



W. LEE CHAMBERS

1878-1966

(Photograph taken about 1928)

IN MEMORIAM: W. LEE CHAMBERS

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W[ILLIE]. LEE CHAMBERS liked to recall that Sedalia, Missouri, where he was born May 7, 1878, was famous for the manufacture of covered wagons used by California-bound emigrants. His father, William Henry Chambers, a wheelright, helped build these wagons. Lee's mother, Dora Neiper Chambers, born in Kentucky, had moved to Missouri during the Civil War. The couple met soon after William Henry's discharge from the Union Army; despite the conflict of their backgrounds, they entered into a long and happy marriage. Their happiness was marred when an infant daughter succumbed to a respiratory ailment. Lee, their second and last child, also suffered from frequent attacks of "grippe" in the damp Missouri bottoms; when he was five the family decided to move to California. William Henry Chambers had been impressed during a youthful visit in goldrush days by the healthful climate and abundant fine land to be found in the far west.

The Chambers family settled in Los Angeles and the father found employment as an engineer for the Southern Pacific Railroad. Lee attended the Eighth Street Grammar School and, in the second grade, made a friend who was to become a lifelong companion in natural history interests—Howard Robertson. The youngsters, and others with similar interests, enjoyed bird rambles in the abundant open country available to them then, even near the center of the undeveloped city.

Among school friends were descendants of early Spanish-American settlers, still living on portions of land-grants held for generations by their families. It was a treat to the city boys to be invited to one of the old adobe haciendas and to listen to tales, told by elderly grandfathers, of the abundance of game in the days before the "Anglos" came—great herds of deer, numerous grizzly bears, and huge flocks of birds. Lee Chambers was deeply impressed by that great change in numbers of wildlife during a scant fifty-year period.

Entering Los Angeles High School in 1891, Chambers and Robertson had become active in a large group of boys with natural history interests; most concentrated on collecting eggs and nests of birds. Chambers now restricted his interest to birds and was eager to learn as much as possible about ornithology. At this time he became acquainted with Harry Swarth, a youth with sophisticated zoological interests. Swarth, an orphan living with his guardian, George Frean Morcom, had been introduced to museum preparation techniques and to the ornithological literature. Morcom, a man of means and English by birth, had a university education and possessed a considerable ornithological library. These wonderful books

opened a whole new world to Lee Chambers; he determined to acquire a library of his own and developed a lasting respect for scholarly works and for education.

High school did not then offer biology, but chemistry, mathematics, and natural philosophy added scientific depth. As often as the boys could, they planned field trips, limited only by transportation via common carrier, buckboard, or bicycle.

In the fall of 1893 a group of young naturalists met together to form the Southern California Natural History Society. Some who attended the original meeting were Lee Chambers, Horace Gaylord, Ozra W. Howard, William B. Judson, Virgil Owen, Howard Robertson, and Harry S. Swarth. Many of these men developed a lifelong interest in birds. Meetings were held from time to time in space provided by the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce. A modest display of bird skins, nests, and eggs was set up. Field reports and brief papers filled the programs; the young naturalists were learning the value of reporting their observations. Most were collecting eggs and skins and they exchanged specimens with other naturalists across the country, among whom were some leading zoologists. Specimens from California were then much sought after by collectors in the eastern United States.

At about the same time in San Jose, a group of bird students had organized the Cooper Ornithological Club, named for Dr. J. G. Cooper. Chester Barlow was the moving spirit behind the organization and its official organ was the *Nidologist*, edited by Henry Reed Taylor. Joseph Grinnell was active in this group at an early date. By 1894 the Southern California Natural History Society had become the "Southern Division" of the Cooper Ornithological Club. From that time on W. Lee Chambers was a leading figure in the affairs of the organization and it was largely through the Cooper Club—now called the Cooper Ornithological Society—that he expressed his natural history interests.

Chambers and his parents moved to Santa Monica in 1894. The western part of Los Angeles was still wild and birdlife abundant. Lee Chambers recalled his enthusiasm:

"I will never forget how we watched in the fall for the flocks of cranes which came to feed on the barley fields that extended from the present site of Wilshire Boulevard to the foothills, an area nearly four miles long and one and one-half miles wide.

"We also saw occasional flocks of Mountain Plover. These birds generally accompanied large flocks of Killdeer, apparently for sociability. But what thrilled me most were the long clouds of ducks and geese on migration. I have seen ducks and geese in thousands covering the ocean off the present site of Playa del Rey and on the lagoons back of there. This area was called Ballona Swamp. In rainy winters Ballona Swamp extended over nearly all the low ground as far back as the present site of Culver City, then called 'The Palms,' and running over to the Inglewood Mesa,

an area about ten miles square. Apparently it was one of the resting places of migrating flocks. Often I stayed awake to listen to the continuous call of the flying birds."

Lee Chambers' first publication on birds appeared in the *Avifauna* when he was seventeen. He had developed some skill in nature photography and a picture accompanied the article. His schooling was resumed at the University of Southern California where he was enrolled in the preparatory program from 1895 until 1897. He then matriculated to undergraduate status in the University as a candidate for the Bachelor of Science degree. He chose chemistry as a major because it offered more career opportunities than did zoology. But he registered in most of the life sciences courses offered in the limited curriculum. Whenever they had a chance he and his friends planned field trips. Chambers recalled Topanga Canyon as a favorite field haunt:

"The Santa Monica Mountains swarmed with coveys of Valley Quail, and deer were abundant. Every group of large sycamores was ruled by a Red-tailed Hawk or a Swainson Hawk. Hollow trees housed numerous Sparrow Hawks, Barn Owls, and Screech Owls. Everywhere in season, we could hear the cries of woodpeckers, Flickers, Western Kingbirds, and Bullock Orioles. Smaller birds were abundant, making this a wonderful place for me."

In the summer of 1896 William Henry Chambers purchased an interest in a hardware store in Santa Monica and Lee was given the responsibility of managing the sporting goods department. He learned a lot about guns, ammunition, and fishing tackle and he became knowledgeable about the behavior of sportsmen. He also found that he had a flair for business. Selling firearms made him keenly aware of the need for wildlife conservation; he was greatly concerned about improving laws to prevent commercial destruction of birds:

". . . one of the outstanding spots in my memory was the taxidermy establishment of Mr. and Mrs. John Brickner. Along in the middle 1890s they sold enormous quantities of small, mounted birds for millinery purposes. Hummingbirds were very common through this section and the Brickners caught most of their hummers by netting them. With Mrs. Brickner's unusual skill as a taxidermist, these gorgeous birds were beautifully mounted on long stickpins or on wires. It was common to see hundreds of these mounts pinned on a large slab of redwood bark, so lifelike they seemed about to fly away. I remember one lady in Santa Monica who had a quantity of these beautiful creatures pinned on her hat. She looked like a walking aviary!"

In the summer of 1897 the Chamberses sold their interest in the hardware store and opened a sporting goods store. Lee Chambers had greater business responsibilities but he found much time to work for improvement of game regulations:

"Up to this time and through 1898 there was no bag limit, and [very limited] closed seasons were the only curtailment on hunting. . . . Market hunting was in full swing, but at that time there were not many market hunters and the game was

plentiful . . . ducks brought only 25 cents each and quail 5 cents. Nevertheless, I have seen market hunters drive up in front of the store with a light buckboard literally heaped with quail or ducks.

"Shortly after 1898 many new high power rifles came out and the market was flooded with them . . . it seemed that everyone who purchased a new high power rifle had to target shoot, and it was the common practice for purchasers to go into the wilds and shoot everything they could see in an effort to improve their marksmanship. It was not long until we noticed a decrease in the hawk and owl population . . . [and the less frequent sighting of] California Condors."

Beginning in 1899 the Fish and Game Commission gradually curtailed hunting privileges. Much pressure was brought to bear by the Cooper Club, but restraints were not yet sufficient:

". . . in February 1900 thousands of wild pigeons (*Columba fasciata*) [were] poisoned on the Wolfskill Ranch. The pigeons were eating the grain . . . ranch people had scattered some poisoned grain near the present site of Sawtelle, then a large barley field.

"When I arrived at the field I saw a large flock of Turkey Vultures feasting on the dead pigeons, the remains and feathers of which covered a large part of 160 acres."

In the summer of 1900 Lee Chambers was married to Virginia Treadwell and dropped out of the university to concentrate on business. His working hours were devoted to selling sporting goods until their family of five was raised, but Chambers found ample spare time for ornithological pursuits. Cooper Club activities proved a rewarding outlet. Lee Chambers held the position of treasurer and business manager from 1905 to 1950. During this period he worked tirelessly to increase membership while managing the finances of the organization. He built a substantial endowment fund to insure continuance of Cooper Club publications. When Chambers resigned six men were appointed to take over his duties.

Conservation of wildlife continued to be a lifelong interest of Lee Chambers. Many of his papers followed this theme. His close contact with sportsmen helped him to see what restrictions were needed and how hunters could be educated to accept necessary regulations. As early as 1912 Chambers was a member of a committee appointed to make recommendations for improved game laws.

The waning population of the California Condor was a special concern of Chambers. In 1900 he started a systematic inquiry—corresponding with ornithologists and museums throughout the world—to gather all the data accompanying each specimen of Condor skin or egg as well as the several living birds then held in captivity. He also wrote to all persons who had collected Condors, or had a chance to observe Condors over a period of years. Chambers hoped to use this information in writing a history of the nearly extinct species. The extensive correspondence brought him into contact with most of the leading ornithologists. Chambers was

still collecting these data when Carl B. Koford undertook his Condor study and the information was turned over to Koford.

From a small start in student days Chambers built his ornithological library into a significant collection and became something of an authority in the field of ornithological literature. In later years much of his attention was devoted to bibliographic matters relating to birds.

Topanga Canyon was chosen as the place to spend his last years. Lee Chambers continued to enjoy birds to the end. On the morning of January 8, 1966 he was sitting on the porch, watching the birds at his feeding station, when his heart stopped.

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