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### Phi Beta Delta Presentation - Lawrence Bruner

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**Phi Beta Delta Presentation – Lawrence Bruner**  
**April 30, 2003**  
**Andrews Hall, UNL**  
**John C. Owens**  
**NU Vice President and IANR Harlan Vice Chancellor**

A year ago I had "the privilege" of being inducted into Phi Beta Delta, and at that time I was invited "to speak" at the next induction-ceremony, which it is my-pleasure to do today. I am delighted to have this opportunity to congratulate our scholarship recipient, our "new" inductees, Peter Gleick, President of the Pacific Institute for Studies in Development, Environment, and Security, and Merlyn Carlson, Director of the Nebraska Department of Agriculture and a member of the Governor's cabinet, on their "honorary memberships" in the society. I want to acknowledge Harriet Turner, Director of International affairs, for her fine work on behalf of the university and us all, *Dean-Emeritus Merlin Lawson - tremendous contributions to the Univ.* and I want to "thank all members of this society of international scholars for "the important work" you do, not only for Nebraska but, indeed, for our world.

Since my induction into Phi Beta Delta, I've had several conversations with Dr. David Keith, President of our Nebraska chapter, as to what "might be" an interesting topic today. Dave suggested a "brief talk" on Professor Lawrence Bruner who, as far as we know, is responsible for the University of Nebraska's "first" international program. As a person who enjoys history and who began my career in entomology, this is "a topic" to make my heart glad. I thank Dave for his enthusiasm for Professor Bruner and for all his assistance as I prepared my talk today. The "only" problem with my assignment is that of making today's talk a *brief* presentation! Lawrence Bruner, a pioneering scientist in entomology and ornithology who worked "to-help" the farmers of our state, is someone I would like to tell you "much more" about than our time permits this afternoon.

An early leader in developing his own sciences and related scientific organizations, Bruner was known as a great teacher who

① Justin Morrill -  
L.G. in.  
American  
of  
Canada!  
② My Great-Great  
Heinrich  
Engelkelet  
FEB  
2000

"mentored" talented students, as well as a distinguished citizen and a caring family man. To set the stage for Bruner's appearance and importance in Nebraska history, it helps to consider "a few" independent events that "converged" to create the circumstances and ~~THE~~ opportunities for his many contributions.

The Louisiana Purchase, in which the Nebraska Territory that became Bruner's home when he was an infant and accounted for a "major-portion" of Lewis and Clark's so-called "Great American Desert", is "one" of the key events. "Second" is the grasshopper outbreak of 1873 - 1876, which made a "lasting impression" on Bruner as a young boy. Clouds of grasshoppers, primarily the Rocky Mountain Locust, spread out of Nebraska's vast sea of prairie grasses to literally blot out the sun. When they landed, they laid waste to virtually everything green, eliminating the year's crop and "the food" on which pioneer families depended "both" for themselves and their livestock. In 1874 the outbreak was "so bad"

that there was “serious-debate” on whether or not Nebraska could “sustain” human-settlement.

“The third major event” was the Morrill Act of 1862, which created the land-grant universities and “from-which” grew our own University of Nebraska, where Bruner studied and later built his “distinguished” scientific-career.

Born a Quaker in Pennsylvania in 1856, Lawrence was the “second-child” of Uriah and Amelia Bruner, whose family eventually grew to 9 children. When Lawrence was only six weeks old, the Bruners traveled by both train and stagecoach to Omaha where they settled on a “small-farm” north of town. From there the family moved to the community of West Point just about the time West Point was founded. Lawrence, who early on demonstrated “great interest” in the various “creatures” inhabiting fields and woods, was known to “dismay” his parents when, assigned to plow a field, he’d stop the team to lie on the ground and “observe” the grasshoppers.

West Point was Bruner's home from 1869 until he began working for the University in 1888. He had a certain amount of fame in his community, but not, he used to joke, as much for the value of his insect studies as for the fact that most West Point residents simply didn't understand what possible good could come of hours spent studying grasshoppers, ants, and other "bugs." They didn't always ponder that in silence, Bruner used to note, and were perhaps more concerned with his mental state than with the scientific value of his studies!

Bruner published his very first paper on grasshoppers of Nebraska in 1876. Through correspondence, he linked up with Samuel Scudder, a premier authority on grasshoppers, at Harvard University. For many years Scudder introduced to science Bruner's numerous insect discoveries as Bruner sent the specimens to him.

In 1877 the U. S. government, concerned primarily about Rocky Mountain Locust depredations, formed the U. S.

Entomological Commission in Washington, D.C. When two of the three most-learned economic entomologists of the time – Charles V Riley and Cyrus Thomas – visited Nebraska to investigate the grasshopper depredation here, they contacted Bruner. He began “assisting” the Commission in grasshopper investigations in 1878, and was appointed an Assistant to the Commission in 1880. He served the Commission and later the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Division of Entomology for eight years.

Bruner traveled widely in his work, by train, by wagon, and on horseback, through many Plains and western “states and territories,” making “extensive trips” from 1880-1884 to study grasshoppers.

These were the days of smallpox outbreaks, short supplies, and the “ever-present” challenges of Plains and western weather. He was not deterred. On his trips Bruner took notes and collected specimens “extensively.”

Bruner married Marcia Dewell of Little Sioux, Iowa in 1882

and their honeymoon was a trip to Washington D.C. Entomologist L.O. Howard recalled that trip, as well as a telegram he received sometime later from Bruner announcing the birth of a daughter. In his congratulatory-reply, Howard said if Bruner would name the baby Psyche, which is a genus of caddisfly found in trout streams and clear water rivers, the entire United States Division of Entomology would stand as her godfather. Baby Psyche received a silver cup from the federal entomological corps in Washington!

When a student at the University of Nebraska, Bruner studied under Professor Samuel Aughey (Aug-ee), and early on, he took up Aughey's ( ) interest in birds as natural-control agents for insects. Bruner remained interested in birds all his life. In 1888 Bruner joined Aughey ( ) at the University of Nebraska when Bruner was appointed entomologist of the Nebraska State Agricultural Experiment Station. In 1890 Bruner began offering a course in entomology at the university; in 1895 the Department of



Entomology and Ornithology was formed with Bruner's only professor. In 1899 Bruner became the first President of the Nebraska Ornithologists' Union.

During his years as a professor, the den of Bruner's home at 2314 South 17<sup>th</sup> St. in Lincoln, which housed his personal library and insect collections, became a laboratory, as well as a haven for "his boys" – university students who came there at all hours of the day to talk, study, write papers, and learn from their professor. Many of Bruner's students later became well known, worldwide, in the field of entomology – the most famous may be Harry S. Smith, who married Bruner's daughter Psyche and who became a key leader in development of biological control, which is the process of engaging beneficial insects, mites, and microbes in an effort to "manage" populations of pest insects. In turn, one of Smith's students at the University of California at Berkeley was Paul DeBach ~~who~~ who became the leading authority on biological control

and wrote many distinguished books-and-papers on this key topic.

This distinguished “chain” of students is “a part” of Bruner’s scientific legacy.

It was his detailed study and great knowledge of grasshoppers that led to Bruner’s work in Argentina at the end of the 1800s where he was, as far as we know, “the first” University of Nebraska professor to conduct an invited international program. Grasshoppers were raising havoc in the Argentine, and the situation was “so serious” that a group of business firms in Buenos Aires organized in early 1897 to underwrite a “scientific-investigation”. Bruner was brought in and, with a year’s leave from the university, he sailed for Buenos Aires in the spring of 1897. He conducted the investigation and submitted his report in February of 1898 before returning to the United States with a “large-collection” of Argentine insects and birds. He completed a “second”, more-technical report three years later.

The University of Nebraska recognized Bruner’s achievements

with an honorary degree at the commencement following his return.

In 1899 Bruner took on another "large-challenge" when he agreed to contribute to a work known as the *Biologia Centrali-Americana*, which began in London in the 1870s as a monumental-work that was conducted in parts "on the flora and fauna of Mexico and Central America." The work took over 20 years to complete, and the orthoptera were done by European orthopterists, mainly Dr. Henri ~~de Sews-yure~~ (de Sews-yure) of Switzerland. When it came time to catalogue the grasshoppers, "however," which was equal in volume to all the other orthopterous families combined, Dr. de ~~Sews-yure~~ Sews-yure's) "failing-eyesight" left him unequal to the task. The editors turned to Professor Bruner as the worldwide authority in this area, and he agreed to complete the work. He was responsible for 340 of the 376 pages in the second volume of the *Biologia Orthoptera*, devoting almost every minute of his time not demanded by his many university-duties to the task for nearly eight

years. Some considered it his greatest <sup>“</sup>single-contribution<sup>”</sup> to systematic entomology.

In June 1933, when the Depression was in full force and cupboards often were bare, Lawrence Bruner presented the University of Nebraska with <sup>“</sup>a treasure<sup>”</sup> – his complete library on the Orthoptera, an accumulation of a scientific-lifetime, totaling 2,591 books and pamphlets, and his collection of Orthoptera, containing thousands of specimens of this order of insects from all parts of the world, grasshoppers he <sup>“</sup>added<sup>”</sup> to his collection during some 60 years of collecting, whether by personal experience, purchase, or exchange with other scientists.

The Bruners lived the last years of their life at 3033 Deakin Street in Berkeley, California, and they are buried here in Wyuka Cemetery, beside their daughter Alice, who died as a child. At services for Dr. Bruner at First Plymouth Congregational Church on February 3, 1937, Nebraska Historian Dr. Addison E. Sheldon said

*Spencer  
Berkeley*

this, and I quote: “In the future annals of Nebraska, Lawrence Bruner will be known as the state’s first great naturalist. Whatever successors may come in that field, his position is secure for all time. His childhood passion was for bugs, butterflies, and birds. He was his own teacher for most of his work in this field, like Audubon and Nuttall (Nut-all). The woods, mountains, and prairies were his school room. On the-honor-roll of those daring pioneers who have made Nebraska what she is and what she hopes to be will always be inscribed the name of Lawrence Bruner.”