The account really amounts to a prenatal history of Eagle Lake Biological Station, from its conception as a dream, in the mind of Dr. Vestal Holt in the very early 1940’s, to its birth as a building on a permanent site in 1964. It is based on discussion with Vesta Holt, the records of Omicron Theta Epsilon, and my recollection of its growth since the time when I joined the staff of the Chico State College Biology Department in 1945.

Dr. Vesta Holt was the head of the Biology Department and was an inspiring teacher and colleague who believed that learning could best be achieved by direct experience and that this could be most effectively accomplished by biologists through living with the organisms being studied in their own environment.

In 1943, Dr. Vesta Holt spoke to Omicron Theta Epsilon, the honor society founded by her in 1927, about the importance of establishing a permanent site to which biology classes could be taken for filed study. In a note written for that presentation, she referred to the site as “Omicron’s Field Laboratory.” She further wrote, “Our interest so far has centered around Eagle Lake…Such a laboratory would offer opportunity for extending the range of field classes…open up possibilities for summer work for biology majors from Chico and elsewhere, and provide a place for individual research…We want it to be a monument to Omicron Theta Epsilon, commemorating the initiative resourcefulness, and scientific spirit of that organization.” Omicron accepted the challenge, and in the fall of 1943, a member started Omicron’s Eagle Lake Fund by donating his military severance pay of something around $300.

In the summer of 1944, Vesta spent nearly two weeks at Eagle Lake with three or four students and her friend and colleague, Professor Isa Reed of the Psychology Department. The students received no credit but their work served as a basis for papers presented to gain membership in Omicron. In 1945, the first regular session of Eagle Lake Biological Field School was held at the site they had visited the summer before. This was the hunting resort of Sam and Grace Webb, pioneers of Eagle Lake. The resort was located at the edge of the woods about a mile from the shore of the lake at a place know as Spaulding’s. There were six students, registered for Natural History of the Vertebrates, taught by Dr. Alford Hetherington and Plant Taxonomy taught by Dr. Vesta Holt. The students received credit but the instructors did not receive a salary.

I joined the staff in the fall of 1945 to fill the position vacated by Dr. Lloyd Ingles. Vesta and I planned and operated the second Eagle Lake field school at the same site in the summer of 1946 when Dr. Holt taught Limnology and Plant Taxonomy and I taught Entomology and supervised research. There were eighteen students registered, the school was allowed a very small operation budget and one salary was provided to be divided between two instructors.

The housing facilities at Webb’s consisted of very old and primitive wooden buildings, old-fashioned outhouses, and one shower for which water could be heated in a fifty gallon drum on top of a shed building a wood fire in a Forest Service type of fireplace equipped with coils. The
The rising cost of operating such field sessions, and the demand that they be operated on a paying basis, resulted in a decision to hold sessions only every other year. There was also the problem of housing. Where could facilities be found to handle 25 or 30 students necessary to break even on expenses? By the winter of 1947, the latter problem seemed to be solved. The resort (Spalding’s) was purchased from the Webbs by Mr. L.L. (Curly) Dahl. The Webbs moved to a different site leaving their house for our use, still another cabin (commonly known as “Charlie’s Cabin”) was made available, and Curly Dahl built a chicken house that could be used as a second laboratory. So, plans were started for a session in 1948.

I taught Natural History of the Vertebrates and Field Biology and Vesta taught Aquatic Biology. Individual research was carried on by most of the students under the supervision of either instructor. During this session, Bruce Kimsey, working half time for the California Department of Fish and Game, made a thorough study of the life cycle of the Tui Chub. The results of his study were published the next year.

During these early years of Eagle Lake Biological Field School, the roads into the lake from Susanville were so bad that broken tires, broken springs or axles and even punctures pans were not uncommon. Trips to town were made not more than once a week, and they were full day expeditions. Yet, one-to-three day field trips were made to smaller nearby lakes, high mountain country to the west, and desert country to the east.

There were twenty students registered in 1948, but that did not provide enough revenue yet to pay the salaries of two instructors plus the operating expenses.

No progress was being made toward the establishment of permanent facilities on the Forest Service land set aside for the Station. It was also made clear to the supporters of the project that research was the function of the University of California and not Chico State College. Our biology staff had grown to six and though they supported the project in principle, they were quite pessimistic about the chances of selling the idea to the “the powers that be,” and it never seemed possible for them to take an active part in the program at the lake. The strongest supporters outside the Biology Department were Dr. Hector Lee, the Dean of Instruction whose support went as far as it could at that time so close to the days of Chico State Normal School, and Professor J. Russell Morris, who became director of summer school in 1951 “whether it pays or not”.

The main building was 18 x 30 feet and housed the kitchen, dining hall and laboratory. The sleeping accommodations consisted of three small cabins and some tents.

Later in the summer of 1946 a two acre site was chosen where it was hoped that a station could be built. The site was in a young ponderosa pine forest just north of the estuary of Pine Creek, only a few hundred feet north of the old Bell ranch house.

shower was immediately adjacent to the well, a situation chosen to conserve pipe, but that incidentally conserved water.
Omicron Theta Epsilon met twice a year and always gave strong support but was unable to swing it alone. Even they were skeptical of the readiness of a State College to support such a project.

The water level in the lake was dropping year by year, and the tule areas along the shores were nearly gone. Also, there were rumors to the effect that Tule Irrigation District, the bankrupt corporation that had bored a tunnel and drained twenty-three feet of water out of the lake in the early twenties, was about to regain water rights and would drain more water from the lake. This year, their water rights which had expired in 1947, were restored.

Dr. Holt and I became very discouraged. Vesta would not try to hold another session at Curly Dahl’s resort and at that time, I did not have the courage to try.

However, during the next two years, there was a change of heart on the part of some administration, and it was decided that another session could be planned and would not need to pay—biology classes were making enough profit during summer session on the campus to carry a small loss at Eagle Lake. So, a very conservative plan was set up for the summer of 1951. I was allowed to teach Invertebrate Zoology and Problems in Field Biology. A minimum of ten students would be required. Only seven students registered.

That summer, much effort was spent studying the fate of the fish isolated in drying pools of Pine Creek as it follows its usual course of drying up by early summer. Mr. Harry A. Hanson, District Fisheries Biologist for the Department of Fish and Game, worked very closely with the group and aided in securing Eagle Lake Trout that were isolated in pools of Pine Creek and carrying them to the lake. Hanson and the group also made the usual three-day trips to Bayley Canyon on the north side of Mount Fredonyer and Silver Lake at the east boundary of Caribou primitive area.

This was the year of the cave cricket—the year that Mr. Harry Chandler, biologist for the Department of Fish and Game, and Bill Kamp (perennial student) discovered the occurrence of grylloblattids in the ice caves of Brockman Lava Flats. These little relatives of crickets and cockroaches were known before only from two isolated peaks on the Sierra Nevada, in two or three similar places in Oregon and Washington, and in many places along the edges of the permanent ice in Canada. They thus provide a classical example of a relic population that has persisted since glacial time. Kamp continued research on these insects and, like many perennial students, became a college professor.

For several years, we had wanted very badly to find a place on the lake to hold the school rather than Curly Dahl’s quarters, but the only other place large enough to accommodate the school was a (we thought) busy resort at the southwest corner of the lake. However, when we contacted the owner, Mr. Leland Stafford, we found that it could be arranged.

We had a talk with Dr. Victor Houston, the new director of summer sessions and were granted permission to hold a session in 1953, and tentively for 1954 and 1955, provided that we would get enough people enrolled to pay expenses.
For the session in 1953, I was hired to teach Natural History of the Vertebrates, Ornithology, and Problems in Field Biology, and Mr. Glenn E. Seeber was hired on a two-thirds basis to teach Field Life Sciences, Elementary School Science and Conservation of Natural Resources. Glenn received his Master’s degree at Chico State College in 1947 and was then on the staff of the high school and junior college in Susanville. The next year he joined the staff of the California Polytechnic College at San Luis Obispo where he is teaching today. We were allowed a limited mailing of a mimeographed announcement of the courses available. Such a wide variety of courses was offered out of desperation to get a large enrollment and it is also quite obvious that to accomplish this, courses were offered at the lake that could have been offered as well at Susanville or Westwood.

Logging activities had increased around the lake with the result that roads were being improved. This made it possible for some people to commute from town. Only 17 people enrolled but the session was allowed to proceed as planned. However, plans for any future sessions were cancelled.

In the meantime, the land near Pine Creek that had been set aside for construction of Eagle Lake Biological Station, reverted back to the Forest Service.

The next two or three years constituted a period of concentrated campaigning for a field school in biology for Chico State. Documents were prepared outlining the history of the station and the need for its continuation, the value of such a station in the development of biologists and good biology teachers, the importance to scientific knowledge of study and research in that particular area, and the exact needs for the success of the field school in the immediate future. These documents were submitted to everyone who might be helpful in aiding the continuation of the field school. A grant from the National Science Foundation was applied for without success.

Meanwhile, something else was happening that, in a peculiar way, gave the program a boost—in fact, was responsible for another session being planned for the summer of 1955. A writer named John Wesley Noble had heard that Eagle Lake is a unique place, that it is an ancient lake and supports unique forms of life. He arrived at Eagle Lake during the session of 1953 and asked questions about the unique features of the lake. Because of Noble’s weak background in biology, he tended to expect dinosaurs. I could not tell him much beyond the story of the endemic trout, or to describe to him the nearly microscopic pink hydra, colored so by eating smaller pink animals. He did not know what hydra are, so I explained that they belong to a larger group of animals that include jelly fishes. That seemed to satisfy him. Noble’s article took shape during the next year and described “pink jelly fish floating in the bays of Eagle Lake”. During the summer of 1954, the editors of Collier’s Magazine phoned me and went over the entire manuscript of “The Lake that Time Forgot.” They liked the article and wanted it to succeed and I must admit quite frankly that I also wanted it to see it published. It was published at about the time of the death of Collier’s Magazine but it provided a new breath of life for Eagle Lake Biological Field School.

A copy of the article was presented to all those in authority who might be impressed by it. I then proposed another try at a session at Stafford’s Eagle Lake Resort, for summer 1955. The plan was approved without hesitation and a phone call was made to the Business Office. “Elizabeth?
Will you please set aside $100 for a printed brochure for Tom for his field school next summer? You know, he got nation-wide publicity on the school this year.” Then to me, “If you need more money than that, we can get it.”

A beautiful brochure in two colors, including four photographs was prepared and printed. With much help from the Dean’s Office, it was distributed more widely that any publicity for the school any year before. Field Work in Conservation of Natural Resources, Invertebrate Zoology, Plant Taxonomy, and Problems in Field Biology were offered, and Glenn Seeber and I were hired to teach them. Dean Hector Lee offered Field Work in California Folklore and supervised it from Chico, and with several visits to Eagle Lake.

The session was a great success every way except financially. Twenty-nine people registered, a large percentage for less than six units, and with too many commuters from far away from the lake. When I got back to Chico, I was greeted by the same pleading request that followed the session of 1953: “Tom, will you please not ask for another field school at Eagle Lake?”

In early September of 1955 a forest fire burned through most of the west side of the lake, destroying two buildings of the Eagle Lake Resort and turning the countryside into a charred waste.

During the period between the sessions of 1953 and 1955, Omicron (with money donated by Vesta Holt) purchased two small cabins that had been moved from Camp Ten, some eighteen miles to the west side of the lake. They were moved onto the land of Mr. Stafford’s Eagle Lake Resort, where it was felt they could expand housing and make larger (better paying) sessions possible. They were somewhat improved by volunteer help from Omicron and equipped by Omicron and Mr. Stafford. It was understood that if he supplied stove, sink, and cupboards, he could rent them when we didn’t need them.

It was obvious that because of the forest fire, the west side of the lake was no longer usable for a field school.

The Forest Service was approached about use of the Gallatin place on the south-east side of the lake for a future session. Fruit Growers Supply (Lumber) Company was approached about using their recreation center on the south shore of the lake and a thorough search was made for another piece of land to which the two Omicron cabins could be moved as a nucleus of Eagle Lake Biological Station.

A beautiful site consisting of 92 acres of land with over one-half mile of shoreline was located just north of the abandoned irrigation tunnel (Blye Tunnel) of the now bankrupt Tule Irrigation District. It seemed to be the ideal situation on the lake for a station. It was land administered by the Bureau of Land management. Omicron members began to make plans for purchase of that site.

In the summer of 1956, Glenn Seeber conducted a session in Susanville. He taught courses designed to help elementary and secondary school teachers in field study of native plants and animals, geology and conservation of natural resources. His session in Susanville was a financial
success, and being conducted with many field trips to Eagle Lake area, served to keep the idea of a station on the lake alive.

In early 1957, Mr. Stafford sold Eagle Lake Resort but kept a piece of land including his cabin and the two Omicron cabins. He continued to maintain them and he and visitors from Chico State College used them occasionally.

Negotiations with the Bureau of Land Management for obtaining a patent on the land near the tunnel were started but it became clear that Omicron could not get the land unless it was a non-profit corporation. Plans for establishment of “Eagle Lake Biological Station, Incorporated,” sponsored by Omicron Theta Epsilon were begun. Great difficulty was experienced with the Bureau of Land Management because of the Greek initials of Omicron. Many of their employees could not believe that a Greek-letter society could be honest or of serious intent.

With the success of Glenn’s session in Susanville for support, the college administration was again approached for support of a field school; and because there were not adequate facilities at Eagle Lake, this 1958 session would be held at Westwood. It was further supported by the decisions of two prominent members of the Biology Department to work with me on the program. Another beautiful printed brochure was prepared and widely circulated. When the time came to actually get ready to go to Westwood and teach, my two colleagues found themselves unable to live up to their commitment. A last-minute selection of a teacher to replace them turned out to be a fortunate one for the project.

Mr. Norman Abraham, a Master’s degree recipient from Chico State College and then head of the science department of Yuba City High School, joined me and we carried out a very successful summer field session. I taught freshwater Biology and Ornithology and supervised upper division and graduate research of six students, including a Master’s candidate. Norm taught Native Plants and Elementary School Science. Twenty-five students were enrolled.

During the years 1959 and 1960, our campaign to get land from the Bureau of Land Management was intense. Congressman Harold T. (Bizz) Johnson helped at many points along the way, and especially when Norm Abraham and Pat Balch (also in the science department at Yuba City High School) were visiting in Washington D.C. At that time, Congressman Johnson arranged for a visit with Bureau of Land Management authorities where they, together, spent several hours discussing the problems of our obtaining the land. We feel that these discussions helped to give the Bureau of Land Management a clearer understanding of the nature of our organization, our seriousness of intent, and our determination.

To Norm Abraham goes the credit for saving the program toward establishment of Eagle Lake Biological Station at that time. I was so discouraged that I told Norm I was through. I had also told Omicron that I was through trying to sell the idea to a college and college system that was not ready for it. Norm said, “If you will get the land, I’ll get buildings on it.” That sounded good and the program continued. Norm and his entire staff at Yuba City were extremely helpful in the next few years of work, bringing the corporation into existence, raising money to buy the land and selling the idea of a field stations at Eagle Lake by taking many trips there with their high school classes. Up to the time of establishment of Eagle Lake Biological Station (1964) those
Omicron members and teachers at Yuba City High School had contributed far more work and had taken far more students to Eagle Lake than anyone else.

At that time, I decided to put all my efforts into getting land and a station and save energy for this by not conducting any more summer field sessions until they could be held on the land and in the facilities of Eagle Lake Biological Station, Inc.

In 1959, Dr. Robbins King applied to the National Science Foundation for, and was granted, financial support to operate an institution for high school biology teachers. He conducted it out of Chico State College in Chico. He applied for similar funds in 1960 and again met with success. He conducted that session working out of the school facilities at Westwood where Norm and I had taught in the summer of 1958.

This summer (1960) Robbins King, Homer Lowe and I taught twenty-four high school teachers. Among the lecturers brought in for that institution was Professor Paul F. Romberg who later became Dean of Instruction a Chico State College and who then played a most important role in the fate of Eagle Lake Biological Station.

In the meantime, a representative of the Bureau of Land Management tried to get me to settle for two acres of land instead of the ninety-two. Because it was going to cost Eagle Lake Biological Station, Inc. (Omicron) $250 per acre, I gave in to the extent of settling for twenty-three acres. The formation of the corporation was completed on the 6th day of February 1961. The Board of Directors named at that time were:

- Patrick E. Balch – Chairman
- Thomas L. Rodgers – Director of Station
- Alice E. Stone – Secretary-Treasurer
- Vesta Holt – Member
- L. Wallace Miller – Member

In June of 1960, legal advertisements of sale of the land appeared in the Susanville newspaper. The price was indicated as $6,480. In November, a payment of $500 was made toward purchase of the twenty-three acre plot of land.

All through the campaign, it was the belief of most of the people concerned that such a station should be the property of Chico State College. Considering the policies of the State Colleges then, some had reservations about their ownership, yet it did not seem practical for the corporation (Omicron) to purchase, build and operate it themselves unless they could find an “angel.” No angel was in sight. The administration of Chico State College had been consulted on the matter many times but no hope was ever given of the station being established by the State College any time in the near future.

State College Chancellor Gallagher’s office was notified of what we were doing, both by the Chico State College administration and the Bureau of Land Management. Administrators of the Bureau of Land Management were apparently worried about our stability because we did not have the approval of the Chancellor’s Office.
In November of 1960, it was rumored that Chancellor Gallagher’s office was making a study of the matter. That same month, a representative of his office appeared at Chico to talk to us about the matter. He asked for and received a massive report on our history and hopes. Nothing was ever heard from the Chancellor’s Office again.

The Eagle Lake fund of Omicron was growing but was far from approaching the eight or nine thousand dollars needed to buy the land, move the cabins onto it and build at least one other cheap building.

During the years 1961 and up through 1964 the usefulness of the site of the future station was endangered by an attempt on the part of Tule Irrigation District and several farm owners in Honey Lake Valley to regain water rights to Eagle Lake, and also by a Lassen County plan to build a Shore-line road to (and eventually, past) the site chosen for the station. I took considerable study, planning and effort to effectively aid the forces against these projects. I wrote many letters, got more written by interested organizations, made visits to offices of people and organizations concerned and testified before the State Water Rights Board and the Lassen County Board of Supervisors.

The irrigation district and the farmers failed to gain water rights, and the studies made (principally by the Department of Water Resources and the Department of Fish and Game) demonstrated that any use of water from Eagle Lake for irrigation of any amount of land was entirely impractical. The county plan for a shore-line road was also eliminated from the picture for the time being at least. It was to have been a joint project of Lassen County, the United States Forest Service, and the Bureau of Land Management. Those working against the proposed road were assured publicly that there would be adequate notification of such plans if they came under consideration again.

During late 1961 and 1962, it began to be evident to the Board of Directors of Eagle Lake Biological Station, Inc., that if the corporation could qualify as, not just a “non-profit corporation,” but as an “educational non-profit corporation” the land would become available to them at $2.50 per acre instead of $250 an acre.

Revisions of the by-laws of the corporation were made and a thorough study of what was needed to be considered an educational non-profit corporation was also carried out. By June of 1962, prospects of qualifying were looking quite hopeful.

In the fall of 1962, Dr. Paul F. Romberg joined the Chico State College staff as Dean of Instruction. He immediately presented the idea of turning over the project to Chico State College Foundation, a non-profit corporation that did qualify as educational. They purchased the twenty-three acres of land with money donated by Omicron. Dr. Glenn Kendall signed the document of the transaction April 22, 1963. Support of the project was immediately broadened.

A committee was established to administer the affairs of Eagle Lake Biological Station. It consisted of Dr. Tom Rodgers, Dr. Donald Wootton, Dr. Margery S. Anthony, and Dr. Robbins S. King with Dr. L. Wallace Miller and Dr. Paul F. Romberg being exofficio members.
Mr. Elvin B. Shepherd (Superintendent of Buildings and Grounds) and Dr. Robert Meran, of the Industrial Arts Department, started planning for the construction of as much building for as little money as was possible. Shep and Bob are experts at this. Bob, with a class of Industrial Arts students, and Shep with the volunteer help of his right and left-handed men, Louis Beebe and Al Bates, and other volunteers, built the 100 x 20 feet building in just a few week-ends. Part of the Institutional Grant of the National Science Foundation was made available to develop a water supply, install septic tanks, and purchase other basic equipment. By spring of 1964, it was ready for use. Money for its construction was donated to the Chico State College Foundation by Omicron Theta Epsilon, the Greek-letter society that dreamed so long of the establishment of a permanent station on Eagle Lake. Omicron decided to leave their little old cabins at the Staffords, and donated money that might have been used to move them, to help furnish the kitchen of the station.

In the summer of 1964, Dr. Kenneth Evans conducted the first session at Eagle Lake Biological Station. In the fall of that year, I resigned as Director of Eagle Lake Biological Station, very happy to see it finally a reality.

Like the birth of a child, birth of the station marked only the beginning of its early, most formative years. It has needed and received good care from many dedicated foster parents, one of whom can never be forgotten—Elvin B. Shepherd. Without Shep’s unselfish and untiring efforts, our child rapidly growing and full of promise at this time of dedication (July 6, 1968), would be an emaciated and underdeveloped infant.

Professor Donald Wootton, a dedicated director for two years, deserves great credit for the success of the station, as does Director Dr. Richard Meyer and other directors who have served or are serving. President Robert Hill has been very helpful in this formative stage, by his understanding of the value of such an institution. There are many others who have helped more than a little and the number is now increasing. We have great hopes for our “child,” Eagle Lake Biological Station.