



JOHN ROY PEMBERTON, 1884-1968

IN MEMORIAM: JOHN ROY PEMBERTON

ED N. HARRISON AND JACK C. VON BLOEKER, JR.

THE passing of J. R. "Bill" Pemberton at a Tujunga, California, rest home on 1 July 1968 after a long, lingering illness, brought to a close one of the most colorful careers in the annals of western natural sciences. Born in Los Angeles, California, 22 September 1884, he was the son of William Samuel and Elizabeth Hampton Pemberton, both of whom were natives of Missouri but had emigrated to California after their marriage. Christened John Roy, he must have been highly displeased with his baptismal name because sometime early in his life, with his characteristic scorn for convention, he chose to be known as Bill, and Bill he was to his friends and acquaintances forever after.

His early boyhood years were spent in Los Angeles. The family home was situated at the corner of Pico Boulevard and Berendo Street and he attended the nearby public elementary school. He and his father were close companions and from his father he learned the importance of close and careful field observations while participating in frequent natural history explorations in a once forested region that later became Westlake Park but today is known as MacArthur Park. In 1895, at the age of eleven, Bill took up the study of ornithology in all seriousness and from then on until the time he suffered a serious paralytic stroke in 1960 he collected bird skins, nests and eggs wherever he traveled.

When he was fifteen years old the family moved to San Francisco and he attended Mission High School there. At that time he was already a strong, capable, confident, and physically attractive young giant, nearly six feet tall. As the time approached to decide about higher education, he found the choice between ornithology and geology as a profession somewhat difficult. After considerable deliberation, he finally selected the latter because he foresaw that this field of science, which then was rapidly growing in popularity, would provide not only an interesting and rewarding occupation but at the same time would give him the opportunity to be in situations where he could continue to study and collect specimens of birds and other animals. Throughout his career as a petroleum geologist, natural history constituted his overriding avocational interest.

Bill graduated from high school in 1902, but postponed going to college until 1905. In the interim he gained practical experience in his chosen profession by working in some of the newly opened oil fields in various parts of southern California. In the course of his undergraduate years at Stanford University, Bill's varied talents began to come

forth. He was a popular member of Kappa Alpha fraternity and participated in many campus exercises and activities. When the 1906 earthquake and fire hit San Francisco, he participated in the rescue operations. In the field of sports he proved to be an outstanding athlete. In his four years as an undergraduate he was on all Stanford varsity football teams and a member of the rowing eight. Also he was a formidable boxer in the heavyweight class and on several occasions sparred with the world champion, Gentleman Jim Corbett, at the San Francisco Olympic Club. He boxed with such impressive skill that a number of promoters eagerly offered to train him for an eventual attempt to win the world title. However, and fortunately for the petroleum industry, he was dissuaded from such a choice by Dr. J. C. Branner, who saw in him a scientist of high potential.

Following his graduation with an A.B. degree in geology in 1909, Stanford employed him as an Instructor in Geology while he was enrolled as a graduate student and was preparing a thesis for an M.A. degree. Before the thesis was completed, Dr. David Starr Jordan urged him to accept an appointment as geologist for the Argentine Republic. This he did and left Stanford in December, 1910, to serve as assistant to Dr. Bailey Willis on a project concerned with land classification of the Argentine public domain for 2½ years. He returned to California in mid-1913 but shortly thereafter he was invited by the Argentine government to return as Director of the project, replacing Dr. Willis. He did so and upon conclusion of his work prepared an exhaustive report on the classification of public lands in Patagonia, written entirely in Spanish, for the Argentine Ministry of Public Works. It is still highly regarded as a classic example in the field of land systematics.

Never one to miss an opportunity to add to ornithological knowledge, Bill employed his leisure hours in studying the Argentine avifauna whenever he traveled from June 1911 through January 1915. The birds he collected in that period proved representative of most of the species of the region. After his return to California the pressure of business affairs interfered with his plans to work up this extensive material himself, so he eventually donated the entire collection to the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology at Berkeley, with a request that it be made the basis of an appropriate scientific report. In due course of time this was accomplished under the title, "Report on a collection of birds made by J. R. Pemberton in Patagonia," by Alexander Wetmore (Univ. California Publ. Zool., 24: 395-474, 1926, pls. 12-14, 11 figs., incl. 1 map, and 10 photographs by Pemberton). Bill also prepared two unpublished research manuscripts covering his ornithological and geological studies in Argentina, the former

entitled "The avifauna of Patagonia," and the latter "The glacial period in Patagonia."

From 1916 to 1923 Bill was busily engaged in geological survey work in Kansas, Kentucky, Oklahoma, and Texas for the Hamilton Oil Corporation. Contractual restrictions his employers placed upon him prohibited his publishing any of his geological discoveries in this period, but he was able to make reports on his extracurricular ornithological observations, several of which were published in *The Condor* (see bibliography).

For the ensuing eight years he was associated with the Pan-American Oil Company of California and the Petroleum Securities Company, and became a close personal friend of Edward L. Doheny. For the various Doheny enterprises Bill was successively petroleum geologist, chief geologist, and manager of oil field operations and development. Mr. Doheny held great admiration for Bill because he was so well qualified both academically and by experience as an authority on subjects pertaining to land evaluation and petroleum exploration. He relied on Bill implicitly for advice on the diverse exploratory problems he faced and held him in high esteem because he had the courage and integrity to disagree with "the chief" when the facts warranted.

Life was a continual adventurous challenge for Bill, and he made every effort to add to its savor. He became a licensed airplane pilot and flew his own plane in the 1930s, taught himself to play the piano well enough to accompany an occasional impromptu quartet, and even invented a boomerang of revolutionary construction. A lamination of exotic woods glued together under high pressure for added strength and endurance, its shape, weight, and velocity were developed with the use of the wind tunnel at the California Institute of Technology, Pasadena, and the resulting airfoil was acknowledged to be superior to those made by the Australian aborigines.

Beginning in 1929, Bill used his yacht, the 'Petrel', and later the 'Kinkajou', to conduct periodic explorations of the fauna of the islands off the eastern Pacific Coast from Point Conception, California south to latitude 18° off the west coast of Mexico, and also in the Gulf of California. On these expeditions he was accompanied by recognized scientists from a number of scientific institutions, including Alfred M. Bailey, William H. Burt, Stephen A. Glassell, Ed N. Harrison, H. N. Lowe, George H. Lowery, Robert J. Niedrach, William J. Sheffler, Kenneth E. Stager, Adriaan J. van Rossem, George Willett, and others. Most of these men published on the discoveries made on these cruises in a series of technical papers too numerous to enumerate here. Alfred M. Bailey's popular account of the Pemberton expedition of Spring 1941,

titled "Cruise of the *Kinkajou*," appeared in the National Geographic magazine for September 1941.

In 1932, when the California petroleum industry, which a decade earlier had taken upon itself the onus of controlling state production, found itself facing a serious problem of overproduction, Bill Pemberton was called upon to serve as Oil Umpire. With this appointment the oil industry accorded him near dictatorial power to regulate and control the production of every oil well in California. This demanded conformance with rational economics and reservoir engineering. The job called for a man with the technical skill to devise a sound and logical system for allocating production, oil well by oil well, throughout the state in order to assure the maximum economic life of the wells and concurrently to maintain a proper balance between overall production and consumption. It required a man with a reputation for fairness and the strength of character to be firm in all cases. No scientific award or accolade, of which Bill received many, could have given him more pleasure and satisfaction than this gesture of confidence on the part of the entire California oil industry. The confidence was well-placed for he performed an excellent service in managing an extremely touchy situation. In such a position, one could easily have become a very unpopular individual, but not Bill Pemberton! Very quickly it became obvious that here was a man eminently qualified by both disposition and understanding to handle the involved problems of natural reservoir drainage, and his methods of establishing well potentials and production allowances were completely endorsed by all concerned. He especially treasured in this connection a citation from Harold L. Ickes, National Petroleum Administrator, for his contribution to the cause of conservation. Perhaps most satisfying of all, however, was the illuminated scroll the producers themselves presented him in testament to the efficacy and equity of his administration as oil umpire from 1932 to 1940. Thereafter, he went into private practice as a consulting geologist and petroleum engineer until his retirement from business in 1960, at the age of 76.

Throughout his life, from early youth until after the unfortunate onset of his last illness, his interests in natural history, and particularly in ornithology, never flagged. He became a member of the Cooper Ornithological Club in September, 1900, a Life Member in 1928, and was elected to Honorary Membership in 1949. Between the years 1908 and 1954 he presented many lectures for the Northern and Southern divisions of that organization based on his personal field studies and observations of birds and mammals in western North America, Mexico, South America, and East Africa, usually illustrated with outstanding

motion pictures or color slides that he himself took. For several consecutive years, particularly in the 1930s, he specialized in studying the California Condor, living with the great vultures in their native habitat, day and night on end. He squatted or half-sat for seemingly endless hours in foxholes, pits, and shallow trenches that he and his associates, Ed Harrison and Sidney B. Peyton, dug and covered over with canvas, brush, leaves, and dirt, with small apertures just above ground level in order to make motion pictures of the condors while they fed, drank, bathed, courted their mates, and performed other behavioral antics. The pictures he produced were of such superior quality that in due time Bill became nationally recognized as an authority on the habits and behavior of these survivors of the Pleistocene Epoch.

In the course of his membership, he served the Cooper Club in many capacities: as member and chairman of numerous committees, including those that led to incorporation of the group in 1934 and the change in name from "Club" to "Society" in 1952. He served as Vice President of the Southern Division in 1930 and as President in 1931; he was a member of the Board of Governors from 1930 to 1963; Chairman of the Endowment Committee from 1951 to 1960; member of the Board of Directors, 1936-1960; Senior Vice President, 1948-1950; President, 1951-1960; and, upon retirement from that office in 1960, was unanimously elected President Emeritus.

He joined the American Ornithologists' Union in 1918, was made an Elective Member in 1940, and a Fellow in 1953. In 1919 he became a member of the California Academy of Sciences, a Life Member in 1945, and was elected a Fellow of that organization in 1955. For many years he served on the Board of Directors of the Los Angeles County Museum; was a Life Member of the Southern California Academy of Sciences; and was a Fellow and Patron of the Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology from 1938 on, and served as President of the Board of Trustees for several years. In addition, he was a member of the Wilson Ornithological Club, American Institute of Mining and Metallurgical Engineers, American Petroleum Institute, American Geographic Society, Branner Geological Club, Seismological Society of America, Society of Sigma Xi, and, as late as 1963, after many years of active membership in the American Association of Petroleum Geologists, the Pacific Section of that organization conferred Honorary Life Membership on him "in recognition of distinguished professional attainment."

Pemberton was never one who could be referred to as a nominal member of any group. He became affiliated with scientific organizations because he was deeply interested and active in the subjects they represented. He expected to contribute to their aims and objectives, and he did so

in a remarkably energetic way. The wonder of it all is how he managed to find the time to become involved in such a multitude of worthwhile enterprises. Wherever he went, his towering stature and the magnetism of his personality were inescapable.

At the end of World War II President Truman awarded him the distinguished Selective Service Medal "in appreciation of loyal and faithful adherence to duty, given voluntarily and without compensation to the impartial administration of the Selective Service System." His life was generously garnished with similar encomiums, earned by impressive performance in many phases of scientific and social contribution. Excerpts of his motion picture film of the life history of the California Condor were used by the United States Air Forces to study various aspects of flight and a number of scenes from his films were used in a Walt Disney True Life Adventure feature. In recognition of his enthusiasm and patronage of scientific field exploration the following taxa were named in his honor: *Inoceramus pembertoni* Waring (an enormous Cretaceous mollusc from the Santa Monica Mountains), *Clavus pembertoni* Lowe (a large spiral gastropod from Angeles Bay, Baja California), *Pinnixa pembertoni* Glassell (a commensal crab from the Gulf of California), *Lophortyx gambelii pembertoni* van Rossem (a desert quail from Tiburon Island, Gulf of California), *Turdus magellanicus pembertoni* Wetmore (a Patagonian robin), and *Peromyscus pembertoni* Burt (a white-footed mouse from San Pedro Nolasco Island, Gulf of California).

In summary, one may well aver that Bill had ample justification to be pleased with his life's work. He achieved to an extraordinary degree and in an unmistakable manner. In his heyday he was a rugged, strong man of many talents that he employed pleasantly and profitably. He was well regarded by men in high places and by all who had the good fortune to know him. In actuality, he was himself what he sought so eagerly, a *Rara avis*, and it will be a long time before the nostalgic memories of *Homo pembertoni* are completely dissipated. In the vernacular of the field man he was what is known as "a great guy." Of course, there will be other great guys, but there will never be another Bill Pemberton. One of his closest personal friends was that prolific producer of mystery stories, Erle Stanley Gardner, with whom he often shared his adventures. Here in conclusion is a tribute from Mr. Gardner:

"Bill Pemberton was one of the most vital, virile men I have ever known. He was a good-natured giant; a man of terrific physical power; a man who scorned hypocrisy; a man who represented a high-voltage materialization of the Divine Force that actuates the Universe. To me as to all his friends he was intensely loyal, for he valued friendship beyond price. He was a great athlete, a wonderful boxer, and he had a

genuine regard for all opposition which is the attitude of men who know that there is no series of events that can physically dominate them.

"Bill's body is dead! But the life that was manifested through his body is no more dead than is the electricity that lights an incandescent bulb, when the bulb goes dark. As energy is indestructible, so is life! It is my privilege to make a silent tribute to Bill Pemberton, with bowed head. He was my friend and in the lexicon of this man there was no word that had deeper or more lasting significance than that word 'friend'."

Bill is survived by his wife, Diana; a son, John Rollins Pemberton, a Stanford graduate, musician and composer, now living in Palo Alto, California; a brother, Cyril Pemberton, world famous entomologist, resident in Honolulu, Hawaii; and a sister, Mary Pemberton Ford, amateur ornithologist, of Oakland, California.

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- (*Note:* In addition to the above, Pemberton wrote a great many articles that were published in the trade journals of the oil industry. These were principally of a statistical nature, bearing on predictions for the future of the petroleum producing business in California.)

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