



HARRY CHURCH OBERHOLSER

1870-1963

Photograph taken in his office in Room 414, U. S. National Museum, in January 1939 at age of 68

IN MEMORIAM: HARRY CHURCH OBERHOLSER

JOHN W. ALDRICH

THE era of purely descriptive ornithology in North America is definitely on the wane. In its heyday, among the most active and perceptive of the describers and classifiers was Harry Church Oberholser. Certainly few ornithologists had the extraordinarily keen perception of minute morphological differences and their geographical correlation that this man demonstrated. His ability to remember these differences and to notice them in specimens long afterward, and far from his comparative series, was nothing short of phenomenal. His idol was Robert Ridgway, noted taxonomic ornithologist of the United States National Museum, with whom he was closely associated for 34 years while studying the collections of that museum. In his memorial of Ridgway in *The Auk* for 1933, and repeatedly in conversation with me, Oberholser clearly showed his great admiration for this kind and talented ornithologist, and very likely his habits and concepts in the study of birds were influenced to some extent by this esteem.

In my rather close professional contacts with Dr. Oberholser, from 1930 until his death on Christmas Day, 1963, I found him a person of many surprising and seemingly contradictory characteristics. He had a strong urge to accumulate all sorts of items, which accounted for his possession of large and valuable collections of books, stamps and coins, and a small collection of birds which subsequently was purchased by the Peabody Museum at Yale. He had an unusual habit of filling his pockets with rubber bands, paper clips, and pencils of all colors. Two interlocking and overloaded rings of keys always occupied his left trousers pocket, and the right pocket was usually weighted down with a double handful of pennies that had been discarded after searching for special issues. Folding money he carried in a used envelope from which he had cut the postage stamps with a small pair of scissors attached to the end of his watch chain and always carried in a lower vest pocket.

He believed in Prohibition and was an ardent "dry" all his life. He enjoyed telling about how he was almost forced to imbibe spirits on one occasion when a Newfoundland sea captain invited him to his cabin and offered him a drink. However, "H₂O," as he was aptly called by some of his associates, contrived to pour the glass of liquor into the cuspidor when the captain's back was turned.

At times Oberholser was severe, unbending, and demanding of his subordinates, although always gracious to those whom he held in high esteem. He would not permit his employees to smoke in the office, and he always

impressed them with the need for maximum production. He once figured anticipated production based on the number of seconds per unit of specimen labeling, and employees returning from lunch were warned that the length of their absence was being observed by the telltale snap of Oberholser's watch case. Field men working for Oberholser were advised that nothing less than 10 specimens collected per day would be an acceptable production. In his professional contacts he gave the impression of having an intense curiosity about the activities and information known to others, but a reluctance to share his own wealth of knowledge. At other times, he seemed extremely generous in advising and assisting inexperienced students over the difficult points in their investigations. When he was in the mood to be helpful he would go to considerable lengths to make his extensive knowledge available.

Oberholser was a member of 40 scientific and conservation societies throughout the world, and this greatly enhanced the acquisition of publications for his extensive private library, which he eventually sold to the University of Illinois. Most ornithologists knew him as a tall, gangling figure with a fantastic memory for geographical variation and a marked propensity for taxonomic splitting. These characteristics resulted in his naming 11 new families and subfamilies, 99 genera and subgenera, and 560 species and subspecies of birds from many parts of the world. Taxonomic and other ornithological matters are treated in almost 900 publications, including a state bird book, *Bird Life of Louisiana*. In addition, much more information on the taxonomy of North American birds acquired during his 93-year span is contained in a ponderous manuscript of more than 3 million words on Texas birds, now being cut, updated, and edited for publication by the University of Texas Press.

Of a number of interesting facets of Oberholser's character, many of his professional associates were unaware. He had a keen interest in baseball and for years he never missed an opening game of the Washington "Senators" if he could help it, although he never went to games on Sunday. On matters of personal economy, he would go to great lengths to perfect his knowledge and ability. This characteristic caused him to train himself to become an expert in diamonds when it became necessary to select an engagement ring for his intended wife. He also had a great interest in politics and in watching the stock market. Strict personal discipline, thriftiness, perserverance, and attention to details were among his characteristics. He worked steadily and for long hours, including holidays and weekends, in the National Museum on his ornithological investigations. He enjoyed telling his close associates how he conquered a squeaky voice by spending one entire vacation period in a secluded spot where he practiced speaking steadily for eight hours a day for an entire month.

Harry Oberholser was born in Brooklyn, New York, June 25, 1870, the son of Jacob and Lavera Oberholser. He was of Swiss and French-German-English extraction. He entered Columbia University but he had to leave at the age of 20 because of bad health. He then went to work in his father's dry goods store in Wooster, Ohio, where he stayed for four years until his appointment to a government post in 1895. During that period he obtained information for his first ornithological paper, "A preliminary list of the birds of Wayne County, Ohio," which appeared in the *Bulletin Ohio Agricultural Experiment Station* in 1896. Later while working for the government, he completed his education at George Washington University where he received the Ph.D. degree in 1916.

On June 30, 1914, Harry Oberholser married Mary Forrest Smith who survives him. Harry taught the largest Sunday school class in Washington, all girls, at the Washington Metropolitan Memorial Methodist-Episcopal Church. For this occasion he always wore a formal cutaway coat and striped trousers. He also enjoyed and participated in dramatics and group singing. He and Mrs. Oberholser enjoyed frequent trips to Charleston, South Carolina, where Harry sang with a choral organization that specialized in folk songs.

Oberholser joined T. S. Palmer and Wells W. Cooke in conducting bird classes, including 200 students in one year, for the Audubon Society of the District of Columbia, which made him an honorary vice-president in 1907. He was active in this organization during the remainder of his stay in Washington and continued with equally active interest in the Cleveland Audubon Society after moving to that city. At a meeting of the latter society he attended during the last year of his life he was given a special citation for his achievements in conservation and ornithology.

Oberholser's professional career began on February 1, 1895, when he was appointed Ornithological Clerk in the Division of Economic Ornithology in the U. S. Department of Agriculture. This Division subsequently became the Bureau of Biological Survey and later the Fish and Wildlife Service which was transferred to the Department of the Interior. On June 30, 1941, Dr. Oberholser retired from government service as Senior Biologist after a presidential order extended his services one year beyond maximum retirement age of 70 to complete the monumental work on Texas birds.

During his 46 years of government service, Oberholser functioned primarily as an expert in the identification of birds. This service included subspecific determination of literally thousands of specimens sent to the Bureau by private collectors and institutions. The natural history museums of America have benefited greatly from his critical identification of specimens, as evidenced by the frequent appearance of the familiar "HCO"

pencilled after names on specimen labels. One of his responsibilities was the identification of carcasses and fragments of feathers or bones of birds held as evidence of violations of federal laws. As a result of this, he appeared in court many times as an expert witness.

It was largely at his instigation that operation of the North American bird banding program was taken over by the Bureau of Biological Survey from the American Bird Banding Association in 1920. Beginning in 1928, and for years afterward, he was responsible for organizing the national "waterfowl census" on which the Bureau's management of these species was based and which has been continued to the present time under the name of "winter waterfowl survey." He also supervised the continuation of the extensive program of carding and mapping published and unpublished records of distribution of North American birds started by Wells W. Cooke on which bird ranges in the AOU Check-list have been based. During his career he was able to find time in addition to his government work to serve as professor of zoology at the Biltmore Forest summer school in North Carolina from 1904 to 1910 and as professor of zoology at the American University graduate school, Washington, D. C., from 1920 to 1935.

Oberholser collected birds and mammals at Roan Mountain, Tennessee, coastal Virginia, and a number of localities in Nevada between 1895 and 1898. His lifelong work on the birds of Texas began in 1900 when he set out to explore the state with Vernon Bailey, mammalogist of the Biological Survey, and the famous bird artist, Louis Agassiz Fuertes. These explorations, which continued until 1903, were chiefly by foot, horseback, or mule team. An incident Oberholser loved to relate was when Bailey and he rescued the impetuous Fuertes with a rope from a cliff ledge where the artist had become stranded after retrieving a zone-tailed hawk he had shot. After his Texas adventures, a chronic digestive ailment prevented Oberholser from any further strenuous field work, although he took pride in having observed birds in every state and province in the United States and Canada. He conducted brief field investigations, chiefly on waterfowl, in Minnesota, Iowa, Virginia, and New Jersey between 1917 and 1926.

After retirement from government service, Oberholser spent the next six years as curator of ornithology at the Cleveland Museum of Natural History (Ohio). Final retirement from regular employment came in 1947, but until his death he continued, with the same dogged persistence that had characterized his entire life, to try to keep information on Texas birds in his manuscript up to date.

Although a student of bird classification and nomenclature in general, Dr. Oberholser's chief contribution to ornithology was his painstaking description of morphological differences between geographical populations. Many of the differences that he described and considered as bases for new

subspecies were very slight and resulted in ridicule by his colleagues. Nevertheless, I have found that with adequate comparative material and careful study, the differences he described can usually be discerned. The fault, if any, was not one of fact, but of attempting to use the stereotyped system of Linnaean nomenclature in classifying the differences. The recent tendency of American ornithologists has been to ignore such minor differences, but to an increasing number of population systematists interested in the dynamics of evolution, these stepping-stones of speciation are significant. I believe the time will come when a practical and generally accepted system of nomenclature will be devised to fit all populations representative of differing stages of speciation. On that happy day the fine distinctions indicated by "HCO" on specimen labels will have new significance.

Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife, Fish and Wildlife Service, U. S. Department of the Interior.