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- Chicago Natural History Museum, Chicago, Illinois, May 9, 1950.*

LOUIS BENNETT BISHOP, 1865-1950

BY HILDEGARDE HOWARD

LOUIS BENNETT BISHOP, the son of Timothy Huggins and Jane Maria (Bennett) Bishop, was born on June 5, 1865, at the home of his maternal grandparents in Guilford, Connecticut. The Bishops were one of the early families of Connecticut, dating back to John Bishop who settled in Guilford in 1639. The family residence had been in New Haven for two or three generations before Louis was born, and it was there, at 215 Church Street, that Louis grew up.

His earliest schooling was received in a private school maintained by two New Haven ladies. We may picture him, one morning at the tender age of six, trotting through the garden on his way to school, slingshot in pocket, and perhaps a book on a strap. Undoubtedly he is intent on punctuality, for so his parents trained him. But in the garden, close at hand, appears a bird. School is momentarily forgotten, while his trusty slingshot is aimed—oh, so carefully—and the bird falls at his feet. Conflicting emotions bid him—take the bird back to the house, go on to school. Dutifully, he pockets the bird and runs on to school, fearful now of tardiness. We wonder, though, how much he learns this day—the day he collected his first bird. Somehow that bird was preserved and became part of the famous Bishop collection which at the time it was transferred to the Chicago Natural History Museum numbered 53,000 specimens.

Louis was 12 years old, and a pupil in the Hopkins Grammar School in New Haven, before he had any actual training in collecting or preparing bird skins. He and L. C. Sanford were schoolmates and

often walked together in the countryside about New Haven observing birds and shooting them with their slingshots. One day, on returning from a jaunt to nearby Woodbridge, the boys met Willis Wright then a student at Yale. Wright's gun and game bag intrigued the lads, and in the conversation that followed Wright agreed to teach them to collect and mount birds—for a small fee—and to give them the birds used for demonstration. Though Louis quickly learned to skin birds, he found the mounting tedious and decided that his would be a collection of skins. Recognizing the boy's real interest in collecting, the Reverend Bennett, his maternal grandfather, presented him with his first rifle at the age of 14. With the gun went grandfather's promise to the family that he would accompany Louis on all of his hunting expeditions while the boy was growing—for Louis was small for his age. This promise was faithfully kept, though it involved trailing the boy and his companions across fields and through marshes and streams on their many adventures.

In Connecticut society, in which the Bishops occupied a prominent place, a young man was expected to be educated in one of the professions—the ministry, law, or medicine. Both Louis' father and grandfather had been doctors, so it was natural that the son should follow in this line. With this in view, Louis entered Yale, receiving his B.A. degree in 1886. Then, after an unforgettable summer travelling with several other young men of his age down the Nile and camping amid the pyramids, he entered the Yale Medical School. He received his M.D. from Yale in 1888 and carried on additional studies at the New York Polyclinic Medical School, 1888–89, followed by an internship at the New Haven Hospital in 1889–90. He then set sail for Europe where he spent two years in travel and study at the Medical School of the University of Vienna.

Returning to New Haven in 1892, Dr. Louis Bennett Bishop opened a private medical practice. As it was the custom for a doctor to have his office in connection with his residence, he at this time established a separate residence at 356 Orange Street, around the corner from the parental home. Although he had a housekeeper to keep the place in perfect order at all times, he continued to return to his mother's home for his meals.

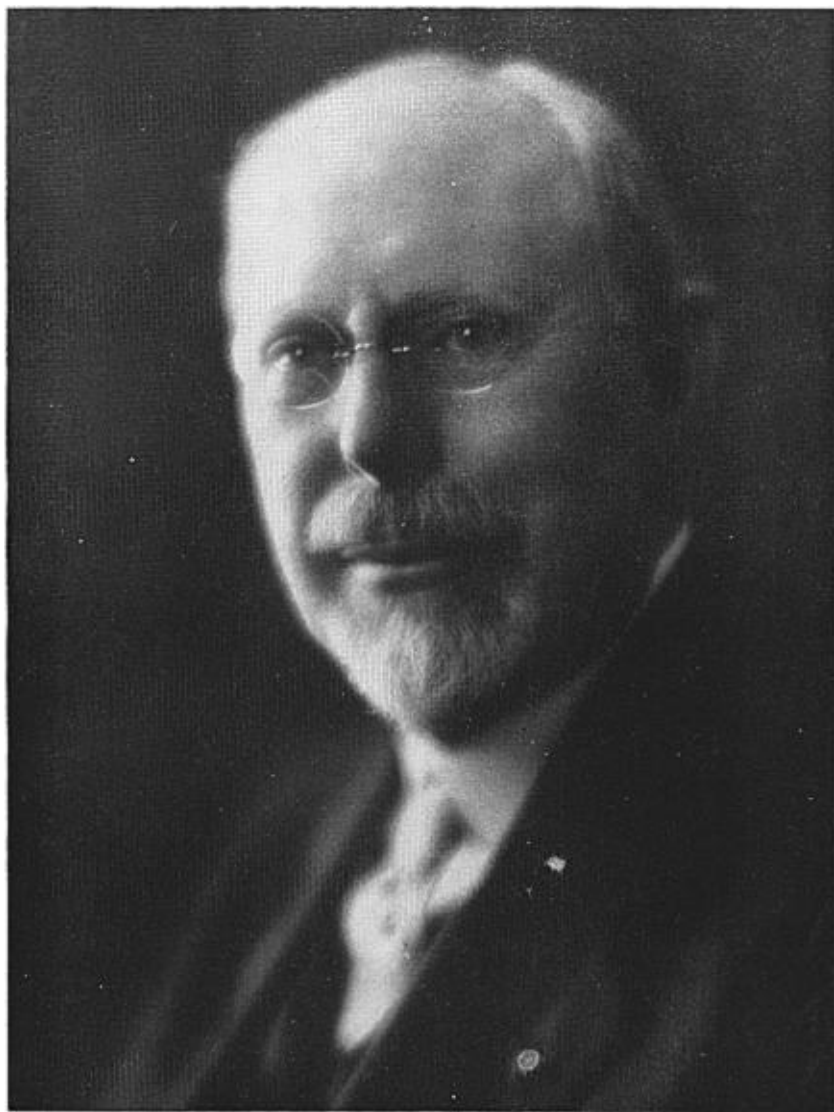
Bishop was a successful doctor, but ornithology was his real interest in life. He spent many vacations in travelling where he could study and collect birds and their eggs. In 1895, 1901, 1902, and 1905 he went to North Dakota; in 1897 to Florida; in 1899 to British Columbia and Alaska, travelling down the Yukon in a small boat; in 1904 to California, British Columbia, and Alberta; in 1906 to Saskatchewan;

in 1908 to the Magdalen Islands; and between 1888 and 1916 many trips were made to Nova Scotia, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Virginia, and South Carolina.

His first published ornithological note was written when he was 20 and still a student at Yale. At this time (1885) he joined the American Ornithologists' Union as an Associate member. His election to Fellow, in 1901, placed him in the first group to be known as Fellows of the A.O.U. At about this time preparation of the first "Auk index" was begun, and Bishop served on this committee. From 1889 to 1901 his ornithological notes and papers were published almost exclusively in "The Auk." The appearance in 1903 of the 600-page volume "The Water-fowl Family" by Sanford, Bishop, and Van Dyke won much favorable comment, particularly Bishop's carefully prepared summaries of habitats and summer and winter ranges. Bishop was a master at observation of details. All his writings reflect his understanding of the importance of accurate recording of such observations. Many notes which he himself did not publish have played an important part in the work of others—as, for example, his excellent color records on gulls, the use of which Jonathan Dwight gratefully acknowledged in his "Gulls of the World."

Bishop met Dwight back in the 1890's. The two were "rival" collectors but became fast friends. It was this friendship which led to the building of a small museum in the garden of Bishop's place on Orange Street in New Haven. Dwight's collection was larger than Bishop's in the 1890's, and he was at a loss to know where and how to house it safely. The spacious garden on Orange Street offered an excellent site on which to erect the proper kind of building for the purpose. Accordingly, Bishop offered the space, and Dwight immediately set about having the building erected. Later, Bishop bought the place from Dwight and this one-story museum, roughly 40 by 30 feet in size, became the depository of a large part of the Bishop collection.

After 15 years of medical practice, which included important posts both in surgery and in pediatrics at the New Haven Dispensary and in the Yale Medical School, Bishop retired from medical work in 1908 to devote his entire time to birds. Two years later, on July 10, 1910, he was married to Leona Anna (Bayles) Sturtevant in New York. The honeymoon was a year spent in travel through Europe and Africa. The occasion of the trip probably accounts for his remark (Auk, 29: 179) "Ornithology was not our aim, and no actual fieldwork was done anywhere. But I kept my eyes and ears open for birds during all parts of our trip . . ." Mrs. Bishop remembers clearly that the gun, which was a part of their luggage, did not go unused. In Italy,



DR. LOUIS BENNETT BISHOP, 1865-1950

however, it was hardly necessary to go hunting for birds as the markets were full of them, thousands of them, hanging in large bunches. Bishop bought quantities of these market birds—larks, starlings, siskins, redbreasts, thrushes, blackbirds, wrens, sparrows—and soon learned that he must quickly direct the salesman to leave the feathers on the birds, as the average purchaser, buying birds for the table, expected them to be plucked at the market. Relieving the salesman of the task of plucking had an effect on the price of the birds, too—it went up; cannily, the salesman knew his wares had a special significance for Dr. Bishop. Perhaps it is unnecessary to add that Dr. and Mrs. Bishop did not share the Italian's love of "skylarks on toast." This delicacy, prepared by the chef at one of the hotels on their journey, was left untouched.

The Bishop's one child, Herbert Bennett, was born to them in 1912 in New Haven. Five years later, the California chapter in Louis Bishop's life began. Coming to California originally for the health of his mother and expecting to spend only the summer, the visit lengthened out to 33 years. A few eastern interludes were necessary to arrange business matters, for Dr. Bishop maintained his New Haven residence for many years.

A great friend of Eugene Law, Bishop chose Hollywood, near the Laws, for winter residence, while the summers were spent at Carmel. Not for eight or nine years was a permanent home established, in Pasadena. The proximity of Hollywood to the hills and canyons, still undisturbed by civilization, delighted Dr. Bishop. Days were spent in tramping the hills, learning the birds of the west, and always collecting. Not too far away, by trolley, lay the beaches. Here, from 1918 to 1920, Bishop and friends from the Cooper Ornithological Club went regularly to study and collect gulls.

The Bishop collection continued to grow. Added to by his own efforts, and also through purchase from collectors abroad and at home, his series of skins housed at the Los Angeles Museum began to rival the collection left behind in New Haven. In later years, when field work was no longer so inviting, Dr. Bishop spent his days at the museum writing and studying his specimens. During this time budding ornithologists were given financial help by collecting and preparing specimens for him. He was very generous and the number of grateful young men whom he assisted is legion. He also generously contributed to many organizations. His memberships numbered more than 30 societies. Most of these were related to natural history in its various aspects, but included also were medical groups, university clubs, and two societies reflecting the background of the

Bishop family in America, namely the Society of the Cincinnati and the Society of Colonial Wars, both of the state of Connecticut.

Dr. Bishop was especially interested in plumage changes and in the slight differences which might, or might not, indicate racial distinction. He collected with these thoughts in mind, collecting from one locality at various times of the year or choosing particular areas which might yield information concerning marginal forms. His became one of the most important study collections in the country, and the loan of his specimens was sought by ornithologists from east to west. Dr. Bishop himself described a number of subspecies, six of which are accepted today—a goodly total in view of the heated arguments which have long existed between the “splitters” and the “lumpers.” In view of his several recommendations for new races, Dr. Bishop might be grouped with the “splitters.” However, in this group he should certainly be considered a conservative, for no recommendation was ever advanced without considered judgment based on long series of specimens at hand. In fact, we might say that in all things in life Louis Bishop was on the side of the conservatives—indeed militantly so in the realm of politics! Innovations were weighed cautiously before being accepted. Because of this conservatism, the revisions which he sought should be the more convincing. Only by the greatest care in observation of detail would his decisions be made. But once made, he was willing to back them through any amount of criticism. He delighted in discursive argument, either written or oral, and was not one to mince words in putting over his point.

It was with great foresight that, about ten years ago, Dr. Bishop arranged for the final disposition of his great collection of bird skins and a smaller collection of eggs and nests, as well as a series of sterna of North American shorebirds. The larger collection was purchased by the Chicago Natural History Museum; the smaller was given to the Peabody Museum at Yale. A portion of the skin collection remained in California for his use until, because of failing health, he urged the completion of the transaction, and the last shipment was made to Chicago. His life's work was put in order. His beloved collection in good hands, his note books and catalogues and remaining manuscripts carefully listed, Louis Bishop, who had lived a full, rich life, was ready to meet his Maker. He died April 3, 1950.

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