

FRANK STEPHENS—AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

WITH PHOTO

THE EDITOR of THE CONDOR is planning to publish a series of autobiographies of the older ornithologists of the west. He insists that I initiate the series, and promises to get others to follow. I do not like the task, but as I see some justice in his argument that I begin the series, I will "do my bit".

I was born in a log house on a farm in Livingston County, New York, April 2, 1849. As a small boy I attended a country school pretty regularly until

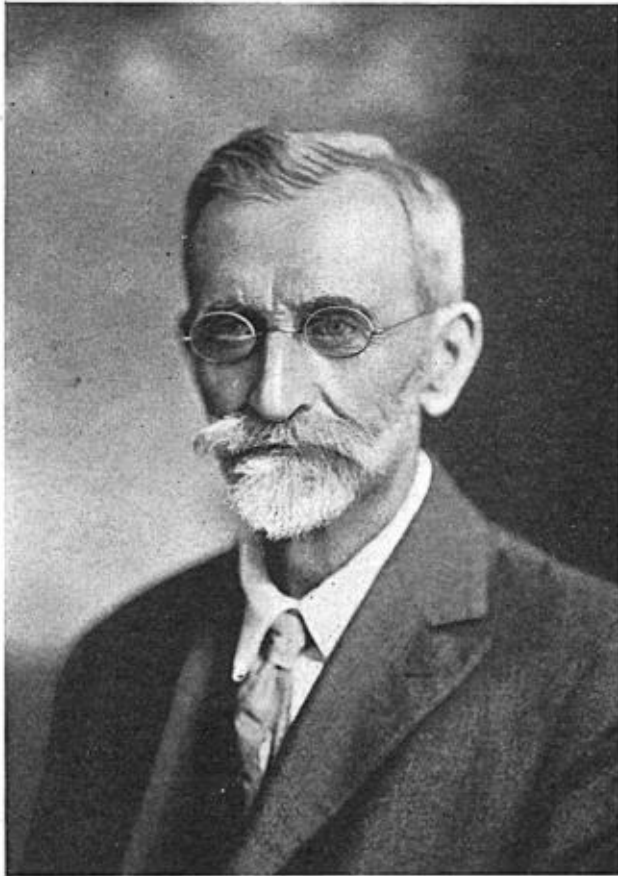


Fig. 33. FRANK STEPHENS.

thirteen years old, when the family moved to Michigan. After this time my school days were few. I never attended other than country schools and not even these after I was sixteen years old. Among my boyhood recollections those pertaining to the Civil War then in progress are prominent. The drain of men to supply the army was so great that every one's help was needed, so that by the time I was fifteen years old I was taking a man's place in the fields to the extent that I was able. I remember following the reaper in the wheat field when the binding crew consisted of two of us "men" and four young women.

After the end of the war the next year laborers were still scarce and I did my part to help support the family.

I was fond of reading, and having a leaning toward natural history I eagerly read everything in that line I could find. Living far from libraries I did not see many books on natural history subjects. I remember reading a set of Mayne Reid's books, including the "Cliff Climbers", etc.

Some years later the family moved to Illinois, and there at the age of twenty-two I had the opportunity to take lessons in taxidermy—"stuffing" birds. It really was stuffing them, too. I was never satisfied with the results. I think my preference was for botanical work, but I had no opportunity to get started in it. At the age of twenty-four I married and moved to Kansas and a few months later started on west with a pair of little mules and a spring wagon. We wintered at Colorado Springs where I became acquainted with Mr. Charles E. Aiken, then a well known ornithologist. He showed me how to make bird skins and agreed to purchase ornithological material to be taken in New Mexico and Arizona. Mrs. Stephens and I left Colorado Springs in March, 1875, driving by way of Santa Fe and Albuquerque to the neighborhood of Silver City, then a new mining camp, in southwestern New Mexico, where we stayed a year, doing more or less bird collecting.

In the summer of 1876 the Apaches were troublesome, with prospects of worse times ahead, and as we were living on an exposed mountain ranch, we decided that we had better get out. The Indians had stolen the horses I had traded my mules for, but I bought a yoke of oxen and started on for California. We were fortunately not molested on the way, but settlers were killed ahead of us and after we passed. We reached Tres Alamos, Arizona, in September, and stopped there a month, as this place was practically out of the Apaches range at the time. Passing through Tucson and the Maricopa Indian village we reached Yuma, November 24, crossing into California that afternoon. At that time Yuma was a comparatively busy place. There was not a mile of railroad then in Arizona or New Mexico, and the mails were carried on six-horse stages passing Yuma each way every four days. Freight came by ocean steamer to the mouth of the Colorado River, thence by river steamer to Yuma, where it was transferred to freight wagons to be delivered to the various government posts and mining camps.

Ever since the Civil War we had used greenbacks for money, coin being at a large premium. I did not know that California was on a specie basis and got a jolt when we crossed the Colorado at Hall Hanlon's ferry, seven miles below Yuma. Our ferriage bill was four dollars and I handed Hanlon a ten dollar greenback. He handed me back a silver dollar, the first one I had handled for years. I said: "You have made a mistake, I gave you a ten dollar bill". He said: "This is California and greenbacks are worth only fifty cents on the dollar here".

We had a hard time crossing the Colorado Desert, and when we reached Campo the oak timber and the valleys looked so good in comparison with the country we had just come through that we made a permanent camp. I continued collecting birds for Mr. Aiken for several months. The next summer we came to San Diego and in the fall went on to Riverside, where I farmed one year, and the next year to Wilmington, doing a little collecting now and then. News of mining activities at Tombstone, Arizona, lured us back to that region in 1880. The spring of 1881 I collected birds in southeastern Arizona for William Brewster and came back to California that summer, locating at San Ber-

nardino. In 1884 we spent five months in southeastern Arizona again, collecting birds, including a trip across Sonora to the Gulf of California.

In 1887 we moved to the mountains east of San Diego, the nearest post office being known as Ballena. In 1889 a new post office was established at Santa Ysabel which was more convenient for me. In 1892 a post office, called Witch Creek, was established on the farm next mine. Skins made by me from birds taken in the neighborhood of my home were labeled by these different locality names accordingly.

In 1891 I accompanied the Death Valley Expedition as one of the collectors, and for several years I did intermittent work for the Biological Survey. In the fall of 1897 I moved to San Diego, where my home has since been. In January, 1898, my first wife died and the following August I married Miss Kate Brown. No children were the offspring of either marriage.

Up to 1885 I had worked exclusively on birds, but that year, at Dr. Merriam's suggestion, I added mammals, and since that date I have perhaps spent more time on mammals than on birds. I began to feel the need of a book on California mammals, and, as no one else cared to undertake it, in 1893 I decided to try to publish an account of the mammals of California, though I did not feel well equipped for the job. I engaged W. J. Fenn to make some drawings for illustrations and began getting together what data I could. In March, 1906, I arranged with the Southern California Printing Company of Los Angeles to print and bind 1000 copies of "California Mammals". They had just begun work on it when the San Francisco earthquake occurred. The fire destroyed the printing establishments of San Francisco, with the result that a large amount of printing orders was transferred to Los Angeles. In a few days the printers wrote me that I had better come there and help. I found them crowded with work and my job had to be linotyped and printed a form at a time, as it could be worked in. I had no experience as a proof reader but had to do it, and a poor job I made of it. It took us two months to finish the job. I may as well say here for the benefit of others that publishing books of this class does not pay. My receipts on account of "California Mammals" are now over twelve hundred dollars behind the expenses incurred. If I had let established publishers publish the book on the best terms offered I would have been much worse off.

Perhaps some persons have wondered at the cover title "West Coast Nature Series". My friend W. G. Wright had just published "West Coast Butterflies", and we were considering trying to get out a series of nature books covering other classes and this was in furtherance of some such plan. Most of the edition of "West Coast Butterflies" was burned in the San Francisco fire, and this loss, with the failure of my book to pay expenses broke up the scheme.

In the spring of 1907 Mrs. Stephens and I formed part of Miss Alexander's party in Alaska. This work was in a very different region from that which I was accustomed to, and we found it very interesting. We returned home in October. In the spring of 1910 I accompanied Dr. Grinnell on the Colorado River expedition of the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology. Since then I have not done much field work, leaving that for younger men, though I chafe sometimes at being tied to indoor work and often plan to get out again. I haven't given up the hope of doing more field work. Although I am in my seventieth year I am in good health and able to do a lot of hard work yet.

FRANK STEPHENS.

San Diego, California, May 26, 1918.