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A HISTORY OF THE WILSON ORNITHOLOGICAL CLUB¹

BY R. M. STRONG

AT the annual banquet of the Wilson Ornithological Club in Chicago, two years ago, I gave an extemporaneous report of the early history of the Club. That account was based mostly on memory. This paper, on the other hand, has been prepared mainly from publications of the Club and from letters received by me from fellow members during the first eight years of the society's existence. A brief history of the Wilson Ornithological Club by Lynds Jones was published in *The Wilson Bulletin* in March, 1914.

It happened to be my custom, in those early years, to save my natural history correspondence. There were several hundred letters, and they were stored for many years in my father's house. I secured them in 1937, and I have gone through them during the past eighteen months for items of possible use in preparing this paper. Those letters which have any value as historical material have been deposited in the Wilson Club Library at Ann Arbor.

The Wilson Ornithological Club was founded by a group who were already partly organized as the Young Ornithologists' Association, and they were mostly boys. They lived in various parts of the United States from Maine to Texas, and they had become acquainted, at least in some cases, through exchange advertisements in Frank Lattin's *Oologist*. The Club was originally organized as a chapter of the Agassiz Association, a society devoted to natural history in general. Harlan H. Ballard was president of the Association.

According to my recollection, it was felt that the affiliation would be advantageous in reaching new members and that some prestige would be gained. It was not long, however, before dissatisfaction with this arrangement arose. Thus Willard N. Clute, president in 1894, in a letter dated December 8, 1890, wrote: "I do not see how the chapter can make much progress until its methods are changed very materially. First, I would like to shorten the name. Just think, of 'The Wilson Ornithological Corresponding Chapter of the Agassiz Association.'" Later, August 26, 1894, he wrote "I am sorry to see an inclination among some of our members to cut loose from the Agassiz Association. What can we gain by cutting loose? And are there not advantages to be

¹ Read at the Twenty-fourth Annual Meeting of the Wilson Ornithological Club in recognition of the Fiftieth Anniversary.

gained by an affiliation with them? President Ballard has always been very friendly toward us, and if the Wilson Chapter drops out, someone is sure to start a rival chapter in its place." Again, September 13, 1894, "Regarding the cutting loose from the Agassiz Association, I would say that the Chapter stands as the Ornithological Chapter of the whole association and to it every ornithologist in the ranks turns. If properly worked, it would bring us many members each year."

The affiliation with the Agassiz Association was not broken, however, until 1902, when the present name, The Wilson Ornithological Club, was adopted. An effort to change the name to Wilson Ornithological Society was voted down at the 1916 meeting (*Wilson Bull.*, 28, 1917: 34).

These letters of fifty years ago include references to scientific ambition and ideals. These boys wished to undertake something more than collecting and unorganized observation. To be sure, some of them were making systematic reports on bird migrations for the U.S. Biological Survey, but they had dreams of more intensive work.

Research in ornithology, up to that time, had been nearly all in morphology, physiology and taxonomy. The members of the Wilson Chapter did not have the training for either morphological or physiological work, and few had the opportunity to do taxonomic work. Furthermore, they were interested in field ornithology.

Animal behavior and ecology were not yet born, and photography was in its infancy. If an ornithologist went to a university to study, the chances were small of being assigned to a problem which had any ornithological bearings. Even life history studies had hardly begun. These boys had to strike out for themselves without scientific training and with little preceding work to guide them.

Committees were formed, some of them for subjects and others for states. Thus J. B. Richards, the first president of the young chapter, wrote, March 25, 1889: "The members are to be organized in each state so that they may better carry out our object of studying birds. You will see that the members in Wisconsin report on time and direct investigations in Wisconsin under my direction. . . . I wish you to select one or two common summer residents of Wisconsin for additional study." This scheme had already been suggested in a letter of November 24th, 1888, when plans were being made for the establishment of the society.

Still earlier, January 16, 1888, Richards had written about a plan to divide the Young Ornithologists' Association into local divisions which he proposed to call legions. Three members would be sufficient to start a legion, and the idea was to encourage cooperative research.

A letter from Lynds Jones, dated January 20, 1891, announced the following committees and their chairmen: Melological (Song), John H. Sage, Portland, Conn.; Oological, Frank L. Burns, Berwyn, Penn.; Migration, Lynds Jones, Oberlin, Ohio; General Committee, Charles A. Ely, Perrinville, New Jersey, and R. M. Strong, Wauwatosa, Wisconsin.

A melological committee had already been appointed by Richards, June 4, 1889, with S. W. Bridgham, East Providence, Rhode Island, as chairman.

Other letters from Jones and other members mention still other topics for committee study. Though some of these schemes did not materialize, there resulted some valuable publications.

With the idea of stimulating ornithological studies, Clute wrote, January 31, 1892, "With the membership we have at present, we cannot hope to do much for science. I believe offering a yearly prize—a medal for instance—for the best report by an associate member, would greatly increase their interest in the chapter."

A letter Richards dated March 15, 1889, contains the following statement concerning membership. "All the active Y.O.A. members have joined the Ornithological chapter so that what we must do now is to make our investigation a success. The Y.O.A. is kept up only as an honorary organization. It is practically changed to the Wilson Ornithological Chapter of the A.A. The Ornithological Chapter has now 32 members. The Y.O.A. has 26 enrolled."

A membership list published in the March 1889 *Curlew* contains thirty-five names, including John H. Sage, secretary of the American Ornithologists Union 1889-1917 and president of the Union 1917-20. He was one of the exceptions in age, being forty-one years old at the time. A second list in June contained sixty-two names and a third list, published a year later, contained eighty-five names, a considerable growth for one year, and by then even California was represented.

A proposal to divide the membership of the society into two groups, active and associate is found on pages 38-39 of the January 1890 number of the *Ornithologists' and Oologists' Semi-Annual*. The successor of this journal, *The Semi-Annual*, April 1891 has such a division with 19 active and 75 associate members.

The membership roll published in the March 1918 *Wilson Bulletin* contains a group of four "Honorary Members" and a year later, there appears a list of eighteen "Sustaining Members." I have been unable to find records of the legislation establishing these classes. The membership did not become large until after the establishment of regular annual meetings.

The Nebraska Ornithologists' Union became affiliated with the Wilson Ornithological Club at the annual meeting in December 1916. Proceedings and membership lists were published in *The Wilson Bulletin* for several years.

A similar affiliation with the Iowa Ornithologists' Union was approved at the 1923 meeting. Other affiliated organizations are the Kentucky and Tennessee Ornithological Societies. All four affiliated societies are listed on the front inside cover page of *The Wilson Bulletin* 1927 to 1932.

The first president was J. B. Richards of Fall River, Mass. He

served through 1889 but seemed to lose interest in the latter part of the year. His correspondence refers to plans to go to college, and his name does not appear in the 1892 list of members. He was succeeded by Lynds Jones. A vice-president was not elected until 1893, C. C. Maxfield, and the series of second vice-presidents began only six years ago. Lynds Jones was the first secretary, serving also as treasurer for two years. The writer was the first treasurer, 1892-1893. There was a business manager 1914 to 1920. Lists of past officers have been published in recent March numbers of *The Wilson Bulletin*.

The story of the official organs of publication is complicated. A tiny journal called the *Curlew* was published in October 1888 to April 1889 in seven numbers, four and five being combined. The first five numbers were only 4 x 5¾ inches in size and with a total of 48 pages. The size of the page was enlarged to 6 x 8 inches in numbers six and seven. The subscription price was twenty-five cents a year. The *Curlew* began as the official organ of the Young Ornithologists' Association. However, in the second number, November 1888, pages 23-24, there appeared an announcement of the formation of "A Corresponding Ornithological Chapter of the Agassiz Association," with conditions and expense of membership. The December number contained the constitution of the Wilson Ornithological Chapter of the Agassiz Association with the names of the president and secretary, and the Young Ornithologists Association is not mentioned. The plan of organization was stated and a program for study of the thrushes was outlined. The January-February issue contained a report of the secretary of the chapter. The covers of the March and April numbers contain the caption "Published for the Wilson Chapter A.A." The first list of members appeared in the March number, and a supplementary list appeared in the April number. The *Curlew* then died as have so many other boys' journals.

Under date of November 24, 1888, Richards wrote, "Of course I should advise you to subscribe for the *Swiss Cross*, \$1.50 per year, the official organ of the A.A., but it is not necessary." In another letter, December 25, 1888, Richards said, "If anyone joins the Y.O.A. he must subscribe for the *Curlew* but if he joins the Ornithological Chapter, he will not have to subscribe."

A letter from Lynds Jones dated October 8, 1889, contained the following, "As you probably know, the publisher of the *Curlew* has suspended publication and given his right to W. H. Foote, of the *O. & O. Semi-Annual*." This was a handsome magazine six by nine and one-half inches in size, and two numbers, comprising volume 1 had been published in 1889. The January, 1890 (vol. 2, No. 1) number devoted thirteen pages to the Wilson Chapter and another list of members was included. Seven pages were devoted to a report of the melological committee. The July (vol. 2, No. 2) number had eighteen pages occupied by Wilson Chapter material, including a report of the committee on the study of the thrushes.

The next number (April 1891, vol. 3, No. 1) appeared with the name of the journal shortened to "*The Semi-Annual*" and the entire table of contents for the 45 pages was headed "Department of the Wilson Chapter A.A." Reports by the president, secretary and treasurer were included. There is another list of members, officers and committees. This was the last number of this series.

The next venture was the *Wilson Quarterly* which appeared in only two numbers (April and July 1892), edited by Lynds Jones, assisted by Willard N. Clute and published by myself. Lynds Jones transferred in 1890 from Grinnell College to Oberlin College at the end of his sophomore year. We had been considering the advantage of being in the same town for the chapter publication work, and this idea had considerable to do with my decision to go to Oberlin. I entered the junior year of the preparatory school of Oberlin College, in September 1891, graduating from the college in 1897. Jones was a member of the class of 1892. The *Wilson Quarterly* was succeeded by the *Journal* of the Wilson Ornithological Chapter of the Agassiz Association with the same editor and publisher. Two numbers (headed vol. 1 and vol. 2 respectively), of this were published in January and June 1893 with the financial difficulty that had accompanied all of these efforts. I recall taking an entire issue of one number of the *Quarterly* from the printer to my room in Oberlin, Ohio.

In the first issue of the *Journal*, President Jones announced that the Secretary, Willard N. Clute would have space in the *Popular Science News* containing Chapter news and reports, and the May 1893 number had such material including a committee report on owls, compiled by Lynds Jones. Another number for the same year, p. 151, had two paragraphs for Wilson Chapter news. During this period, space was also obtained in *The Taxidermist*, Akron, Ohio. I quote from the history published by Lynds Jones in 1914:

Beginning with the fourth number of the first volume of the *Taxidermist* . . . space was used until its suspension with the May number, 1892. . . . Following . . . the suspension of *The Journal*, communication between the members was maintained by means of mimeographed sheets done on the writer's typewriter and the mimeograph of the Oberlin Department of Zoölogy.

Beginning with February, 1894, the present series of *Bulletins* was begun by the then Secretary, William B. Caulk. These were post card size, and the three which were issued bear the dates of February, May and July, 1894. To supplement these several printed postal cards were sent out.

Two reports had been prepared and it was thought best to publish them as a fitting end to the organization. The two were the "Warbler Report," issued as *Bulletin No. 4*, January 15, 1895, by the writer, and "The American Crow," as *Bulletin No. 5*, by Frank L. Burns. These were mostly financed by the writers of the reports. Instead of killing the organization, as we expected, these reports seemed to infuse it with such life that the writer of this sketch was encouraged to plan for the publication of a modest official organ to be known as *The Wilson Bulletin*, with a bi-monthly appearance. Accordingly, the publication was begun in January, 1896, as a twelve-page magazine with a printed page of 5 x 3½ inches, brevier type. This publication continued through 1899, with regularly recurring deficits which

the editor met for the good of the cause, with some occasional assistance from Mr. Burns and others.

During the several years preceding 1900 Mr. Burns had been working on an exhaustive study of the Flicker, and the editor upon a study of the songs of the warblers. Both of these papers were ready for print by the beginning of 1900, and plans were made for putting them into print. The deficits were becoming so onerous that it was decided to issue these two reports as a grand finale and disband the organization. But history repeated itself and it was found that a continuance of the publication was demanded by the membership. The editor was not able to spare the time necessary for the preparation of a bi-monthly, so it was decided to increase the size of the printed page and increase the number of pages in order to make a quarterly magazine of reasonable size. Volume 12, 1900, thus became the first of the enlarged volumes, as at present.

A letter from William B. Caulk, August 14, 1893, had in its letter-head "*The Bird*. Published in the interest of the Ornithologist and Oologist. Organ of the Wilson Ornithological Chapter of the Agassiz Association, William B. Caulk, Editor and Manager." This was apparently premature printing, and I know of no authorization of such an arrangement. Furthermore, in a letter dated July 25, 1894, the following statement occurs: "At one time, I offered to make my proposed magazine the official organ of the chapter on what I considered very reasonable terms. Some were in favor of accepting my offer and others opposed it. The opposition claimed that the chapter did not need an organ, that their reports could be issued in a more convenient form and for less money. "My magazine will soon be published but I must decline to make it the official organ of the chapter."

On August 2, 1896, Lynds Jones wrote, "The editors of the *Osprey* want us to take that paper for our official organ. As long as we can maintain one of our own, we had better do it. A regular publication gives a certain dignity to the chapter which nothing else will."

At the 1921 meeting of the club in Chicago, a proposition was presented which involved much discussion among the officers at least. I quote from page 47 of *The Wilson Bulletin* for 1921: "The president gave the gist of some correspondence which had developed with a firm specializing in the publication of scientific periodicals and which had made a tentative proposition for taking over *The Bulletin*. A letter was read from Vice-President Oberholser favoring its acceptance. Inasmuch as the contract made necessary a considerable advance in dues and certain changes in the established editorial policy, the matter was referred to the Executive Committee, with instruction to report its recommendations at the afternoon session of the second day." It is obvious that the scheme was not approved. During the years 1921-26 inclusive, the editor was assisted by an "Editorial Board."

Under date of March 13, 1891, Lynds Jones wrote "We must have a meeting somewhere, somehow. If we hope to make the organization a permanent one, we must have personal acquaintance with one another, at least with those active in work." An announcement of a meeting at Oberlin, Ohio, for December 4, 1891, with titles of papers and signed

by Lynds Jones as president was printed. I do not recall that this meeting was actually held, and I cannot find any other record of it. In *The Wilson Bulletin* for September 1914, the following appears on the first editorial page: "Remember the second annual meeting of the Wilson Ornithological Club, which will be held in Chicago, Illinois, on December 29 and 30, 1914. The first opportunity for a gathering of ornithologists in the central part of the United States was presented at the 1890 [meetings of the] American Association for the Advancement of Science held at Indianapolis. The writer attended that meeting, where he met Mr. O. Widmann, Dr. B. W. Evermann, Dr. A. W. Butler, Dr. Morris Gibbs and others. The next opportunity was offered in February, 1914, at Chicago, when we met last spring."

It will be noted that the Oberlin meeting was not mentioned, and there is no positive statement of an independent meeting of the Club at the 1890 American Association meetings, but the Club did have a real and successful meeting February 5th, 1914, and still another meeting December 29-30 in the same year, both in Chicago.

On the first editorial page of *The Wilson Bulletin* for June 1916, the following statement occurs: "As a result of negotiations begun in the early part of 1915 word has recently been received by officers of the Wilson Club that this organization has been accepted as one of the scientific societies in affiliation with the American Association for the Advancement of Science. The value and significance of this relation will be appreciated by all of our members. When meetings of the American Association occur within the territory of the Wilson Club it will be well for us to endeavor to hold our meetings in conjunction with them. The advantage at such a time and place was shown to those who attended the Columbus meeting last December. From one to two thousand scientific men coming together affords an inspiration and stimulus of the greatest value."

Meetings have been held with the A.A.A.S. each year since 1916 except for 1924, 1926, 1932, 1936 and 1938. There were no meetings in 1918 and 1933. Recent March numbers of *The Wilson Bulletin* have given lists of meetings held to date, a commendable practice.

The Wilson Club has given considerable attention to conservation activities. Many numbers of *The Wilson Bulletin* in the past twelve years mention the subject, especially in the Proceedings of Meetings.

A Committee on Endowment was appointed at the 1925 meeting. (See *Wilson Bulletin*, March, 1926:53-54.) Subsequent March numbers have contained reports on the endowment fund, in the Proceedings of Meetings.

At the 1930 meetings a library project was endorsed. The March 1931 *Bulletin*, pages 76-78, gives the report of the committee on the subject and the agreement with the University of Michigan.

Finally, some consideration should be given to the devoted and effective work of the editors of the publications of the Club and especially to

Professors Jones and Stephens. The Club would not exist now, if Professor Lynds Jones had not carried the *Bulletin* through the years from 1894 to 1914 or later at considerable financial sacrifice and with a small and not over-enthusiastic membership. Dr. Stephens, taking on the duties of editor and I believe publisher also, in 1925, has been conscientious and highly successful. There are many others who should be mentioned. Mr. Percival Coffin as treasurer 1914 to 1916 contributed greatly to the reorganization of the Club, especially from a business standpoint. Time limits do not permit other recognitions.

LOYOLA UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF MEDICINE, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS.