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Author: Smith, Kimberly G.

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100 Years Ago in The American Ornithologists' Union



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Starting in 1907, the annual meeting of the AOU was no longer referred to as a "congress," so the 27th "stated meeting" was held in New York City at the American Museum of Natural History in 1909. The AOU also published volume 26 (new series) and volume 34 (old series) of *The Auk* that year. Edward W. Nelson continued as President, A. K. Fisher and Frank M. Chapman continued as Vice-Presidents, John H. Sage entered his 20th year as Secretary, and Jonathan Dwight, Jr., served his sixth year as Treasurer. In addition to those five, the Council consisted of seven elected members and seven ex-presidents. J. A. Allen continued as Editor of *The Auk* for his 26th volume and Frank M. Chapman remained the Associate Editor.

The annual business meeting was called to order by the President on the night of Monday, 6 December, at the museum, and 17 Fellows were in attendance. The membership was 866 individuals, about 20 fewer than the year before, in five categories: 48 Fellows, 14 Honorary Fellows, 62 Corresponding Fellows, 71 Members, and 671 Associates. During the year, the Union had lost 85 members: 5 by death, 33 by resignation, and 47 for nonpayment of dues. The report of the Treasurer showed the finances of the Union to be in a satisfactory condition. Changes to the by-laws were adopted to reflect having a stated meeting on an annual basis.

The five deaths were all of Associates (= Members today). William L. Kelker was from a prominent family in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Edward Seymour Woodruff died of typhoid fever at the age of 32, a year and a half after being named State Forester of New York, having graduated from the Yale School of Forestry with high honors in 1907. Charles K. Worthen was a noted illustrator of scientific publications and a well-known collector and dealer of natural-history specimens. William H. Brownson was City Editor for the Portland (Maine) *Advertiser* for more than 25 years, in which he published many articles about birds. He also was Editor of the *Journal of the Maine Ornithological Society* for several years. William Hubbell Fisher, who joined the AOU in 1883, was a prominent lawyer in Cincinnati, Ohio, and an amateur naturalist. He published one paper in *The Auk* (10:167–169), "Preserving equilibrium by use of one wing," in which he presented a photograph of a House Finch (*Carpodacus mexicanus*) holding one wing up in the air to maintain its balance on a hotel window sill after another finch tried to push it off the sill. Curiously, he also presented a photograph of one boy pushing another boy down a slope with the boy being pushed sticking his arm out to maintain his balance, claiming that people and birds do similar things to maintain their "equilibrium."

Arthur Cleveland Bent (1866–1954), of Taunton, Massachusetts, was the only Fellow elected. Bent joined the AOU in 1889, was made a Member (= Elected Member) in 1902, and would eventually serve as President of the AOU from 1935 to 1937. He also was elected a member of the Nuttall Ornithological Club while an undergraduate at Harvard University in 1888, and he would become the fourth Honorary Member of the Club in 1945. He was an incredibly successful businessman; it is almost unbelievable to review the list of the numerous companies that he ran, worked for, and started during his business career (see Taber 1955). In addition, he had a distinguished civic career in the state of Massachusetts, served his church in a number of capacities throughout his adult life, and maintained active memberships in more than 15 clubs and societies in and around eastern Massachusetts (Taber 1955). Somehow, he also found time to travel widely around North America, making nearly annual trips from 1901 to 1930 in preparation of writing his life histories.

In 1910, Bent agreed to continue the unfinished work of Charles Bendire (1836–1897, founding member of the AOU) for the Smithsonian Institution, promising "6 large volumes" of "Life Histories of North American Birds" (Taber 1955). Of course, there were a lot more than six volumes: the first volume appeared in 1919, and the 19th, on wood warblers, in 1953, with two more manuscripts in preparation. (Wendall Taber, his close friend, saw to the publication of volume 20 in 1958, and Oliver Austin, Jr., compiled and edited the last volume in 1968.)

As one who grew up reading and memorizing the wealth of knowledge in those volumes, I find it is amazing that Bent did not fully retire from business until his sixties while writing these life histories. Forty years ago, it was not unusual for someone to say "What does Bent say about that?" when engaged in conversations about birds. For example, I once saw an Eastern Kingbird (*Tyrannus tyrannus*) fly up and land on the back of a soaring Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*) and proceed to peck the hawk on the head. Consulting Bent (1942:20–21), I read that

> If we were limited to one adjective to suggest the kingbird's character as impressed on us by his behavior, I think most of us would use the word "defiant"; if we were allowed one more, perhaps we should add "fearless." In contrast to most birds, whose concern is restricted to the immediate vicinity of their nest, the kingbird's attention reaches far out. His perch always commands a good view of the surrounding country; he is always on the watch for the enemy. He reminds us of those delightful young men in *Romeo and Juliet* who, let a Capulet appear, flash out their swords and rush into a fight. . . . The kingbird seems to consider any big bird his enemy; he does not wait for one to come near but, assuming the offensive, dashes out at crow, vulture, or a big hawk—size seems to make no difference to him—and practically always wins.

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This is followed by three anecdotes by people who described kingbirds landing on the back of crows and hawks. Bent relied heavily on correspondence in composing his species accounts, with more than 800 people acknowledged.

Four individuals were chosen to be (what today we call) Elected Members, the first three of whom would eventually be elected Fellows. Allan Brooks (1869–1946) was one of the leading bird artists of his day, illustrating many bird works, including Percy A. Taverner's (1875–1947) books on Canadian birds. He also was a fantastic caller of birds, able to imitate bird songs and calls perfectly. Laing (1947) credits Brooks as being the first person in North America to attract birds by making owl calls, a trick his father had learned while living in India, where Brooks had been born. A collaborator of Brooks, Harry S. Swarth (1878–1935) spent most of his career associated with the new Museum of Comparative Zoology, where he was Curator of Birds, and later the California Academy of Sciences, where he was the Curator of the Department of Ornithology and Mammalogy. His important works include *The Avifauna of the Galapagos*, published in 1931. He also published a history of the Cooper Ornithological Club, *The C. O. C. 1892–1928*, in 1929. The importance of Taverner's contributions to bird-banding and to Canadian ornithology has been discussed here previously (123:924–925). In 1907 and 1908, Taverner and Bradshaw Swales (1875–1928), a close friend of Taverner when they both lived in Detroit, Michigan, published a five-part series in *The Wilson Bulletin* on bird migration at Point Pelee, Ontario. A lawyer by trade, Swales moved to California, where he was influenced by Joseph Grinnell, and then to Washington, D.C., where he eventually held an honorary position as Assistant Curator of Birds at the U.S. National Museum. He was responsible for starting the Baird Ornithological Club in 1922 for the purposes of "the advancement of ornithological knowledge, and the furtherance of good fellowship among the members." The Club apparently disbanded in 1949.

A total of 121 people were elected as (what today are called) Members. These included Arthur A. Allen (1885–1964), at the time a beginning doctoral student at Cornell University, where he would develop the best graduate ornithology program in the country during the 1920s and 1930s and, eventually, the Laboratory of Ornithology; and A. Brazier Howell (1886–1961), who had a dual career in ornithology and mammalogy, while a professor of vertebrate anatomy at Johns Hopkins Medical School. Howell endowed a prize for both the Cooper Ornithological Society and the American Society of Mammalogists specifically for people without doctoral degrees, as he thought it was a waste of time and energy to obtain a Ph.D. (von Bloeker 1993).

The next three days were devoted to scientific sessions. The highlight of the first day was the announcement by C. Hart Merriam (27:72)

> of the recent discovery of the skulls and bones of several species of birds in the asphalt beds near Los Angeles, Calif., including a gigantic bird of prey, and other species undoubtedly new to science.

He was referring, of course, to the discovery of the Rancho La Brea tar pits, home today to the Page Museum. A highlight of the second day was a presentation by William Beebe on "Racket Formation in the Tail-feathers of the Motmot," with an exhibition of skins and a living specimen. Day 3 started with a letter from Beebe, asking people to locate, if possible, living specimens of the Passenger Pigeon (*Ectopistes migratorius*). Also, a resolution was passed supporting H. R. 10276, introduced in Congress on 28 May 1909 by John Wingate Weeks of Massachusetts, entitled "A Bill to Protect Migratory Birds of the United States." (Weeks would later introduce the Weeks Act of 1911, which led to the formation of the U.S. National Forest system.)

The first day's session was followed by a reception that night at the museum, the second day ended with dinner at the Hotel Endicott at 81st and Columbus Avenue, and a reception with refreshments was held at the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences (The Brooklyn Museum today) after adjournment on the third day. Friday was spent visiting the New York Aquarium (today the oldest continually operated aquarium in the United States) and the New York Zoological Park (The Bronx Zoo). Saturday there was an all-day outing to observe large flocks of gulls in the Lower Bay of New York Harbor and on the ocean off Sandy Hook, New Jersey, a barrier spit that is a National Recreation Area today.—Kimberly G. Smith, *Department of Biological Sciences, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Arkansas 72701, USA. E-mail: kgsmith@uark.edu*

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