



BURT LEAVELLE MONROE, SR., 1901-1968

(Courtesy of The Courier-Journal and Louisville Times, Louisville, Kentucky)

IN MEMORIAM: BURT LEAVELLE MONROE, SR.

ROBERT M. MENGEL

BURT MONROE was born in Louisville, Kentucky, on March 16, 1901, to Herman Frederick and Marietta Elizabeth Becker Monroe, the second youngest of four children. He died at 2:00 PM on Friday, May 17, 1968, at his home in Anchorage, Kentucky, a suburb of Louisville. At the precise moment of his death he was engaged in service to the American Ornithologists' Union, possibly dearest to him of the many organizations that he loved and served.

An astonishing proportion of Burt Monroe's life was devoted to service: to his family; to the Commonwealth Life Insurance Company, for which he worked all of his professional life, 1924–1966; to the State of Kentucky and its League of Kentucky Sportsmen; to his country, as a reserve airman (Private to Master Sergeant) in the 1920s and as an officer in World War II; to the many young people who came to him for counsel in natural history; to the numerous readers of his distinguished newspaper column; to the several major and minor ornithological societies in which he held office; and most of all to the cause of conservation.

The quiet, compartmentalized efficiency with which Burt managed the manifold facets of his life was one of the most remarkable things about him. I had long known this in an abstract way, but I was forcibly struck with it on the day of his funeral. On a brilliant, rain-washed morning in May I rode in a limousine with a few of his old friends through Louisville's verdant Cave Hill Cemetery—and past the grove of sweet gums where Burt had long ago spent many hours furtively and longingly firing nuts and bolts with a slingshot at the first flock of White-winged Crossbills recorded in Kentucky. Besides myself, the car contained a successful aviation executive, a gifted sportsman, an accomplished falconer, an insurance executive, and a prominent journalist.

Conspicuous in this vehicle was a very strong sense of the shared good fortune of Burt's prolonged acquaintance. All of the passengers were eager to reminisce about the interesting situations into which his varied life seemed always to be leading him and the famous humor with which he so enthusiastically recalled them. Most interesting was the fact that none of the stories told was known to others of the group, only one or two of whom had more than a passing acquaintance with any of the rest. Each member, indeed, represented a completely independent compartment of Burt's life and, by extension, a single major fragment of a remarkably versatile man.

If in spite of his many accomplishments Burt had a single problem that troubled him at the core, it was a feeling of inadequacy because of his lack of formal education beyond high school. To him it was academic that the imagined stigma was apparent to no one else; in his proud, sensitive mind the deficiency was real. Many aspects of his complex personality become explicable in this light: his prolonged dark moods (little known to most of his friends in the A.O.U.); his carefully concealed sensitivity to any suspected condescension—especially from those with academic pedigrees; his near reverence for the research and academic achievements of those he loved or truly respected; and, most of all, his early renunciation of what could have been a productive research career in ornithology for a life of the varied duty and service in which he felt wholly prepared and entirely secure.

Thus, while he was honored in 1947 by elevation to Elective Membership in the A.O.U. for his contribution to knowledge of Kentucky birds, he subsequently performed little of the research that might have led easily to his election to the rank of Fellow, traditionally a requirement for the "In Memoriam" tribute in *The Auk* (most of his 30-odd ornithological titles are cited in *Ornithol. Monogr.*, No. 3, 1965, pp. 545–546). However, as former President Harold F. Mayfield noted in assigning the present memorial, the A.O.U. had no precedent to guide it in case of the death in office of an officer not a Fellow, and all surviving officers seem to have attained that rank. The precedent here set therefore seems sound, quite without reference to the amount and personal cost of Burt Monroe's particular services to ornithology and to the A.O.U. These, in any case, can be fully appreciated only in the perspective of his entire life.

This life was always involved with birds. Burt's earliest published "titles" were Christmas bird counts in *Bird-Lore* around 1917. His early interest in birds, however, was sublimated to vigorous competition in athletics, including baseball (first and second base, right field), football (quarterback), basketball, and a notable career in tournament tennis culminated by a most salutary marriage on November 6, 1926, to his best mixed doubles partner, Ethelmae Tuell.

Burt's interest in birds became paramount in the early 1930s, when he joined the young Kentucky Ornithological Society (of which he later became a President and Editor) and soon met kindred spirits from his own and nearby states. This in turn led to his first meetings of the A.O.U. at Charleston, South Carolina, in 1937, and Washington, D.C., in 1938. Here he rapidly made the acquaintance of many leading ornithologists and, as one after another of an eventually very large number

became close friends, his devotion to ornithology became complete. He missed few A.O.U. meetings, which with him were one of the high points of each year.

These associations quickly led Burt to dissatisfaction with the then sorry state of knowledge of Kentucky birds and the virtual lack of recent collections of them. He accordingly obtained the necessary permits and, with many an agonizing early failure at the preparation of specimens (at which, for some elusive reason, he never became highly proficient), set about rectifying the situation as best he could. This was very well indeed. He brought the skills of an experienced duck hunter and natural outdoorsman to his task. At one time the only extant Kentucky specimens of about 30 species were examples in his collection of some 500 skins (now at the University of Louisville) and he collected a great deal of information of value.

Beginning in 1936 I was fortunate indeed to be the first of several of Burt's younger protegées, including his son. At that time I was 15 and he 35 years of age. I was too naïve by far to think of it then, but in memory it is astonishing how much information, common sense, encouragement, and character he imparted or demonstrated without a trace of "adult" superiority. The only time the adult in him ever came out was when I "grew up" a little prematurely in my first semester at college and returned too ready to upgrade Burt's education. I then deeply learned a lesson imparted to many an errant state legislator or other obstructor of conservation in Kentucky, namely that few things were worse than facing Burt Monroe truly angry. His method was never precipitous attack; he would reflect, prepare his forces, and then systematically and utterly destroy. The bushy black brows (like John L. Lewis's) would lower ominously, the wide mouth compress, the customarily friendly eyes turn to ice. Always the assault would begin with the words "Now listen." The thought can still give me chills.

But most of his extensive early patronage was sheer delight to me, and our relations were nearly always pleasant and very often mirthful. I spent many boyhood evenings at his house examining specimens and talking ornithology and many other things. I cannot recall his ever suggesting that I go home before midnight, although he must often have been tired, and for nearly 30 years he rose every weekday morning at six for the long drive to work.

Weekends he rose even earlier, because those days could be devoted to truly important things, that is, birds. When not away at school I was usually privileged to go along on Burt's outings. Most of these trips were necessarily carried out near Louisville. We were often out until after dark, returning tired out and laden with birds to be skinned, nests,

eggs to be blown (still respectable in those days), and other objects. There were no limits to Burt's enthusiasm for either birds or foolishness (he was fond of organizing competitive games, given almost any target and any kind of missile, and he usually won). On rare occasions we drove to the wilder parts of Kentucky, either in the mountainous east or the lowland west, staying overnight in the simple "tourist courts" of the day and leaving them liberally sprinkled with corn meal and feathers. Once in 1941 we almost blundered into a moonshine still in full operation. Such was Burt's rustic charm with the impressively armed operators that we ended with the risk to our sobriety being far greater than that to our skins.

It is pleasant to remember the comparatively good health that Burt enjoyed before World War II. Even then, however, there were signs of the frailty that later plagued him. Possibly the first occurred a few months before I first met Burt. In 1936, climbing to a Green Heron's nest, he suddenly became very weak and dizzy and narrowly avoided a possibly fatal fall. Characteristically, he said nothing until much later, choosing to worry alone, but the event had much to do with his response to the first misguided humor I ever ventured in his formidable presence. I had known him through a few meetings of the C. W. Beckham Bird Club of Louisville (of which he was a founder and first President) and I was greatly excited when he first invited me to go afield with him.

"Oh," said I, by way of displaying my wit and stature as a man among men, "you want somebody to do your climbing for you, eh?"

I always was clever! Predictably Burt found some excuse to cancel the engagement. It was months before he reconsidered and years before I learned how magnificently maladroit my sally had been.

About the same time as his first attendance at A.O.U. meetings Burt became active in the Wilson Ornithological Club (later Society), attending his first meeting at Indianapolis in 1937 and his second at Ann Arbor in 1938. In 1939 he headed the local committee that hosted the Louisville meeting of the Club and at the same time he chaired a new Membership Committee, which under his direction brought 359 new members into the Club in two years.

World War II curtailed many ornithological plans, Burt's included. In 1942 he was commissioned a First Lieutenant, U. S. Army Air Forces, and was shortly advanced to Captain. Upon his discharge in 1945 he was promoted to Major. He served in the training of heavy bomber groups at Casper, Wyoming, and Dyersburg, Tennessee, at the latter being commended for outstanding service in Combat Intelligence 1 February to 31 July 1945. A minor terror to fledgling bomber crews, "Old Irontail" was fond of such devices as secretly arranging for fighter groups

to spring heart-stopping ambushes on his B-17 training missions. In violation of all training, the bombers would wildly break formation, a fact fully reported to the grinning intelligence officer long before the first returning plane touched down.

Scarcely back in civilian life, Burt assumed the Treasurership of the Wilson Ornithological Society. He served from late 1945 through most of 1950 with such distinction that his services for this sort of post were ever afterward in demand—he once turned down a suggestion that he serve as Treasurer of the A.O.U. and Wilson Society *simultaneously*. As in all of his positions, Burt never charged the Wilson Society for secretarial help, preferring to keep all his own books and records and type his own correspondence. Ethelmae helped him extensively with mailings and the like.

Upon retiring as Treasurer, Burt served the Wilson Society as Second and First Vice-President from 1951 through 1954 and President in 1955 and 1956. His two presidential banquet addresses were sound and inspirational, and as quickly forgotten as most such speeches are. This was untrue, however, of his 1954 banquet speech at Douglas Lake, Michigan, delivered on a few hours' notice when President W. J. Breckenridge was prevented at the last moment from appearing. No one who heard that extemporaneous outpouring of Kentucky barbecue wit has ever quite forgotten it.

After World War II Burt was increasingly involved in activities demanding energy and time that he might otherwise have applied to ornithology. He bore increasing responsibilities as an official at Commonwealth Life, becoming Assistant Secretary in 1939, Director of Planning and Methods in 1949, and Vice-President in 1961. Even after retirement he was commissioned to write the history of the company, which he had nearly completed at the time of his death, and he remained in demand for consultation.

He also quietly undertook extensive work with the large and active League of Kentucky Sportsmen and the Kentucky Division of Game and Fish. He was President of the league in 1941 and 1958, and twice served as Chairman of its influential Legislative Committee. He was responsible for a great deal of the state's legislation pertaining to game laws (he was very proud of engineering the league's endorsement and the legislature's passage of a model hawk law). He drafted the original bill that placed employees of the Division of Game and Fish under civil service, a forward step of great importance. He was a ferocious and tireless fighter when need be, and as is usual in such activities, a good deal of fighting was essential to progress. "If Burt is sick," said one battered opponent later widely quoted, "I'd hate to have him work me over when he was well!"

In 1951 and 1952 Burt edited *Happy Hunting Ground*, the excellent joint magazine of the League and the Division, and he served as a Commissioner of the Division from 1962 to 1966, being one of the most active members of the commission.

One day in 1947 the Sports Editor of the *Louisville Courier-Journal* suddenly needed a substitute outdoor columnist. Burt obligingly produced the next installment of "The Courier Sportsman" for the Sunday edition and missed scarcely an assignment for the next 20 years. He had an unparalleled ability to speak the language of sportsmen and to write in this language authoritative ecological and biological information that they would never otherwise have read. Indeed, he wrote more of these things than of sport as such.

These varied activities resulted inevitably in a miscellany of awards and honors. Burt was the League of Kentucky Sportsmen's "Sportsman of the Year" in 1951; he received the American Association for Conservation Information's "Award of Merit" (for outstanding outdoor writing) in 1960; he received awards from the National Wildlife Federation in 1954 and 1960 and from Ducks Unlimited in 1967, and from the Kentucky Outdoor Writers' Association in 1952. To his considerable pleasure he was commissioned a Kentucky Colonel in 1954. He was a charter member of the Kentucky Athletic Hall of Fame, formed in 1963.

For many years Burt held the advisory position of State Ornithologist of Kentucky, and he was long an unpaid but wholly official Conservation Officer with full powers of arrest and two large badges pinned in his wallet. To my knowledge he never made a single arrest, but he nonetheless struck many forceful blows for observation of the game laws at the grassroots. Various of these provided bases for some of his most amusing anecdotes.

For example, in the 1950s while in the Veterans' Hospital at Louisville for surgical attention to a service-incurred hernia, Burt became friendly with two talkative wardmates. One day their topic was the great numbers of Mourning Doves they had killed in excess of the legal limits. Finally Burt could stand it no longer.

"Aren't you fellows afraid of the game warden?" he asked.

"No," was the answer. "Oh, no, that's no problem."

"Oh, why not?"

"Well, because anybody can tell a game warden as far away as they can see one. Those guys can't sneak up on you."

"Really? Well, tell me, how do recognize a game warden, anyway?"

"Oh, it's easy—they just have a certain kind of special look about 'em; you get so you can always tell."

Burt was now moving toward his bathrobe with the bulging wallet in the pocket.

"I want to show you fellows something."

There is a suspicion that he showed them far more than the two gleaming badges. He was ever concerned with education, and he would use any opportunity to make a telling point.

Mention of the Veterans' Hospital leads inevitably to the matter of Burt's perennially terrible health. Equally remarkable were the awesome variety of his complaints and the dogged humor with which he either accepted or dismissed them. Even a partial catalogue of his debilities is staggering. He had a chronic athletic knee that went painfully out of joint on occasion, requiring a cast and crutches; he had the above-mentioned hernia; more serious, he acquired both gout ("What did I ever do to earn gout?" the usually temperate victim justly complained) and diabetes, whose treatment is perversely incompatible with that for gout; a little later he developed a hemorrhage-prone case of diverticulitis of the colon, which produced symptomatic suggestions of malignancy, and recurrent anemia requiring hospitalization and transfusions; finally, in his last few years he had ever more debilitating and painful angina pectoris.

If these troubles were not enough, for years when his resources might otherwise have been adequate he was required to support various aged relatives. Ethelmae had her own share of illnesses, and Burt, Jr. (born August 25, 1930), in his early years was extravagantly disposed to hay fever, asthma, and upper respiratory infections including at least one siege of double pneumonia. No wonder Burt took a just pride in never in his life having been late paying a bill! And only a few times in the years from 1945 to 1965 did he reveal some hint of the depths of depression and despair that sometimes bore upon him.

Burt, Jr.'s eventual outgrowth of his youthful ailments, his graduation from college, successful tours of duty as a Navy pilot, and especially his marriage and his attainment of the Ph.D. in zoology under Burt's good friend George Lowery at Louisiana State University were among the principal things that cheered his father through some very difficult times—together always with Ethelmae's encouragement and support. He was also delighted upon the arrival in 1966 of Burt Monroe III.

As Burt, Jr. became in his own right an adult and a capable zoologist (Elective Member, A.O.U., 1966) he and his father became very close and shared as much time as they could in the field. Although by necessity I was more and more away from Louisville, Burt also followed my own education and career with quiet interest and constant encouragement,

being especially attentive to the progress of "The birds of Kentucky" (Ornithol. Monogr., No. 3, 1965), a work that was the ultimate outgrowth of his own early work in the 1930s. For some time we thought of it as a joint project, but as Burt had less and less time to keep in touch with it and its dimensions grew, he withdrew with equal firmness and unselfishness.

In 1965 Burt's retirement from Commonwealth Life was imminent and at last he accepted the Treasurership of the A.O.U. that had beckoned for so long. He immediately set up an efficient set of books and procedures and went to work, as usual eschewing all secretarial help (he always claimed that under his system it was easier that way). In his interactions with the other officers of the union, he was a model of cooperation and concise, helpful efficiency. In council meetings, as always (for years he sat on these on and off, as Wilson Ornithological Society representative), he was as firm, forceful, and helpful in regard to the financial and legal affairs of the union as he was deferential in matters of ornithological judgment.

The burdens of the treasurership, however, were great; it had really come to him just a little too late. At the Duluth meeting in 1966 Burt was clearly not well, and by the time of the Toronto meeting of 1967 he was ashen-faced and taking frequent doses of nitroglycerine to ease the pain in his chest. He soberly informed the business meeting that the A.O.U. had better have a reserve Treasurer in mind. Gone were the times when Burt could always be found in the center of an enraptured circle of listeners—he simply lacked the strength. But his humor and defiant disregard of his own condition were intact as ever. He had come to Toronto with Burt, Jr., and with outrageous delight he told everyone that: "The kid's biggest concern is how do you get a corpse through customs?"

An unassuming, friendly, self-educated, rarely humorous, tough man of great courage, humility, and total lack of pretense, Burt Monroe in his 67 years carved an impressive mark in the affairs of his native city and state, in business, in service to ornithology, and in the memories of all who knew him. The totality of his achievement is even yet known to no single person, so diverse were his goals and activities. He never made excuses, and he so conducted his life that he needs none now.

Museum of Natural History, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas
66044. Accepted 1 June 1970.