

IN MEMORIAM: ARTHUR CLEVELAND BENT

BY WENDELL TABER

ARTHUR CLEVELAND BENT, President of the American Ornithologists' Union from 1935 to 1937, died in his home on December 30, 1954. Born on November 25, 1866, the son of William Henry Bent and Harriet Fellowes Hendeë Bent, he had lived for many years at 140 High Street in Taunton, Massachusetts, diagonally across the street from the home of his childhood days. Bishop Cleveland, for whom he was named, was a favorite friend of the family.

His mother died when he was about six years old. Not many years later his father, watching a frail and delicate child growing up, embarked him on an invigorating outdoor life to promote physical development. Father and son would amble off together on long walks into the woods and country so easily accessible around Taunton in those days. Came the bicycle at first, that one-huge-wheel affair with trailer-wheel, and carriage drives to exercise the family horse. Not until many years later, when he was in middle life, did the era of the automobile arrive. Much of the time he was alone, simply because of inability to arouse interest among his companions. With the limited transportation facilities of the era, bird trips were necessarily of a type that would now be considered local. Rarely did they extend beyond the neighboring townships of Rehobeth and Fall River. Ultimately, he became acquainted with and frequently joined forces with Owen Durfee of Fall River, only a few years his senior. In these boyhood days, too, came the beginnings of specimen and egg collections. Carried on throughout years of travel all over North America, the specimen collection ultimately attained a size which warranted presentation to Harvard University. Similarly, the U. S. National Museum in Washington received a 30,000-unit egg collection. The trips were health-maintaining, and ornithologically constructive. At home, the use of an axe later in life was a daily delight. At night came setting-up exercises with dumbbells. His major long-distance trips ceased when he was 60: the axe and dumbbells he kept using until he was over 80.

Primary education in the local public schools instilled in him a lasting spirit of democracy. After seven years of secondary education at Bristol Academy, he entered Harvard College. He graduated, with Honorable Mention, and an A.B. degree, in 1889. A broken nose from boxing reflected his athletic career.

In the fall of 1889, he commenced work with the Massachusetts National Bank at a salary of \$15 a month. Early in 1890, however,



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he went to Fall River to learn the cotton mill business, working in the Crescent Mills. In the fall of 1891, he took charge of the Seamless Pocket Mill in Plymouth, a position he retained for four years, drawing a monthly salary of \$50. He was able to augment his income by acting, also, as manager of the Atlantic Covering Co., which manufactured magnet wire. Here he obtained a yearly salary of \$1000. He invested \$1000 in the business—and lost it when the company failed in the Panic of 1893. In the fall of 1892, he and a certain John Scott purchased the Plymouth Electric Light Co. from the General Electric Co. for \$87,500—in notes with company bonds as collateral. He writes, "In the Panic of 1893 the Electric Light Company defaulted on its bonds and was bankrupt and so was I, as I could not meet my notes. John Scott died bankrupt and I had to buy out his interest in the company and assume his debt. But I persuaded the General Electric Company to let me work out the situation, which I finally did." One sees, here, the beginning of the successful business man, inspiring confidence and trust, overcoming tremendous obstacles, forging ahead. In his sixties, "After the sale of Plymouth interests, (I) retired from all business, to live on income from what was left, and devote my time to ornithology."

On October 23, 1895, he married Rosalba Peale Smith, daughter of Professor Clement L. Smith, a former Dean of Harvard College. After a few months the Bents moved from Plymouth to Taunton and Bent became associated with the Mason Machine Works as superintendent's assistant. Ultimately he became General Manager, a position held before him by his father and brother. He moved the Seamless Pocket Co. to Lowell in connection with the Whittier Cotton Mills there, and was able to reduce his time with that company to one day a week. Childless, the couple was divorced in 1911.

In 1914, he married Madeleine Vincent Godfrey, who survives as do three married daughters, six grandchildren, two great granddaughters and a great grandson. The family is noted in Taunton for its almost Scottish clannishness and unity. On Thanksgiving Day in 1954 the assembled family, 18 of them, took turns going upstairs to see the patriarch.

One can but be awe-struck by the dynamic energy and vitality displayed by this former "frail youth." In his initial three jobs, he worked from 6:30 A.M. to 10:00 P.M. daily. Success came from all directions—business, civic affairs, charities, ornithology. He was President and Treasurer of the Plymouth Electric Light Co. from 1900 to 1931, and General Manager of the Mason Machine Works from 1900 to 1914. He also served as Treasurer and Director

of this company. At one time or another he acted as Vice President and Manager of the Campbell Printing Press and Manufacturing Co., N. Y., Vice President of the Autoplate Co. of America, Director of the Jager Engine Co., and Director of the Corr Manufacturing Co. He preferred that limited success which he could derive operating from his own home city to the greater glitter of a business career in a large metropolis. Envisioning the future of the then infant public utility field, he organized and developed a number of small, local utilities. He was President of the Provincetown Light and Power Co., President of the Old Colony Light and Power Association, Director of the Plymouth Gas Co., Southeastern Mass. Power and Electric Co., and Trustee of the Massachusetts Utilities Associates.

Civic duties he took seriously, entering whole-heartedly into the life of his community. He was an Alderman of Taunton in 1906 and one of the nine members of the first Municipal Council set up in 1910 under the new city charter. He also held a three-year term on the School Committee. During the First World War this prominent business executive and municipal leader, a corporal in the State Guard, drilled in the armory, on rifle range, on parade, under regular army discipline, and did a tour of duty in camp each summer. He also acted as escort for the Governor on the latter's public appearances. He still found time to become farm agent for the Food Administration Board, urging Bristol County farmers to produce more food, and he worked closely with the Exemption Board to secure exemption from military service for those farmers who were producing satisfactorily. He was a member of the local committee on public safety, and a "Four Minute Speaker." He organized and served as President of the Bristol County Academy of Sciences, acted as President of the Taunton Chamber of Commerce and a Trustee of the Taunton Savings Bank. Many were the other committees of which he was chairman or a member, undertaking to raise funds for various civic purposes.

Along charitable lines he was Vice President of the Associated Charities of Taunton. Came the depression of the 1930s and he acted as chairman of the so-called "Rochester Plan" which raised over \$300,000 in promised employment for improvements. He took special interest in youth and for his services as Scout Commissioner for Anawan Council, Boy Scouts of America, he received the Silver Beaver with citation. He also took an interest in the John Burroughs Association in New York and was a recipient of the John Burroughs Medal. He served as President of the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, and of the Social Welfare League.

Devoutly religious, he took an active part throughout his adult life as vestryman, clerk, or senior warden of the St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Taunton.

Indicative of the extraordinary breadth of mind and character of the man was his club membership. He organized, became president of, and moved a few times, the Segregansett Country Club as it is now called. He was a member of organizations such as the Taunton Yacht Club, the Taunton Rod and Gun Club, the Bristol Branting Club—and in sharp contrast, organizations such as the Massachusetts Audubon Society where his name appeared in the lengthy list of Honorary Vice Presidents, the Massachusetts Fish and Game Protective Association, the Massachusetts Forestry Association, the American Forestry Association, and the National Association of Audubon Societies. Other clubs included the Old Colony Club in Plymouth, the Harvard Clubs in Taunton, Fall River, and Boston, the University Club in Boston, the Cosmos Club in Washington, and the Explorers Club (Honorary) in New York.

In spite of the pressure of business, civic, and charitable interests, he somehow found time, too, to keep up an interest in birds and to publish numerous minor ornithological papers. Until about 25 years ago the Bents maintained a summer home in Harwich on Cape Cod. Thence it was but a short motor trip to Chatham and Monomoy. The latter area was a favorite haunt. In later life he looked forward annually to a day's outing counting osprey nests in the late spring in southeastern Rhode Island and adjoining parts of Massachusetts. Many were the different ornithologists who partook in this memorable event. Not infrequently the group would record, also, the Carolina Wren and the White-eyed Vireo.

The childhood joys of exploring the great unknown found reflection in the adult on a grand scale. And this in spite of an episode which might well have caused a less confident, strong-willed man to relax into a life of comparative ease! Right at the peak of his young manhood, in 1896, alone, he shinned without climbers up the trunk of a large dead oak in a tract of swampy, mixed woods in North Middleboro, near Taunton. While attempting to reach into a wide, deep cavity for the eggs of a Barred Owl, he slipped and fell. He jerked to a stop with his arm tightly wedged in the narrow slit at the lower end of the opening. For 25 minutes by the village clock, visible in the distance (he would take note of that) he struggled hopelessly, calling in vain for help. How, he never knew: he tore his arm loose. The fall should have killed him. On the ground, he rested for some time in a state of collapse and exhaustion. For the rest of his life

he carried the reminder—a trembling hand. With the passage of time the other hand developed a sympathetic reaction.

The great unknown called him. Without premeditation, he prepared himself by travel and exploration for greater things to come. Later, as part of his self-preparation for writing life histories, he methodically set about the task of seeing North America. The chronology of his trips is:

- 1901. North Dakota with H. K. Job and C. G. Day
- 1902. Florida, east coast, with Job and Day
- 1903. Florida Keys, with Job and Day
- 1904. Magdalen Islands and Nova Scotia with Job, M. L. Church, and an eager youth named James Lee Peters
- 1905. Assiniboia, Saskatchewan, with Job and Day; L. B. Bishop joined them later
- 1906. Saskatchewan, with Bishop; later, Jonathan Dwight joined them
- 1907. Cobbs Island, Virginia, and Nova Scotia, both with Bishop
- 1908. Florida Keys with F. M. Chapman and L. A. Fuertes
- 1909. Labrador, southern, with C. W. Townsend
- 1910. Louisiana coast
- 1911. Aleutian Islands and Alaskan points with A. Wetmore, R. H. Beck, and F. B. McKechrue
- 1912. Newfoundland and eastern Labrador with D. B. MacMillan
- 1913. Manitoba with Job and F. S. Hersey
- 1914. California and the Canadian Rockies with Madeleine V. Bent
- 1915. South Carolina with his family and A. T. Wayne; also alone to the Magdalen Islands
- 1916. Virginia with H. H. Bailey
- 1917. Northern Saskatchewan alone
- 1918–19. Remained at home on war work
- 1920. Percé, Province of Quebec, with family
- 1922. Arizona with F. C. Willard
- 1923. Texas with G. F. Simmons and others
- 1924–25. Central Florida with family
- 1926. Central Florida with family
- 1929. California with family
- 1930. Southern Florida with family

Here, again, the family man is in evidence. Mrs. Bent quite unconsciously summarizes much in writing, "Time was such a precious commodity to him, and although he gave much of himself to his family and friends, most of his days were spent in accomplishment in many walks of life."

On November 18, 1888, just before his 22nd birthday, a senior at Harvard, he was elected a member of the Nuttall Ornithological Club. Under the then by-laws of the club his membership automatically ceased when he left Cambridge upon graduation. Of this brief initial membership, however, C. F. Batchelder wrote in "An Account of the Nuttall Ornithological Club, 1873 to 1919," that "even in that short time he had taken such a place that he was not to be forgotten." To the end of his life it was a bitter blow that, as one of the oldest members of the club in 1938, yet still physically active, there could be no 50th Anniversary Celebration at Mr. Batchelder's home. Actually, Bent had been re-elected, under revised by-laws, in 1896, and he had served on the Council from December 1, 1902, to December 7, 1914. Some compensation for this unfortunate situation did occur when, on October 15, 1945, he was elected to Honorary Membership. To the best of my knowledge such rank has otherwise been held only by Henry Wetherbee Henshaw, John Hall Sage, and Witmer Stone, all of whom were elected on the occasion of the Club's 50th Anniversary celebration on December 7, 1923.

In 1893, Bent became a member of the Wilson Ornithological Club. Not until 1909 did he become an Associate of the American Ornithologists' Union, but by 1920 he was a Fellow. He became a Vice President in 1929 and was elevated to the presidency in 1935. In 1909 he also joined the Cooper Ornithological Club. He was elected an Honorary Member of this organization in 1933. Other associations included the old Boston Society of Natural History, the Linnaean Society (Honorary), the Philadelphia Academy of Natural Sciences, the California Academy of Sciences, and the Maine Audubon Society. He was a recipient of the William Brewster Award from the American Ornithologists' Union, and the Daniel Giraud Elliot Medal from the National Academy of Science. At Harvard University, he was Associate in Ornithology attached to the Museum of Comparative Zoology. In Washington, he held the Asher Chair of Biology at the Smithsonian Institution and the title of Collaborator, U. S. National Museum. Modestly, he writes, "In considering the amount of ornithological work that I have done, allowance must be made for the fact that I was deeply engaged in various business enterprises until I was 48 years old, and only partially retired then. I did not wholly retire from business until I was over 60. Most of my ornithological exploration was done between the ages of 35 and 60. I have not travelled far from home since I was 65."

Not until 1910 did he undertake to carry on the work left unfinished by Major Charles Bendire. In that year, under the instigation and encouragement, especially, of Charles Foster Batchelder, who con-

tinued a life-long admirer, he engaged with the Smithsonian Institution to write "6 large volumes" of "Life Histories of North American Birds," as he calculated in 1914. Another forecast, "It will be my life work," proved far more accurate. Characteristically, he elected to lay out a framework uniformly applicable throughout the entire check-list and to start anew from the very beginning. He gathered material himself. He engaged the cooperation of ornithologists throughout the Western Hemisphere—and ultimately even abroad—originally as contributors of information, later as collaborating authors. His vision stood the test of time and expanding knowledge. Minor changes or additions sufficed to maintain the standards at modern levels. The consensus of many qualified ornithologists today is that the series should be completed in its original style.

The Smithsonian Institution has published 19 volumes of "Life Histories of North American Birds" by Arthur Cleveland Bent. These carry through the North American Wood Warblers. The twentieth volume, on the Icteridae and Thraupidae, has long been in Washington awaiting publication. Except for a few papers in process of preparation by collaborating authors, a twenty-first volume, as planned by him and extending through the Green-tailed Towhee, *Chlorura chlorura*, is in manuscript.

Rare, indeed, is the person so showered with success in whatever he touched who, though exhibiting justifiable pride and pleasure at times, could in the same moment display that modesty so distinctive in and dominative of his entire life. What better manifestation than his comments in the first of the Life History volumes—"No one is so well aware of the many shortcomings and omissions as the author. Allowance must be made for the magnitude of the undertaking."

His work commenced in 1910. The first volume was published in 1919. With the publication of the volume on Wood Warblers in 1953 the business man, impatient for action, but long accustomed by that time to protracted delays between completion of manuscript and appearance in print, took the offense as the best defense. Smarting a bit, perhaps, from criticisms of having omitted important recently published papers from his compilations (an unfair criticism), he remarks in the Introduction, "The manuscript for this Bulletin was written in 1945; only important information could be added. If the reader fails to find in these pages anything that he knows about birds, he can only blame himself for failing to send the information to—The Author."

The long delays in publication might well have caused a weaker

personality to give up. Bent went doggedly on. The work necessarily made him almost a hermit during working hours—yet this was not such in fact. The vital correspondence served as a substitute, keeping his brain in active contact with other brains. The sedentary nature of his work, commenced so late in life, coupled with his enthusiasm, may well have been a major factor in his longevity.

Seldom does it fall to the lot of man to have evidenced in his old age the esteem not only of his contemporaries—those that remain—but of younger generations in addition. On his eightieth birthday, November 25, 1946, after his customary spell with his axe, he went to attend in Boston a birthday dinner given under the auspices of the Nuttall Ornithological Club. From far and wide assembled 112 men. James Lee Peters, President of the Club, presided. Also at the head table was Hoyes Lloyd, at that time President of the American Ornithologists' Union. Other Fellows present were James P. Chapin, L. Griscom, A. O. Gross, F. C. Lincoln, H. C. Oberholser, and A. Wetmore. Charles Foster Batchelder, Bent's senior by over ten years, was able to attend in spirit, only. Jim Peters, commenting on the presence of 9 Fellows and 7 Members, remarked he had never seen so much North American ornithological talent assembled at once outside of an "A.O.U. Meeting." Of the other persons present, 5 have since been elected Members.

Meeting for the first time this man in his middle eighties, one might well have been startled to see him suddenly galvanize and become the alert, tense young business executive, sparkling with power and confidence as he responded in emergency with a flashing, concluding major decision. Incredible? No! Underneath, never dormant, was that driving force and first-hand knowledge of humanity which had taken him to the top in the business world. One saw only the decision. Long in advance he had been thinking, thinking, laying plans against what his calm, analytical judgment told him *could* happen. The crisis came! He was ready!

3 Mercer Circle, Cambridge 38, Massachusetts, May 30, 1955.