

IN MEMORIAM: OTTO WIDMANN

BY T. S. PALMER

OTTO WIDMANN, Fellow of the American Ornithologists' Union, authority on the birds of Missouri, careful and accurate observer, and painstaking recorder of notes, left an enviable record of accomplishments. Despite his years he never lost interest in birds or friends and serenely enjoyed the fountain of youth longer than is permitted to most men. Notwithstanding a modest and retiring nature, lack of interest in ordinary social diversions, and a disinclination to write for publication, he won for himself a position of honor and respect through a large circle of personal correspondents. Among members of the Union he was noted chiefly as the father of the social features of the annual meetings and for his penmanship, which resembled copperplate engraving.

Otto Widmann was born in Karlsruhe, Baden, Germany, on June 15, 1841, the younger son of Christoph Friedrich Widmann, 1796-1871, and Catherine Baumann, 1804-1851. His grandparents on his father's side were Christoph Heinrich Widmann, 1765-1837, and Fredricke Marie Dresch, 1753-1814; on his mother's side, Christoph Baumann, 1763-1835, and Christine Nothardt, 1766-1835. It will be noticed from these dates that he never saw any of his grandparents and that his mother died when he was only ten years of age. None of the family was remarkable for longevity. His father attained 75, his two grandfathers 72, his mother only 47, and her mother 69.

From both of his parents he inherited a love of nature which was carefully cultivated in early youth, but his love of birds was not acquired until he was over thirty. In his autobiography (Wilson Bull., 39: 146-155, 1927) Widmann describes the peculiarly favorable circumstances under which he was born and brought up. His father was connected with the management of the estate of the Grand Duke of Baden and was a nature lover and apparently an all-round naturalist, who in his early youth had collected a large herbarium, and his mother was particularly interested in gardening. Young Widmann had access to the Hofbibliothek or private library of the Grand Duke, and one of its treasures was a copy of 'Naumann' in 12 volumes with copper-plate colored illustrations of the birds of Germany. Adjoining the library was the Naturalien-Kabinet, a small natural history museum. In the Schlossgarten could be found many live birds, and adjoining the garden were the deer park and a pheasantry where pheasants were reared. Besides these attractions was the Hardtwald or coniferous forest several miles in extent, the deciduous woods



OTTO WIDMANN, DECEMBER 6, 1921.

about the city with the foothills of the Black Forest on one side and the Rhine on the other.

As soon as he was old enough Otto was allowed to accompany his elder brother on explorations in search of birds' eggs. Other boys of the same age were also collecting and there was much rivalry to find rare specimens. "I remember well certain events," he writes, "for instance when I found quite unexpectedly the nest with four or five eggs of the *Baumpieper*, tree pipit. We boys were as usual somewhat scattered in going through the forest when I almost stepped on the nest from which the bird flew. It was a treasure, for it was the first ever found and the eggs were so different from all other eggs, a chocolate brown with markings of a darker color." When his father saw how interested the boys were in egg collecting, he bought them a copy of 'Little Naumann,' 'Die Naturgeschichte der Vögel Deutschlands' by C. G. Friderich, containing 200 colored illustrations of birds. He also subscribed to 'Naumannia,' the leading German ornithological journal which began publication about 1853.

At the age of 7 young Widmann entered the Lyceum at Karlsruhe, where he continued his studies for nine years. On completion of the course in April 1857, he began his training in the drug business by serving as an apprentice to a local apothecary for three years. Following this he served three more years as a clerk at Freiburg, Schwetzingen, and Neuchatel and then returned for a year's study in the Polytechnium in Karlsruhe. After his graduation in pharmacy in July 1864, two years more were spent in travel, visiting London, Paris, Berlin, Dresden, Frankfurt, Hamburg, Cologne, Antwerp, and Brussels. As a student and during the years of his apprenticeship he had little time for bird study but confined his attention to botany, chemistry, and acquiring a knowledge of French and English. But during his travels he never failed to visit the natural history museums and zoological gardens and thus maintained his interest in birds and mammals.

In March 1866, at the age of 24, he came to America and entered on a career which was destined to extend over more than an average lifetime and to bring him fame in his adopted country. On arrival he became a clerk in a drugstore in Hoboken. During the next year he worked as a clerk in Savannah and New Orleans, and finally reached St. Louis in 1867. Here he devoted his attention strictly to business, often working 16 hours a day, and finally in December 1867 became a proprietor in his business.

During this time he had little opportunity for recreation or bird study, but he mentions a few conspicuous birds with which he became

acquainted at various places, including the Redstart at Hoboken, the Cardinal at Savannah, Tree Swallows at New Orleans, Purple Martins at Vicksburg, and finally the Baltimore Oriole at St. Louis.

In 1871 he made a nine-months' trip to Europe, extending from November to the following August, and while there married Augusta Bender in Mannheim, Germany, March 5, 1872. She took great interest in his bird work and accompanied him on various trips. In 1874 she gave him for Christmas a subscription to Jasper's 'Birds of North America,' the book which was practically the beginning of his serious bird studies, and later a cane gun for collecting specimens of small birds. Mrs. Widmann was a charming woman and made friends wherever she went. For 49 years the couple enjoyed life together until her death, May 18, 1921. She accompanied him on his trips to California in 1903 and 1915 and in later years when his hearing became impaired she would often call his attention to certain warblers whose high notes he could no longer hear. After her death his daughter accompanied him to the A.O.U. meeting in Chicago in 1922.

Widmann was elected an Active Member, now known as a Fellow, of the Union in 1884. He was also a member of the National Association of Audubon Societies, the St. Louis Bird Club, and the Wilson Ornithological Club. After attending one of the early meetings of the A.O.U. he remarked that the sessions were so occupied with business and committee meetings that there was no opportunity for getting acquainted with the members or for social intercourse. This condition was soon remedied by the introduction of receptions, buffet luncheons, and the annual dinner as regular features of the meetings.

As an ornithologist Widmann was especially interested in distribution and bird migration. Most of his writings deal with the occurrence, abundance, and migration of various species. He contributed notes on migration to W. W. Cooke's 'Report on Bird Migration in the Mississippi Valley' and for a number of years regularly sent in reports on bird migration at St. Louis to the Biological Survey of the Department of Agriculture. Widmann was deeply interested in bird protection but took no active part either in legislation or enforcement. He never appeared before legislative committees or took part in game warden work. He had, however, definite and practical ideas concerning protection, such as the importance of protecting raptorial birds and the establishment of bird refuges. He never lost an opportunity to point out weak places in the game laws or the advantages of wildlife refuges. He called attention to the use of the ambiguous term 'chicken hawk,' which included useful as well as injurious species, instead of listing by name the destructive species to be excluded from

protection. In his account of the birds of Yosemite Valley, California, he emphasized the result of complete protection in the abundance of individual birds and their unusual tameness in feeding and nesting close to the porches of the hotel.

Widmann's bibliography numbered less than 50 titles. He contributed to various ornithological journals, including 'Forest and Stream,' 'Bulletin of the Nuttall Ornithological Club,' 'Auk,' 'Ornithologist and Oologist,' and 'Bird-Lore.' For about 30 years the contributions continued from 1880 to 1911, but after attaining the age of 70 apparently he ceased to write for publication. His principal works were the 'Preliminary Catalog of the Birds of Missouri,' 'The Birds of Shaw's Garden,' used as a text in the public schools, his papers on the discovery of the nest of Bachman's Warbler in the St. Francis bottoms in 1907, and the birds of Yosemite Valley, 1904, in 'The Auk,' and his Autobiography in the 'Wilson Bulletin' in 1927.

In the nineties he began work on his 'Catalog of Birds of Missouri' and had covered the land birds when the work was interrupted by a trip to Europe. He had intended to add the water birds on his return, but during his absence in 1902 his house was burned and he lost not only the manuscript but his series of diaries for 25 years. Naturally he was greatly discouraged but set to work and rewrote the book, which was published 5 years later. It was entitled a 'Preliminary Catalog of the Birds of Missouri,' as the author evidently considered it a provisional or first attempt to bring together existing knowledge concerning the birds of the state.

Widmann not only visited various parts of Missouri to familiarize himself with the native birds, but he made a number of long trips. In addition to his two European trips in 1871 and 1902, lasting nine and five months respectively, he made two trips to California, two visits to New Orleans, a trip to Wequetonsing, Michigan, in 1901, and three trips to Colorado, including two to Colorado Springs and one to Estes Park. After retiring from business in 1899, he lived at Old Orchard, Missouri, for 13 years and then returned to St. Louis where he spent his later years at 5105 Enright Ave. On November 26, 1933, he died in St. Louis, at the advanced age of 92, and was, at that time, the oldest member of the American Ornithologists' Union.