

The Travails of a “Lady Scientist”

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ON A THURSDAY NIGHT in December 1920, an attendant at the Museum of Natural History, worried about a woman, called the police. The next morning, the *New York Times* ran a short account—three sentences on a back page, smuggled down below Friday’s theater news.

WOMAN EDITOR IN BELLEVUE.

Taken from Museum of Natural History
on Complaint of Attendant

Mary C. Dickerson, 53 years old of West 118th Street, editor of the bimonthly magazine *Natural History*, issued by the Museum of Natural History, Central Park West and Seventy-Seventh Street, was sent to Bellevue Hospital last night for observation on complaint of an attendant of the museum. The attendant reported to the police of the West Sixty-Eighth Street Station that the woman’s actions in the museum were peculiar. Dr. Foster Kennedy of 20 West Fiftieth Street advised that the woman be sent to Bellevue.

There is a lot of fascinating information packed in this short report. Two New York institutions—the hospital and the museum. Four addresses stretching down the west side of Manhattan. Two names—an editor and a doctor. And an unnamed attendant reporting the editor’s “peculiar” actions. The attendant must have known Mary Cynthia Dickerson. A year earlier, museum directors had named her curator of a newly formed department of herpetology, the first woman at the museum to hold the rank of curator on the institution’s scientific staff. But for all its detail, the story lacks a key piece of information: what did the woman do, what were the “actions” that struck that attendant as “peculiar”? The word leaves a hole in the heart of the story. Was the woman unique or odd or simply out of place? We do know that

after that Thursday Dickerson never returned to the museum. She died three years later, still in custody, at the Manhattan State Hospital on Wards Island in the East River.

Many at the museum suspected that an Arctic explorer named Vilhjalmur Stefansson lurked behind Dickerson's peculiar behavior. Mental illness troubles this story, but pull on that frayed thread and, with peculiar twists, a world opens that includes frog ponds and ice floes.



In December 1919, when directors of New York's American Museum of Natural History appointed Mary Cynthia Dickerson curator of the Department of Herpetology, she had been working at the museum for almost ten years—running the Department of Woods and Forestry, editing the *Museum Journal*, and working as an associate curator in the Department of Ichthyology and Herpetology. Her name appeared three times on the journal masthead—the lone woman on the scientific staff. But now, the fifty-three-year-old Dickerson (and frogs, toads, snakes, and salamanders) had their own department.

This lady scientist had come a long way. Dickerson was born in 1866 in Hastings, a small town in central Michigan. Like Henry Ford, her near neighbor and rough contemporary, Dickerson watched the upper Midwest work itself out of the farmers' world and into industrial modernity. Her family moved to Grand Rapids in the 1870s, when Dickerson was a girl. Her father took a job in a spice mill and, after work, played music with fellow Union Army veterans in the Second Regiment brass band. We can imagine him as a sweet-smelling, musical man, but a friend remembered Dickerson telling her she'd grown up in a household short on learning and long on the obligations it settled on the oldest child, an only daughter with two younger brothers.

In the 1880s, she enrolled in the University of Michigan, taking courses in German, English, French, Chemistry, Physics, Biology, Elocution, and Philosophy. Between semesters, she returned home to teach biology at Grand Rapids High School. That route might have led Dickerson to a settled life teaching school or raising a family, as

Grand Rapids grew rich on profits from factories turning lumber from the upper Midwest into household furniture. If she had done that, we would never have known the exceptional ambition that distinguished her, the determination that set her apart.

Instead of aging into conventional patterns of a Michigan life, she moved to Chicago and, in fall 1895, enrolled with the University of Chicago's fourth class of undergraduates. "Chicago had the peculiar qualifications of growth, which made such adventuresome pilgrimages even on the part of young girls plausible," was how novelist Theodore Dreiser had described the city a few years earlier in *Sister Carrie*. Like that fictional sibling, Dickerson embarked on one pilgrimage peculiar to Chicago—not to the department store and the stage that drew Carrie but to the new university's biology department.

With credit for her work at the University of Michigan, she spent four academic quarters at the university, earning a Bachelor of Science degree in January 1897. Dickerson turned thirty-one that spring, but she had added her name to the short list of women with university degrees in zoology. Count just three of them from University of Chicago before 1920, a singular, distinguished, and peculiar group of women. She enrolled briefly in the graduate program but didn't stay long enough to earn an advanced degree—a decision that followed her onto the museum masthead, leaving her name with only a BS on the PhD-studded list of the museum's scientific employees.

Leaving Chicago, she found a job teaching teachers at the Rhode Island State Normal School in Providence, eventually becoming head of the Department of Biology and Nature Study. Her eight years there, 1897 to 1905, were the high tide of "Nature Study"—a curriculum based on a turn to what museum historians call "object-based epistemology" and designed, as Liberty Hyde Bailey, a horticulturalist behind the movement, put it, "to open the child's mind to his natural existence, develop his sense of responsibility and of self-dependence, train him to respect the resources of the earth, teach him the obligations of citizenship, interest him sympathetically in the occupations of men, quicken his relations to human life in general, and touch his imagination with the spiritual forces of the world."

Heady language for grade-school science but nature study promised to ease the anxieties of some settled middle-class Americans worried about what would unite a diversifying, urbanizing, polyglot country. Some high-minded university types signed up to promote nature study. "The rocks and shells, the frogs and lilies always tell the absolute truth," Stanford President, ichthyologist David Starr Jordan, told an audience of schoolteachers. Scientists might lie, but nature's things did not. Led by a good teacher, pupils were apt to learn more from frogs than from old fables about George Washington's cherry tree.

Nature study paid Dickerson's bills, plus interest from university men like Jordan kept schoolteachers like her engaged in scientific work. She spent summers at the new Marine Biological Laboratory at Woods Hole, joining the university researchers who settled in every summer. "The place is a very beautiful one, I think," Dickerson wrote in 1905. "It has great charm for me. Dr. Lillie [the lab's head] and others were very good to me and made my work easier not only by giving me laboratory accommodations etc. but also in inspiring me with praise."

For a stretch of years, it seems, Dickerson found a fit for her talents. Praise gave her the confidence to quit teaching, and she turned gradually to writing to make a living, first publishing in 1901 a book for school children, *Moths and Butterflies* ("with two hundred photographs from life by the author"). A last chapter urged every child outdoors to catch caterpillars. Watch a creature spin a chrysalis and emerge a moth or butterfly, she urged, a lesson in wonders still featured in many a third-grade classroom. Turning to grown-ups, she described New England's changing seasons with a year of articles for *Country Life*, an outsize lifestyle magazine aimed at gentlemen farmers, their gardening wives, and their city friends. Dickerson's "The Pageant of Nature" column, an editor wrote, described "the happenings of woods and fields, just as a newspaper man would report the disasters and crimes which make up so large a portion of the days' 'news.' Very few writers on nature subjects have succeeded in combining an intimate

knowledge of natural history with literary force to the degree attained by Miss Mary C. Dickerson." The doings of field mice, bullfrogs, and white-tailed deer were captured with a reporter's eye and set out in a large-format monthly. For some, the format proved a problem. *Country Life* was big, so big in fact that a friendly Staten Island reader thanked Dickerson for her good articles but complained that he didn't have room in his small apartment to save the year of issues with her stories.

In 1906, Dickerson published the book that earned her a slot in the history of American herpetology and, in a few years, a job at the Museum of Natural History. Doubleday and Page brought out *The Frog Book: North American Toads and Frogs with a Study of the Habits and Life Histories of Those of the Northeastern States* ("with over three hundred photographs from life by the author"). If you think about it, *The Frog Book* is a peculiar inclusion in Mrs. Neltje Blanchan Doubleday's (the socially connected wife of prominent publisher Frank Nelson Doubleday) series of books on butterflies, birds, and flowers, creatures from a boy's world nestled alongside the fancies of rich lady gardeners.

The Frog Book combined the descriptions of a trained taxonomist with the joys of a naturalist's bent for observation (figs. 1 and 2). "Batrachians," she wrote, "are representatives of a very old race, older than reptile, bird or mammal. When their primitive songs ring from the watercourses, as in ages gone by, they announce the height of the year's activity of this race. They proclaim enjoyment of the warmth and the water, of the abundance of food and their fellows." She reiterated the appeal to the senses learned in nature study. "Listen!" she wrote. "What is the strange monotone of sound?" "See the effect of sunlight. . ." "Watch" as a newt sheds his skin. . ." Smell a June wind bringing "some new fragrance."

She nodded at the market value of frogs and toads, calculating their worth to farmers and gardeners. "Counting the cutworms only," she wrote, "the estimated value of a single toad is \$19.88 per year, if the injury done by a single cutworm be put at the low figure of one



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Fig. 1: Plate from *The Frog Book: North American Toads and Frogs with a Study of the Habits and Life Histories of Those of the Northeastern States*, by Mary C. Dickerson (1906).

cent per year.” The collection of specimens she put together (and the contacts she’d developed among men of science) proved more valuable for her than the appetite of a toad. When she finished her book, she sold her collection of frogs and toads—some dried, some preserved in alcohol—to the Museum of Natural History for \$200.95 and, in 1907, took a job working as an assistant to David Starr Jordan at Stanford.

Dickerson spent a miserable year at Stanford, a bit player in some Palo Alto dramas. In 1907, Jordan’s lab was unhappy and scandal ridden, and still disordered by the great earthquake of April 1906 that had left his jars of fish specimens in a shattered heap. There were rumors that he was about to lose his job as the university’s president and even that he’d had a hand in the recent death of university founder Leland Stanford’s widow. “Why didn’t someone tell me a year ago that the teaching work Dr. Jordan gave me was tied fast to his fish research? That he could afford only \$200.00 a year for the latter so has to hitch it to the instructorship in order to get anyone at all to take the work?” she complained. “It would have saved me my California experiment which has been rather disastrous to my pocketbook, my time and my courage.”

She was broke and worried, single, forty-two years old, a university-educated zoologist without a job. She played a few connections. But when botanist Luther Burbank’s “third-rate Chicago publishing house” turned down a book project that would have employed her, Dickerson’s letters hit a note of panic. “What ‘under heaven’ shall I do?” she asked Smithsonian zoologist Leonhard Stejneger.



Contacts in the scientific world scrambled to get her a position. In 1909, she moved to New York and went to work at the American Museum of Natural History, dividing her time between two departments: Woods and Forestry in the morning and Ichthyology and Herpetology in the afternoon. After a few months, the museum added a third job, editing the *Museum Journal*, the publication that still appears as *Natural History*. At \$125 a month, the salary was enough to cover rent on an apartment on 118th Street, near Columbia’s campus

in Morningside Heights and an easy subway ride to the museum's Romanesque building on the eighteen-acre site on Central Park West and West Seventy-Seventh Street.

Dickerson joined the museum for a heady decade. Founded in 1869 and grown on Gilded Age riches, the museum stood out in the teens as America's preeminent institution of natural history. The museum was busy, thronging with scientists and school children. The AMNH sent fossil hunters to the Dakotas and expeditions to the Congo and the Arctic. A gifted staff mounted dinosaur skeletons and built the dioramas that gave life to stuffed mammals and birds. Trustees funded new departments of education and public health. As the founding generation of Gilded Age titans died off, new board members led by the mustachioed anti-immigration activist Madison Grant steered museum resources into support for the hardline racial views of eugenics and away from the slow work on taxonomy, the describing and sorting that had shaped Dickerson's scientific career.

Although Dickerson had an appointment in a Department of Ichthyology and Herpetology, once again a colorful scholar of fish overshadowed her study of frogs and toads. She reported to Bashford Dean, a man who taught at Columbia, ran a department at the AMNH, and managed a new armor collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The story goes that a boyhood fascination with medieval armor led Dean to his study of armored fishes of the Devonian era and that those armored fishes led him back across Central Park to the museum's collection of armor.

Her work was less glamorous. She managed collections, designed one diorama of pond life and another of toads, begged copy for monthly issues of the *Museum Journal* (or when pressed, printed runs of her beautiful photographs of flowers and birds), and handled correspondence from dealers, children, missionaries, mining engineers, and collectors like "Rattlesnake Ed," who "with compliments" sent her a snake from upstate New York that "*has not had* its fangs taken out and seems to be a very ugly one." Time and again, she schooled the writers who offered the museum strange things—a goat's horn found embedded in a tree, for example—that the AMNH was a place of science, not a cabinet of curiosities; a place for specimens, not freaks of nature.

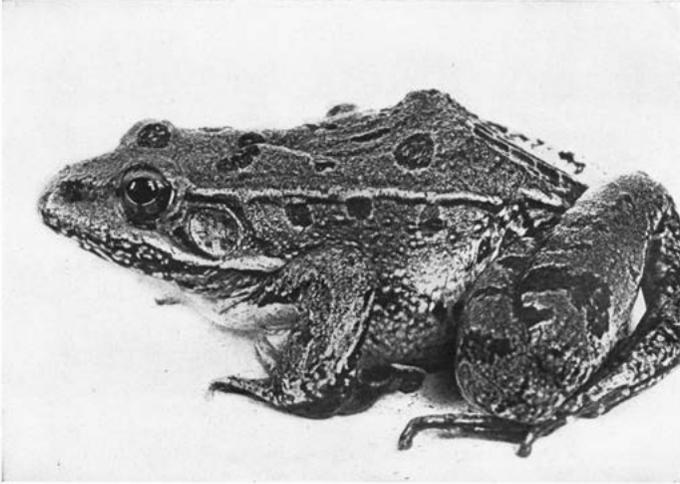


FIG. 200.—The COMMON LEOPARD FROG is wild when young; alert, active and strong when fullgrown. In Texas it attains a larger size than does this species in other parts of North America. The lateral folds are conspicuous; the skin may be rough with elongated warts.

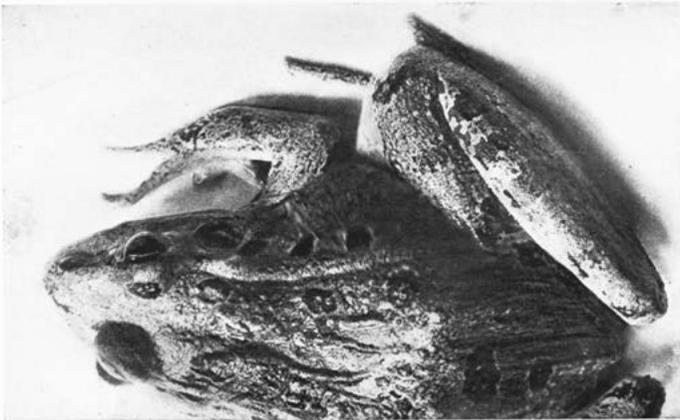


FIG. 201.—The COMMON LEOPARD FROG (*Rana pipiens* Shreber). Brownsville, Texas. Length 4 1/4 in. Light greyish brown with dark brown spots.

Fig. 2: Plate from *The Frog Book: North American Toads and Frogs with a Study of the Habits and Life Histories of Those of the Northeastern States*, by Mary C. Dickerson (1906).

The museum valued amateur collectors across its departments, recognizing that merchants, missionaries, and boys could help fill out collections. Herpetology skewed to boys, Dickerson knew. She advised a missionary with a side interest in reptiles to recruit “natives,” “preferably. . . boys of 10 to 16 years of age.” “Get a ‘gang’ of youngsters,” she wrote, “supply each with a collecting bag, and by an exhibition of enthusiasm and interest, stimulate them to turn over all the rubbish on a hillside, dig in likely places under overturned logs, tear apart all piles of debris, pull apart rotten logs, and tear loose all bark from trees and logs. Quantitative results can be counted on.”

To a school principal in Indiana: “I have \$1.50 for the boy who will find and ship to me half a dozen of the big spotted frogs that live in the crayfish holes and cultivated fields and meadows around Claremont. Can you turn this over to the right boy? In addition he will have his name on the records of the American Museum and will have helped the work in science. The school boys in New York—some half million of them—never saw or heard of this frog and will be interested to see it when they come to the Museum.” Best to ship frogs in five-gallon square kerosene cans, she said, adding the caution to punch holes from the inside out: a lesson learned from a shipment of frogs ripped to death on jagged edges.

Kerosene cans might have been good for shipping frogs, but empty cans were harbingers of the spread of petroleum technologies that would bring destruction to frogs, toads, and their swampy habitats. The beginnings felt harmless. Railroads, streetcar lines, and automobiles gave collectors easy access to places one historian of science beautifully described as “inner frontiers.” Dickerson’s collectors noticed that muddy tire ruts harbored salamanders and that lizards skittered along in dry ruts. Drivers flattened them. A man wrote describing the lizards that “seemed to enjoy getting into the narrow wagon wheel ruts and racing ahead of the auto, but as the latter was usually going at a 25 to 35 mile clip the races ended disastrously. I believe many hundreds were killed this way.” A collector from Virginia saw “a nice big fat juicy toad and was looking for others to keep him company on a trip to NY but he ventured onto the roadway and as I passed his lair yesterday

I found his sadly disarranged remains. I doubt if frogs and toads will become accustomed to having autos run over them. He was a monster and when he landed it sounded like two pounds of liver dropped on a slab of cold marble.”

Wearing her many hats, scuttling between departments, Dickerson earned \$1,500 a year and then, thanks to a small raise, \$2,000. (Somewhere around \$40,000 in today’s dollars and about what a schoolteacher would have been paid.) Dickerson also earned a string of complaints from her several bosses: that the storeroom was a mess, letters unanswered, a checklist of reptiles from Baja unfinished, and a guide to the Department of Woods and Forestry too sophisticated for “the thousands or hundreds of thousands of children and women, possessed of simple minds [who] will see the collection,” in the opinion of celebrity forester Gifford Pinchot. “Isn’t this good, addressed to a woman? Not that I don’t agree,” she penciled along the margin of Pinchot’s note, a sad comment that captures her peculiar situation. Insulted by Pinchot’s remark but tempted to agree with him, Dickerson seemed unable to imagine a community of like-minded women.

Early in these busy years, she posed for a portrait (fig. 3). Here she is a tight-lipped woman, more Victorian than modern, giving the camera a wary look.

And then, it seems, her professional and personal life began to unravel.

World War I added to the press of Dickerson’s work. The draft cut into her staff, and President Henry Fairfield Osborn cut into the working hours of the young men still in New York, borrowing from the museum weapon collection and ordering the able-bodied into the Philippine Hall for bayonet drills. Dickerson joined the museum women, organizing a Red Cross chapter and buying war bonds. Women sent money to orphaned children in Belgium, compiled a chatty newsletter for museum employees in the army, and knit socks and sweaters for an ill-equipped African American regiment shivering in Van Cortland Park in the Bronx.

The war seeped into Dickerson’s correspondence and rumbled through the work of her departments. Her boss, ichthyologist-armor-



Fig 3: Portrait of Mary C. Dickerson.

expert Bashford Dean sent the government a helmet design. (Too much like the German, a government official told him.) One man asked to borrow a caribou-skin suit he thought might protect pilots from the cold. Another offered to train seagulls to spot submarines, and another warned the Department of Woods and Forestry that a man he knew to be German might be planning to stuff maple seedpods with banned metals and pack them off to enemy naturalists. Dickerson took on additional tasks as museum staff volunteered with the Red Cross or turned to planning war-related exhibits on public health and food conservation. Barrington Moore, her talented assistant in Woods and Forestry, left for France to take charge of an Allied logging operation, “to take out of a given forest as large a yield as possible and to leave the forest silviculturally intact.”

Maybe thoughts of repurposed caribou suits and a forest intact in a war-ravaged landscape soothed Dickerson’s spirits as she began to lose the discipline or dedication that had sustained her through hard years as editor, researcher, cataloguer, and curator. None of this helped her finish her work on the checklist of lizards or the leaflet on forestry. By the end of 1918, things began to slip beyond her control. With candor, she apologized for lizard specimens too long on loan. “My own overwork, in several lines, with assistants away in war service, besides the deterring influence of a troubled mind, has deferred my research beyond what would seem the pardonable limit of time.” In her own words, she was “nervously broken down.”

As her countrymen suffered a devastating influenza epidemic and faced (or engineered) a postwar Red Scare and spasms of white-racist violence, Dickerson unraveled. Sympathetic colleagues thought the stress of overwork led to her breakdown, and President Osborn recommended a vacation. But that promise of relief in rest came too late. Wagging tongues traced her collapse to an encounter with a celebrity explorer named Vilhjalmur Stefansson.



Stefansson, the son of Icelandic immigrants, was born in Manitoba in 1879 and raised in North Dakota. He changed his name

from William Stephenson to Vilhjalmur Stefansson—its Icelandic equivalent—during his junior year at the University of North Dakota in Grand Forks. The name change got him noticed, which was what he wanted, but notoriety and an antiauthoritarian streak got him boot-ed out of the university. He finished his senior year at the University of Iowa, where he met a visiting Unitarian minister who recruited him for a program at the Harvard Divinity School. He left Iowa for Cambridge in 1903 and never looked back.

Divinity was not his calling. At Harvard, he peddled his knowledge of Norse sagas to the anthropology department and was hired to lead an expedition of undergraduates to Iceland in 1905. He went to Alaska in 1906, was in the north again with AMNH support from 1908 to 1912, and took a final trip for the Canadian government from 1914 to 1918—an expedition that added a last landmass to Canadian maps but led to the tragic deaths of eleven young scientists. In all, Stefansson spent ten winters and thirteen summers in the Arctic. A wordy man, he saw enough during those trips to write four hundred articles and twenty-four books. He boasted meeting with a group of “blond Eskimo,” who had never seen a white man, touted insights into the last days of “authentic” Eskimo life, and made promoting “the friendly Arctic” his signature issue.

With our taste for iconoclasts, rogues, and men who invent and reinvent themselves, with our efforts to understand the power relations behind intimate connections between white imperial adventurers and native women, and with our eyes again on the Arctic and on the handful of explorers who celebrated the skills of native peoples, Stefansson has come back into conversations. A broad-shouldered man with a long resumé and a smile that gave him the look of a handsome frog, he lived a good life, courted controversy, charmed reporters, became a fixture in Greenwich Village in the teens and twenties, a public figure in New York in the thirties and forties, and a celebrity on the Dartmouth campus in the 1950s (fig. 4).

It's likely Dickerson encountered Stefansson first as his editor. In 1908, with museum support, Stefansson had gone north with



Fig. 4: Portrait of Vilhjalmur Stefansson.

the zoologist Rudolf Anderson. The pair filed the field reports that Dickerson edited and published in the *Museum Journal*. She gave readers short descriptions of “Eskimo life and customs” and accounts of the explorers’ success living on seal meat, singed ptarmigan feathers, and whale tongue. “All results of the expedition will possess unusual value, representing as they do, work accomplished in spite of the almost insuperable obstacles set by the Arctic winter and the necessity of ‘turning Kogmollik’ (living like the Eskimo),” she wrote in an editor’s note.

Budget worries (and perhaps questions about his character) kept museum trustees from funding Stefansson’s third trip to the Arctic. Dickerson seems to have fallen victim to the charm campaign he devised for funders, her mind pulled across the thin line that sometimes

separates the salesman from the seducer. The Canadian government gave him money, and Stefansson headed back to the Arctic in 1914. He proved a better publicist than expedition leader, and in the cold months of a tragic winter eleven young members of that Canadian Arctic Expedition died after the aged whaling ship, the *Karluk*, was trapped in the ice and broke apart. In spring 1915, newspapers printed rumors that Stefansson himself was dead, although he had left the icebound ship for a seal hunt and made his way south while former shipmates suffered and died. Stefansson reappeared in New York in 1918, "coming out," as contemporaries put it, and back into the life of Mary Cynthia Dickerson.

He spent the next years crisscrossing the country, lecturing to audiences pleased by his ability to mix science, adventure, entertainment, and controversy. He left a child in the Arctic, like many of his contemporaries, and, like the screen stars of the 1920s, left an erotic disturbance in his wake. A packrat narcissist, he saved dozens of passionate letters from women who heard him speak.

Dickerson got caught in the whirl around Stefansson and his sexual adventures. She heard rumors at the museum that the Inupiat woman Pannigabluk was more than the expedition seamstress and ethnographic informant Stefansson had described. She was the mother of Stefansson's child, an offspring Dickerson was ready to welcome. "Some man," she wrote Stefansson in November 1918,

who had been in the western Arctic came to the museum and talked about the North a great deal. Of course, my heart was greedy for any words seeing he had come from where you had been. In the course of his talk I thought I would perhaps have the chance to whisper this to you someday he said Storkerson and you were squaw men. (I did not know the meaning until he explained), he had seen your son. This personal hurt, the jealousy, the lowering of my ideal of you, gave me a hard time for a few hours—and then I remembered. What? Only that that was just what I had been wishing for you. . . . To tell you that if you wished me to live in case anything happened to you, to please leave me one or more of your children, Eskimo or not, that had you in them.

Their paths crossed in the museum corridors and at events and lectures. In 1918 and 1919, she wrote him dozens of late-night letters describing her love and longing, filling both sides of museum letterhead that she had turned on its side. Looking at these letters, it's hard not to wonder if she remembered the memo that had come with the office letterhead. "My dear Miss Dickerson," the museum secretary explained, "at the request of the President, I am sending you herewith official letter-head paper to be used for official communications from your department to the office of the President, the office of the Director, and to various departments of the Museum. It is not the President's intention to have this paper used for correspondence outside the Museum." Nor was it his intention that the letterhead be used to record the love life of a lady scientist.

The letters are hard to read, leaving a historian trespassing on this woman's privacy. We will never know whether the letters record the justified ravings of a jilt or the thoughts of a woman caught by passion.

I love you so madly, the pain drives me and I must see you to tell—just that I give you all myself, friendship, love, for always, just because I must because you are you and I am I and irrespective of anything except that I may tell you. Seeing you and hearing your voice has knocked out all the rest of the world. What do I care whether the people in the museum I meet in the hall smile or frown. . . . There is no one but you. That is the thing the pain beating in my breast and throat, dear.

But perhaps there is something more in them than the private pain of unrequited love? The language itself seems to align her with the contemporary talk of sex that animated Village Bohemians. In Dickerson's case, words traveled uptown and across a generation. In the museum, though, the liberation others found snapped back and hit Dickerson with the sting of rejection and a scar of mental illness.

Obsession with Stefansson disrupted Dickerson's museum work. She did not hide her love for the man, whispering his name to hunter-taxidermist Carl Akeley, to museum secretary Sherwood, and even to her assistants. Higher-ups dogged her about the never-

completed checklist of lizards and finally, not sure what else to do, had her committed to Bellevue and then approved her release to a brother in Cleveland. She took a train right back to New York. On the recommendations of Dr. Foster Kennedy (the neurologist on call the December night Dickerson was taken off to Bellevue and a man who would go on to embrace eugenics and recommend “putting down” defective children at about age five), Dickerson’s family and colleagues arranged to move her from Bellevue and to an involuntary commitment in the New York State Hospital, the hulking four-thousand-bed institution on Wards Island in the East River.

As often happens in the workplace, the museum came alive with gossip. And as often happens in a museum, everything was saved—even the nastiest letters finding a spot in the institutional archives. “Miss D. adjudged a paranoiac! The Lord has delivered the enemy into the bug house I hope. She should have been there long ago,” the head of Harvard’s Museum of Comparative Zoology wrote to his Smithsonian counterpart, her erstwhile friend Leonhard Stejneger. Or a note to Stefansson from one of the museum assistants: “I somehow couldn’t any more connect you as falling in love with her than I could think of you as being really interested in a circus-rider or snake charmer. She is not at all in your class.”



A snake charmer? A mean comment about this scholar of frogs and toads. Yet those dismissals suggest that modern bureaucracies, even in a museum, had little tolerance for the fragile, unstable, or peculiar—even among naturalists (especially herpetologists) known for their strange ways. Or certainly when instability and eccentricity came dressed as a woman.

Dickerson arrived at the New York State Hospital on Christmas Eve 1920. She died there in April 1923, just as the spring peepers woke up to a new season. The concern of museum colleagues followed her through her last unhappy years. Did she have milk and eggs? A space to read or work? Was there any sign of improvement? Could

she finish a new leaflet for the Department of Woods and Forestry? (“I think of it very often,” she wrote, “and hunger to get at work on it.”) Museum trustees set aside funds for her “maintenance,” and Secretary Sherwood sent the hospital back issues of the *Museum Journal*, as though to give Dickerson’s doctors evidence that hers was a mind worth saving. He apologized to Dickerson that planning for the Second International Eugenics Conference had kept him too busy to visit.

Hospital superintendent Marcus Heyman assured the museum that “since Miss Dickerson has been here she has been quiet and has adjusted herself very well to the situation.” “She of course entertains many delusions of persecution which no doubt she maintained previously to her coming to the hospital,” he added. Back at the museum, colleagues wondered if Dickerson had a chance to “return to normal mentality.” Unlikely, her keepers said, with her fear of persecution and her “systemized dilusions [*sic*] centering about the Stephansson [*sic*] affair.” “She belongs to the type of case that rarely gets well or even shows improvement,” was Heyman’s unhappy conclusion.

I do not have Dickerson’s medical file, but my guess is that Heyman and his colleagues classed her among the erotomaniacs: patients described as paranoid, marked as delusional and given to erotic fantasies, and, particularly sad in her case, unlikely to recover. One sympathetic contemporary called erotomania the disease of “falling in love.” The less kind would have seen Dickerson as a victim of “Old Maid’s Insanity,” a condescending diagnosis of a disease “that usually appears in unprepossessing old maids, often of a religious life,” as Thomas Smith Clouston put it in his *Clinical Lectures on Mental Diseases* (1884). Repression, according to Clouston, aroused in these women “a grotesque and baseless passion for some casual acquaintance of the other sex.” I have hesitated to write this paragraph with its hint that a medical diagnosis is all we need to know about Dickerson’s story. But doing so robs the story of all the cultural richness that makes it worth telling, the details that give this suffering woman a place in the history of the early decades of the twentieth century and not just in a dust-caked drawer of medical records.

Women friends worried about her surroundings. How could anyone with Dickerson's love of nature recover in "that miserable place," the hulking hospital with its dark halls and crowded dormitories? "What wonder she is depressed," Alice Rich Northrop, a friend from the nature study movement, told Museum Secretary Sherwood. Somehow the museum and doctors had all forgotten one of that movement's central tenets—that the walks in a garden or through woods that helped make good citizens of immigrant children could also cure wandering minds and damaged souls. With faith in nature's therapeutic powers, Northrop proposed moving Dickerson to the Bloomingdale Asylum in White Plains where she could breathe fresh air, and "she would come in contact with people of her own kind," Northrop added. Dickerson's keepers deemed her case too hopeless for the private sanatorium.

Northrop, with her faith in nature and deep sympathy for the unhappy woman, is an unusual presence in the Dickerson file. Nagging official voices to the contrary, Northrop insisted that Dickerson "will doubtless be able to go on with some kind of work and live a useful life, only being a little 'queer' perhaps and after all are we not all of us that?"

It could be that acquaintance with grief and faith in the slow pace of emotional recoveries fueled Northrop's kindness and fed her sense that even the peculiar among us have a place. Like Dickerson, Northrop was a lady scientist. Tragedy twists their paths together, although Northrop had wealth and class that Dickerson did not. In 1889, Northrop had married John Northrop, a recent graduate of the Columbia School of Mines and nephew of sugar magnate Frederick Havemeyer. The couple spent a botanizing honeymoon in the Bahamas and settled back in Manhattan, she to teach botany to young women enrolled in the Normal College of the City of New York (forerunner to Hunter College); he to teach biology at Columbia. It could be Northrop modeled the sort of career that drew Dickerson to the biology department at the University of Chicago.

Life must have felt promising to the Northrops—newly married, jobs in New York, hundreds of plant specimens from the Bahamas to

catalogue, and a manuscript recounting their island travels. But on an unusually hot June day in 1891, John Northrop set fire to a demi-john of alcohol, and he burned to death. A week later Alice, “suffering greatly from the shock,” gave birth to a son, John Howard Northrop. Over the next three decades, traveling, teaching botany, and working to introduce nature study to New York City schoolchildren, Northrop found a way to live through her loss. (That son, born in the wash of tragedy, went on to win the Nobel Prize in chemistry in 1946.)

Northrop wished Dickerson could share nature’s therapy, and in the spring of 1922, she offered to drive her to a private asylum in the Berkshires. Once more, the staff at the state hospital deemed Dickerson’s case too hopeless to release her. And here the story takes one more tragic turn. On 7 May 1922, Northrop was killed when a train struck her car at a grade-level crossing near Mt. Riga in the Berkshire foothills. Local papers reported that “The tonneau was thrown all the way around and tossed off the track, and Mrs. Northrop and Mrs. Hirsch were flung forty feet into a ditch.”

This was the trip to the Berkshires that Northrop had promised Dickerson.

While Dickerson spent sorry months locked in the asylum on the island in the East River, Stefansson swanned his way around the country, packing crowds into summer Chautauqua tents. “A lecture every evening for 138 consecutive evenings is some job,” he complained from Salt Lake City in the summer of 1921.

The personality that warped Dickerson’s world worked its magic on summer audiences. But even in a Chautauqua tent his charm had a dark side. Stefansson’s descriptions captured the imagination of three young Americans and a Canadian, all longing for Arctic adventure. He enlisted them in an ill-fated attempt to stake a Canadian claim to Wrangel Island, a rocky outpost in the Arctic Ocean. The four young men died. Some historical reckonings leave the four as martyrs whose lives were lost in service of Stefansson’s signature idea of a “Friendly Arctic.” The lone survivor of the expedition was Ada Blackjack, an extraordinarily resourceful Inupiat woman hired as a cook and seamstress.

Again, Stefansson escaped fate's rebukes. His Arctic days behind him, a long career took him from a book-stuffed townhouse in Greenwich Village to a position overseeing his Arctic collection housed in the library at Dartmouth. He kept his name skirting through news stories of the twentieth century, an eccentric man who made good copy. The *New Yorker* ran a two-part profile in 1941. Readers could find him promoting an all-meat diet he'd learned in the Arctic, defending a Jewish "homeland" in Stalin's Siberia, predicting a polar route for European-bound aircraft, and tangling with anti-Communists on the House Un-American Activities Committee. He carried on a long affair with the novelist Fannie Hurst, which brought him into near orbit with Zora Neale Hurston, who sometimes chauffeured Hurst to trysts with Stefansson. Stefansson spent his last years minding his Arctic materials in New Hampshire and died there in 1962, at the age of eighty-two, hailed as "Klondike Stef," the last of the dogsled explorers.

We know that demons pursued Dickerson, but demons of a sort followed Stefansson too. A packrat collector with a narcissistic bent, he saved hundreds of letters from women he had aroused on the lecture circuit. He told the museum that he'd destroyed Dickerson's letters, but some years after his death, those letters turned up in a shoebox at a Vermont tag sale. Stefansson had saved them along with letters from dozens of women from stops on his lecture tours from Seattle to Winston-Salem. Had he slept with them—groupies on the road—or are their voices just records of the erotic longings that fuel a culture of celebrity?

About his collaborator Pannigabluk, the mother of his son, we know the least. By the time she encountered Stefansson in the 1910s, her world had begun its slow melt into modernity, but she knew traditional ways well enough to serve Stefansson as a crucial informant and how to leverage her knowledge to get some of the things she needed. In August 1915, she turned from the traditional practices that had made her so useful as an expedition seamstress and as an informant in Stefansson's "salvage ethnography" and asked him for \$5 to pay an Anglican priest at the Church of the Ascension in Inuvik to baptize Stefansson's five-year-old son Alex.

We could follow Alex and Alex's children on into another world, but that story would take us too far from the scrap of Dickerson news that appeared on the bottom of a page in the *New York Times* on 10 December 1920.



A last twist that brings us back to the “peculiar” behavior that worried the museum attendant. The screenwriter Alvah Bessie, who is best remembered for his place on the blacklisted Hollywood Ten (the writers and producers jailed for refusing to denounce comrades or confess their Communist-party affiliations to congressional investigators on the House Un-American Activities Committee) fictionalized Dickerson's story in a novella published in the 1950s. Bessie was a boy who liked snakes. As an undergraduate at Columbia in the 1920s, he worked as an intern in the herpetology department at the museum, a place where gossip preserved Dickerson's ghost. Bessie complained that sexing bottled snakes and typing labels for jars of alcohol-preserved specimens was tedious. Better to be a writer than a herpetologist, he decided. As a tribute to his boyish days, he made a character of Dickerson in a short story, “Susan Aldridge, *Requiescat*,” and had her enact his undergraduate revenge, roaming through her basement, slowly, patiently soaking labels off “the nine thousand bottles on the half-a-city block of shelves,” and, ever the scientist, pasting labels back on different jars. When the authorities arrive, she screams, “My life work! *You're taking me away from my life work!*” Picturing the scene, Bessie conjures an image from a movie released in 1920, the year she was taken from the museum. “Did she rub and ‘wash’ her hands as John Barrymore had done when he had metamorphosed from Dr. Jekyll into Mr. Hyde?” (fig. 5).

If the museum attendant who called the police was a moviegoing man, it's possible he saw *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* too: Miss Dickerson, the mad woman from the museum basement given the guise of a different Victorian figure, the mad scientist. Dickerson, the student of metamorphic creatures, moved through changes of her own. She was a student, a teacher, a colleague of scientists, a writer, a photographer,



Fig. 5: John Barrymore in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1920).

an observer of field creatures and swamp dwellers, an editor, a curator, a peculiar woman, a mad scientist, and, finally, “That awful animal, a ‘lady scientist.’”

The phrase belongs to Margaret Mead, the anthropologist who joined the museum staff in 1926 and stayed until her death in 1978. “Perhaps it was because I was given that little attic room with a view out over the city roofs,” she said, “that I decided within a few months that I was going to stay at the Museum all my life.” Far as she was from the herpetologist’s basement, the Bessie story makes me wonder if whispered tales of Dickerson—the first woman to hold the rank of curator in a scientific department—made their way up the museum stairs to Mead’s attic and had her thinking of Dickerson when she wrote to a lover in 1928, confessing that she shivered at the thought that she might become that “awful animal, a ‘lady scientist.’” Did the anthropologist picture the prim, unhappy, haunted herpetologist

trying to make her way from frog ponds and classrooms into the scientific establishment? Dickerson never capitalized on the metamorphic promise she must have seen in caterpillars and tadpoles, a magic that eluded a woman tangled by the personal and professional constraints of American life in the messy early decades of the twentieth century. Though in the end Dickerson haunted Bessie and Mead, maybe we should welcome her ghost and thank the herpetologist's shade for compelling us to open places for the few, the brave, and the peculiar.