THE MOTHERS OF CONSERVATION

by John Hanson Mitchell

Often overlooked in the long history and analysis of political currents in this country is the fact that environmental activism historically has been primarily the work of women. Theory, philosophy, and writing may have been the handiwork of men such as Henry Thoreau and John Muir. But action, that is, letter-writing campaigns, organization, boycotts, demonstrations, or the willingness to lie down in front of offending bulldozers, has been the business of women.

One of the first acts of environmental activism in this country took place in Boston in 1896. On a February afternoon that year, one of the scions of Boston society, Mrs. Harriet Lawrence Hemenway, happened to read an article that described in graphic detail the aftereffects of a plume hunter's rampage—dead, skinned birds everywhere on the ground, clouds of flies, stench, starving young still alive, in the nests, that sort of thing.

Harriet Hemenway was properly disturbed, and inasmuch as she was a Boston Brahmin and not just any lady of social rank, she determined to do something about it. She packed her reticule—presumably with the article—and went across Clarendon Street to the house of another society woman, her cousin Minna B. Hall. There, over tea, the two of them began to plot a strategy to put a halt to the cruel slaughter of birds for the plumes that decorated the hats of fashionable women of that time. Never mind that the plume trade was a multinational affair involving millions of dollars and some of the captains of nineteenth century industry, the two women meant to put an end to the nasty business.

Harriet Hemenway, it used to be said, had a mind of her own. She once entertained a black man as houseguest when he could not find lodging elsewhere in Boston (he happened to be Booker T. Washington, but that is beside the point). She used to fire off public denunciations of other Brahmins, and when she sat for her portrait by John Singer Sargeant, she let the world know she was pregnant by holding a water lily to her breast—symbolic language announcing her condition and a rare, even shocking public announcement for the period. She was independent, a bit of an iconoclast, an activist, boundlessly energetic, gregarious, overly fond of chocolate and tea, and furthermore, she lived for a very long time. Not a few people around today still remember her.

Boston had a tendency to produce such types. Unlike other great families, when Bostonians come into money, instead of constructing grand estates in Newport or the Hudson River Valley, they tended to put their riches into educational institutions, schools for the blind, progressive (relatively) mill cities such as Lowell, and honorable causes. It was Boston money that built some of

the first museums and libraries in this country. It was Boston money that backed the abolitionist movement, and when the war finally came, it was a Boston family that put one of its favored sons at the head of a special fighting company made up entirely of African Americans.

Harriet Hemenway, *nee* Harriet Lawrence, was out of this tradition. She came from a family that had made money in the textile mills. Her father was a devoted abolitionist and a great supporter of education, and, quite naturally, when she came to marry, it was only right that she should marry within the Brahmin clan. She became a Hemenway, another illustrious, rich, and active Boston family.

The Brahmins had a deep moral streak, part of which was no doubt inherited from their Puritan forebears. But that is not to say they were without sin. They had made their money in the Satanic mills or in the China trade, and by 1896 many of their women, Harriet Hemenway and Minna Hall included, would commonly wear upon their hats the elaborate nuptial plumes of murdered birds. The practice was so common that in the whole there were fewer than 5000 egrets nesting. In New England terns had been entirely extirpated from southernmost states, partly because of fashion and by 1896 it was estimated that some five million American birds of about fifty species were killed annually for fashion purposes. But unprincipled acts such as the wanton slaughter of innocent birds for so shallow a matter as fashion would not long endure once Harriet Hemenway was on the case.

She and Minna Hall took down from the shelves *The Boston Blue Book*, wherein lay inscribed the names and addresses of Boston society. Then Hemenway and Hall went through the lists and ticked off the names of those ladies who were likely to wear feathers on their hats. And having done that, they planned a series of tea parties. Women in feathered hats were invited, and then over petite fours and China black, they were encouraged, petitioned, and otherwise induced to forswear forever the wearing of plumes. After innumerable teas and friendly persuasion, the two women had established a group of some 900 members who vowed to work to discourage the buying or wearing of feathers and to protect native birds. Hunters, milliners, and certain members of Congress may have found the little bird group preposterous. After all, the feathers were plucked from long-necked things that lived in swamps and ate tadpoles, as one senator would later phrase it, whereas their plumes were decorating the hats of beautiful ladies. The Lord made birds for bonnets, it was argued.

But opponents of any regulation on the trade underestimated the opposition. The Boston group was made up of women from the families of the Adams and the Abbots, the Saltonstalls and the Cabots, the Lowells, the Lawrences, the Hemenways, and the Wigglesworths. These were the same families who brought down the British empire in the Americas, this was the same group that forced

Lincoln to issue the Emancipation Proclamation, and it would be this same group who were about to create the American tradition of environmental activism. Within a matter of decades the little group focused on protecting native birds spawned what would be the most popular conservation movement in America up to that time.

Notorious, independent Boston women notwithstanding, these were not the freest of times for society women, and Hemenway and Hall were wise enough to know that if their group were to have any credibility, the women would need the support of men and, most importantly, would need a man as its president, even if he would be a mere figurehead. The women organized a meeting with the Boston scientific establishment, outlined their program, and got the men to agree to join the group, which would be called, they decided, the Massachusetts Audubon Society.

From the start the organization had the backing of some of the foremost names in American ornithology. Edward Forbush, George Mackay, the naturalists Charles S. Minot and Outram Bangs. Minot was associated at Harvard with the foremost biologist in America, Louis Agassiz. The women made him chairman of the board. Then they chose as their president one of the cofounders of the Nuttall Ornithological Club and the American Ornithologists' Union, the Cambridge bird man, William Brewster. It was a skilled political choice. With Brewster as head of the organization, the society immediately garnered national recognition, which is what the women wanted. This was, after all, a national issue.

By the third meeting of the young organization the board resolved to use every effort they could to establish similar societies in other states. By 1897 the District of Columbia and a number of states, including Pennsylvania, New York, Maine, and Colorado, had formed groups. Massachusetts began producing leaflets and helped distribute the legislative models prepared by the American Ornithologists' Union to other societies. By 1900 a conference of state Audubon societies was held in Cambridge, and the following year Massachusetts organized another conference in New York. By 1905 with the prodding and money of the Brahmin women, a National Association of Audubon Societies was established. In 1940 this group became the National Audubon Society.

All this work was to a singular purpose—to do something about the continued slaughter of plume birds. By 1897 Massachusetts had passed a bill outlawing the trade in wild bird feathers, and in 1898 Massachusetts Senator George Hoar attempted to introduce a bill to the U.S. Congress that would prohibit the importation, sales, or shipment of plumes in the United States. The bill failed, but sentiment for the cause was running strong by this time, and when Congressman John Lacey of Iowa proposed a bill in 1900 that would prohibit the interstate shipment of animals killed in violation of local state laws, it passed. The Lacey Act, coupled with strong state bird protection laws and the

establishment of agents to enforce them, slowly began to weaken the trade or at least make it more difficult. The fact that a friend of Minot's family and a former member of Brewster's Nuttall Ornithological Club, Teddy Roosevelt, became president of the United States in 1901 certainly did not harm the cause.

But as with many successful campaigns, this one was fought on two fronts. Laws may have been passed, but just as importantly, social pressures were applied. In 1909 when first lady Mrs. William Howard Taft had the audacity to appear at the presidential inauguration with feathers in her hat, Minna Hall promptly wrote her a personal letter of remonstrance. Brahmin women never were considered paragons of fashion. They shopped at R.H. Stearns. They wore pearl chokers, low-heeled shoes, and long-sleeved nightgowns, and by 1920 no lady with any sensibility would be seen on the streets of Boston wearing feathers, at least not without being glared at by one of her sisters. It was not unlike the current movement against wearing furs.

From time to time the two fronts converged, as in one legislative fight in New York state when a deluge of letters and petitions from women's clubs convinced legislators to pass restrictive legislation. A bill was passed in 1913 to protect migratory birds, and by 1916 the Migratory Bird Treaty with Great Britain further reinforced the law. By the 1920s the issue was dead, the trade was illegal, and although Harriet Hemenway would still have to glare at an occasional offender on the streets of Boston as late as the 1940s, feathers were going out of fashion anyway.

But the fight was not over. There was the matter of that other phrase in the founding charter, to "otherwise further the protection of our native birds," and Harriet Hemenway, who was all of sixty-two in 1920, still had another forty years to go. Proper Boston women, it used to be said, liked getting old. They could wear their hair in the queen mother style with impunity, did not have to worry about fashion anymore, and they could say what they wanted. The Boston abolitionist, Julia Ward Howe, who wrote the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" and lived to be ninety-one years old, confided to her diary at age eighty-seven that she hoped the coming year would bring her useful work. Aging was like a cup of tea, she believed. The sugar was at the bottom.

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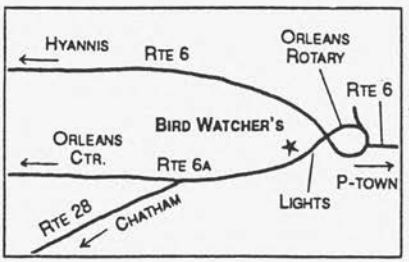

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