

## AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

By HENRY WETHERBEE HENSHAW

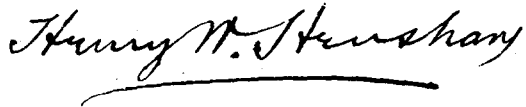
WITH PORTRAIT

## PREFACE

THE FOLLOWING notes have been prepared at the request of the Editor of The Condor for publication in that journal. While not to be regarded as a complete autobiography, they touch upon the main incidents and activities of the author's life, particularly his ornithological work in the far west, the chief field of interest of the journal in which they are to appear. Their principal value to the reader will come from the side lights they may throw on the character and work of the men—some well known and others scarcely known at all—whom the author has been privileged to meet, and also the knowledge they may confer on the intimate personal history of times long past and now existent in the memories only of the very few.

Judging from his own tastes and present experience the author is of the opinion that the writing of autobiographies will never become a popular form of amusement. Nevertheless, fresh as he is from the difficulties attending the fixing of dates and events belonging to the dim past, he cannot but feel that, regardless of their own preferences, scientific men, if no others, owe this duty to their own and future times—a duty not to be lightly thrust aside.

*February 3, 1919.*



## EARLY LIFE

As a man's career in the world is more or less closely connected with the place of his nativity, I may as well state at the outset that I was born in Cambridgeport, Massachusetts, March 3, 1850, the last of seven children. The windows of our house overlooked the marshes and tidal basin of the river Charles, and from it was visible the dome of the Boston State House. Thus I may fairly claim to be a Yankee by birth, and, as every genuine Yankee is wont to trace his ancestry back to the Mayflower, I may boldly claim the same distinction, at least on my mother's side.

It is often said of one who displays special aptitude for a particular pursuit or calling, as artist, musician, lawyer or what not, that he is born to it, meaning, perhaps, that his tastes and abilities are inherited. If there be any truth in the saying, it would seem to apply with special force to the naturalist, although I do not doubt that his tastes, even if inherited, are greatly strengthened or modified by particular environment or circumstances.

For myself, I seem to have inherited directly from my mother my love of nature and my desire to study her ways. Though no naturalist and with little or no exact knowledge of any branch of natural history, she possessed, nevertheless, an innate love of nature and a sympathy for all her creatures. From her I received my first lessons as an observer when she used to direct my attention

as a child to the beauty of the bark and foliage of trees, and point out their individuality and infinite variety of form and color. What seems to me even more remarkable, she taught me to see and admire their wierd beauty, after

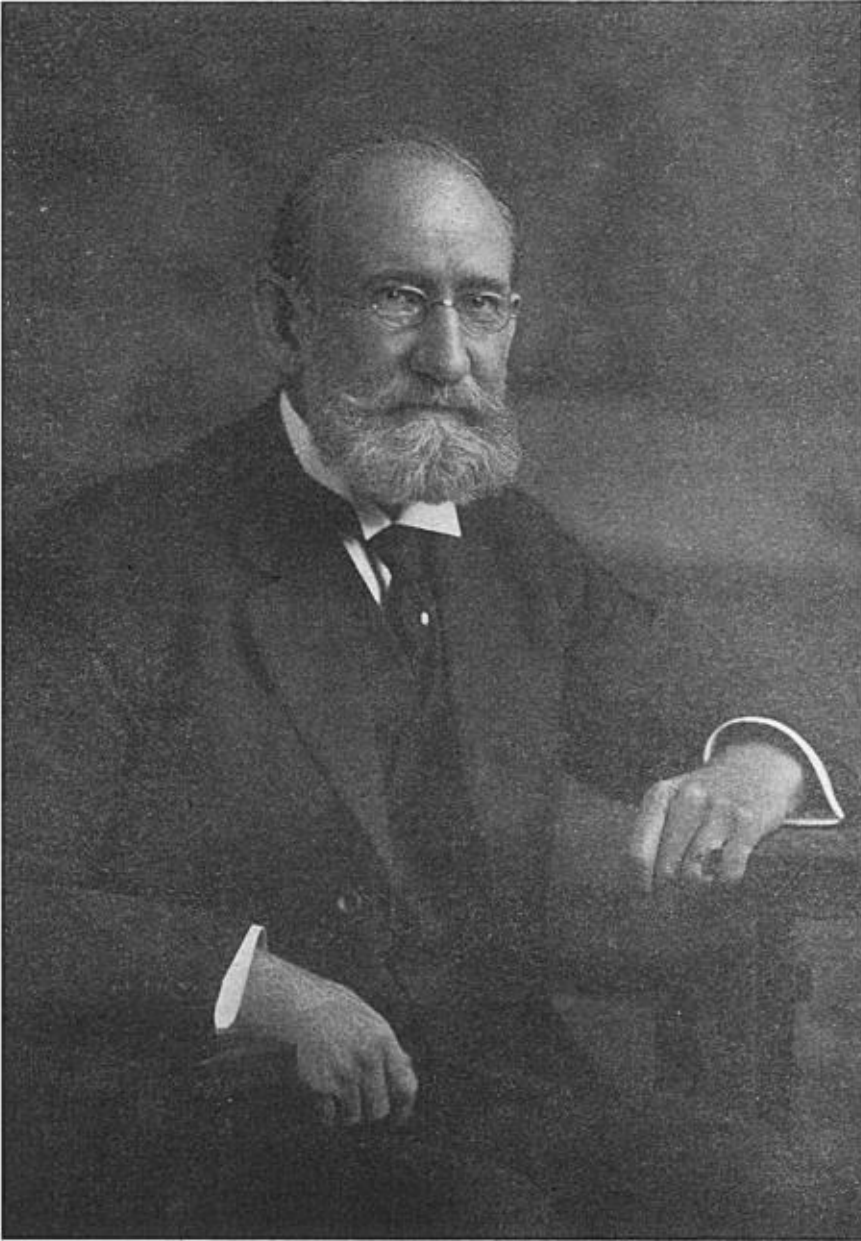


Fig. 24. HENRY W. HENSHAW—IN 1913.

they were stripped of their foliage, especially as their branches were being bent and tossed by the eager winds of autumn and winter. She never studied

any books of natural history, so far as I know, but she had a keen appreciation of literary excellence, and was familiar with the best in English literature. She was a strong admirer of Thoreau's writings, which, among many other good books, she recommended to me while still a lad.

To her I owe such advantages as attach to a New England training, for when my father received an advantageous offer to enter into the book business in Chicago, and was inclined to the change, she dissuaded him on the ground that no pecuniary advantage, however great, could compensate for the loss to the children of an education amid New England surroundings.

An older brother, who fell in the civil war, had made a small mineralogical collection, though probably with no very definite purpose in view, and more than once she suggested to me the desirability of making that my own and of adding to it. But if I had any interest in minerals, which I doubt, it was not sufficient to impel me to study or collect them, though I well remember the little cabinet in which they were stored.

The Charles River marshes were only a few moments walk from our house, and its banks, ponds and ditches were the delight of my boyhood. In its waters I learned to swim, and its mud banks and clam beds proved an inexhaustible source of pleasure to myself and the other boys of the neighborhood. Many an afternoon we spent on its banks "playing Indian", the essential features of the game being a camp fire of drift wood and a goodly supply of clams dug from the mud flats at low tide for roasting or boiling after the supposed methods of the red man, who long before us had utilized the very same locality, as the beds of clam-shells testified.

In the Charles River marshes, too, I learned to shoot long before I owned a gun of my own, and, indeed, before my parents knew anything of my ambitions in that direction. This was when I was about ten or twelve years old, and was made possible because a chum, somewhat older than I, had been presented with a single-barrelled shot gun. It must have been made of good stuff, for when our shot gave out we used anything we could lay our hands on for projectiles, but found marbles particularly good. Having assured themselves of my competence to use a gun without endangering my own life or the lives of others, I was formally commissioned as the sportsman of the family. My principal game was the diminutive peeps, with "grass birds" in the late fall, and an occasional yellow-legs or plover, and, though the game was small and my bags smaller still, my enjoyment was immeasurable.

Like many other boys I was a lover of snakes, and frequently carried them home to show to my mother or anyone else whose interest could be counted on. They were chiefly green or garter snakes, which in those days frequented a bit of woodland on the banks of the river known as Pine Grove. This locality later became the site of the Alvin Clarke observatory where Clarke made the big lenses which in turn made his fame known to the uttermost parts of the earth. Here, too, was the summer home of certain of our common birds, including the pine-creeping warbler and the purple finch, with other common species, which became well known to me even before I knew their names.

On one occasion I learned that not every one was as tolerant of the presence of snakes as my mother. On my way home with a couple of snakes in my pocket I was accosted by a lady as to the whereabouts of a certain near-by street. While I was directing her she suddenly gave a loud shriek, grasped her skirts with frantic haste, and fled as one who had seen a vision. And in a way

so she had, for one of my pets, perhaps finding my pantaloons pocket too warm for comfort, had climbed up under my jacket, and, sticking his head out of the nearest opening, was gazing steadily at my interlocutor and vibrating his tongue after the manner of snakes who seek to know what is going on about them.

But my interest in things that walk, crawl or swim does not seem to me to explain satisfactorily my very particular interest in birds nor why, so far back as I can remember, I was always asking the names of birds and seeking information about their habits. I may add that such questionings availed me little, for in those days the man who knew the names of more than a half dozen common birds was rare indeed, while books on the subject, save Audubon, Wilson and Nuttall, were rarer still. What a Godsend to me a few years later was Volume IX of the Pacific Railroad Reports and the Smithsonian Check List! And what an ornithologist I thought myself when, by its aid, I had memorized the scientific names of our common birds, till then, as it seemed to me, only half known, since known only by their vernacular names.

#### FIRST MEETING WITH WILLIAM BREWSTER

And so the years passed, as years have the habit of doing, slowly then, but, alas, how rapidly now, till the year 1865, when I entered the Cambridge High School to prepare for Harvard. Up to that time I had made a small collection of pinned butterflies and moths as so many boys do, and also had gathered the nucleus of a small collection of eggs. In endeavoring with the aid of a classmate to establish the identity of a set of purple finch's eggs, I stumbled on the fact that in our class was a boy by the name of William Brewster, who not only had a collection of birds and eggs, but who also knew how to "stuff" and mount birds. Now above all earthly things the ability to "stuff birds" seemed to me the most to be desired, but up to then I had met no one who had the art. Recess was a long time coming that morning, but come it did finally, and at once I made my way to a young fellow pointed out to me as Brewster, who was standing against the iron school fence with both arms extended along the railing. I can see him now as I saw him then more than a half century ago. Boys are not apt to be very formal, and soon we were chatting about birds and their eggs. The subject of stuffing birds being broached, Brewster told me that he had already skinned, and planned to mount that afternoon, a ruddy duck, and, if I cared to see him work, I was welcome to come to his house. A trivial enough event our meeting was, as it seemed then, but it proved the prelude to a close friendship which has continued for more than fifty years without break or misunderstanding, and is likely to continue to the end, or, perhaps, to put it in another way, to the beginning.

Brewster had been studying birds, as well as collecting them, for several years, and what he had gathered already gave promise of becoming the finest private collection of birds, nests, and eggs ever gathered in this country. This collection, now numbering some forty thousand skins, as I write these lines, is being transferred as a gift to the Cambridge Museum of Comparative Zoology, which it will permanently enrich.

Almost at the start Brewster and I became intimate comrades, and every moment we could spare from our studies, including no doubt some moments we could ill spare, were devoted to the hills, swamps, woods, and pastures of Cambridge, Belmont, Waltham, and Concord. I doubt if local ornithological

knowledge was ever absorbed more rapidly than by me under Brewster's tuition, and soon it was a rare event to see a bird I could not name on sight or by its song.

About this same time I became acquainted with Ruthven Deane, who lived hard by the Brewster place, who already had the nucleus of a collection of mounted birds, but who, also, soon abandoned the time consuming method of mounting birds on stands in favor of the quickly made bird-skin. His business career in Boston had already begun, later to be transferred to Chicago, but such spare time as he had, especially holidays and Saturday afternoons, was spent in the woods with his collecting gun, and we had many a good tramp to gether, often with Henry Purdie as a third.

#### HENRY PURDIE

At that time Henry Purdie was connected with the Massachusetts State Board of Charities, and his office was in the State House in Boston. He also was engaged in making a small but choice collection of birds and eggs, chiefly local species; but I think he was always more interested in studying live birds and listening to their songs than in collecting dried skins. His interest in bird literature, too, was strong, and the advent of a new local check list or a new book on birds was always hailed with pleasure. In pursuit of information on his favorite subject he spent many hours weekly in the libraries of Boston. As a consequence he was remarkably well posted on general American bird literature, and nothing pleased him better than to be called upon to share his knowledge with and for the benefit of others. He cared little for the fame of the author and wrote very little for publication. In later years he became an excellent field botanist, and came to know the plants of the general region around Boston very well indeed. He was one of the rare spirits who are happiest when serving others, and it is given to but few men to make as many sincere friends as he did.

#### E. A. SAMUELS

I fancy there were few boys who collected birds' eggs round Boston in the sixties who did not know E. A. Samuels. He was then connected with the State Agricultural Department, and his office was in the Boston State House. At that period he was collecting data for a book on the "Birds of New England and Adjacent States", the advent of which was eagerly looked for by us boys for several years. Samuels was very pleasant, was always ready for an exchange of eggs, and ever alert for any original data that could be utilized in his forthcoming book, which in large measure was a compilation, though a very useful one. He was a keen sportsman and an ardent fisherman, and is, perhaps, most widely known for the many excellent articles on these subjects he wrote for sportsman's journals.

#### EMMANUEL SAMUELS

Mention of the son naturally recalls to mind the father, Emmanuel Samuels, whom I never saw, but who possesses some interest for Californians, inasmuch as, under the joint auspices of the Smithsonian Institution and the Boston Society of Natural History, he visited California in 1855 (leaving New York November 5). His mission was to make collections in all branches of natural history, and, in addition, to gather the seeds of as many California trees and shrubs as possible for distribution over the country. This latter duty was imposed upon him by the Commissioner of Patents at Washington. For the Patent Office proved to be the birth place of that lusty offspring, the Department

of Agriculture, which did not enter upon its separate existence till July 1, 1862, when the Honorable Isaac Newton was appointed first Commissioner.

Samuels' principal collecting ground apparently was Petaluma, but he visited Tomales Bay and probably other localities in that general region. The Smithsonian's share of the birds he gathered was 103 specimens and a few eggs, by no means an insignificant number when are considered the multifarious duties of the collector. His memory is embalmed in the A. O. U. *Check-list* under the name of *Melospiza melodia samuelis* (Baird). Recently I had the pleasure of examining Baird's two types of the form, the true one being no. 5553 of the National Museum Catalogue, and both skins are in excellent preservation.

#### ACQUAINTANCE WITH C. J. MAYNARD

C. J. Maynard, living hard by in Newtonville, was then becoming active as a bird collector and dealer, and Brewster and I soon made his acquaintance, and from him learned to make a "bird skin", when the real business of collecting birds for scientific study began for each of us. The so-called New England type of bird skin was soon evolved, due in no small measure to Maynard's skill, and was, I believe, so far as speed in preparation and general excellence goes, superior to anything made up to that time. In my eyes the final touch was attained by the adoption of the Coues method of wrapping the green skin in filmy cotton till dry. Brewster soon abandoned mounting birds on stands for the much quicker and more practical method of making skins, while I had nothing to abandon being still a novice in the taxidermist's art. Not a single specimen of my skill as a taxidermist survives, and the only triumph I achieved in that direction was a fox sparrow. For its life-like appearance I accept the authority of our house cat. As the mounted bird stood drying on the mantelpiece of my bird room she mistook it for the real thing and, making a wild leap, secured it before realizing her mistake.

#### ACQUAINTANCE WITH R. E. C. STEARNS

It was in 1868 that I came in touch with R. E. C. Stearns who, though a New Englander by birth, had lived a decade in California, where he went in 1858, but was then sojourning for a time in Boston. Not only was he a learned and enthusiastic conchologist, but he was one of the most genial and delightful of men. Though much older than I, we soon became great cronies, for he never became too old to love and sympathize with the aspirations of young people. Many were the happy hours I spent with him in his Boston home, helping him pack and unpack shells, and listening to the anecdotes of which he had a rare fund, including his experiences in that land of romance, California. Under his tutelage I became greatly interested in shells and soon had a collection, largely gifts from his duplicate series. Indeed he used to say that he had stolen me from the ornithologists. But as I now see, my interest in shells was largely due to personal association with Stearns, and subsequently was replaced by the more absorbing interest in bird life. The little shell collection, however, made at that time was not without value, and now is in Wellesley College.

(To be continued)