

# Lowell R. Laudon and His Bushels of Fossils

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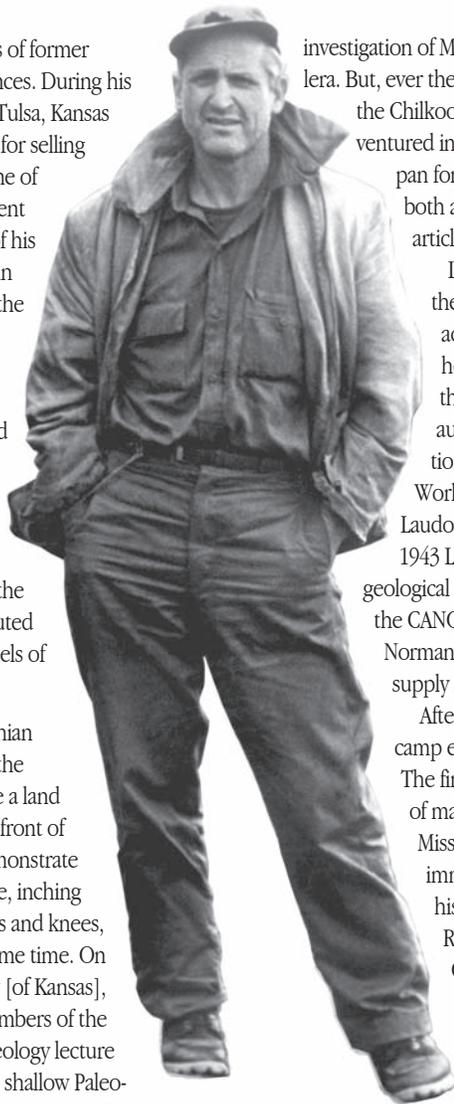
Lowell Robert Laudon is remembered by thousands of former students for his freshman lectures to packed audiences. During his forty-five-year teaching career at three universities, Tulsa, Kansas and Wisconsin, he developed an evangelistic fervor for selling geology to the impressionable young student. As one of his protégés remembered, "Doc could make a student think it was actually fun to collect fossils from one of his bushel basket localities while lying with one's belly in two inches of mud and rain pelting down." During the 1960s college enrollment explosion, Laudon taught two lecture sections with 500 students in each section every semester.

Some colleagues and graduate students criticized Laudon's introductory course as "Boy Scout Geology" because of his slide shows of rugged mountain scenery, wilderness camps, and large catches of fish, as well as his histrionics in demonstrating the evolution of life. This latter attribute of the course is captured in the following passage contributed by Walter Youngquist for Laudon's biography, *Bushels of Fossils* published in October by the department:

Each year when Laudon discussed the Devonian Period, he would reenact the emergence of the lungfish from the sea, as it sought to become a land dweller. Throwing himself upon the table in front of the large classroom, he would physically demonstrate the lungfish crawling out of the oceanic slime, inching himself across the lecture table on his elbows and knees, and continuing a verbal description at the same time. On one occasion, the president of the university [of Kansas], while conducting an inspection trip with members of the Board of Regents, opened the door of the geology lecture room as Lowell was floundering through the shallow Paleozoic seas on his annual trip across the lecture table. (p. 93).

Besides his fame as a lecturer, Laudon also pursued a distinguished research career in paleontology and stratigraphy. Although as a youth he was mostly interested in athletics and the great outdoors, he did enjoy collecting fossils during some western family vacation trips. It did not occur to him to major in geology, however, until he took a summer field course in 1926 with a University of Iowa professor in the Black Hills. Once he discovered geology, he raced through the Iowa program, earning the Bachelor's Degree in 1928, the Master's in 1929, and the PhD in 1930. Paleontology became his passion, especially Mississippian crinoids, which were the principal subject of both of his graduate theses.

Laudon completed his PhD at the beginning of the great depression and was very lucky to get a teaching position at the University of Tulsa. "Lowell was the last Iowa PhD to get a teaching job for several years," his wife, Florence, once observed. He began teaching at a salary of \$3000, but with the worsening economy in 1933, he had to accept a reduction of salary to \$1000 and to assume extra duties as Dean of Men and Assistant Registrar. In spite of such economic strictures, irrepressible Laudon managed from 1936 to 1938 to launch an important research program during vacation trips to New Mexico to study Mississippian strata and fossils. This was the beginning of a career-long



Lowell Laudon.

investigation of Mississippian rocks all up and down the western Cordillera. But, ever the romantic adventurer, he took time out in 1939 to hike the Chilkoot Trail to the Klondike with two students and in 1940 he ventured into the Honduras jungles with three other students to pan for gold. In characteristic fashion, he made the most of both adventures through public lectures and newspaper articles.

Laudon's numerous publications about crinoids attracted the attention of Raymond C. Moore, and in 1941 L.R. accepted a faculty position with Moore at Kansas, where he could conduct more research than at Tulsa and in part through collaboration with the older Moore. They co-authored the classic GSA Special Paper 46 on the "Evolution and Classification of Paleozoic Crinoids" (1943). When World War II began, Moore was called to active duty, leaving Laudon to take over the chairmanship of the department. In 1943 Laudon's own war effort was service as Party Chief for a geological reconnaissance in Canada's Northwest Territories for the CANOL project to build a pipeline south from the remote Norman Wells oil field near the Arctic Circle to provide an oil supply for Alaska safe from Japanese submarines.

After the war, L.R. began a series of high adventure field camp experiences with students into the western mountains. The first such roving field course in 1947 was the most heroic of many. Lowell had done some reconnaissance work on Mississippian strata along the Alcan or Alaska Highway immediately after the war and he now resolved to extend his Mississippian research southward in the Canadian Rockies. He selected remote Wapiti Lake in British Columbia as a promising site half way between the Alcan Highway and the accessible Jasper Park area farther south. But there was no road access to Wapiti Lake and to back pack in would take a week. Not to be deterred, he decided that the solution was to fly in and land on the lake. So Lowell took a second mortgage on his home to purchase an amphibious Republic Seabee plane, took flying lessons, and practiced landing on the Kaw River near Lawrence.

Laudon advertised the course widely and chose eight students, all servicemen who seemed well qualified for a rugged wilderness field course. Luckily one of them had been a pilot in the Navy, so he did most of the flying to the relief of everyone (including L.R.). The group had many hair raising and amusing experiences with bears, St. Elmo's fire during a thunderstorm, and chewing leathery mountain goat meat provided by the Great White Hunter himself. One notable outcome of that trip was the discovery of a world class Triassic fish locality high up near the continental divide. After Lowell reported this to the Geological Survey of Canada, the government built a road to Wapiti Lake and excavated the site, which is featured in the Tyrrell Museum at Drumheller, Alberta. Many of the students got MS theses from that trip and all were co-authors of a paper published in the AAPG Bulletin in 1949 describing the Devonian and Mississippian stratigraphy of the Wapiti Lake area. This was a very timely paper for the Alberta petroleum boom was just beginning with the discovery of large oil reserves in subsurface Devonian reefs.

In 1948 Lowell accepted a faculty position at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. He continued to lead wilderness field courses every summer until

**Photos, top to bottom:**

**Blackboard after a Laudon strat paleo class, c. 1952.** (Courtesy of Burt Amundson)

**Wapiti party, 1947: Gray, Sprang, Laudon, Stoneburner, McBee, Dietrick.** (Courtesy of Warren Hamilton)

**Tom Bailey and Doc, Alaska Highway, 1946.** (Courtesy of Bob Laudon)

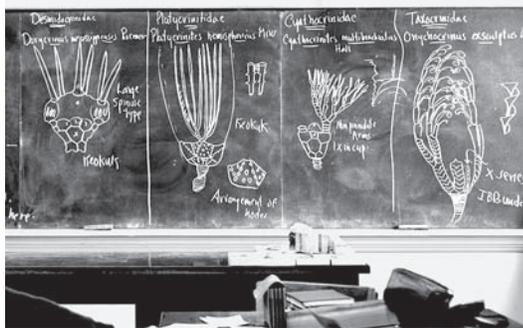
**Laudon's amphibious Seabee at Wapiti Lake.** (Courtesy of Warren Hamilton)

1953, when he began summer consulting work for the Humble Oil and Refining Company in Alaska and the Pacific Northwest. None of his subsequent field courses were quite so challenging as Wapiti Lake, but they did require substantial back packing into the high country of Montana and Alberta because the resistant Mississippian carbonate rocks everywhere form the highest ridges. The high-spirited adventures of several generations of students who took those courses are legendary.

"Always striving to stay ahead of civilization for field camps," as son Tom Laudon has observed, his dad stopped at Tagish Lake in the Yukon in the early sixties while driving the Alaska Highway. He decided at once that this might be a great place for a field course, and in 1967, he instituted a new field course at Madison, Geology 150, for students who had had only one introductory geology course. This was separate from, and not in competition with, the long-standing advanced field course taken by geology majors, which L.R. himself had begun in 1948 but which was now being taught by other, younger faculty members. This new Tagish Lake elementary course proved to be very popular and continued to be led by Lowell until he retired in 1975. Gordon Medaris accompanied Lowell during his last few years at Tagish Lake and then continued to lead the course for eight more years after Lowell retired. The popularity of the course was captured best in 2001 by Fox Network anchorwoman, Greta Van Susteren (BA 1976):

The professor I remember best was Lowell Laudon, geology. No contest. I went on a geology expedition to the Yukon Territory and had the best time of my life. Never a week goes by that I do not talk about that class. I was crazy about Professor Laudon. Of all of the great deal of education that I have had, that was the best course that I ever took. (p. 4)

On the way home in 1967, Laudon stopped to visit son Tom and his UW-Oshkosh field camp



located farther south in the Alberta Rockies and told him that he should consider Tagish Lake as a new site for his course. In 1968, the Oshkosh course did re-locate there and continued to do so until Tom retired in the 1990s. So Tagish Lake hosted not one, but two Wisconsin field courses for more than twenty years.

Lowell was a consummate paleontologist trained in the biostratigraphic tradition that began with William Smith around 1800 in Britain and continued for 150 years when paleobiology gradually shifted the emphasis away from stratigraphic paleontology. Coupled with his love of field work in remote, little-studied places (always

with good fishing), Laudon's mastery of stratigraphic paleontology made him a superb reconnaissance geologist. Set down blindfolded anywhere in the world where there were fossils, he could quickly locate himself within the stratigraphic column. This talent served him well throughout his career of teaching, research, and consulting throughout western North America. His passing in 1993 represented a historic watershed, for the field-oriented stratigraphy and regional geology that he represented so well had been largely superseded by more narrowly-focused topical field studies and more laboratory-oriented investigations. In paleontology, the emphasis was now upon evolution, and ecology—that is paleobiology—instead of the taxonomy and stratigraphic distribution of fossils.

Lowell Laudon is remembered in different ways by different people. Countless non-geology alumni of three universities remember those freshman lectures laced with yarns and slides of field adventures and fishing exploits. His many former graduate students remember Doc's incredible energy as he raced them up a mountain and then razzed them good humoredly around the campfire because they found so few fossils. Fishing and hunting buddies remember fondly trying unsuccessfully to catch as many fish or shoot as many ducks as did "The Old Man." Many also remember the warm hospitality at Laudon Manor where every visitor was charmed by Florence Laudon's relaxed hospitality.

Former student Hubert H. Hall, Jr. reminisced:

I shall think of him as I saw him that day, a bronzed figure with khaki shirt sleeves rolled up, carrying a musette bag and a geology pick. If there is a heaven for geologists, that is where he is now, pigeon toeing along a mountain ledge, headed for an outcrop where the fossils are so perfect and plentiful that he can just rake them in by the bushel basketful.

Bushels of Fossils written by James Parks and assisted by F.D. Holland, Jr., both Laudon's students, contains illustrated details of Laudon's career richly laced with anecdotes of which the above remarks are but a small sample. All profits from the book that come back to the department will go to the Laudon Scholarship Fund. If you have not already obtained a copy of the book, or one for a friend or relative, **an order form is provided on page 67.** ●