this is referred to as the disagreement over whether or not to teach evolution on campus, but evolution actually played a very small part in this debate that totally changed the existing religion and biology departments.

J. Wilhelm Ylvisaker was president of the college at the time; he was well intentioned but mostly interested in the college’s relationship with the church. Some faculty felt he was vacillating and not acting decisively in leading the college in growth and that he was not supporting his faculty and—especially in issues of very low faculty salaries—that he depended too much on the dean and did not solicit the opinions of others. Ylvisaker also had Parkinson’s disease, which was another factor influencing his presidency.

Orlando W. “Pip” Qualley, the academic dean, was competent and efficient, but he often acted without consulting anybody. Qualley kept apprised of Luther grads and alumni of other church colleges. When a faculty position opened up, Pip would be on the phone inviting his choice to join the faculty without regard to the current professors’ opinions.

Gerhard L. Belgum, head of the religion department, had a strong personality and was an outspoken critic of the
administration. He had extraordinary influence on students in his classes and also felt strongly that the religion (or Bible) department needed to nurture the faith of the student, a faith based in tradition. He advocated biblical study that would not undermine beliefs or create doubts.

Robert W. Jenson had been a student of Belgum’s who then pursued his PhD in Germany, where he studied under Karl Barth, a renowned theologian of the twentieth century. Jenson was the polar opposite of Belgum, believing that any attempt to protect students by censoring ideas or literary works defeated the purpose of Christian education. Jenson was equally charismatic in front of the classroom.

When Jenson returned to campus as tenure-track a member of the Bible department, heated discussions erupted. Some of these centered on evolution. Jenson definitely believed in evolution and Belgum probably did, too. But evolution was one of those topics that might shake a student’s faith and therefore Belgum felt evolution should best be left alone and not discussed. Things got worse; Belgum would hold department meetings while excluding Jenson and two other religion professors who were perceived not to hold the majority’s opinion.

How does biology fit into all of this? Sherm Hoslett, had been teaching in the biology department since 1933. Where did he stand on the issue of evolution? In the late 1950s Hoslett held a weekly seminar in the living room of his house with treats and coffee. Students called the seminar Evolution Seminar. They read The Origin of Species and discussed it chapter by chapter. When students would ask if evolution concepts were really correct, Sherm would answer, “What do you think?” It was pretty clear that he was an evolution biologist.

But Hoslett was also a very close friend of Belgum. Both Hoslett and Giere had a common and growing dissatisfaction with the administration concerning many of the same issues espoused by Belgum. One of the leading points of contention in 1960 was whether or not Jenson should receive tenure.

Belgum had made it clear to the administration that he wanted Jenson dismissed and unless Jenson was dismissed, he, Belgum, would resign. Therefore on January 23, 1961, Belgum submitted his letter of resignation and President Ulvisaker accepted it. It should be noted that Jenson was sensitive to what was happening and he also submitted a letter of resignation, but the administration rejected his letter, keeping him on the faculty.

There was one final detail. When Belgum joined the faculty, he requested a letter of pastoral call because he viewed his work in the Bible department as a pastoral ministry. Since he was “called by the college,” the Board of Regents would also have to accept his resignation. If the Board refused his resignation, it would vindicate his position and show lack of confidence in the administration. However, on February 21, 1961, the Board of Regents accepted Belgum’s resignation, and in the spring of 1961 the majority of the religion faculty also resigned.

This put Hoslett and Giere in a very difficult situation. Valders Hall of Science was scheduled to open for classes that in that fall of 1961. Valders, the first million-dollar building on campus, was spacious and modern, with labs and offices with windows—a facility they had been wanting for years and years. How could they walk away from that? So Hoslett and Giere both signed contracts. Bud Bahr had just been rehired and found himself moving equipment including six kymographs, eighteen microscopes, one dissecting scope, and the natural history collections to the new building that summer. Louise Ambuel was on leave in St. Louis studying at Washington University.

Classes started but Hoslett and Giere had continuing dissatisfaction with the administration and most likely felt increasingly isolated from the rest of the faculty.

Then on a windy night, November 2, 1961, the C. K. Preus Gymnasium caught on fire. According to Chips the fire started backstage. The back windows were open and a west wind gusting up to forty miles an hour blew flames through the building. A student turned in an alarm and the firemen arrived within moments, but they could not get water due to lack of pressure and the fact that some of the valves were not open. The brand new carillon in a tower of the gymnasium was affected by the heat and its chimes were going crazy. Embers fell to the ground around Valders and were blown far beyond.

Overnight Valders was no longer just a science building. Valders became the campus canteen, the book shop, and the post office. Valders 117 (the current V206) became the site for chapel, Nordic Choir, and Messiah rehearsals. Physical education classes and theater productions were held in the basement, and there were recitals in the concourse.

Three weeks later, on November 22, 1961, both Sherman Hoslett and Frederick Giere resigned. They were asked to reconsider but the rift was too large. Louise Ambuel elected not to return to campus from her sabbatical leave.

And so it was time to start over again.

Notes
Much of the information in this article has come from the three volumes of published Luther College histories; college catalogs; the school newspaper, Chips; the college yearbook, Pioneer; the Luther Alumni Magazine, Agora; and interviews with former Luther biology faculty, including Fred Giere and Vernon “Bud” Bahr. My thanks to both Rachel Vagts (Archives) and Robert Fitton (Director of Projects and Laboratories in Biology) for their assistance in obtaining information and photographs for this article.