

## *Back in the Country...* *Bell Acres Stories*

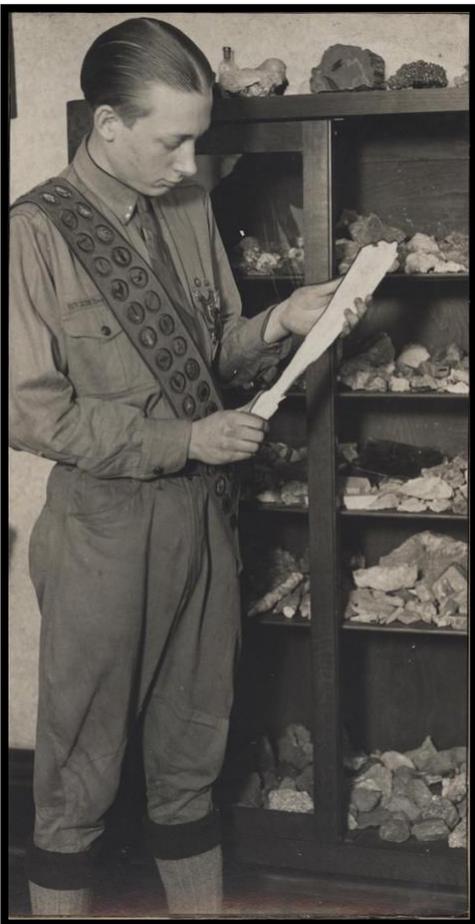
By Debby Rabold

### **William C. Darrah...*the most medaled boy in the U.S.***

Between 1924 and 1949, the Allegheny County Boy Scout Council operated Camp Umbstaetter on Turkey Foot Road in then Sewickley Township. It was on this 105-acre wooded tract, which is now part of the Bell Acres Nature Park, that thousands of scouts from across Pennsylvania were able to enjoy a variety of outdoor summer activities.

With the guidance of his scoutmasters, young William "Bill" Darrah (1909-1989) roamed Umbstaetter's steep hillsides and creek beds in search of fossils. As a college student, Darrah returned to Umbstaetter as a naturalist, giving him the opportunity to share his exceptional knowledge and love of nature with the scouts. Darrah would become an internationally known paleobotanist (studies plant fossils) and educator, donating many of his Umbstaetter fossil finds to the University of Pittsburgh.

*Thank you, Elsie Darrah Morey, for sharing your father's story and family photographs.*



Bill's first encounter with minerals occurred at age 8 or 9 on a trip to the "forbidden family attic" where he found a handful of minerals that had been collected by his father. With his father's encouragement, Bill began collecting everything; rocks, minerals, arrowheads and fossils.

Joining the Boy Scouts at age 12, Bill found an outlet for his developing interest in fossils. As a member of Troop 12 in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, Bill's scoutmasters were T. Z. Phillips and George Courier who both served at Camp Umbstaetter. Phillips had been a mine foreman with great knowledge of the coal fields and Courier possessed an extensive mineral and fossil collection. Both men guided and encouraged Bill's growing interest in fossils.

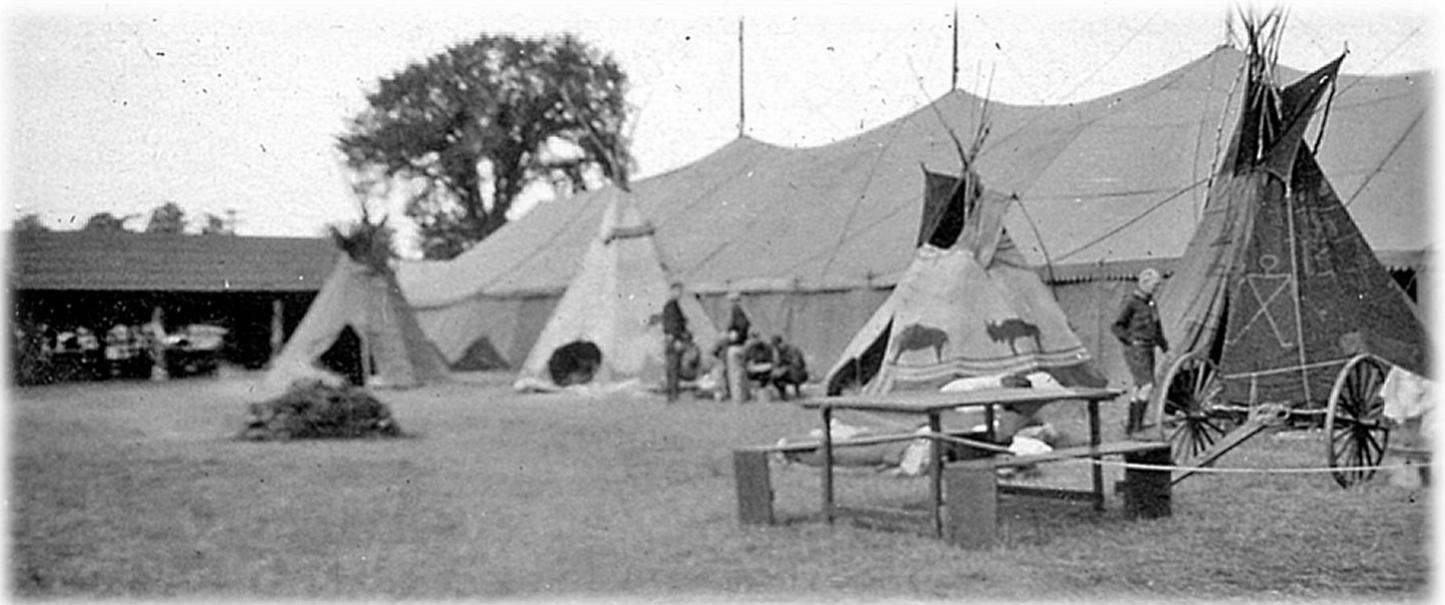
Mr. Darrah was a mechanical engineer with ALCOA and by 1923, the Darrah family had moved to Pittsburgh's East Liberty neighborhood where Bill joined Troop 9 that met in the East Liberty Presbyterian Church. His new scoutmaster, Edward M. Porter, continued to encourage Bill's interest in fossil collecting.

Patience enduring Bill's growing collection of rocks, minerals and jars of pickled snakes that seemingly occupied every room in their home, Mrs. Darrah was very supportive and proud of each of her three sons as they worked toward Eagle Scout status.

Bill became an Eagle Scout in 1925. By 1927, the year he graduated from high school, 18-year-old Bill had accumulated 79 medals and badges, including the prized Hornaday Award for significant

work in wildlife conservation. Pittsburgh newspapers dubbed him “the most medaled boy in the U. S.”, frequently mentioning him in scouting articles that included a 1930 feature story likening him to a modern-day Daniel Boone. In addition to scouting, Bill was also busy lecturing school, club and scout groups on forest conservation.

## Daniel Boone *Outdone* By a Pittsburgh Eagle Scout



*Camp Umbstaetter was known for Native American themed programs. The large mess tent (shown in the above photo) was replaced with a dining hall. There was a time when Bill was on kitchen duty and the cook became ill. What to do. Bill phoned his mother who gave him step by step instructions on how to make chili for the entire camp. Another time when Bill was left alone in the kitchen, the situation did not turn out as well. He decided to make each camper a baked potato, but by meal time, the potatoes remained hard. They continued to bake for several days until ready to serve.*

Bill entered the University of Pittsburgh in the fall of 1927 as a geology major and botany minor. He also served as Umbstaetter’s naturalist and in 1930, the camp built a museum for his wildlife collection. After graduating from Pitt in 1931, Bill received a fellowship at Pittsburgh’s Carnegie Museum where he assembled 30,000 specimens for the museum’s fossil collection.

In 1934, he left Pittsburgh to study and teach at Harvard University where he also curated the botanical fossil collection. Bill remained at Harvard until 1942 when he took a position with Raytheon Laboratories where he conducted coal, oil shale and fossil plant research. After nine years at Raytheon, Bill moved his wife and daughters to a farm in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania where he and his wife. Helen taught biology and zoology respectively at Gettysburg College until their retirement.

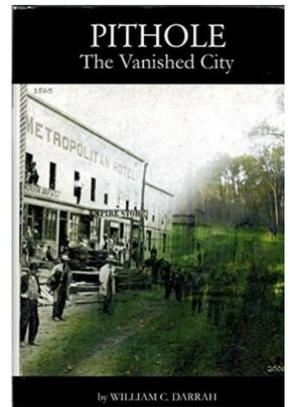
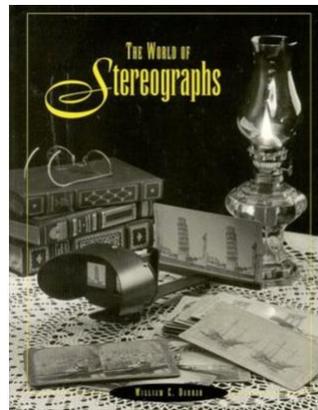


*Bill collected 5,000 specimens while at Umbstaetter.*



The author of thirteen books and numerous scientific publications, William C. Darrah was not only an internationally known paleobotanist and educator, but was also an authority on early photography. He notably authored several books on the subject of late 19<sup>th</sup> century stereographs.

During his tenure as a scoutmaster, Bill explained to young scouts how boyhood interests often lead to one's life work. He credited his scout training and boyhood experiences for shaping a successful and rewarding career.



### *Umbstaetter Fossils*

300 million years ago, long before dinosaurs roamed the earth, Western Pennsylvania was a lush, hot, humid, swampy, tropical forest situated near the equator. In geologic time, it was known as the Carboniferous Period when conditions would turn these swampy forests into today's coal beds. One common plant was the *Percopteris* seed fern that grew up to 30 feet in height. Fossilized leaf sections (pictured) can be found in the shales around Pittsburgh.

