
From the Archivists

Woods Hole Historical Collection

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Fun and Games at the MBL

A characteristic of the early days at the Marine Biological Laboratory that keeps appearing in the papers in our archives is the great sense of fun shared by all. The fun lightened all the hours of hard work and serious studying and research. Our Oral History Collection is full of examples of the good times at the MBL — lobsters steamed over the steam engine boilers at the Woods Hole Railroad Station, picnics and sing-alongs, ice cream sodas at Daniels' Ice Cream Parlor at the end of evenings spent in the labs. Other examples crop up from other sources: tales of explorations by canoe and rowboat, expeditions to Penikese, and swimming at Woods Hole's beaches.

In a recent gift to us the fun is obvious, depicted in both photograph and word. The gift includes two photograph albums, one put together by Hannah Croasdale, who came here as a student and worked her way up through investigator and instructor, to become a national figure in phycology, the study of seaweeds. The other album was put together by Gladys Bulmer, Hannah's great friend and fellow student. The photographs are mostly from summers in the 1930s. Both the hard work and the gay light-hearted times at the MBL are documented. Pictures of students assiduously searching for specimens of algae are paired with poses of the students clowning before the camera, dramatically draped in a fine boalike specimen of *Laminaria*.

Other photographs show students hard at work at their lab tables, bent over microscopes, yet the hand-printed captions counter with a non-serious air, pointing to one student and saying "Work!" and to another "Thought!"

There are students looking up with a grin as they are interrupted in their search for the perfect specimen. But who is surprised that they are enjoying themselves, nets in hand, waist-deep in water — it's summer, and they're in Woods Hole!

Included in the donation is a typescript telling the story of a grand and elaborate hoax perpetrated by the young investigators in the botany lab in 1929. Each investigator was assigned a certain amount of bench space in the lab. To keep a bit of bench free, a group of students secretly set up lab space for a make-believe researcher. First some lab equipment appeared on the table: a few flasks, a notebook, simple tools. Soon, small branches of a mulberry tree were found standing in the flasks of water. So evidence of the man and his experiment grew.

To quote: "He took shape in bits and parts, following unobtrusive conferences among two or three people, and not always the same people. That was the most glorious feature of the whole fascinating week or two while he existed among us."

His name "Maurice Rayon" showed up on a neat desk label. Herein lay a subtle joke: *Morus* is the genus for mulberry, and rayon, the name of the man-made fiber imitating silk. The jokes and additions became more and more elaborate. Eventually no one knew who was in on the joke, or who was adding to the "experiment." Letters and telegrams would arrive for and from Dr. Rayon. The whole business continued for several weeks, until he was "killed off." A beautiful obituary was written for the Collecting Net (the MBL newspaper) announcing his death by a rare brain disease. The death notice claimed that he had begun to identify himself with his silkworms and insisted upon sleeping between



Students "working" and "thinking" at their lab tables at the MBL. Ca. 1930. Photo by Gladys Bulmer. Courtesy WHHC.

silk sheets and "at length was found suffocated in their folds, a bit of greenery in his mouth."

So ended one episode of fun at the MBL. Our thanks to Hannah Croasdale for sharing it with us, and thus with posterity. Our hope is that the fun goes on, hand in hand with the hard work, a great tradition of the MBL.