

IN MEMORIAM: FLORENCE MERRIAM BAILEY

BY PAUL H. OEHSER

FLORENCE MERRIAM BAILEY was the first woman ever elected a Fellow of the American Ornithologists' Union. This honor, which came to her in 1929, she had sound reason to cherish; in her family the A.O.U. naturally held high status, inasmuch as her older brother, Clinton Hart Merriam, was one of its founders. Furthermore, the Bureau of Biological Survey, of which her brother was the first chief and in which her husband, Vernon Bailey, spent a lifetime of service, had its roots in the Union. Florence was proud of her brother and his scientific accomplishments, and in her brief account in 'Who's Who in America' she was content to be listed simply as "interested in ornithology" (a classic understatement) and as the "sister of Clinton Hart Merriam."

Florence Augusta Merriam was born on August 8, 1863, at Locust Grove, New York, the daughter of Clinton Levi and Caroline (Hart) Merriam. The little town of Locust Grove is in Lewis County, in the Black River Valley, near the present village of Port Leyden, in the shadow of the Adirondacks. The Merriam estate, "Homewood," was a country place with ample acres and ready opportunities for young people to study natural history first-hand. Florence must have acquired an interest in such matters at an early age, probably through the encouragement of her brother Hart and of her father. We know that her father did have an interest in scientific matters, for there is on record (*in* Badè's 'The Life and Letters of John Muir') a long letter from Muir answering some questions the elder Merriam had apparently put to him concerning the glaciation in Yosemite Valley, California, following a visit he made Muir at Yosemite in the summer of 1871.

On both parents' sides Florence Merriam was descended from old American stock. Her father's line went back to Joseph Merriam who about 1636 came to America from Kent, England, and settled in Concord, Massachusetts. Clinton Levi Merriam (1824-1900), her father, was a native of Leyden, N. Y. As a young man he followed mercantile pursuits in Utica, N. Y., but in 1847 he moved to New York City and became an importer and later engaged in banking. About the time that Florence was born the family returned to Locust Grove, and a few years later Mr. Merriam was elected Republican Representative to the United States Congress from his district; he remained in Congress four years (1871-1875).

Florence's mother was the daughter of Levi Hart, of Collinsville, N. Y., a judge of the county court and member of the State Assembly. Caroline Hart was a graduate of Rutgers Female Institute in New York, one of the earliest women's colleges. Perhaps this affiliation was to influence Florence's education, for following her preparatory training at a private school in Utica she entered Smith College at Northampton, Mass., a newly founded non-sectarian institution for women only. She spent four undergraduate years at Smith and there formed many lasting friendships.

For some reason, however, she did not receive her degree with her college class (1886), and in the autumn of that year we find her writing to her classmates: "I have been doing Audubon work combined with that most abhorred and abhorrible occupation of plain sewing, with housekeeping and bookkeeping, and am taking a P. G. course in business with my father. In the meantime I have not forgotten the B. L. that I did not get last June, and when I have graduated from receipt books and ledgers I hope to become one of the proud alumnae of dear '86." She was not granted her degree until many years later, in 1921, but at Smith she was always considered a member of the class of 1886.

During all this time her interest in ornithology was, without doubt, uppermost, in spite of these domestic distractions she writes about, and even while at college she was spending days afield, sometimes leading groups of students, and becoming that incomparable mistress of birdlore for which she was to be famous. During her last year at Smith College her beautifully written articles began appearing in the 'Audubon Magazine.' Then she proceeded to revise and add to these articles, and in 1889 they went into her first book, 'Birds Through an Opera Glass,' published by Houghton Mifflin & Co., in its Riverside Library for Young People. It is rare indeed that an author at only 26 years of age produces a work so charming, unpretentious, and useful. This little volume set her style as a writer, as well as the type of ornithologist she was to become. On both counts it was good. Her simple purpose was to help "not only young observers but also laymen to know the common birds they see about them."

Besides the study of birds, which she pursued in earnest, Miss Merriam became interested in social work. In the summer of 1891 she spent a month in the "summer school" that had been started for Chicago working girls as a branch of Jane Addams's Hull House activities, and the following winter she was employed in one of Grace Dodge's working girls' clubs in New York City. But about this time, or before, she developed tuberculosis, and it seemed best for her to

take the "west" cure. She had already spent one spring (1889) in California, and in 1894 she went west again. She attended six months of lectures at Leland Stanford Junior University, and then in the spring, the bird-nesting season, she was off to Twin Oaks, in a small valley in San Diego County, Calif., observing the birds and taking notes that later went into her book 'A-Birding on a Bronco.' "Then," she writes, "I went to the San Francisco Mountain country in Arizona for a final dose of climate." From her brother's home in Washington, D. C., the next December she wrote: "I have come back from it [the "wonderful" Arizona climate] so well that I expect to spend the winter here and to give courses of 'bird talks' to boot." That winter she was busy also in the Women's National Science Club, working "to get women to start branches in the country."

For awhile during her western trip, Miss Merriam had stayed at a little Utah town, where she took occasion to observe not only the local avian inhabitants of the country but also the human inhabitants. She wrote up her experiences there in her book 'My Summer in a Morman Village,' which was published in 1895. She did not altogether approve of some of the characteristics and customs of the Latter-Day Saints, and though there is much in the book about mountain scenery, horseback riding, Great Salt Lake, and nature in general, Miss Merriam did not entirely hide her feelings concerning the Mormons.

The next year saw the publication of her delightful 'A-Birding on a Bronco,' and two years later came 'Birds of Village and Field,' a book for beginners in ornithology and one of the first popular American bird guides. It contains simple field color-keys for identifications and more than 200 drawings by Ernest Thompson Seton, Louis Agassiz Fuertes, and John L. Ridgway.

These four early books of Miss Merriam's belonged to a class apart and represented a genre of nature writing found, among her contemporaries, in such writers as Bradford Torrey, Frank Bolles, Sara Anderson Hubbard, Olive Thorne Miller, Dallas Lore Sharp, and the two Johns—Muir and Burroughs. Florence Merriam was not the least of this group, and even today the charm of these volumes, which she wrote before her marriage, has not faded. She was one of the most literary ornithologists of her time, combining an intense love of birds and remarkable powers of observation with a fine talent for writing and a high reverence for science. She made a definite contribution to nature writing, a form of literature that in America has indigenous roots; nature, indeed, is the eternal spring that has given important parts of American literature its greatest vitality.

Her brother Hart, as chief of the Biological Survey, had engaged an energetic naturalist, Vernon Bailey, in the work of making biological field studies, especially in the West. Young Bailey lived at the Merriam home, and so it was inevitable that he should meet Hart's sister; and, if it can be said of any couple, it could be said of Florence Merriam and Vernon Bailey—they were made for each other. They were married on December 16, 1899, and thereafter made their home in Washington, D. C., first at the Merriams' on Sixteenth Street, then at the corner of Nineteenth and California Streets, and finally at the home they built on the oak-wooded site at 1834 Kalorama Road.

Almost immediately Vernon began a series of field trips for the Biological Survey that were to continue for many years. Sometimes alone but frequently accompanied by Mrs. Bailey, he covered New Mexico systematically, probably as thoroughly as any state has ever been worked biologically. Vernon collected and studied mammals, birds, reptiles, and plants, and Florence observed the birds. During the next 30 years they worked also in Texas, California, Arizona, the Pacific Northwest, and the Dakotas. Mrs. Bailey wrote up her ornithological observations made on all these trips, and they appeared for the most part in a long succession of papers in 'The Auk,' 'Bird-Lore,' and 'The Condor.' She was no "woman tenderfoot," and the wagon trips across the prairies and the pack-outfit travel in the western mountains, in those early days of the century, were not to be laughed off. Though not a robust woman, and as a girl threatened with tuberculosis, she developed a wonderful vitality, both physically and mentally. The rich experiences of the outdoors, especially in the great Southwest which she loved, the companionship of her husband, and the stimulation of the work they were accomplishing—these were the rewards of the arduous life she chose to pursue.

In 1895 had appeared the first edition of Frank M. Chapman's 'Handbook of Birds of Eastern North America.' Who better than Florence Merriam Bailey to do a companion volume for the West? She must have spent assiduous hours at this task in the two or three years following her marriage, for the book appeared in 1902, with 600 pages and as many illustrations. In its various editions the 'Handbook of Birds of the Western United States' has been a standard work now for half a century, and how many bird students during that time must have first known the name Florence Merriam Bailey through its pages! I have a letter from Olaus J. Murie that testifies to this and also precisely describes the kind of book it was and the manner of its author.

"My first knowledge of Mrs. Bailey," writes Murie, who knew her well in later years, "was my purchase of her Handbook of Birds of the

Western United States, the blue-covered edition of 1908. I have just taken this battered copy from the bookshelf, and in the preface I note her meticulous care in stating the corrections in this and announcing that '*Astragalinus* has been revised in the text to accord with the rulings of the American Ornithologists' Union.' But throughout the book, following the necessary technical descriptions, are the delightful informal accounts of the birds, accounts that help to make each bird something of flesh and blood, a living thing. Some of these she wrote herself; some are by Vernon Bailey. She drew her accounts from whatever source was competent—first-hand experiences of Dr. E. W. Nelson, on the Alaska tundra, or of L. M. Loomis [off Monterey Bay] . . . Revering science with a deep devotion, and with skilled first-hand experience, she still saw more in a specimen than a skin. In her scientific writings, even her handbook, she did her best to bring the outdoors into its pages."

During all her active years in Washington, Mrs. Bailey was a tireless member and promoter of the Audubon Society of the District of Columbia. She was one of the founders of the Society when it was organized in 1897. One of the Society's first projects was the preparation of 'Birds of Washington and Vicinity,' by Mrs. Lucy Warren Maynard, which was published in 1898 and was introduced as a textbook in the District of Columbia schools. Miss Merriam, experienced in the publication of bird books, inspired and aided this project. That same year the first of the Society's famous bird classes was organized, aimed primarily to furnish basic instruction in both field and laboratory ornithology at the normal-school level to teachers of nature study. Early leaders and instructors in the work were T. S. Palmer, H. C. Oberholser, Sylvester D. Judd, and Wells W. Cooke, all then on the Biological Survey staff. Mrs. Bailey was the prime mover of this group of volunteer Audubon workers, and year after year saw her teaching the bird classes or directing the work, always a guiding spirit. By 1902 there were five classes, aggregating 50 or 60 members, and by 1913 it took a dozen or more teachers to accommodate the membership of between one and two hundred. To Mrs. Bailey must be given the principal credit for the popularity and success of this rather remarkable activity which continued for more than a quarter of a century.

The Bailey home on Kalorama Road, between Eighteenth Street and Columbia Road, was a mecca for naturalists of all breeds and varieties. No one who visited there in the old days will forget it. Whether it were some young tenderfoot mammal collector like Clarence Birdseye, then probably little dreaming of frozen foods, or some

eminent person like John Burroughs (in his Journal he records having dined at Mrs. Bailey's in February, 1906)—all were welcome and felt at home in the Baileys' inviting second-floor library and living room filled with books and pictures. One remembers especially the octagonal dining room, the fireplaces, the American Indian rugs and baskets the Baileys had collected on their western trips, Vernon's mammals and humane traps in the basement, the backyard, with its oaks and squirrels and birds (but no cats!). There was also the unique show piece on the panel of the library fireplace—a portrait of a fine Bengal tiger then living in the National Zoological Park, painted in repose by the wildlife muralist, Charles R. Knight. In 1949 Mr. Knight wrote me: "I remember both Vernon and Florence saying that they had built their house around the tiger picture, which I had promised to do for them before the place was actually constructed. The panel seemed always to give these two splendid friends the greatest amount of satisfaction, and I am wondering what will become of it." That question can now be answered. Mrs. Bailey bequeathed the picture to the Smithsonian Institution, where it is now permanently deposited in the National Collection of Fine Arts.

For some years after the death of Prof. Wells W. Cooke in 1916, his projected work on the birdlife of New Mexico, which he had undertaken for the Biological Survey, remained uncompleted. Finally, Dr. E. W. Nelson, then chief of the Survey, asked Mrs. Bailey to complete the volume for publication. She was a logical choice, for she had been with her husband during the years beginning in 1903 when, as the Bureau's chief field naturalist, he was making the Survey's thorough biological investigations in New Mexico. Furthermore, she knew the western birds perhaps as no other person did. It remained for her to recheck and bring down to date Professor Cooke's records and data, fill in the gaps, then produce a manuscript according to the enlarged scope prescribed by Dr. Nelson. Under the aegis of the Biological Survey the task was completed, and 'Birds of New Mexico' appeared in 1928. This was published by the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish. Containing some of Maj. Allan Brooks's best bird portraits in color, the book was the first comprehensive report on the birdlife of the Southwest. In 1931 Mrs. Bailey was awarded the Brewster Medal of the A.O.U. for this, her *magnum opus*. She was the first woman ever to receive this honor, and two years later the University of New Mexico awarded her an honorary LL.D. degree "in recognition of the educational and scientific value of her work on Birds of New Mexico." Vernon Bailey's companion work on 'Mammals of New Mexico' was published by the Biological Survey in 1931. The two works together form a landmark in western natural history.



FLORENCE MERRIAM BAILEY, May, 1915. Photograph from the Deane Collection of the Library of Congress.

The companionship that existed between Florence and Vernon Bailey was something that was enriching to all who knew them. Childless, they were both children at heart. They had a common devotion, their love for nature, in which they found their greatest pleasure—but their devotion to each other transcended that. It was an affinity of the spirit that is attained by few in this life. It is not something easily described, yet it should not go unmentioned in any account of the two. It was not a selfish devotion. Murie remarks: "Their ambition in little or big things was to be helpful, to do service. Both would be delighted in the discovery of some young person who had promise of good influence. 'Leaven the lump!' was a favorite saying of Florence Bailey on such occasions."

Mrs. Bailey possessed a gentle, feminine personality but at the same time a forceful one. In spite of her preoccupation with things of the wild, she was a humanitarian, taking an eager interest in educational, child-welfare, and other affairs. She loved all wholesome things and wholesome living; she hated all forms of cruelty and was uncharitable toward many of the degrading influences of modern life. She held firmly to principles and ideas. Those who knew her well will remember, too, many amusing traits she had. One was her short manner on the telephone. When she had finished a conversation she "hung up," without any of the customary but meaningless formalities or valedictories. This was characteristic. There was no room in her life for fripperies.

Her last work of any magnitude, 'Among the Birds in the Grand Canyon National Park,' was published by the National Park Service in 1939, when she was past 75. Also should be mentioned the fact that she contributed the bird sections to some of her husband's works, including 'Wild Animals of Glacier National Park' (1918) and 'Cave Life of Kentucky' (1933). Others of her more important papers will be familiar to many bird students simply by their suggestive titles: "Red Letter Days in Southern California," "Birds Recorded from the Santa Rita Mountains in Southern Arizona," "Characteristic Birds of the Dakota Prairies," "A Return to the Dakota Lake Region," "Wild Life of an Alkaline Lake," "Meeting Spring Half Way," "A Populous Shore," In A. C. Bent's "Life Histories of North American Birds," Mrs. Bailey is among the authorities most frequently quoted on bird habits and behavior, particularly in the volumes dealing with the smaller species.

As an ornithologist Mrs. Bailey had little or no concern with such matters as taxonomy except as a means to an end, and that end was to familiarize others in an orderly and interesting way with her beloved



birds. I do not know that she ever named a new form. Her forte was elsewhere—observing and describing what she saw afield. In her writings she made use of the work of others, some thought inordinately, but this was through no lack of knowledge of her own but rather because of a wide acquaintance with and a conscientious awareness of avian literature and an ability to “step up” her own enthusiasms and observations with those of others. Her “literary luggage” (to use a phrase of the British author C. E. Montague) was anything but meager, yet she never carried it ostentatiously.

When Vernon Bailey retired from the Biological Survey in 1933, the two planned to spend their winters at their “ranch” near San Diego, Calif., but the aging couple soon found that “roughing it” is better for young people; it was easier to live in Washington. After Vernon died in 1942, Florence kept on at the Bailey home, but she was to survive her husband by only six years. Her death, which occurred in Washington on September 22, 1948, passed unnoted by many of her admirers of long ago. But on that day there departed a true friend of birds, a sweet and unselfish spirit, and altogether a most unusual woman. The Reverend John Van Schaick, Jr., the well-known Universalist editor and writer, also a member of the A.O.U., conducted the funeral service in Washington. Burial was at the old Merriam home place at Locust Grove, N. Y.

Besides her long affiliation with the A.O.U. (first elected in 1885, the first woman associate member), Mrs. Bailey was a member of the Cooper Ornithological Club, the Wilson Ornithological Club, the National Audubon Society, and the Biological Society of Washington.

It is of interest that Mrs. Bailey's name was memorialized in ornithology by Dr. Joseph Grinnell in 1908, when he gave the subspecific name *baileyae* to a form of chickadee (now known as *Parus gambeli baileyae*) from the higher mountains of southern California.

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