THE UNPLANNED PRESIDENCY

(Or The Convivial Adventures of an Ardent Naturalist Who Also Happened to Shape the University as We Know It Today)

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DID YOU KNOW that we had a University president with a wife game enough to smuggle two live boa constrictors back from Veracruz, Mexico, in her ship’s berth?

DID YOU FURTHER KNOW that we had a president who counted among his best friends his dog, Eleanor? A DOG NAMED FOR A FAMOUS FIRST LADY? And that circumstances would dictate the two Eleanors meet face to face? (More on that awkward situation later.)

FLORENCE RUTHVEN, A VERY BRAVE LADY

ALEXANDER GRANT RUTHVEN

ELEVEN-FOOT BOA CONSTRUCTORS KEEPING WARM AND TOASTY

HIS BEST FRIEND, ELEANOR
ONE FINE DAY  this past summer, I made the familiar trek over to a favorite place, the Exhibit Museum on central campus. As I walked into the Alexander Grant Ruthven building, the motto over the door caught my attention: *Truth Conquers by Itself.* For some reason, this gave me pause. Hadn’t I walked under these words countless times before? Why did they catch my attention this time?

I stopped to consider the origins of the inscription, the museum, and the building. Was this building constructed specifically for the museum? And who is this Ruthven person in the building title?

I decided I needed to conquer some truth myself. I headed to the Bentley Historical Library and started digging. I was not surprised to find that Alexander Grant Ruthven was a prominent Michigan scientist. He was the director of the museum, chairman of the Department of Zoology, and presided over the construction of the current building in 1928.

I was much more surprised to find that Ruthven was U-M’s seventh president — despite all efforts to the contrary. Ruthven simply wanted to be a first-rate herpetologist, tramp through South America in pursuit of (usually deadly) snakes, and run the best zoological research museum in the country. But as reluctant as he was to find himself in administration, he didn’t hold office idly. As president, he turned the University on its head and revolutionized the structure of the institution we know and love today.

Ruthven lived a truly contented and enchanted life, despite being president during Prohibition, the Great Depression, and World War II. How did he do that? My research turned up story after story of his intelligence, wit, and sense of adventure — attributes that no doubt played a large part in his success.

**THE FOLLOWING IS A PATCHWORK HISTORY OF THIS REMARKABLE YET HUMBLE MAN — A FEW SELECT VIVID AND CHARMING CHAPTERS FROM A TRULY VIVID AND CHARMING LIFE.**
During his presidential years, you could find Ruthven at the family’s summer home in Frankfort, Michigan, where he shared stables with another faculty member, and where the two families held regular rodeos. Quite often the rodeos featured imported bucking stock, amateur trick riders, the Frankfort high school marching band, and the entire Board of Regents watching agog.

Alexander Grant Ruthven is born into this world on April 1, 1882. No fooling. His birthplace is Ruthven, Iowa, also not a joke. The city is named after its founding father, Ruthven’s grandfather, Alexander Ruthven Sr. The big man in town is Ruthven’s uncle, Alexander Ruthven Jr. (Junior owned the first lumberyard in town, was the director of two banks, served as president of the first school board, was elected mayor, and owned the first cement-paved sidewalk in town—a definite mark of distinction.)

At the tender age of eight, our hero starts riding ponies and discovers a love of the outdoors. As he rather poetically remembers:

“Riding a cowpony over the sunlit, wind-swept prairie, trampling over the black loam of plowed fields under dull autumn skies, listening to the calls of the wild fowl as they dropped into sloughs swollen with floods from melting snows . . . a small boy dreamed of knowing wild animals, studying their habits, and being associated with them in a museum or zoological garden.”

This surprisingly specific dream will eventually put him at odds with his family’s grand plans for him (he is next in a long line of Alexander Ruthvens, after all), but he pushes on. At age 12, Ruthven asks his mother for a copy of Darwin’s On the Origin of Species. And remarkably, despite his parents’ strict code of ethics and the fact that the name Darwin was anathema to churchgoers everywhere, his mother purchases the book. Which he proceeds to read. In its entirety.

With that feat accomplished, there is no turning back. Ruthven sets his sights on a future filled with science.

Ruthven cultivated a passion for the outdoors and horses, something he never lost, even as his career grew increasingly deskbound.

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Immediately After High School

Ruthven heads off to Morningside College in Sioux City, Iowa. He is the first Ruthven to go to college, and the family is bursting with pride. Naturally, Ruthven dives headfirst into science courses, including such classes as “Algae and Fungi” and “Morphology of Spermatophytes.” The family probably wasn’t so happy about this. How could spermatophytes help him become the next great Alexander of Ruthven, paragon of business?

During the Summer

After his third year of college, the family tries to distract Ruthven from science and his father gives him the strategic task of supervising the sale of a carload of cattle in Chicago. Surely the thrill of a business transaction will straighten out the young man.

This plan backfires spectacularly as Ruthven grabs the opportunity to enroll in graduate classes at the University of Chicago. Here he meets his lifelong mentor, Charles C. Adams, a professor of zoology.

And this is where Ruthven destroys the hopes of his family. Instead of going home to Iowa and becoming a banker and prominent citizen, Ruthven determines to follow science wherever it may lead him. He clinically severs all ties with his family and never once looks back.

Alexander Grant Ruthven on His College Record

“My academic performance as a student will forever be a secret. In afteryears, to prod my children to do well in school, I could boast of a perfect record. Both my offspring and my secretary were skeptical. When they convinced to check my class records, however, they were disappointed to discover there were none extant. My high school had burned. My college records had been destroyed by fire. I had been admitted to Michigan on diploma, and in my time graduate students were not graded on classwork—they passed or flunked. I cannot prove I was always a model student, but no one can prove I was not.”

Carload of Cattle

Alexander Grant Ruthven
AND NOW WE ARE AT THE POINT in the story where Ruthven comes to our great University. Charles C. Adams is appointed curator of the Museum of Natural History at U-M, and he invites Ruthven to come with him as a graduate assistant.

Ruthven learns two important lessons here.

The first involves the actual duties of a research assistant.

"The activity included...touring of local farms on foot to secure cats for the comparative anatomy course...I collected earthworms at night in President Angell's garden...President James B. Angell must have been a sound sleeper, for he seemed never to be disturbed by my wanderings through his garden with my dark lantern in search of the wary Lumbricus."

The second:

"I learned that a museum of zoology is not a 'dead circus,' not a gallery of elaborate exhibits to astound the public, and not a storehouse to demonstrate material for professors and students to tear to pieces. It is a teaching and research institution akin to a library. Its proper function is to gather intelligently and to preserve carefully specimens for research and to maintain exhibits illustrating biological facts and principles."

THE SECOND LESSON IS PROBABLY THE MORE VALUABLE OF THE TWO.

IN 1906, Adams leaves the University and Ruthven becomes a full-fledged instructor of zoology. He seamlessly takes over as curator of the museum as well. He is 24 years old.

The Museum of Natural History at this juncture is something of a campus joke. It holds an incoherent cache of objects including a collection of musical instruments and a Chinese exhibit presented to President Angell. One of the more frequent users of the museum is a fraternity that requires its initiates to steal a toenail of a mounted walrus.

Ruthven soon becomes ruthless about raising independent funds to expand legitimate collections and build a new and bigger museum building. And he starts turning down donations deemed inappropriate or unscientific.

"The public had to learn that a curator did not pickle or stuff animals, that a museum was not a repository of freaks and curios, and that a specimen without data was all but useless. I had to refuse, as tactfully as possible, a two-headed calf, Aunt Mary's hair wreath, and grandfather's hunting trophies."

Finally, frustrated with lack of support from the museum director and President Hutchins, ruthless Ruthven makes a bold move. A really bold move. He writes a letter to the Board of Regents suggesting that the museum become the Museum of Zoology, and that they not only jettison irrelevant collections, but also the current director. The regents agree and name Ruthven director at age 31.
WHERE U-M ZOOLOGICAL EXHIBITIONS were previously limited to the United States, the new director boldly decides to go abroad. Ruthven directs trips to South America, Central America, and the Caribbean.
And here are two of his adventures.
The first happens in Veracruz, Mexico, where the team acquires two boa constrictors just before setting sail. The snakes are ideal specimens and nobody wants to leave them behind. So...

“We placed them in a suitcase in our stateroom. During the voyage home it became quite cold, and we feared the boas would not live to reach Ann Arbor. Mrs. Ruthven, who accompanied us on this trip, solved the problem. She placed them in two cheesecloth bags and put them in her berth. All three got along very comfortably.”

THE SECOND ADVENTURE INVOLVES WORLD WAR I.

In 1914, Ruthven and team are in British Guiana (on the northern coast of South America, known these days as Guyana). Ruthven sets out alone to track down and capture bushmasters (11-foot-long VERY venomous snakes). About halfway through he discovers he’s being tracked by a jaguar.

Ruthven remains calm and makes it back to camp safely. Only to discover the place in chaos. What is going on? What could be worse than a jaguar? Local boys with hats that read “River Police” manage to convey that Germany and England are at war and have been for several days, and American officials are not happy. They didn’t even know Ruthven was in Guiana.
The team is given a choice: Board a freighter back to the States and travel directly through German and British warfare in the Caribbean, or sit back and stay in Guiana for the duration of the war. However long that might be.

GUESS WHICH OPTION THEY CHOOSE?

Ruthven’s team aboard a blacked-out freighter passed close enough to a destroyer to fear for their lives, only to hear music wafting out of the speeding ship. According to the first mate, the band on the deck of the destroyer played “America.” Everyone relaxed and the ship made it safely back home with no further incidents.
**Not Only Does**

Ruthven’s sense of adventure find an outlet during this chapter in his life, but his more academic ambitions come to fruition as well. He is credited with training the majority of herpetologists in the country. He starts a museum newsletter called *The Ark* with the tagline, “The only research museum in the middle west.” And the museum collection grows to consume the entire Natural Science Building, two frame houses, two rooms in Angell Hall, two rooms in the Medical Building, and two rooms in University Hall.

In 1926, Ruthven is made the chairman of the Department of Zoology. He pushes even harder for a new museum building, and the regents finally approve it.

The new museum opens on June 14, 1928, and is declared an artistic triumph. This is a bit amazing since Ruthven and the architect did not get along. Albert Kahn considers the building insignificant and is irritated by Ruthven’s passion for details. Ruthven remembers thinking:

> Albert Kahn is a jack-ass and I am glad I will soon be through with him.

**Carved on the Front of the Building Is:** "Go to nature, take the facts into your own hands, look and see for yourself," along with the inscription, "Truth conquers by itself." Ruthven likely picked both.

**Keep in Mind,** Ruthven has an ideal partner throughout all these adventures and endeavors.

Florence Hagle Ruthven was a student of zoology herself, taught science at Chelsea High School, and met her future husband in a class at U-M. She was the student who grinned every time graduate assistant Ruthven couldn’t get the lamp on the projector to work. He was infuriated and claims he got even with her by marrying her.

The two happy zoologists start a family right away, and by 1919 they had assembled a cast that includes: three children (Katherine, Peter, and Bryant); one parrot; one parakeet; one canary; two love birds; three salamanders; two telescope fish; 742 gold fish; one alligator; one turtle; and one dog.

Ruthven’s life is a dream at this point. He has a wonderful family and he’s working successfully in a field he loves. Then he is made dean of administration of the entire University in June 1928. He did not campaign for this job and there is much concern he will not be able to continue his scientific work. But he respects the trust the regents put in him, accepts the job, and insists his interest in the museum will continue “as long as I can toddle to it.”
Shortly after Ruthven’s appointment, C.C. Little’s controversial presidency comes to a rather abrupt end. The Regents make Ruthven president in 1929. He is the first president to be promoted from within the University.

When Ruthven comes to power, the executive office of the president has exactly two employees: the president and his secretary and business manager, Shirley W. Smith. The workload is overwhelming, and to expedite major decisions, deans and faculty often skipped the backlogged president’s office and go directly to the regents.

Although this system puts him in power, Ruthven views it as archaic, aimless, amorphous, and militaristic. He turns to the burgeoning business community for inspiration and finds it in General Motors. He creates a cabinet of five executive officers, each with the rank of vice president:

- Vice President and Secretary
- Vice President in Charge of Educational Investigations
- Director of Plant Extension
- Vice President in Charge of University Relations
- Director of Student-Alumni Relations

Ruthven wanted students to feel that they had a home on campus. He instituted weekly student teas at the president’s house, eventually drawing as many as 500 students at one sitting.

In addition to altering so drastically how faculty and deans deal with the administration, Ruthven determines to change University dealings with others as well. He and Florence humanize the University by installing three phone lines in the president’s house (in 1929!). They prepare themselves to live in a fishbowl, allowing students, parents, and alumni to contact them whenever they wish.

Ruthven institutes an open-door policy in the office as well. He tells his secretary to follow one rule: “Students get in first, faculty members second, and deans when they can.”
Ruthven and family also open their home to visiting personalities, with a wide cast of characters: Eugene Ormandy, Charles A. Lindbergh, Marian Anderson, Ezio Pinza, Eleanor Roosevelt, Robert Frost, Madam Chiang Kai-Shek, and Cornelia Otis Skinner, just to name a few.

And, of course, it wouldn’t be fair to omit a few of the interesting stories from these visits. Here are two for your reading pleasure, but it’s up to you to guess the visitor in each tale.

The first involves a famous poet invited to visit and give a public reading. After a most genial dinner, the poet discovers he has forgotten his recitation materials. Ruthven comes to the rescue with a book of collected poems. To show his gratitude, the poet offers to recite a poem of Ruthven’s choosing. Nobody should be surprised at this point that Ruthven picks a poem about a horse. When the poet announces he’s reading from the “Morgan Horse Edition” of his collected poems, it causes quite a stir. Nobody has ever heard of that edition! Ruthven announces that only one copy exists and he owns it. He then writes in his memoirs:

“I have often wondered for how many years this bit of misinformation was passed along to students.”

The second story involves two ladies named Eleanor. One is married to a president, and the other is the best friend of a president. One is a prominent first lady, and the other is a bulldog. This poses a problem of etiquette. What if the first lady doesn’t take kindly to having a dog named for her? Will confusion reign every time someone calls the dog’s name? The family is nervous, students and faculty aghast. It is decided that everyone must make it through the visit without ever saying the dog’s name. It must be kept a secret at all costs.

Ruthven remembers:

“By exercising great vigilance, lying to newshawks, threatening the maids, and bribing the children, the secret was kept. The two ladies became fast friends, no embarrassing questions were asked, honor was preserved, and the family escutcheon was kept unstained.”

It was only after the meeting that Ruthven found out some interesting information from another visitor. The first lady had remarked before coming to campus that she looked forward to meeting the Ruthvens very much. She thought any family who named their dog after her must hold her in high regard.
The same year Ruthven comes into office, the Great Depression hits. Ruthven stands firmly behind the Ann Arbor banks, and the support of the University is probably what saves them. When he is short on payroll, Ruthven sends the University comptroller, along with a local sheriff, out to state offices to collect even small amounts of change owed. During the entire length of the Depression, the University only misses one payday — and it isn’t missed completely, just postponed. That’s not a minor feat.

In the months leading up to World War II, Ruthven aggressively argues against military recruitment on campus. He feels very strongly that training students to be doctors, dentists, engineers, and teachers serves the war effort more than sending young men off to fight. As a result, he faces loud criticism from both the regents and students for being unpatriotic. In the end, more than 32,000 Michigan students serve in the war, and 520 of them die. Two hundred twenty-three faculty members are granted leaves for government service, and much of the classified research done at the University is later cited as instrumental in winning the war. Sounds pretty patriotic to me.

One significant challenge Ruthven faces immediately in his tenure is student housing. Previous to his presidency, there were no dormitories on campus, every student had to fend for his or herself. Recognizing a growing need and knowing that shared living experiences can help ease a student into university life, Ruthven develops the Michigan Housing Plan. While he is president, East, West, and South Quadrangles are built, and Mosher-Jordan is acquired. So not only do we owe him the current administrative structure of the University, we also owe him the physical structure so many students associate with their college experience.

Instead, I think I’ll head out to the Exhibit Museum once again and admire just one of the many legacies Ruthven left behind. I highly recommend you do the same. For now I’ll leave you with the last words of Ruthven’s memoirs. I think they sum up the man far better than any of my words ever could.

Life for me is pleasant, rewarding, often amusing, and sometimes exciting. What more could one desire?