

THE EARLY YEARS OF THE WILSON ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY: 1885–1921

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Every society, like every human being, has a personality of its own. The Wilson Ornithological Society is no exception. From its very beginning right up to the present we can see the imprint of the founders and early leaders, who were drawn together by their interest in the birds about them. Over the decades the concerns of the Society and its members have expanded, but the traces of the origins are still discernible.

The founders did not appear to be historic figures. They were not famous scientists at prestigious institutions, museum curators leading expeditions to exotic lands, nor university professors with established reputations. They were boys, some as young as 15, living mostly in small towns from Maine to Texas, reaching out by mail for kindred spirits with whom they could share their ideas and their collections.

The birth of this Society, however, was not an isolated event. The three decades after the Civil War brought a ferment of enthusiasm for nature study, with clubs springing up in many specialties—wildflowers, butterflies, rocks, shells, birds, and others. From 1873, when the Nuttall Ornithological Club started in Boston, until 1893, when the Cooper Ornithological Club began in California, at least 17 bird study societies appeared in various regions of the country, and many of them are still in existence.

These had been stimulated by a general rise in literacy and interest in cultural subjects, manifest in the Chautauqua movement, bringing lecturers on thoughtful topics to the remotest villages, and by the publication of many books and magazines on natural history, including notably Elliott Coue's "Key to North American Birds" in 1872 and many popular books and magazines appealing to naturalists and sportsmen. During the period 1884–1888 many small magazines, often not associated with any society, sprang up to reach the new audience. In *The Auk* for April, 1885, editor J. A. Allen noted: "Juvenile and amateur publications in Natural History appear in different parts of the country with bewildering frequency, not less than twelve or fifteen such publications having started within the last twelvemonth."

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THE EARLY PUBLICATIONS

The early history of the Wilson Society was intertwined with the bibliographic maze of its publications. Two were particularly significant. *The Young Ornithologist*, an eight-page magazine, appeared in Boston in 1885 under the editorship of A. A. Child. In its December issue, L. O. Pindar of Hickman, Kentucky, suggested that subscribers should form a corresponding association. The magazine lasted only long enough to give its name to the group. Then Pindar wrote Frank W. Lattin, publisher of *The Oölogist*, for permission for these young men to publish reports in his journal. The first of these appeared in the July–August issue of 1886, consisting of a constitution drawn up by Pindar with the help of John B. Richards of Fall River, Massachusetts. It named the Society, “The Young Ornithologists’ Association,” and *The Oölogist* the “official organ of communication” among the members. Lattin appointed Pindar as President and Richards as Secretary (Bagg 1968).

The Oölogist also had a faltering life. Lattin started it as *The Young Oölogist* in 1884 in Gaines, New York, and continued it later in Albion, New York. In 1885 he merged it with *The Agassiz Journal*, published in Lynn, Massachusetts, but in 1886 he resumed publishing it as the bi-monthly *The Oölogist*. In this era the hobby of egg collecting was at its height, particularly among young men. Published notices included offers to trade not only bird eggs and skins, but also books, magazines, and bicycles.

Although the Society set down its roots in 1886, it acquired the Wilson name and a new constitution in 1888, causing this year to be recognized as the year of its founding in the annals. The 1888 constitution specified the purpose of the association to be “the study of birds, their nests, and eggs.” The elimination of the word “collect,” which had appeared in the 1886 constitution, may seem small, but it signified a conscious intention to move away from the postage-stamp style of collecting that had become the vogue, by some commercialized, at the time. Seriousness of purpose was demonstrated also by Richards as early as 1888, when he suggested that the association be divided into local divisions to encourage cooperative research. A little later, in 1891, Lynds Jones set up committees to concentrate on melology (song), oology, and general research (Strong 1939:4).

The organization took another crucial step when, affiliating with The Agassiz Association, a national federation of natural history groups, it took a new name: The Wilson Ornithological Chapter of The Agassiz Association, in honor of Alexander Wilson, pioneer ornithologist in

America. A charter was granted on December 3, 1888, by Harlan H. Ballard, President of The Agassiz Association. The Agassiz Association had been inspired by the writings and public lectures of Louis Agassiz, celebrated zoologist and authority on glacial geology at Harvard. By 1888 The Agassiz Association had grown into a national network of clubs devoted to various aspects of nature, numbering 15,000 members in 800 chapters.

Early in 1888 O. P. Hauger of Orleans, Indiana, had offered to publish a monthly magazine for the group, *The Curlew*, and accordingly, this was adopted as the official journal. The first issue appeared in October 1888, under the editorship of J. P. Richards. The March 1889 issue listed 35 members—8 from Massachusetts, 5 from Iowa, 4 from Wisconsin, 3 from New York, 2 each from Maine, Kentucky, and Texas, and 1 each from Connecticut, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, Ohio, and Pennsylvania (Bagg 1968). In 1890 the list had grown to 85 names (Strong 1939:5).

The Curlew lasted only from October 1888 to April 1889, providing a medium of communication during the transition from the Young Ornithologists' Association to the Wilson Chapter. After the demise of *The Curlew*, the Society turned briefly in 1890 to the *Ornithologists' and Oölogists' Semi-Annual* published by W. H. Foote of Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Then after the *Semi-Annual* was suspended in April 1892, the Chapter used the pages of the *Taxidermist*, published by E. W. Martin and C. F. Mignin of Akron, Ohio, until May 1892. Lynds Jones and R. M. Strong put out one issue of *The Wilson Quarterly* at Oberlin, Ohio, in April 1892, and one issue of *The Journal* in January 1893, but did not continue for lack of funds.

In 1893, communication among members was maintained by mimeographed sheets printed by Jones at Oberlin College, and in the same year W. N. Clute secured space in *Popular Science News* for the Agassiz Association, which carried Chapter news and a committee report on owls compiled by Jones (Jones 1914:25).

The Wilson Bulletin under this name began in February 1894, consisting of postcard-size reports on specific birds mailed by W. B. Caulk, secretary of the Chapter, and financed by the authors. The reception of these was unexpectedly enthusiastic, encouraging Jones to continue *The Wilson Bulletin* as a small-format bi-monthly, beginning in January 1896. The future of this publication did not show promise until 1900 when new life was infused into it with two studies more ambitious than any heretofore in this series: one on the flicker by Frank L. Burns, and one on the songs of the warblers by Jones. With new vigor *The Wilson Bulletin* changed

to a quarterly in approximately its present page size. In 1901 the editorship was taken over by Burns at Berwyn, Pennsylvania, but from 1902 to 1924 *The Wilson Bulletin* was edited by Jones at Oberlin, Ohio.

There seems to have been little interaction between the Wilson group and its parent association, if we may judge from the published record. As early as 1890 some dissatisfaction was voiced about this affiliation and a shorter name was desired, but the struggling group felt the relationship gave them prestige and help in reaching prospective members. As the chapter and its leaders became more mature, these advantages seemed less important, and in 1902 the ornithological group cast loose from the Agassiz Association and adopted its own name under a new constitution.

The boyish trivia of the earliest years soon disappeared, and after the turn of the century *The Wilson Bulletin* was attracting contributions from distinguished American ornithologists. By 1915 the list also included prominent Canadians, P. A. Taverner and W. W. Saunders, along with such well-known Americans as Ira Gabrielson, Aretas Saunders, Althea Sherman, R. W. Shufeldt, B. H. Swales, and Otto Widmann. By 1920 it included F. C. Lincoln, W. L. McAtee, E. A. Preble, and Alexander Wetmore. The emphasis remained on field ornithology, however, and *The Wilson Bulletin* printed life histories, local bird lists, unusual occurrences, nesting records, and reports from travelers far from familiar haunts. It included little on anatomy, taxonomy, and other specialties of museum workers. A proposal to change the name from Club to Society was voted down at the annual meeting in 1916 (Strong 1939:4) and came up again in 1919 without result (Ganier 1920:29). Before this time for several years the Bulletin proclaimed itself "an illustrated quarterly magazine" on the cover and carried out its promise with many photographs. If World War I had any impact on the Society, it was not reported except for a paper in 1920 on the birds of France and Germany by a member serving in the army.

THE EARLY LEADERSHIP

Although the Wilson Ornithological Club had roots in New England as well as westward, the long-continued leadership of a few men tended to give the society a midwestern flavor (Kastner 1986:132-144). This regional character was reinforced by the affiliation of the Nebraska Ornithologists' Union in 1916, the Iowa Ornithologists' Union in 1923 (Strong 1939:5), and the Kentucky Ornithological Society, and Tennessee Ornithological Society in 1924 (Wilson 1924:61). In 1917 excerpts from the diary of E. I. Shores of Connecticut added an explanation that *The Auk* was the "bird journal of the Atlantic Coast" (Henninger 1917:2).

Many of the earliest leaders dropped from view in ornithology when

they went on to adult careers in other fields. For example, J. B. Richards of Fall River, Massachusetts, was 15 years old in 1885 when he promoted the beginnings of the society. He dropped out a few years later when he went into business. L. O. Pindar of Hickman, Kentucky, was also 15 and a ringleader in 1885, but gave up this activity when he took up medicine (Bagg 1968).

A pillar of the organization for decades was Lynds Jones of Oberlin, Ohio. He learned taxidermy and egg collecting in childhood from an older neighbor boy (Taylor 1938:228). Jones started higher education at the academy and college at Grinnell, Iowa, but transferred to Oberlin College, where he could get a wider variety of science courses. Later he went on to a doctorate at the University of Chicago and returned to teach throughout a long life at Oberlin.

Jones was a burly, energetic man who brought not only ornithology to Oberlin, but also football. He played tennis until late in life, and he was famous for strenuous cross-country field trips to the Pacific Northwest with his classes (Taylor 1938:236). At Oberlin he instituted the first ornithological course in an American college in 1895, and in 1910 offered a course in the new science of ecology (Kendeigh 1952:259). His contributions to the Wilson Club were incalculable. In addition to being one of the founders, he held offices in the society for 39 years—Secretary, Treasurer, President for 11 years, and Editor for 36 years.

Only a little less influential was Reuben M. Strong, also a founder, whose friendship with Jones in the Club led him to attend Oberlin, first in the preparatory school, and then in the college from which he graduated. He shared with Jones the financial and editorial duties in the early years, and he served as Treasurer in 1892–1893, and as President from 1894 to 1901, and again from 1920 to 1921. In his professional career Strong moved through a series of professorships in anatomy at several colleges and universities, finishing his work at Loyola (Chicago) Medical School. He continued to attend the annual meetings until near the time of his death at age 90 (Rand 1966).

Another memorable founder was Franklin L. Burns, who served as Secretary in 1906 and as President from 1909–1911. Perhaps more importantly, he gave dignity to the early publications by monographs on the American Crow (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*), Northern Flicker (*Colaptes auratus*), and Broad-winged Hawk (*Buteo platypterus*), and by a series of biographical papers on Alexander Wilson (Van Tyne 1946:187, Palmer 1954:105).

A Midwesterner who played a prominent role was T. C. Stephens of Sioux City, Iowa. Although not one of the original founders, he was President at the time of the first two meetings in 1914, and was editor of

The Wilson Bulletin from 1925 until 1938 (Palmer 1954:543–544). Another was Albert F. Ganier of Nashville, Tennessee, a member from 1915, Secretary and President, who remained active in Society affairs for more than 50 years.

MEETINGS

From the earliest days the founders recognized the desirability of regular meetings. Several of them were already mingling with other ornithologists as early as 1890 at the sessions of the American Association for the Advancement of Science that were often held in the Midwest. Jones had prepared an announcement of a meeting to be held at Oberlin in December 1891, including titles of papers to be presented, but there is no record that the meeting ever occurred. The first recorded meetings were held in February and December 1914, both at Chicago. In 1915 the Wilson Club became affiliated with the American Association for the Advancement of Science and, from 1916 through 1937, met fairly regularly in concert with that organization.

For its own meetings the Wilson Club often chose sites in part for their natural attractions, where people could walk afield from the doors of their lodgings. The meetings contributed greatly to the organization's strength and stature, and they came to be remembered among ornithologists for their friendly, informal spirit.