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The Scripps Institute

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The Scripps Institute

As the academic year of my study of biology in Berkeley was ending I was delighted to be offered an assistantship at the Scripps Institute at La Jolla. The Institute was affiliated with the University of California and I could do research there counting toward an advanced degree. It was a happy move to the Scripps Institute, a couple of miles from La Jolla, then only a small town.

At the Institute I was housed in a small redwood cottage for which I paid only a nominal amount for services. There was no telephone or heating system but who needs heat in the balmy climate of La Jolla? The house stood on stilts with no continuous foundation. Underneath lived a family of skunks. They produced no odor and bothered no one. It was only a two-minute walk to the beach for swimming or to the pier of the research boats.

Research

The interest of my boss, Dr. Francis Bertody Sumner, was in evolution and I undertook a research project that might illustrate the role of survival in the development of a species. I made experiments with a small local fish to see if there was a difference between those that survived and those that died in a given period of time when placed in water low in oxygen. I counted the vertebrae of the fish that died and those that survived. There was a difference between the survivors and the fish that died. It was tedious work but the result was an illustration of how an environmental challenge can be selective in bony structure, a step in the development of a new species.

In my second year at Scripps Dr. Sumner told me about a good opportunity that had nothing to do with science. Between the Institute and the town of La Jolla was a mile of flat land for sale at five hundred dollars an acre. Unfortunately, I did not have five hundred dollars!. Today that land would cost one

hundred thousand dollars an acre!

Advanced Degrees

I went back to Berkeley for a few months to get my M.A. degree and then I had the job of writing the thesis for the Ph.D. degree. For the doctor's degree thesis I made drawings of fish skeletons which were admired by the examiners for my degree. The examination went well. The examiners were impressed when I answered one of them who asked about Wegener's new idea of continental drift, the movement of continents. Fortunately, I had just read about it and most of the examiners had not yet heard about Wegner's theory. The theory was long debated but now it is a standard part of world geology and oceanography, invoked in the explanation of earthquakes.