

Infirm Foundation

CONSERVATION of wildlife, soil and other perishable resources is ill practised in this country because the people lack understanding both of its urgent necessity and of the principles underlying it. They do not understand because our educational institutions, both school and post-school, have never adequately taught them. The teachers have not taught aright because they themselves have not been adequately taught.

This menacing chain of weaknesses is surveyed very soberly by one of the nation's leaders in the conservation movement, Prof. Henry B. Ward of the University of Illinois, in the concluding chapter of a new symposium-book, *The Foundations of Conservation Education*. (Reviewed, SNL, this issue.) Prof. Ward is not just indulging in a gloomy jeremiad: he sizes up the evils of the situation only as a means of getting a start toward their correction.

One of the principal contributing causes of this state of ignorance and indifference on the part of public and teachers alike, in his opinion, is the faultiness of present-day education in biology, a knowledge of which must underly any sound conservation program. Although first courses in life science, offered in the elementary grades, on the whole follow the good lead given a century ago by the great Louis Agassiz, in stressing outdoor, natural-history aspects of biology, more advanced courses of college and high school level have departed from this sound practice—and have grievously erred in so departing.

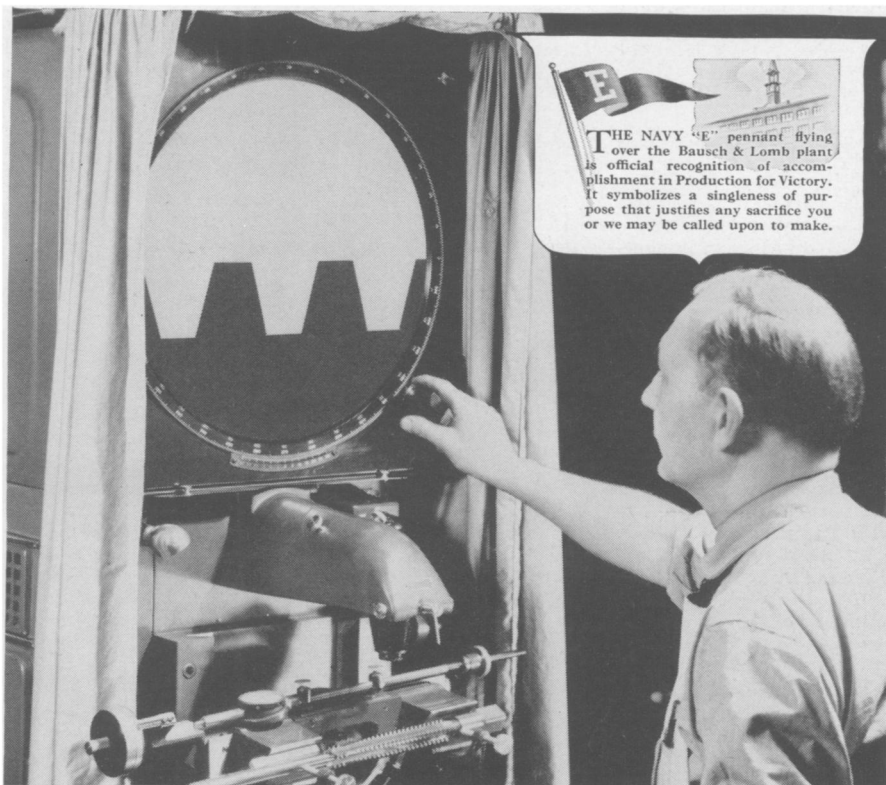
College biology courses nowadays place first stress on the study of classification, anatomy and microscopic structure—all of them practised on dead (and

usually pickled) material. High school courses are usually merely trimmed-down and watered-out versions of what the teacher himself studied in college.

As a result, the teaching is frequently done in a routine, deadening fashion, the students are bored and gladly escape from taking the course at all when an accommodating elective system permits them to do so, and a generation of citizens has grown up without understanding of what goes on in the world about them—or even in their own insides.

In his advocacy of reform, Prof. Ward would not go so far as to thrust separate courses in conservation into already overcrowded school and collect curricula. Better, he thinks, to reconstruct biology into a real life science, and to let conservation doctrine be inculcated as a point of view integral with biological teaching and essential to it, and as a guiding principle in many other courses as well, even outside the formal boundaries of the physical sciences.

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