

History of Camp Branson

By Raymond E. Peck (1904-1984)

Assisted by Clayton H. Johnson (1916-1988),
Walter D. Keller and Tom Freeman

The University of Missouri at Columbia started field training for geology students near Lander, Wyoming, in the summer of 1911, and, with the exception of a few summers, has had a student field party in that area every year since. Records are incomplete, and it is possible that during World War I the field course was conducted in St. Genevieve County, Mo. The site of the 1923 summer course was near Winfield, Mo. In 1928 Tarr and Branson directed students in a study of the economic geology of Colorado and Utah, rather than working in the Lander area as usual. In 1929 the field course returned to the Lander area at which time Branson and Mehl arranged for an educational special-use permit to construct permanent quarters on U.S. Forest land in Sinks Canyon.

In 1910 the University employed Dr. Edwin B. Branson, of Oberlin College, as professor and chairman of the Department of Geology and Geography. He received a PhD with a specialty in vertebrate paleontology from the University of Chicago. Branson served as chairman of the department for approximately 30 years. On his retirement in 1948, Camp Lander was renamed the Branson Field Laboratory in his honor.



Entrance to Branson Field Laboratory.

Branson was a strong believer in the teaching of geology in the field. As a graduate student under Professor Williston he had spent summers collecting vertebrates from Triassic rocks near Lander, Wyo. He was much impressed with the potential of the region as a site for field instruction. When he joined the University he immediately began planning a summer field course for Wyoming. The first announcement of the field course in 1911 stated that the course would be canceled if fewer than six students enrolled. Evidently the summer was a big success — the announcement for 1912 stated clearly that enrollment would be limited to 12 students.

In those early days faculty, students and equipment made the 1,100-mile trip to Lander by train. On arrival at the Lander station, Branson would hire a team and wagon to transport the equipment to a camp site. Faculty and students walked. In a few cases, Branson found it more expedient to simply purchase a team and wagon, use them during the summer and then sell them at the conclusion of summer camp.

In those formative years the camp was both portable and self-sufficient. Buying groceries and planning meals were faculty responsibilities. Cooking was done by the students (under faculty supervision), which provided a way for especially needy students to earn part of their expenses. When supplies ran low, a volunteer would walk to Lander, purchase supplies and hire a team and wagon to deliver them. Field work was entirely on foot. After the area within walking distance of a campsite was thoroughly studied, the camp moved to a new location. Favorite campsites were near stream courses of the Little Popo Agie, the Middle Fork and North Forks of the Popo Agie, on the shore of Bull Lake and within Dinwoodie Canyon. In the summer of 1924, with Dr. Mehl in charge, the group lived in tents pitched among morainal boulders in Sinks Canyon, the course of the Middle Fork of the Popo Agie.

Following one of these early summer courses, Dr. Branson loaded the students on a train bound for Columbia and then hired a team and carriage to take him and his family on a tour of Teton and Yellowstone National Parks. It must have been a leisurely and wonderful trip. I am not sure just when the field course acquired motorized vehicles. W.D. Keller recalls that he was driver and maintenance man for a Ford truck at the 1924 field camp.

Following camp in 1924, the class drove through Utah to California, returning via the town of Needles, Calif., which is noted for record high temperatures, and the Painted Desert of Arizona. In Arizona, they were joined by Jesse Wrench, professor of history at the University of Missouri, who assisted in the collecting of Triassic vertebrate fossils.



"Doc" Mehl (left) and students packing for Wyoming, 1924.

Inserted: A letter from Tom Nelson (1901-1988) to Tom Freeman dated July 11, 1985

Dear Tom:

My thanks for the copy of *Geotimes* containing the Camp Branson article.

I was quite surprised to find myself in one of the illustrations — the picture showing the loading of the truck at the start of the 1924 expedition to Wyoming. When that picture was snapped we were loading aboard the tents. Dr. Mehl is at the tailgate. I am the character farthest to the right, probably offering unsolicited advice. I don't remember the identity of the other two.

That truck was a Super Model T having a dual transmission. In addition to the standard Model T planetary having two speeds forward, it had a three-speed stick shift, thus providing five speeds forward and two in reverse. Its little 4-cylinder, 23 hp engine needed all the help it could get.

We logged about 6,000 miles that summer, about 99% of those miles being on either dirt

or gravel roads. When we broke camp at Lander we went to Salt Lake City where we spent two days; from there to Las Vegas, Nev., which in 1924 was little more than a wide place in a dusty road; then on to Needles, Calif., which lived up to its reputation of being the hottest place in the U. S. From there we found several vertebrate fossils (including your phytosaur skull) in Triassic redbeds of the Painted Desert. From there we went to western Oklahoma, where in the bald desert we found a beautiful glacial moraine, as well as a couple of well preserved skulls, identity unknown.

I left the party at Altus, Okla., where I caught a jerk water train, which in a round-about way would eventually get me to Dallas.

Sincerely,
Tom

My first experience with the field course was in 1927. At that time the department owned two Dodge panel trucks, which transported faculty, students and equipment. Space was at a premium. Our first lesson was instruction in how to roll a 7-foot square heavy canvas tent tight enough to fit into a flour sack. As we headed west on U.S. 40 in June 1927, Branson and his son Carl were in their family car and did not always accompany the group. A. K. Miller, the teaching assistant in charge of the caravan, drove the lead truck, along with one student in the cab, at a maximum speed of 25 miles per hour. Instructor Chalmer Roy, a student cook and I drove the second truck, and Dr. Mehl brought up the rear in his Model-T Ford. Students rode in the back of the trucks with occasional turn abouts in Mehl's car.

We stopped along the highway just east of the Missouri River to observe loess deposits, and stopped again near Kansas City to examine Pennsylvanian limestones. We rolled into Lawrence, Kan., late that afternoon and set up camp on the lawn outside the K.U. geology building. The following morning we were given a conducted tour of the geology building and the collections, and then resumed the journey westward. The trip to Lander took a bit more than one week. We stopped in Wamego, Kan. to examine erratics in the city park

and to speculate as to how these large igneous and metamorphic boulders managed to be resting on sedimentary rocks in the center of Kansas. We stopped at the museum in Hays, Kan., to see the excellent collection of Cretaceous vertebrates. We were delayed by rain at Wakeeney, Kan., as highway 40 was not paved in western Kansas in 1927. Branson devised a successful way to keep restless young men out of mischief. He suggested that we walk outside of town to an outcrop of Niobrara chalk and collect fossils. I am not sure how far we walked, but I do remember that the students were quiet and slept well that night.

The next day we continued on our way, stopping only to examine the Dakota Sandstone, the Niobrara Chalk (including one fault) and the Ogallala Formation. We speculated on the origin of the Ogallala and tried to visualize paleo-topography east of the Rockies at the time of its deposition. We also visited outcrops near Boulder, Colo. where we identified a sill within sedimentary layers. We observed a thrust fault in road cuts on the front slope, en echelon folds north of Boulder, a dike northeast of Boulder and products of spheroidal weathering of granite near the Colorado-Wyoming line.

We marveled at Red Beds north of Rawlins, Wyo., and joints so well displayed on the south side of the Rattlesnake Mountains. Finally we arrived at Beaver Divide and gazed with wonderment on the extent and color of exposures in the Wind River Basin, with the snowcapped peaks of the Wind River Range beyond. We continued down the hazardous switchbacks of the old Beaver Divide road after being advised to keep our vehicles in low gear. This was quite a thrill for "flatlanders."

That summer we camped at Allen Campground in Sinks Canyon, just upstream from present-day Camp Branson. The campground was well equipped with tables, toilets and a garbage pit. We used stream water for drinking and for doing laundry. We bathed directly in the river. No, it was no warmer in 1927! Allen campground was closed when the area above became used as pasture.

We did some mapping, both with Brunton compasses and alidades, but most of our time was devoted to regional studies. We made trips to Atlantic City and South Pass City to study metamorphic rocks, and we traveled to Bull Lake Canyon to compare the section there with the section in Sinks

Canyon. We spent one long day on a trip to the Wind River Canyon where the Bighorn River cuts through the Owl Creek Mountains. This river enters the Owl Creeks as the Wind River and emerges as the Bighorn River. There we speculated on whether the river was superimposed or antecedent. We also observed the hot springs and the travertine deposits at Thermopolis, including those draped over the banks of the river. We spent most of the summer studying the stratigraphy, geological history and structure of sections exposed within easy walking or driving distance from camp.

At the end of the summer we were treated to a pack trip up the canyon to Bill's Lake and from there on to Wind River Peak. As I recall, the party consisted of about 12 students, two faculty members and one pack horse. Each student was limited to a single blanket. At camp on Bill's Lake that first night we kept the fire going and huddled close to keep warm. The second night, after climbing the peak, it would have taken more than a chilly night to keep us awake. The Wind River Peak pack trip, which was a celebration of the approaching end of field camp, continued to be a tradition through 1951. The view of glacial topography and mountain scenery from the "High Windies" is awe-inspiring.



Glacial lake backed by Wind River Peak. Photo by WDK.

The group returned to Columbia via Yellowstone National Park. Miller remained behind to collect cephalopods from the Lander Sandstone, which was the subject of his PhD dissertation at Yale University. I also stayed in camp to help with his collecting. Vernon Scott also remained in camp to work with Dr. Mehl in prospecting for oil and gas. In late August Miller, Scott and I toured Teton and Yellowstone Parks in Dr. Mehl's model T. Mehl stayed in camp. In early September the four of us returned to Columbia in Mehl's car.

After one summer camp in 1929 in the vicinity of the mines in Blacksmith Fork Canyon near Logan, Utah we returned to the Lander area. Branson and Mehl concluded that the Lander area was by far the best place to conduct summer field work and that it was time to establish permanent headquarters. They arranged with the U.S. Forest Service for a special use permit for a part of the present site. The tract was later enlarged to include a total of 13 acres. Once the permit was secured, faculty and students went to work. They built a bridge over the small stream just below where it branched off the main stream and started clearing the area in preparation for the camp. Evidently, the Lander Chamber of Commerce noticed the absence of the field party in 1928, and happily welcomed us on our return. The chamber offered to assist with construction by financing the first building — the present mess hall. Unfortunately, before the cabin was completed and paid for, a thing called the Great Depression developed, so the chamber had to renege on their offer. Branson had to raise the money elsewhere. Branson and his son Carl cut trees on the site and built the Branson cabin. Mehl and students built the first dormitory, Alcova, which provided for 16 students. The present mess hall did double duty — a place to eat and a place to study and work on maps. That dual use proved to be unsatisfactory, so Mehl and students built a laboratory — the present reading room. At about that time arrangements were made with Dr. Frederick Middlebush, professor of political science at the University and later president, to build a cabin on the site. The Middlebush cabin was to be available for faculty occupancy while camp was in session but was available to the Middlebushes at other times.

Up until the early thirties enrollment consisted primarily of men students only. There were women who wished to attend camp, and the field course needed students, so in the summers of 1935 and 1936 a dormitory, Burnt Gulch, was built for women. In the summer of 1936, seven or eight women students, plus Dorothy Davis, who was a graduate teaching assistant, were in residence. As demand for the summer field course increased, Principles of Geology was taught to small groups during the regular summer session. In 1937-38 a larger women's dormitory, Sacajawea, was built. The next structure to be built was the garage, a place to store a couple of old field vehicles during the winter months. It also doubled as a place to store camping equipment.



Class of 1936.

In 1936, the University received a WPA grant for the construction of a bath house and septic tank. The work, which was planned and supervised by Dr. Mehl, was conducted by local residents. The original water supply was obtained by building a small dam near Burnt Gulch and installing a hydraulic ram to pump water into a tower above the bathhouse. This worked fine until the dam was discovered by the local beavers who immediately decided that they could improve on the design and construction. In so doing, they interrupted the water supply to the storage tank. Every August it became necessary to petition the Game and Fish Commission to trap the beavers and move them into some other region. Fortunately, in the late '30s a power line was run up the canyon to our camp and the nearby Ranger Station, after which and we gladly substituted an electric pump for the hydraulic ram. The camp was wired for electricity in 1936, according to Dr. Clayton Johnson, who assisted with the project. For several years power was occasionally furnished by a somewhat balky and contrary gasoline engine housed in a small building near the bridge entering the camp. The exact age of the plumbing system is uncertain. Clay Johnson, who furnished considerable manpower in many of these projects, remembered that the water tower and hydraulic ram were put in place in 1937. While this was being done, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) established a camp on the river just above our site and built the switchback road over to South Pass road.

In the late '30s, Camp Branson consisted of the mess hall, with kitchen attached; the dormitories Alcova, Burnt Gulch, and Sacajawea; the laboratory; the bathhouse with a small neighboring building that served as a faculty office; and a small building containing the gasoline engine for the

power and lights. The faculty office was later converted into a laundry room, and the pump house into a storage shed. The Branson and Middlebush cabins housed faculty. All of the buildings, with exceptions of the mess hall and bathhouse, were built by faculty and students. The chief architect, planner and builder was Mehl. All the faculty work was volunteer, without pay, although I believe Dr. Mehl was on salary for the supervision of the WPA work installing the septic tank and plumbing system. Much of the work was done by students in August following coursework. Students were paid by the department, but in most cases the pay only partially offset their summer expenses.

As paraphrased from an account written February 29, 1984, by Dr. W. D. Keller, the classrooms, dormitories, bridges, and water towers were built by the individual efforts and personal labor of faculty and students, on shoestring funds, an achievement almost unbelievable in the modern age of grant money, subsidies and donations. In other words an extension of the University Campus, not only its instruction but also its physical plant, was pioneered, planned, designed and built by the geology staff with the help of students. Professors Branson and Mehl not only had the vision to create such an instructional extension 1100 miles from the main campus, but physically built it, a unique contribution to the University, presumably without counterpart on this Campus and at most other schools. The physical facilities of this educational unit were carefully preserved by continuous conscientious maintenance by Professor R.E. Peck, Clayton Johnson and supervised students.



Skyline above dining hall by moonlight. Photo by WDK.

In 1939, the students were well housed and the senior faculty with their families (Branson and Mehl) were in the Branson and Middlebush cabins.

The junior faculty and wives, the Kellers and the Pecks, occupied 7x7 tents on wooden platforms. Obviously, more faculty housing was needed. I suggested to Dr. Branson that, if permission were granted and a mutually satisfactory location could be found, the Pecks would be glad to build a cabin on the same basis as the Middlebush cabin had built. This meant the cabin would be available for faculty housing during the school session but at our disposal at all other times. Branson agreed, and we selected the site across the river from the mess hall. There was no place on the island where the main buildings were located that such a cabin could have been built without interfering with either student or faculty activity. During the summer of 1939, in evenings and on weekends, and with volunteer student help, we collected building blocks of Flathead sandstone from the dip slope above camp on the switchbacks and hauled them to the building site. During August, with some assistance from Carl Branson and others staying in camp through August, we built the foundation and put in the bridge across the river. We contracted with a local resident to cut trees, haul the logs, and peel them so they would be ready for immediate placement in the spring. The next spring, with the able assistance of Paul Farmer and Tony Sucher, we completed the basic cabin in seven days and moved in just prior to the arrival of the main group of students.

Enrollment fell off appreciably during the early '40s (the World War II years) with most of the young men in the services, but the Department discovered that women students, especially those enrolled in geology courses with Cornelia Cameron at Stephens College, were anxious for field work. So enrollment held up and continuity was maintained.

In 1946, the GIs were back in force and the facilities of the camp were strained to accommodate the demand. With limited dormitory space, we dropped the co-educational enrollment policy for several years following 1946, converted the garage into sleeping quarters, and put several students into tents. The University administration, principally through the good offices of President Middlebush, recognized our difficulties and made money available to build the large dormitory, Wyopo, in 1948. This eased the problem in so far as sleeping quarters were concerned, but we were still pressed for space for map work, and we did not have any place inside other than the mess hall where we could meet the students as a group. We established

a temporary outdoor classroom between the mess hall and the laboratory and petitioned the administration for assistance. This led to the building of the new laboratory and office, attached to the old laboratory building. The office foundation and floor of the new building were built by faculty and volunteer student help in 1958. One fireplace was built by faculty and the chimney by faculty and students. Otherwise, Wyopo and the new laboratory were built by contract. Enrollment continued high but after the initial rush of GIs had passed, we again opened enrollment on a co-educational basis.

During the late '40s and early '50s the Department of Geology at UMR furnished numerous excellent students for the field course, and at least one faculty member from the UMR staff was regularly employed on the field trip. In 1947, a site was selected and an additional faculty cabin was planned by Dr. Chauncey Holmes, but for some reason it was not built. Things had changed from the '30s. With the large enrollments and the availability of the GI Bill, it was no longer necessary to employ student cooks. We hired professional cooks in Columbia, commonly a couple that cooked for one of the fraternities or sororities during the winter. Generally, they furnished their own transportation from Columbia to Lander. We continued to spend five to seven days doing regional geology between Columbia and Lander, and considered that week as worth one hour of credit. Students who joined us at the field camp registered for seven hours credit. This practice continued through 1967. In 1950, Mehl and Johnson saw the bridge to the Peck cabin wash out for the second time and replaced it with the more practical suspension bridge. It is significant that all maintenance and repair work, including plumbing and electric lines, were made by faculty and students through 1967. Modern water filtering and chlorina-

tion systems were also installed by faculty members in 1962. Starting in 1946, the camp employed one fulltime employee, usually a student, for general camp work and maintenance during the summer session and on through August. This helped keep the buildings and grounds in good shape. In 1968, A. G. Unklesbay succeeded in obtaining \$20,000 from the University for a major renovation. Rooms were added to staff cabins, and coal and butane heat in the bathhouse and kitchen was replaced by electricity. Proper utility poles were installed, and rather tired electrical wires were finally removed from trees. The last improvement of facilities was by Tom Freeman, who, in 1979, obtained \$10,000 from the University and constructed a "dry-well" septic tank for the down-stream bathhouse. The troublesome chemical toilets and the effluent from showers and lavatories were at last eliminated.

A brief history of the establishment and continuation of the University of Missouri Geology Field Camp at Lander would be incomplete without a mention of the great contribution made by a pioneer resident Lander couple, Sid and Edith Winship. The Winships were special friends to the transplanted Missourians and throughout the years furnished comfort, entertainment, and general assistance to all, especially to the those field camp students from the state of Missouri. They looked after the camp when no one was in residence, they brought local goodies up to feed the students, they always were available for advice and assistance. They were excellent trout fishermen and were happy to give instructions in this art. Sid was a natural born story teller and kept many a group enthralled around the campfires with recitations of the "Burning of Dan McGrew", the "Face on the Bar Room Floor", and many stories of their personal experiences in the early days of Wyoming history. □



Class of 1954. Ray Peck seated front and center. Photo provided by Earle McBride.