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1885—FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY NOTES—1935

Reminiscences

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My personal knowledge of the study of the food of birds in the Biological Survey dates back to the summer of 1903. At that time the whole organization ranked as a division and was quartered in 6 office rooms and 2 separate shops for the taxidermist and the photographer. The offices were in a brick building and the shops in frame structures, part of a heterogeneous collection of buildings on the site of the present administration building of the Department.

Although economic ornithology was given precedence in all early appropriation bills, the work was at that time being carried on by 2 employees out of a total of about 20 in the organization. Collections, desks, and work tables all were contained in one room, which served also as headquarters for the messengers, accommodated at times one or two other employees, and served as a general packing and lumber room for the whole outfit.

Equipment was primitive, only single-lens dissecting microscopes, for instance, being available. An ordinary pine table without the plumbing we have nowadays sufficed, and when the work demanded the use of a sink, a trip to one built against the wall was necessary. Small jobs requiring water were done with flasks arranged as wash-bottles. The connections of these could be adjusted so that the user would blow water in his own face—a thing, strange to say, that sometimes happened.

A large compound window gave good light but there was no provision for artificially lighting the work on dark days. Outside the window was a busy driveway with a bubbling drinking fountain for horses, then needed. Birds drank and bathed in it also, robins and grackles boldly flopping from edge to center, or vice versa, and others being more timorous. I saw a grackle with one whack of its bill kill an English sparrow sitting beside it on the edge of this fountain.

At first I had been assigned to miscellaneous tasks, such as helping H. C. Oberholser rearrange the bird collection, in cataloging birds (at which time I sat in the same room in the Old National Museum Building with P. L. Gladmon, now Chief of the Department's Division of Appointments) and in putting in order the Geological Survey topographic sheets, of which the Division then had a considerable, and the Bureau now a great, collection.

When I was brought to the laboratory, if it could be so called, and introduced to Dr. S. D. Judd (Prof. F. E. L. Beal being absent on some of his California field work), Judd remarked, "So you're the new man that has come to take my job." That was a new idea to me, and I said so; but on Judd's part it may have been prophetic, as he might have then been aware of personal handicaps that held a threat to his existence. I did not know Judd at his best in Biological Survey activity, but at that period he must have been a brilliant as well as an enthusiastic worker. Certainly his "Birds of a Maryland Farm" (Biol. Surv. Bull. No. 17), based on field and laboratory work carried on from 1895 to 1902, is the best study of local economic ornithology that has ever been published. He sometimes referred to the days when for him "every stomach was a puzzle and every puzzle was a stomach."

At the time I was acquainted with him, Judd was not well balanced mentally, but there were reasons—misfortunes in his personal history—that might well have affected anyone as they did him. He had suffered a back injury in youth, and also the loss of an arm in a hunting accident. Owing to these or other causes, his voice had not matured, nor had a beard developed. He was thin, eager, and high-strung and wore himself out so that in the fall of 1905 he committed suicide.

Judd was a fancier of sporting dogs, bred English setters, and ran them in field trials. He had a passion for betting and would make almost anything the pretext for a bet. One favorite diversion of his was to get some sticky fly paper which came in paired sheets, arrange a bet with someone as to who would catch the first fly or the first five, or some such number, tear the sheets apart and expose them under the same conditions, then stand by watching and "rooting" for results. After I was fairly embarked in the stomach analysis work, Judd showed a desire to bet on the identity of seeds or insects. As I would not bet unless I was sure, I got in his esteem an undeserved reputation for memory. After losing several times he exclaimed perplexedly, "You never forget anything, do you?"

As he liked to be "shocking" at times Judd said many things that did not reflect his inner personality. He came from good stock, was intelligent, well educated, and innately refined. His great sensitiveness and his physical handicaps probably combined to give him what we now call an "inferiority comp lex," which he attempted to hide by brusque and reckless but superficial behavior.

These last lines bring to mind James H. Gaut, not a food-habits worker, but a temporary occupant of the "gut-shop" as Judd called it. He was essentially a field collector and was known as a "go-getter" being sent hither and yon for topo-types or other much-wanted material, usually "delivering the goods." Certain phases of their personalities meshing well, Gaut and Judd were boon companions during Gaut's Washington visits. Gaut was of a reckless disposition and in the horse-and-buggy days managed to have an accident that cost him an arm. Naturally, when automobiles came along, with this more efficient means, it was not long before he was involved in a fatal crash.

During my second summer, at the beginning of my permanent service in the Biological Survey, that is in 1904, Professor Beal was in Washington. He was the man I wanted to meet and work with, and we got along well then and throughout his life. (He died in 1916.) He was an indefatigable worker who kept his eyes to the microscope more hours per day and more days than anyone I have ever known. It is not likely that

his record of examining over 37,000 bird stomachs will ever be surpassed. Professor Beal was well preserved up to the age of 70 and full of enthusiasm for every cause he approved. In disapproval, especially of the injustices of the world, he was wont to stand and give his opinion to all within hearing in terse and vigorous language. He had reflected much on life, and his views on many things were crystallized in aphorisms that he was fond of quoting. Two of them relating to the work were, "you take care of the facts and the theories will take care of themselves," and "ignorance is better than error." The latter had reference to pushing identifications further than was justified by the condition of the material or by other circumstances.

Professor Beal believed that identification to family was sufficient in many cases to permit correct economic interpretation, and this no doubt was a factor in his great output of analyses. Nowadays we prefer to carry all identifications as far as possible, since interpretation can then be made, regardless of the difference in status of even closely related forms, and the changes that occur from region to region or with the lapse of time.

Professor Beal told me incidents of earlier history, a few of which may be of interest to pass along. Someone in the laboratory chewed the coating off some seeds from a bird stomach as a first step toward their identification, and subsequent results proved that the seeds were poison ivy. Another worker (J. M. Stedman) dropped a scalpel while seated at a work table and, manlike, clapped his knees together to catch it. The blade caught crosswise between his legs—severed a large blood vessel so that he had to be taken to a hospital. A thing one learns by sad experience if not otherwise is: When scalpels, needles, scissors, glassware, and all such cutting and piercing implements want to fall, better let them fall than try any fancy tricks in catching them. It took a number of punctures and cuts, some leaving still bothersome scars, for the present writer to learn this. Here's hoping some of the younger workers can get the habit of acting safely without being forced to it by personal mishaps!

Professor Beal was, indeed, an original, industrious, ethical, and likeable character, who so far as I know never did anything to hurt or harm another person.

Professor W. W. Cooke, although a member of the geographic distribution group of employees, had a desk for sometime in the "gut-shop". He was a small man with a high-pitched voice and always wore a frock coat and standing collar. He was an indefatigable worker and persistent through all difficulties in accomplishing what he set out to do. No one who has not actually seen him at work can have a correct impression as to how largely the wonderful collection of migration records now in the Bureau is the result of Professor Cooke's personal efforts. He had an insatiable appetite for the 2 by 5 slips, on which records from migration schedules and books, and in fact from every possible source, were written. He wrote them at office and at home and took them with him on his frequent trips as an agricultural extension lecturer. He wrote until he got writer's cramp in the right hand, trained himself to write with his left hand while the other was recovering, and thereafter used them alternately.

The 2 by 5 slips were selected no doubt as being the cheapest thing available that could be handled in card-catalog fashion. In a day when such new-fangled devices were not in favor Professor Cooke pushed ahead regardless of all obstacles and made a card index of bird distribution and migration records that the Bureau is proud of today.

He was a good deal like "the quiet Mr. Brown" in Bret Harte's poem "The Society Upon the Stanislaus" (by the way, an oft-quoted favorite of the Professor's)—he did not waste time and effort talking back to those who felt called on to advise him about his work. He listened, said little or nothing, and then quietly went on doing just what he had planned to do all the time.

Professor Cooke was fond of taking field excursions to observe birds and was largely instrumental in organizing and getting leaders for the annual spring series of trips sponsored by the District of Columbia Audubon Society. He was keenly interested in local avifaunas wherever he lived and published two editions of "Birds of the District of Columbia." He enlisted the cooperation of all observers, and as regularly as Monday morning (or any other day after a holiday) came, he was around bright and early with notebook and pencil, asking for notes.

Professor Cooke was a good observer of everything in Nature, and made a special study of ferns, of which he had a large collection of living specimens in the grounds of his rural retreat, called "The Wickiup." He was interested in his fellow man and kept informed about the movements and doings of all his acquaintances. While quiet and unobtrusive, he was nevertheless sociable and in a modest way did a good deal of entertaining both at "The Wickiup" and at his city home.

H. W. Henshaw belonged to a class deemed patriarchal by most of the scientific workers in the Biological Survey, as he had participated in some of the early western exploring expeditions—"The Wheeler Surveys", from 1872 to 1879. His remoteness from the Survey group was accentuated by a long period of absence in the Hawaiian Islands, during which he studied and wrote on the bird life there, so that when he came back to Washington it was distinctly as a representative of another generation.

This tended to make him not less, but more, revered, and as he was a scholarly, kindly, and courteous gentleman, he was liked by all. When I say this it will be seen that if I record some things not mentioned in funeral orations, it is without malice. I believe the peculiarities of individuals and any diverting incidents connected with them should be a part of our recollections of them as tending to round out our picture of the whole man and reveal him as a human being.

One of Mr. Henshaw's foibles made him extremely concerned about his health. A pin prick was a serious thing that must receive thorough aseptic attention. Dietary matters were of great importance, and especially regularity as to mealtime. At the outdoor dinners held twice a year on Plummers Island by the Washington Biologists' Field Club, lateness in getting everything ready was unavoidable. This made Mr. Henshaw uncomfortable, and he in turn made life miserable for the cooks who in those days were chiefly Dr. A. K. Fisher and the writer. Through repetition the situation finally called for a cure, so we provided ourselves with a special supply of apples—one of which was handed to Mr. Henshaw every time the pangs of hunger assailed him.

"Uncle Henry," as he was dubbed by Dr. Fisher and called by most of us, was very absent-minded. An extreme manifestation of this trait was his occasional leaving his office to visit someone in the Bureau, the exact business with whom, however, would slip his mind entirely by the time he found him. Then sometimes, as he said himself, the only way in which he could recall it was to go back to his own office, sit in his chair, and reconstruct his former train of thought.

This absent-mindedness and the hypochondria previously mentioned apparently were forerunners of a paranoid affliction that became so pronounced that Mr. Henshaw was forced to spend the last several years of his life in St. Elizabeth's Hospital. This is recorded in the interests of truth and completeness, but let me say that such an end is no disgrace, nor was it the result of a personal fault. It is something that may happen to anyone with a real mind, and Mr. Henshaw had one. His knowledge of the subject matter and his skill as a writer led to his editing the publications of the Bureau of American Ethnology while he was with that organization. He had a graceful, flowing style, did much editing when he was administrative assistant in the Biological Survey, and made many suggestions that were for the good of those who would profit by them; among that group the writer gratefully acknowledges himself to be one.

He liked to visit about the office, a practice that brought on an amusing incident, the telling of which needs a little prefacing. The section of economic ornithology had acquired for experimental use, among other things recommended as seed coatings to repel crows, a supply of blue powder. This was about as finely divided as can well be imagined, and the tiniest speck of it had the property of spreading as if its mission were to turn the world blue. I sometimes said that the package (a few pounds) we had was enough to change the color of all of the oceans. On one of Mr. Henshaw's calls the box of blue powder was lying open. "What's that stuff?" he said, poking his fingers in it. The deed was done then, so we said nothing. He had a habit of running his fingers though his gray beard, which he presently did. A blue streak appeared and then another. What he thought or said when he discovered what happened I never learned. Though it does not concern Mr. Henshaw, another episode in the history of that blue powder is worth recording. When the section moved from the Bieber Building to Building F it was agreed that we would leave that one package behind, and we thought this was understood by all. It was—by all but one. That one—L. O. Jackson—now at Colorado Springs, Colo., made a trip of inspection to see if anything had been left behind, found the package of bluing and bore it in triumph to our new quarters. You can imagine the feelings of the rest of us at the failure of our well-laid plan—the discarded cat had come back. Desperate now at the charmed life the package bore, a guard of determined men escorted it to the Highway Bridge and dumped it into the Potomac.

Once referring to E. W. Nelson, and, of course, necessarily including himself, Mr. Henshaw said: "Anyone who lives to be 45 years old without being married is not a real human being." This was in jest, of course, for Mr. Henshaw was as good-hearted as men ever are. When Dr. Fisher first came to Washington he was taken all about the country by Mr. Henshaw in his equipage of the horse-and-buggy days and given many ornithological and botanical collecting experiences that he has

prized ever since. When the late C. W. Richmond (for a short time in the Biological Survey but for many years in the National Museum) was beginning his ornithological career he showed some of his bird skins to Mr. Henshaw. "Richmond, you make rotten skins" was the verdict, softened however by the invitation to come to Henshaw's place for lessons. This Richmond gladly did, and as upon arrival he found there William Brewster, another ornithologist he idolized, he received lessons from both of them, and felt himself about as near Heaven as one ever gets in this world.

Formal biographical sketches of the persons with whom these remiscences chiefly deal may be found in the following places: Beal, F. E. L., The Auk, 1917, pp. 243-264; Judd, Sylvester D., Who's Who, 1901, p. 617; Cooke, W. W., The Auk, 1917, pp. 119-132; and Henshaw, H. W., The Auk, 1932, pp. 399-427, and autobiographical notes, in The Condor, vol. 21 (1919), pp. 102, 165, 177, and 217, and vol. 22 (1920), pp. 35, 55, and 95.