

WHEN JOSEPH GRINNELL AND I WERE YOUNG

WITH ONE ILLUSTRATION

By WALTER K. FISHER

On a day early in 1900 a red-cheeked, serious young man walked into the zoological laboratory of Stanford University. It was not much of a laboratory judged by the standard of modern gadgets, being one large room divided roughly into three parts by two tiers of bird and mammal cases—these surmounted by numerous skeletons of fishes and other vertebrates. Adjacent was a lecture room and a small museum housing the collection of fishes, reptiles, and batrachians. Off an entry way a small office served as the sanctum of Dr. C. H. Gilbert, head of the department. Professors G. C. Price and Harold Heath, and Instructors J. O. Snyder and E. C. Starks comprised the faculty. All teaching and investigation was done in these cramped quarters and we students in more senses than one rubbed elbows with our instructors. Nor must I omit among the latter, President David Starr Jordan who wandered in whenever irked by the worries of his office, his approach heralded by a heavy tread and the clink of keys and silver, which he habitually jingled in a trouser pocket. His was a manifest "presence," every whit as distinguished as that of his revered teacher, Louis Agassiz. He had a marvelous capacity for shutting out the world and plunging instantly into a contemplation of his beloved fishes. One felt that for the time he had forgotten, or had little use for, Jordan the president. Withal he was warm-hearted, drily humorous, sympathetic. Usually he had a word for each of the "advanced" students; and to those of us who were not working on fishes he would sometimes jokingly deplore our waste of good opportunity. He rather subtly attempted the conversion of Grinnell to ichthyology! Wherever he went he shed light, a light dimmed at this time by stark tragedy—the loss of his beloved little Barbara, friend of the birds.

Jordan's influence on Grinnell was lasting. I know that Grinnell's admiration for Jordan was deep and sincere. I cannot refrain from quoting at this time Darwin's tribute (*Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, vol. 1, p. 186) to Professor J. S. Henslow, the wise mentor with whom he took long walks, until he became known as "the man who walks with Henslow." To those of us who "walked with Jordan," the following rings true as a portrait of that rare man.

"Nothing could be more simple, cordial, and unpretending than the encouragement which he afforded to all young naturalists. I soon became intimate with him, for he had a remarkable power of making the young feel completely at ease with him; though we were all awestruck with the amount of his knowledge. Before I saw him, I heard one young man sum up his attainments by simply saying that he knew everything. When I reflect how immediately we felt at perfect ease with a man older, and in every way so immensely our superior, I think it was as much owing to the transparent sincerity of his character as to his kindness of heart; and, perhaps, even still more, to a highly remarkable absence in him of all self-consciousness. One perceived at once that he never thought of his own varied knowledge or clear intellect, but solely on the subject in hand. Another charm, which must have struck every one, was that his manner to old and distinguished persons and to the youngest student was exactly the same; and to all he showed the same winning courtesy. In short, no man could be better informed to win the entire confidence of the young, and to encourage them in their pursuits. It always struck me that his mind could not be even touched by any paltry feeling of vanity, envy, or jealousy. With all this equability of temper and remarkable benevolence, there was no insipidity of character. A man must have been blind not to have perceived that

beneath this placid exterior there was a vigorous and determined will. When principle came into play, no power on earth could have turned him one hair's breadth."

Darwin adds, "I owe more than I can express to this excellent man."

Dr. Jordan, with his flair for promising students, immediately took to Grinnell as did Dr. Charles Henry Gilbert, under whom years later Grinnell took his Ph.D. degree. Professor Gilbert was a scientist of very unusual talents, with a controlled and keenly logical mind. He exercised no patience with loose thinking or any work short of the best which a student could produce. His seminars afforded adequate outlet for his uncanny powers of searching analysis and relevant criticism. His students more than once have heard him relentlessly demolish a thesis of one of the Elect. Biology would have been the gainer if his comments had been published verbatim. Oracularness was to him as the proverbial red rag. This went on for years; our own incapacity, if we failed to know good thinking and bad.

These two men complemented each other and young Grinnell was fortunate. They gave the impetus and training that he most needed. Others had a hand—Professor G. C. Price, a great teacher, with whom he studied embryology; William Russell Dudley, the kind botanist; the enthusiastic Harold Heath, just entering on his career in invertebrate zoology—a master anatomist; Vernon Kellogg, talented young entomologist with a department of his own and a flair for the newest in biology.

Maybe his student associates helped in informal ways not open to the faculty: Edmund Heller, Robert E. Snodgrass, J. F. Abbott, William F. Allen, M. H. Spaulding, George Coleman, Malcolm Anderson, Sam Burcham. Alvin Seale, R. C. McGregor, Dane Coolidge, and W. W. Price, former students, were "in and out," but not resident at that time. Snyder and Starks, although technically instructors, belonged in our "age class" (or so we thought) and were treated without reverence.

Grinnell and I roomed in the same house in Palo Alto, which was then a small spread-eagle town with board sidewalks, unpaved streets very muddy in winter, dim street lights, and stores with false-fronts. Autos were, of course, unknown; "carriages met all trains." Everyone, with the price, rode a bicycle. A sumptuous steak cost two-bits. William McKinley was president of the United States; Victoria Regina occupied the throne of England; and in American ornithology the Age of Coues had just closed. The Cooper Ornithological Club was seven years old and its "Bulletin," entering the second volume, had been named "The Condor."

Grinnell had recently returned from a year in the Kotzebue Sound region of Alaska. His collection of birds, stored in cardboard boxes of various sizes and ranged against the walls and under the bed, was in constant demand. He became very deft in extracting the particular box he needed from the center of a tier, for he was at work on his "Birds of Kotzebue Sound," which was published by the Cooper Club in November, 1900, as Avifauna No. 1.

We all became intensely bird-conscious. When Grinnell arrived at Stanford there were only five local members of the Cooper Club, but by the end of that year there were sixteen, and Palo Alto became a center for meetings, although we met also at Chester Barlow's in Santa Clara, at W. Otto Emerson's, Haywards, and occasionally elsewhere. In January, 1901, Grinnell became president of the club and there is no question that his enthusiasm and talent for leadership did much to promote its rapid growth.

At this time Chester Barlow was secretary of the club, its editor, and psychological center. He had a positive genius for friendship and we were all greatly devoted to him. His untimely death in 1902 brought to a sudden close the pioneer period of the club.

Grinnell and I were frequent visitors at Barlow's home in Santa Clara, which meant also an hour at C. A. Nace's printing establishment, for *The Condor*, still in pin-feathers,

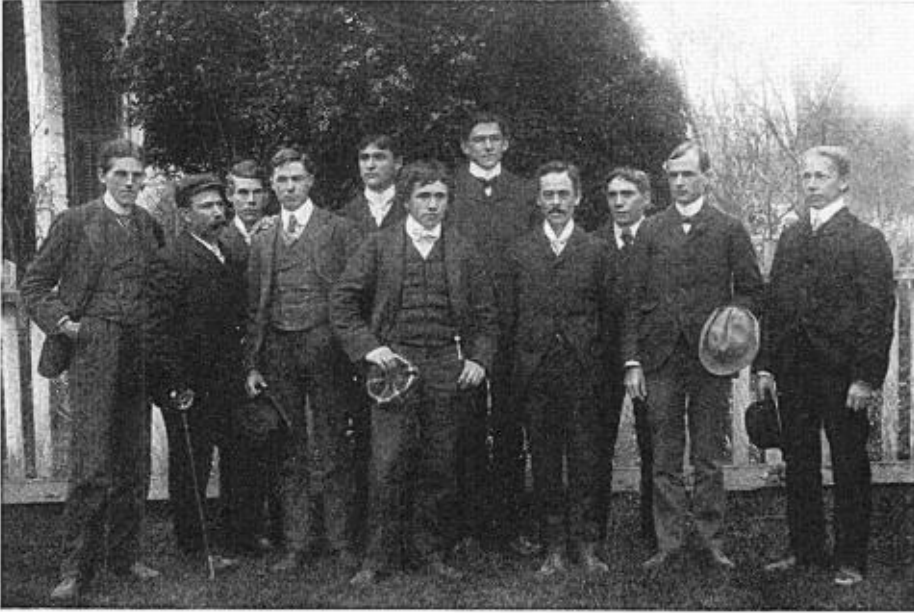


Fig. 12. Members of the Cooper Club at Santa Clara, California, January 13, 1901. Left to right, Chester Barlow, W. Otto Emerson, Malcolm Anderson, Walter K. Fisher, A. J. Zschokke, C. S. Thompson, Harold Gay, W. L. Atkinson, E. H. Skinner, Joseph Grinnell, and R. C. McGregor.

needed coddling, and this involved a mort of talk, all in happy and hopeful vein. Barlow was a great optimist and Nace a patient humorist. Often the conversation turned to eastern ornithologists whom Barlow and Grinnell had never seen but whom I had fortunately known since early childhood—Robert Ridgway, Leonhard Stejneger, C. Hart Merriam, Joel Asaph Allen, Frank M. Chapman, Edgar A. Mearns, Edward W. Nelson, William Dutcher, H. W. Henshaw, John H. Sage, Witmer Stone, Charles W. Richmond, Frederick A. Lucas, and especially Charles E. Bendire, the patron saint of oologists. I had *seen* Elliott Coues—and even had *heard* him speak at an A. O. U. meeting; I certainly represented glamor to these avid young men.

On the occasion of one of our visits to Barlow's, Mr. Lyman Belding, the veteran ornithologist, came from his home in Stockton and regaled us with accounts of early days in California, and of his hunting and fishing trips in the Sierras. He was a shy, sensitive, lovable man, patterned for a poet, but fated for rough usage by life.

We also made occasional visits to the old California Academy of Sciences, on Market Street, San Francisco, where Mr. Leverett M. Loomis made us welcome. The Academy had an active section of ornithology, the guiding geniuses of which were the Mailliard brothers, Joseph and John, who proved most delightful hosts at little annual dinners, never to be forgotten by the fortunate guests. We became, severally, frequent guests of Joseph Mailliard. The Mailliard collection, kept in the basement of John's home, was always generously open for inspection and use. So began one of the friendships founded upon community of interest and mutual esteem. It may appropriately be recorded here that the Mailliard brothers were always generous in their support of the club—morally and substantially!

So time slipped by. Grinnell soon secured a position as teacher of zoology in the Palo Alto high school. In the summer we were both exploring, Grinnell on his own, I as a field naturalist for the Biological Survey under Dr. C. Hart Merriam. Inevitably I became saturated with Dr. Merriam's life-zone philosophy, which I lost no time in "spilling" to Grinnell. Geographic distribution now had a rationale.

There was bad news awaiting me when I returned in August, 1902, after an absence of six months. Dr. Gilbert, J. O. Snyder, and I had been deep-sea dredging with the old U. S. Fisheries steamer "Albatross" among the Hawaiian Islands, and had spent a marvelous week among the sea birds of Laysan. Barlow was ill—a hopeless case of tuberculosis aggravated by confining overwork at his bank. He died November 6. We were young, impressionable. I have often wondered what life would have been like if Barlow had lived his normal span. I think Grinnell felt the same way.

Grinnell and I took over *The Condor*, and in the spring of 1903 the A. O. U. held its first California meeting; but not until we both had had a bout of typhoid during the now famous Palo Alto epidemic. In the autumn he took up his duties of instructor at the Throop Polytechnic Institute, Pasadena, and our close association of three and a half years was continued by frequent letters until 1906. In respect to *The Condor*, I felt that he was the logical successor to Barlow, and with the January issue of 1906, he became Editor, with what happy results has long been a matter of history.

If in these reminiscences more space has been accorded other persons than Grinnell, the purpose has been to sketch his environment during an important formative period of his life. He came to Stanford with graduate standing. He left a few years later, the youngest Fellow in the American Ornithologists' Union—a testimonial of interest and respect by the leading ornithologists of the country. This recognition was an important factor in his further development. It came at what is called the psychological moment. From that time there was never a doubt as to his ultimate position in his chosen fields of work.

Hopkins Marine Station, Pacific Grove, California, December 14, 1939.