

Moving My Family to Michigan

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Lorrie and I moved our family and meager belongings to Ann Arbor in 1957. We came with misgivings galore. First, I never thought I would move to a climate more northern than the ones I had experienced in central Illinois growing up and central Ohio as a graduate student. From days in the Army in Kentucky and field work all over eastern United States, I knew that I liked the South. Second, I had never planned to be a museum curator, although I was going to the University of Michigan to do just that. Some of my fellow graduate students at Ohio State may remember a loud and arrogant proclamation I made one day to the effect that *I would never* be found working in a museum. Third, after we had accepted the job at the U-M, we discovered that we could not afford to rent an apartment on the \$5200 salary we were promised, for 12 months of being an instructor and curator. Eventually we went in desperation to the director of housing and he placed us temporarily in an old house they were going to tear down in about a year, not far from the Museum of Zoology where my office would be. We paid \$100 rent each month.

Fourth, when I had moved my professional gear some weeks before the family moved, I had found my office in the Museum of Zoology still occupied by a disgruntled postdoctoral fellow whom I eventually realized was resenting my new position because he had erroneously believed he was going to acquire the position I would be holding. In subsequent thoughts about this situation, I recognized uneasily that the disgruntled person may have been removed from a position that had been at least partly accepted. But I had no way of knowing, and no possibility of causing any significant changes. The situation was, of course, in control of the Head of the Department and the Director of the Museum. Later, Professor Brown commented in my presence that when the postdoc who was concerned about his position came to Brown's office intending to discuss the other fellow's future, Brown listened to him a while and then stated that he would have to explain his future to his own department head -- meaning someone else in another university. I followed that individual's life, paying some attention to his position. I admit that an event of this kind would always leave me feeling very curious and uneasy, partly because I felt that the individual who was at odds with his previous administrators may have been treated badly. I am glad that, later, my efforts to follow that person's life revealed that he knew how to establish an obviously satisfactory life for himself and his family.

No one appeared to assist me in moving in, and the existing inhabitant of my eventual office had not separated himself from the office. So I had to find a corner in the Insect Division storeroom in which to stack my gear temporarily. As I was piling my stuff there, a very large, buxom, and perhaps unusually overbearing middle-aged woman appeared, informed me that she was the senior member of the Insect Division, and that if I wanted anything I would have to get it from her. She turned out to be the stockroom clerk, and she had Norwegian immigrant parents, a Phi Beta Kappa pin, a degree in biology, a history of operating as a virtual curator of insects, and a seemingly unshakable belief that she was in charge of just about everything. As she turned to leave after her pronouncement to me, which I had accepted in a somewhat awed

silence, she unfortunately passed gas noisily and inadvertently. Whirling back in confusion, she stammered at me for a moment and then hurried out. I viewed that episode sadly as a somewhat appropriate culmination of my inauspicious moving-in process.

A week or so later one of my first requests to this lady in her official capacity as stockroom clerk was for two red pencils. She rose from her chair without a word, silently opened the supply cabinet just far enough to get her hand into the pencil boxes -- not farther, I realized, for I might see something in there I could use but didn't know was there. I finally obtained two red pencils. As she handed them to me, she asked, sternly and pointedly, "One for each hand, I presume?"

Several months later I asked that lady if she had any four by six-inch cards. She stammered a moment, and then said perfectly clearly, "We don't stock those." I started to turn away, but by that time I realized that an alarm bell was sounding somewhere inside my brain. I stopped, turned back, and asked her again if she nevertheless had any of those cards. She gave the same reply, and I felt that I was beginning to know her. I said, "Yes, I understand that you don't stock them, but *do you have any?*" She stammered and stuttered again, eventually blurting the quick sentence, "Yes, but they were ordered for J. Speed Rogers." "Well," I said wearily, "Since Professor Rogers died five years ago, perhaps you could let me have some of the cards?" There were other problems involving the stockroom clerk, but in the end, everything eventually seemed to function effectively.

When Lorrie and I first came to Ann Arbor, there were many other reasons for uneasiness. I had been assigned to teach in the introductory zoology labs, rather than in my specialty, entomology, and my title of instructor placed me scarcely above the graduate student teaching assistants who had essentially the same kind of job. I had never curated in a museum and I knew little about what might be involved. My claim to appropriateness as a budding curator was that I worked on the systematics (classification) of two groups, the Cicadidae (cicadas) and the Orthoptera (the latter including crickets, katydids, grasshoppers, and their relatives). But the primary tool with which I at least began my work was a tape recorder. I used the sounds of the insects as openers into their general behavior, ecology, life history, and taxonomic similarities and differences. Studies of insect sounds were in their infancy then, because the first battery-operated tape recorders had only been made useful about the time I began doctoral work (1953), and the analyzing devices (audiospectrographs) were novel machines designed for other purposes and still somewhat controversial. I knew that both of the Orthopterists at Michigan -- Theodore H. Hubbell, the Director of the Museum of Zoology, and Irving Cantrall, an insect curator and close associate of Hubbell's -- still looked with some skepticism on this new and unorthodox approach, and many established orthopteran taxonomists doubted the value of my approach. I had sensed a rather widespread skepticism in the room when I gave my job seminar several months before, on the origin and evolution of sound production in the Orthoptera. I was actually surprised that I had been offered the job. I also felt that Hubbell and Cantrall knew so much more about the Orthoptera as to make my presence in the Museum of Zoology perhaps superfluous.

Lorrie and I didn't have enough money to hire our belongings moved in the usual fashion, so we scouted around Columbus, Ohio, until we found an old fellow with a ramshackle truck who agreed to move us, without insurance, for a modest fee, if I would serve as his helper. We didn't have much to move, mostly old furniture our parents had given us and a small refrigerator and a washer we had purchased during my graduate years. But those things wouldn't fit into the ancient utility trailer we had bought years before in Kentucky and had used to move from one kind of graduate student housing to another several times. We had just spent every extra cent we had to pay off a loan I had taken years before as an undergraduate from the Methodist Student Loan Fund in Normal, Illinois, so we were arriving in Michigan without any debts, but virtually penniless.

During my first days on campus, I remember a young Professor Tom Moore, about my age, walking me to the Natural Science Building one day and pointing out two zoology faculty members crossing the street to the League for coffee. I stared at them glumly, wondering which of the names I had just scanned in the telephone book -- none of which was familiar to me -- they might represent. One of them was a seemingly oddly constructed individual whose knees tended to bend backward when he walked. He had an over-sized head and the beginnings of an oversized middle. His belly and his pelvis seemed to precede the rest of his body. He was wearing a suit and tie. For some reason that I cannot explain, I said to Tom, "That person must be Slobodkin," and to my surprise Tom immediately verified this snap judgment. Very shortly I was to learn that Slobodkin was one of the truly hotshot young members of the faculty, a man who had attended a science high school in New York as a youngster, and obtained his Ph.D at the age of 21 from Yale, working under the renowned ecologist, G. Evelyn Hutchinson. The students who associated with him informed me that his I.Q. was somewhere well above the genius class, in the 160's as I recall. I wondered how they had discovered that tidbit of information, but I said nothing else about it.

Many years later Larry Slobodkin told me he had once ordered a suit made for him by a tailor in Scotland. He said he was a little nervous as the fellow was kneeling beside him taking measurements, and he had said, "I usually have trouble getting suits fitted properly." The kneeling man went on measuring a bit longer, then paused, drew himself back a little, looked Larry over, and said, "Aye, mon, ye are a wee bit crooked!"

The two faculty hired the same year I was -- David Shappirio and Roger Milkman -- came from Harvard, where they had both worked under internationally known biologists. Slightly older biologists were Nelson Hairston, who had worked with Thomas Park at Northwestern, and Fred Smith, who had also graduated from Yale, working with Hutchinson. No one there knew my advisor, or anyone else at Ohio State. I noticed that zoologists at Michigan talked about problems and projects that I had never heard of, and that made trivial but unnerving things like the fact that some of them also pronounced centigrade, "sahntigrade," seem infinitely more important to me. I saw such things as additional bits of evidence that an Illinois farm kid with a degree from Ohio State didn't have much likelihood of making it at The University of Michigan.

On the first morning that I walked over to the Natural Science building to teach a zoology lab, I felt rotten. My fingernails were chewed to the quick, and I had not slept the night before. I had experienced enough of the University to believe myself entirely out of place there, and I could not imagine doing a reasonable job of teaching those students. I was sure that all of them knew more than I did about zoology. I remember meeting a janitor in the hallway a little distance from my classroom and wanting desperately to change places with him. My uneasiness and lack of confidence were quickly transmitted to the students that first semester, and for that and other reasons I expect I did a fairly miserable job of teaching. I remained glum and uncertain, and I figured I'd have to move rather soon.

At the end of that first year, Professor Hubbell appeared in my office one day to announce briefly that, owing to the budget crunch in the state of Michigan, there was no money with which to give me a raise. I still don't know how I mustered the courage to respond as I did, or where the words came from. I simply said, as he was withdrawing from my office door, "All right, but I am looking for another job." Hubbell's face reappeared in the door with a surprised look on it, and he said, "But you can't do that!" I said, "Why not? I came to Michigan with a 15-month postdoctoral fellowship behind me, yet I received the lowest salary of anyone who left Ohio State this year. Moreover, I am the only one whose nine-month salary was distributed among the 12 months of my job. Now you are telling me there is no money for a raise at the end of my first year. So I think I must look elsewhere." Dr. Hubbell stood there in silence for a long moment and then said quietly, "I'll see what I can do." Later he informed me that my salary for the second year would be \$6300.

The only other time I ever discussed salary with Hubbell was in 1961, the year after I received the American Association for the Advancement of Science Prize. Apparently, only one other University of Michigan faculty member, an industrial psychologist, had received this award, which one older biology faculty member told me was sometimes called "The Little Nobel Prize." It was then the only prize given (sequentially) by the AAAS, then the largest scientific organization in the world.

Hubbell and I were having coffee one morning about a year after I was informed of the AAAS prize, and he told me that when he received his PhD degree, when he was virtually middle-aged, he had to take a cut in salary from his high school teaching job when he started teaching in college. Something must have snapped inside me, for I said in reply, "That's not a surprise. The year I received the AAAS Prize, my mother got a bigger raise, and she has only one year of college work, and she teaches second grade." Hubbell looked startled and mumbled out the surprising comment that because the award included an honorarium of \$3000, he figured that I hadn't needed a raise!

I never again complained about my salary or any raise at the University of Michigan. Nor was there any other reason for me ever to complain about Hubbell's performance as Director of the Museum of Zoology. Many years later, when he was retiring at the age of 69, and I had discovered that the Dean was apparently going to allow him to retire without searching for a Director and simply allow one of our staff members become the new director by fiat, I wrote

and circulated a petition asking him to appoint Hubbell for an extraordinary extra year. I took the petition to the fellow who expected to be the new director to have it signed last, and he had little choice. He was a particularly pleasant and affable person, but I felt that he did not "think big" and as a result, I believed, would surely hurt the Museum. The Dean said it was the only unanimous petition he had ever seen from the members of an academic unit. He granted it, and Hubbell accepted. The fellow the Dean was going to allow to become Director eventually left to become the head of a similar unit in another state. He was a pleasant and good-natured biologist, and his performance there bore out my prediction. I always regarded him as a special friend and one of the nicest people I have known in Academia. I was later invited to present two lectures at his university, and he introduced both of them.

Hubbell was not only responsible for my remaining at Michigan, but he got me there in the first place. In 1955, my doctoral advisor, Donald J. Borror, was asked to give a talk in a symposium at the Entomological Society of America meetings in Cincinnati, in a symposium on "New approaches to systematics." He decided he didn't have anything to say to entomologists on that subject that year, and so he suggested that I speak in his place. The program organizers agreed, and I went. I had already submitted a paper on field cricket taxonomy, and at first I thought that would preclude my speaking in the symposium. I was so naive that I thought you could only give one paper at a meeting. When they told me that wasn't so, I worked up a talk more general than the other one, titled, "The use of insect sounds in systematics."

The chairman of the symposium was Howard Evans, the man who almost became my doctoral advisor because my undergraduate entomology professor at Illinois State Normal, Donald T. Ries, was a friend of his and had gotten him to agree to give me a fellowship if I would go to Cornell. I chose Ohio State instead (where another professor, Dr. E. M. R. Lamkey, had secured a teaching assistantship for me through his old college roommate, Alvah Peterson) because it was closer to my home in Illinois. So Borror became my doctoral advisor instead of Evans. I didn't mention any of this to Howard Evans for many years. I happened to get into the National Academy of Sciences before he did, and I nominated him for the Alfred Giraud Elliott Medal after I had received it and was serving on the award committee. He won it, and although he had already left Harvard (where he went from Cornell) for Colorado State, he made it into the Academy afterward, partly because he had received the Elliott Medal. As G. Evelyn Hutchinson said in my presence about another case, it "brought him to the attention of the Academy."

Some time later I reminded Howard Evans that I almost became his first graduate student. It really buoyed me when his face lit up at this jog of his memory, and also when I later heard him at a bar in an entomology meeting in Cincinnati, telling someone enthusiastically, "You know, Alexander almost became my first doctoral student!" Evans had been one of my biological heroes because of his remarkable field work and his writing ability. I have always wondered what would have happened to my career if I had gone to Cornell instead of Ohio State and worked on the behavior of social wasps, which has intrigued me about as much as the behavior and systematics of crickets and katydids. In Australia Dan Otte and I transferred our Land Rover to Howard Evans using a fraction of their expense. We provided only what we needed to use in shipping all of our specimens to the University of Michigan Museum of Zoology.

T. H. Hubbell was the chair of the 1955 session in Cincinnati in which I gave the paper on field crickets. I was explaining that by recording and analyzing field cricket sounds I had discovered that there were six or seven different kinds in eastern United States that had not previously been distinguished. I was careful not to call them species because I wanted that realization to sink in without belaboring it. I wanted to *show* that they were species rather than *claim* it. When I finished my talk an amateur entomologist from Detroit named George Steyskal, a friend of Hubbell's who worked on flies and was an honorary curator at the University of Michigan Museum of Zoology, later becoming a curator at the Smithsonian Institution, raised his hand and said, "I think what you're dealing with there are perfectly good species." I said I thought so too, I just hadn't used that designation and I hadn't described them formally yet, but I intended to. Hubbell stood beside me with his head ducked in the way I would learn he often does and said, "But what are you going to do about the poor museum curator who will not be able to separate the pinned specimens in his collection?" He was referring to the fact that I had not yet presented information on structural differences that would enable anyone to distinguish preserved specimens. I had thought a good deal about the attitude his question seemed to express, and so I ended my reply, rather loudly -- and arrogantly, I am afraid, as young people do sometimes. I said, "If I were a museum curator, I would rather label a specimen '*Gryllus* species' and know it was right than label it '*Gryllus assimilis*' and know it was wrong!" Hubbell gave a little contemplative grimace and half-nod of either approval or skepticism, or maybe tentative acceptance of this remark. And the meeting went on.

I have always considered it an indicator of the measure of this man that he hired me as a curator in his museum the very next year. Many lesser men in academia might have reacted in the opposite fashion, regarding me as an arrogant upstart and potential competitor who had said something insulting, and who was precisely the opposite to the kind of person he would like to have on his staff and have to see and interact with every day, or help secure promotions and raises. Thirty-three years later, when Hubbell was almost 92 years old, he told me for the first time that he had been impressed at that meeting because I had come to him afterward and explained that I had not meant to be impolite, nor did I say what I did just to disagree with him, but that I felt very strongly on the point. I hadn't even remembered doing that, but I certainly am glad I did.

The year I received the PhD degree, I sent copies of my curriculum vitae more or less all over the country. I think I mailed out 250 copies, to every university and college that I thought might have a position. My friends thought it was a ridiculous way to search for a job, and they were probably right. But I thought that things were much more straightforward than I know now they are. I thought that all I had to do was call myself to everyone's attention and one of them would have a position for me. I didn't realize I might be lowering my status in the eyes of prospective employers by "going begging" this way. At least that's what my fellow students thought about it.

But one college did reply. I got a letter from the president of Eastern Illinois State Teacher's College in Charleston, Illinois, asking me to come over and give a seminar and go on a field trip

with the biology people on a certain Monday. I wrote back that I would be there, and I started packing my stuff the Saturday before. My advisor, Donald Borrer, had tried to get me a postdoctoral fellowship through the National Science Foundation, but he had already informed me that they had turned him down. I knew that another professor, Dr. Dwight M. DeLong, had said he was going to telephone the Rockefeller Foundation and seek a fellowship for me, but I thought Doc DeLong, although he was a fine fellow and a friend to the students, I believed that any kind of fellowship was unlikely.

As I have said elsewhere, it turned out that Don Borrer went to work on the Saturday morning I was packing to leave for Illinois on Sunday morning on a bus. Borrer found in his mailbox there a telegram from the Rockefeller Foundation that ultimately allowed me \$7800 for 15 months of postdoctoral work, no strings attached. He went to the trouble of calling me that afternoon, and I was stunned. My moral psyche being what it was at that time, if I had gone to lecture at the Eastern Illinois State Teachers College, and they had offered me the position, I would have taken it, and then I would have rejected the Rockefeller Foundation money when I returned. But Borrer's devotion to his job prevented that from happening. The next year, as it turned out, DeLong and Hubbell were on a committee together and did some talking about me (I was surprised only later). Hubbell wanted to know what Doc DeLong thought of me, and Doc must have filled his ear, for Hubbell wrote me the next year that he would like me to come up for a seminar, even though he had to manufacture the position for which I would be considered.

There's still another twist to how I got that job. I really didn't want to go to Michigan. Instead I wanted to go to the University of Illinois, which was only about 15 miles from where I had grown up. When I was a boy I used to hike up and down the river from our farm looking for animals and adventures. On one or several of those trips I fell in love with a small piece of land across the road from one of my grandfather's farms, along the Sangamon River, and planned to build a house on it and turn it into a little farm that would eventually earn my living for my family. I used to sit in high school classes and draw maps of that farm and plot out where the buildings would be located, where each crop would be grown, how the fences would run, and such like. In college I hadn't forgotten that farm. The University of Illinois wasn't advertising any entomology jobs for 1957, but I took the bull by the horns and wrote a letter to the department chairman there, Leigh Chadwick, and asked him if he had a position I could fit into. My fellow graduate students at Ohio State really laughed at me for that, and told me that absolutely was not the way to get a job. But I thought, what did I have to lose? And I wanted to find out about Illinois before I had to make a decision at Michigan, should that problem arise.

Chadwick wrote me back that there were no positions at Illinois, but if I would give him some time, he would see what he could do. I didn't take that very seriously, and so when Dugald Brown, the Zoology Department chairman at Michigan walked me outside Hubbell's door at the party following my seminar there and asked me if \$5200 was a satisfactory salary, I immediately said yes. Brown also invited me to his office and asked me what equipment I would need for my research. I was surprised, but I gave him the complete list -- tape recorders, audiospectrographs, sound filters, microphones, and the works. He wrote it all down and said, "I'll have it here when you come." Brown was not a museum kind of scientist, but he was true

to his word, and I have always thought that was an indication of a distinguished departmental chairman. My job at Michigan was half-time in the Department of Zoology, under Brown, and half-time in the Museum of Zoology, under Hubbell.

When I returned to Ohio State after agreeing to take the Michigan job, I received a disturbing letter from Illinois. Leigh Chadwick had not been kidding. He had indeed done some looking around and now was asking me to come and give a job seminar. I was stunned. I wrote him back and explained embarrassedly that I had already taken a job at Michigan. Borrer chuckled when he heard that, and he said, "Next time he'll send a telegram!" But I felt bad about that for years, because I had pretty much poured out my soul in the letter to Chadwick, and I felt that he probably thought now that I was just giving him a line. Some 15 years later, after he had retired, I saw him sitting alone on a bar stool in the Cincinnati hotel where I was staying for the Entomological Society of America meeting. I went up and sat down beside him and introduced myself. But he knew who I was. I asked if he remembered the letter I had written him from Ohio State many years before. He did. So I told him the story I have just told here and said that I had always felt bad about that and wanted to explain it to him because I had meant every word I had written to him and I actually hadn't expected Michigan to impress me at all. He looked at me and said, "I am glad you told me that." He said that he had indeed wondered about my motives, and he seemed pleased as punch to get it straight and to know that I hadn't been pulling his leg. That was one of the few impulsive things I have done in my life that caused me to feel better permanently. Later, when some of my associates were nearby, I was startled and impressed when I heard Chadwick tell Howard Evans that I had almost become a member of his department.

Lorrie and I have happily operated our current 80-acre livestock farm since 1974. Nevertheless, I still wonder if I would have been living on that little plot of land along the Sangamon River, where I rode my pony as a kid, if Leigh Chadwick had written me back more swiftly. I think about it every time I drive past that place, and I do that every chance I get when I am in Illinois visiting relatives and friends.

One day while I was driving to work after being at Michigan for almost 30 years, I suddenly realized for the first time that I am doing the precise thing I used to daydream about in high school, only on a different plot of land. I turn my mind to planning changes on our delightful Michigan farm whenever I am bored or need something pleasant to put me to sleep or keep me awake.

Postscript: In 2005, the seventh edition of Borrer and DeLong's *Biology of Insects* was published, later under the title *Borrer's Biology of Insects*, and now authored still differently by Charles (Chuck) A. Triplehorn and Norman F. Thomson. It has been continuously in print since its original publication in 1954, which must come close to being a record for an entomology textbook – or perhaps any textbook at all. Chuck tells me he has already started preparing the next edition. The acoustical laboratory at the Ohio State University is named *The Donald J. Borrer Acoustical Laboratory*. I have been delighted that the various editions, at least for a long time, have continued to include many of my more than 40 drawings, made for Dr. Borrer in the

summer of 1951, and most in the later versions of the Borrer, DeLong, Triplehorn, Thomson. Especially, I have been delighted that the current publishers asked for two additional drawings that I had done more recently.