NOTES ON THE XANTUS TRADITION

WITH THREE ILLUSTRATIONS

By HARRY HARRIS

To the present school of historians who are cultivating so assiduously and with such fruitful results the fertile field of southwestern history, the activities of John Xantus in California and Mexico during the late fifties and early sixties seem to be but little known, or at least until quite recently they have been the source of but casual interest. This may be the result of the historical scholar's congenital distaste for natural history, in which field Xantus' American reputation is known to have been won, or it may be attributed to the superlative rarity of the two Hungarian books containing the only published account of his American experiences. The fact that these scarce books are printed in the most difficult of all European languages, and that efforts have only recently been made to render parts of them into English, may further account for the almost mythical nature of the Xantus tradition on this side of the Atlantic.

The man, however, is well known to American ornithologists as an important contributor to the development of their science on the west coast, and specialists in other branches of zoological science have had occasion at one time or another to scrutinize closely the Xantus itinerary in connection with new or little known material collected by him. The archives of the United States National Museum contain a wealth of manuscript material in evidence of his character as an educated gentleman and of his attainments and zeal as a votary of natural history in general and of ornithology and botany in particular. There is additional manuscript matter in the Bancroft Library in Berkeley which sheds some light on his relations with the well-known California naturalist Andrew J. Grayson. In view of the fact that the importance of Xantus as a minor historical figure awaits recognition, and that his two Hungarian books cannot fail ultimately to prove of great interest to local historians and ethnologists, it seems not malapropos at this time to place on record at least a sketch of his American adventuring.

Louis John Xantus de Vesey was born of a noble family in Csokonya, Hungary, October 25, 1825; and he died in Budapest on December 13, 1894, in his seventieth year. His is an honored name in his native country to which he did not fail to contribute some luster, and while it will be perpetuated in the annals of Hungary as typifying patriotism, scholarship, and scientific attainment, he made himself most widely known as a great wanderer in frontier America, and his fame at home rests chiefly on his giving to his native literature its first intimate knowledge of the two Californias.

He was educated at the Polytechnical School in Vienna, where he was grounded in the natural sciences and civil engineering that later during the years of his enforced exile in America opened the way to his profitable and congenial relationship with the Smithsonian Institution, as well as to the most welcome opportunity of exploring, and amassing huge natural history collections in virgin fields. After his graduation he entered at once on the customary European military service, receiving a commission in the Royal Austrian Artillery, and soon thereafter he threw himself wholeheartedly into the rebellion of 1848-49 in support of his beloved Hungary. At the termination of the war, so disastrous to the hopes of Hungarian patriots, the leader Kossuth and those of his followers who were fortunate enough to escape the imperial wrath of Austria fled to sanctuary in foreign countries. John Xantus was among

the rebel officers who by their prompt flight saved themselves certain execution, and with a group of these refugees he made his way through England to America where he landed early in 1851. In an official letter to Washington dated at Fort Tejon, California, November 16, 1857, he throws some light on this early period of his American peregrinations. He says:

> When in 1848 the unfortunate war broke out against Hungary, I resigned my commission, but it was not accepted. I left my garrison notwithstanding and offered my services to the Hungarian Secretary of War, who accepted readily and entrusted me with an important mission. The Austrian Government ordered the sequestration of my property... . But I think I did my duty, and never cared much about material hopes... . I came to this country amongst the first of my countrymen, and in advance of Kossuth, and by order of President Fillmore I received a grant of land in Iowa, as [did] the others of my fellow refugees. But actually I never took possession of it, but being a good piano player, and a tolerable draughtsman, I procured an honorable support by teaching for a short time; when I went successively with the Prince of Wurtemburg, Dr. Wagner and Sherzer, and Dr. Kreyer as collector. At last I fitted out of my hard earnings an expedition into North Minnesota, which failed so entirely, that in a moment of utmost despair, and under circumstances completely beyond my control . . . I was forced to enter the American army.

This letter contains the only accessible information bearing on the earliest period of his career in America, and is the only known reference to the Minnesota expedition. Details of events subsequent to this time and prior to the enlistment referred to, which is believed to have been in 1855 shortly before he entered into correspondence with Prof. Baird, may be drawn from the volume of published letters already mentioned. This book, of which there are but three known copies on the Pacific coast (in the private libraries of Henry Raupp Wagner, Robert E. Cowan, and W. Lee Chambers), was published in Budapest in 1858 under the title (translated):

> Letters of John Xantus from North America. With twelve lithographs made from original drawings and with a few woodcuts. Edited by Stephen Prepost. Budapest, Lauffer and Stolp, Publishers and Booksellers. [The title-page is undated, though on those copies that have the printed cover title the date 1858 appears.]

The letters, 37 in number, are addressed to members of his immediate family, chiefly to his mother, and are dated from various points extending from New Orleans and the Gulf to Iowa, and from the Indian infested frontier on the great plains to New York City, and the collection ends with four letters from California. The period covered is from December 1, 1852, to July 5, 1857. They constitute an intimate and lively running account of daily routine, itinerary, comments on flora and fauna, and voluminous ethnological notes. While an abounding enthusiasm for natural history, as well as for everything connected with Indian life, is often enough indicated, his more intimate experiences with rare birds and other animals known to have been collected by him are almost entirely lacking. He mentions more than once his serious intention of publishing in New York or Philadelphia a treatise on the plains Indians, and indeed his careful accumulation of material to this end warranted such an undertaking, though nothing came of it.

The only letter of this collection that has thus far been translated has recently been published in the Quarterly of the Southern California Historical Society, and its extreme interest has led the writer to strenuous effort to ascertain the contents of all the others in the volume. To the generous courtesy and scholarship of Dr. Josephine von Karman, a cultured Hungarian lady now resident in Pasadena, we

are greatly indebted for the translation which has furnished most of the matter for the following brief account. It may be said parenthetically at this point that the printing of the correspondence in this form was so displeasing to Xantus that he went to the length of explaining the matter in the preface of his second book, the *Utazas*, published in 1860. Thus he says:

> A few months ago a book was published by the firm of Lauffer and Stolp of Pest titled "The Letters of John Xantus from North America." The greater part of it, i.e. the letters, were not meant for the general public. I did acceed to the publication of these letters under certain conditions, but these conditions were not properly complied with... . The publishers, not knowing my set conditions for the publication of the first work, bought the manuscript and published it in all good faith. A later agreement with me gave them full publishers' rights.

The matter after all may have had more of a financial significance than any other.

Late in 1852 Xantus had joined a party of privately employed engineers engaged in a preliminary survey for a railroad route contemplated to extend from St. Louis, Missouri, to the Pacific Coast in California. Work was begun about 150 miles west of the Missouri line and continued on to some point in the wilderness of western Nebraska, when severe winter conditions and a shortage of supplies made it necessary for a relief party to be sent ahead to Fort Laramie. Acting in the capacity of topographer-draughtsman, in charge of the commissary and of hunting operations, he was given command of this party of thirty or more men. A somewhat confused and quite puzzling account of his difficulties in reaching the Fort seems to indicate that he had continued on to Oregon and Fort Vancouver, but this reflects merely a hazy knowledge of western distances and geography which led him to see in the shorter journey all the far western landmarks he had doubtless heard much about.

In his last communication from Fort Laramie, dated January 4, 1853, he states that the plans of the railroad company had undergone a radical change and that the surveying party to which he was attached had been given another objective. They were ordered to travel south and then southeast "through territory not before explored by white men and to reach Fort Washita, on the Red River of Texas, in about a month, from which point the road to Salt Lake was to be surveyed." The journey was evidently accomplished on schedule, though the company's plans undergoing still further changes the party was directed to report to New Orleans and await orders. His casual reference further along in the correspondence to his having been in New Mexico and Utah cannot refer to this period of his travels, nor can the dates of such a visit be placed by any known writing by or about Xantus.

While marking time in the southern city he gave serious and thoughtful consideration to an offer made him at the time of his arrival there to join an extensive scientific exploration of Central and South America and the Pacific coast under the joint auspices of the British Museum, the Paris Academy, and the New York Natural History Society. Twenty countries were to be explored and surveyed, and this was considered by him to be a wonderful opportunity to assemble large and representative collections for the National Museum in Budapest. The future of the railroad project intriguing him for the moment as offering better prospects, he accepted instead the position of draughtsman in the St. Louis office of the company, and about the middle of May boarded the Mississippi River steamboat *St. Nicholas* to report for duty in the Missouri metropolis. Unfortunately the *St. Nicholas* was destined to be the loser in one of those traditional tests of speed so common between rival steamboats on the Mississippi during that glamorous period, and shortly after leaving Natchez the boilers of the *St. Nicholas* proved less equal to the extra strain

than those of the *General Scott*, the result being, according to a literal translation of Xantus, that the boat he was on "fell into the river." Fortunate enough to escape serious injury he was able to swim the wide stream to the opposite shore where he spent the night in a tree. Making his way on foot next morning to Natchez where

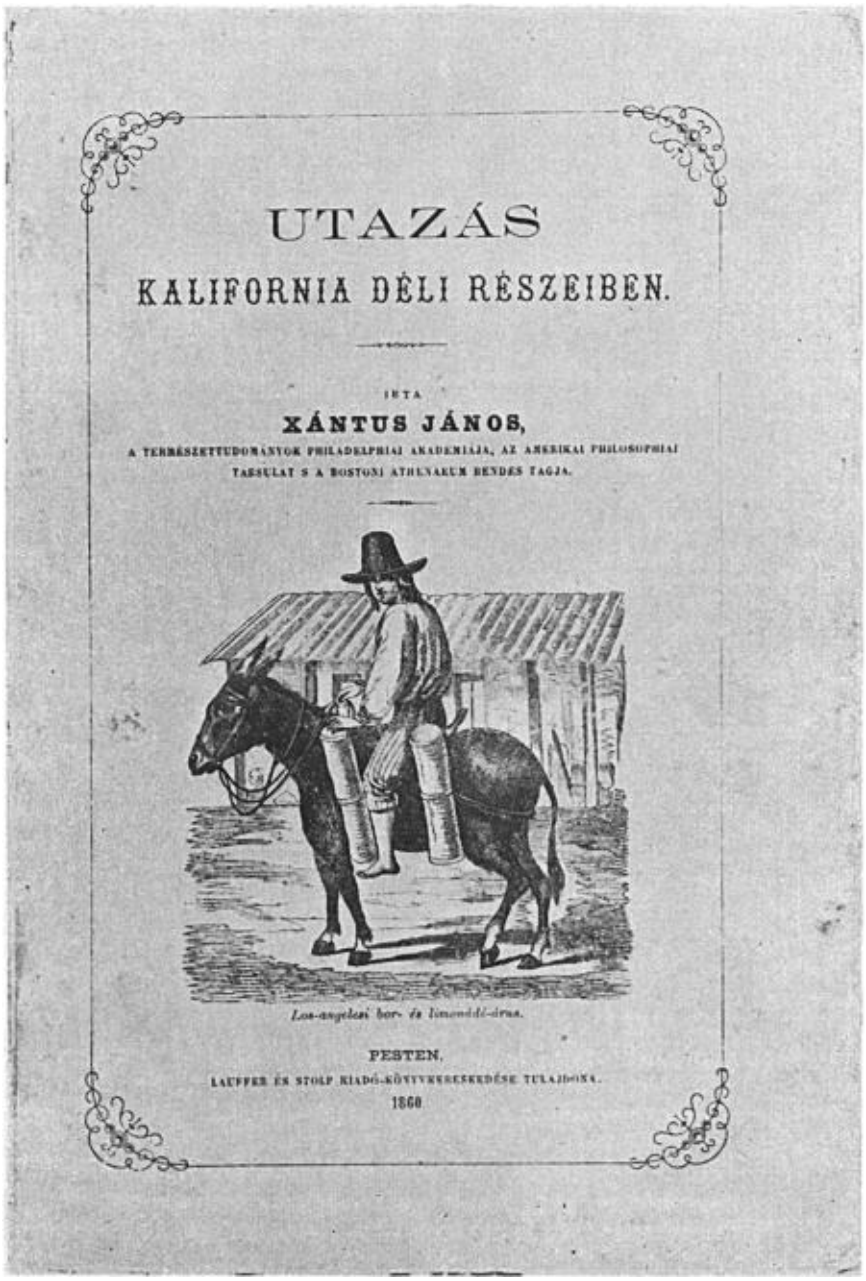

Fig. 34. Cover title of Xantus' "Travel."

he quickly recovered from his bruises, he returned to New Orleans only to fall a victim of yellow fever from which in time he entirely recovered.

At this point, during the summer of 1853, occurs one of the gaps in the narrative. He mentions accepting a professorship in the Louisiana State University after being dissuaded by influential friends from again embarking for St. Louis. He looked forward with satisfaction and great pleasure to settling down to the quiet routine of a teacher of languages, not the least advantage of which was to be nine hundred dollars a year with room and board. However, this pleasant prospect soon gave way to the rosy dream of developing a full section of Texas land into a sort of model estate to be patterned after the most approved Hungarian standards, and he invited his family to join him as quickly as possible. This project in its turn also was abandoned, and a plan to enter some line of mercantile business in New Orleans following the great fire of February 4, 1854, was likewise given up owing chiefly to an epidemic of malaria.

During the spring of 1854 he lived for a time, probably not more than a few weeks, with the lighthouse keeper on one of the smaller islands of the Chandeleur Group in the Gulf of Mexico. Here he collected birds daily "between the hours of 3 and 8 A.M." He had doubtless been led to this insular collecting ground through shooting and observing birds on the mainland coast some 92 miles northeast, as repeated reference is made to visits in the region of Biloxi, Mississippi. The destination of the birds collected during this period is not disclosed, though they were probably sent to Europe, since there is no evidence that he had yet entered into correspondence with either the Smithsonian Institution or the Philadelphia Academy.

On his return to New Orleans from the island early in the summer he decided suddenly on a visit to the Hungarian settlements in south-central Iowa where, in the neighborhood of Decatur, many of his fellow exiles had accepted grants of land from the Government. No incidents of the voyage up the Mississippi to St. Louis are recounted; but at that point, instead of continuing on by boat to Burlington, Iowa, as contemplated, his impatience resolved him to buy a horse and proceed directly overland "straight through the prairies." It may be inferred that this decision was reached through a desire to resume under favorable and widely different conditions his recently interrupted collecting of birds. While there is no specific reference to substantiate this inference, a full account of his adventures includes mention of the excellent hunting in several regions traversed.

After spending several months in the congenial company of his many Hungarian friends scattered throughout southern Iowa, during which time his financial reserve was reaching a low level, he expressed the hope that his work of surveying the boundaries of Kansas would start "next month," that is, in December, 1854. This was evidently the time of his decision to seek employment in one of the several Government surveys then in the field, though in no place throughout his entire correspondence does he confide to his people that he was forced to the expediency of enlistment in the United States army. At this point there follows a gap of about four months in his letters, and it is known from Prof. Baird's memorandum, cited in full later, that some time during 1855 he entered the Medical Department of the army. To whatever branch of the service he may have been assigned under the terms of his enlistment, it is clear enough from his extensive and minutely detailed account of this period that he was constantly in the field on both the west and south frontiers of Kansas Territory, engaged exclusively on boundary survey work. Often he was detached from his regular routine as a map draughtsman and given command of exploring parties sent out in search of headwaters, or to examine and map the

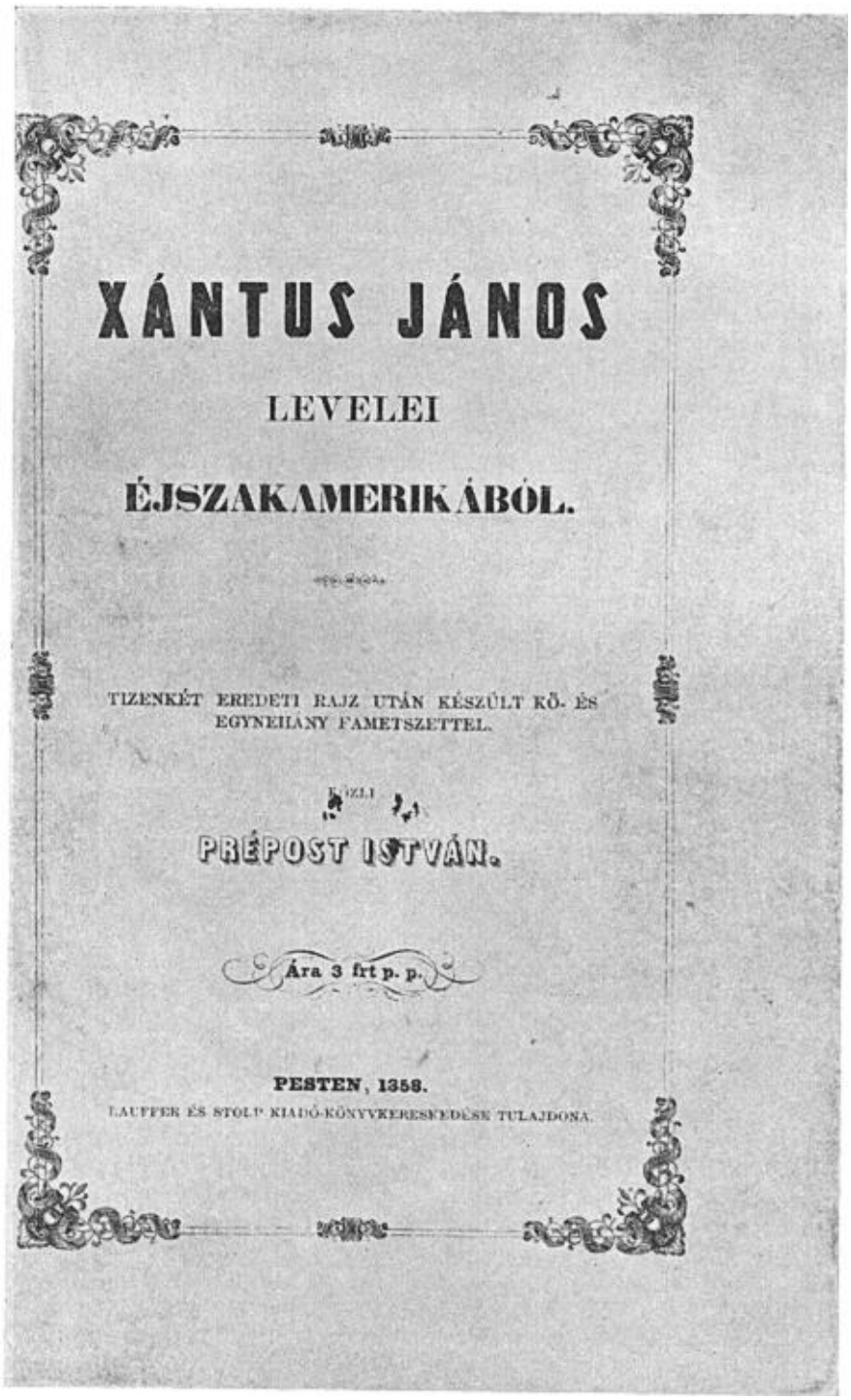

Fig. 35. Title page of Xantus' "Letters."

topography of unknown terrain. During these welcome diversions he was as constantly alert for new and rare zoological and botanical material as he was for hostile Indians.

Responsibilities entrusted to him during the two years of this survey, as well as at other times on the west coast and later in Washington, indicate his possession of superior resourcefulness and other estimable qualities. It was early in this period, in the summer of 1855, that Prof. Baird first learned of the matchless skill and diligence of Xantus as a collector of natural history specimens, and there followed a correspondence between the two that lasted at least six years and perhaps longer. Encouraged and stimulated by this contact, Xantus made full use of his opportunity to assemble great quantities of miscellaneous scientific collections for the National Museum. In one instance during the summer of 1856, while on a distant and dangerous reconnoissance which took him as far south as the Wichita Mountains in what is now southwestern Oklahoma, he mentions having all the empty wagons filled with the collections which were to be forwarded to Washington.

At the first opportunity on his return to the Fort Riley headquarters early in the fall he compiled for his mother in great detail a voluminous résumé of this exploration. The report reflects an intimate and sound knowledge of all branches of zoology, botany, and ethnology, and besides it constitutes an historical document of great interest and value.

Early in the spring of 1857, after nearly two years spent in the wilderness, Xantus had completed his work on the survey and on March 9 he boarded the Missouri River steamboat *Admiral* at Fort Leavenworth on the initial leg of his journey to Washington, D. C. By this time his reputation in several fields of activity was well established, and, choosing to continue in the service, he was offered in Washington his choice of joining the topographical staff then operating in Oregon, or of being assigned to one of the survey groups at that time being organized for field duty in both California and on the Mexican boundary line. Electing to join one of the California parties, one of the deciding factors in which choice being his expressed desire to marry and settle down in that distant and favored region, he proceeded to take what advantage he could of the two weeks remaining before the time set for sailing from New York. He found time to attend a meeting of the Philadelphia Academy of Natural Sciences in order personally to acknowledge his election to membership, and he was at this time further honored by election to membership in the American Philosophical Society and in several other learned bodies. He was presented to President Buchanan, with whom he was privileged to discuss the problems and needs of Hungarian immigrants in America, with the happy result that the President committed himself to certain promises in the matter.

We learn further from his Washington letters that he was affectionately and perhaps significantly referred to by his many friends as Uncle John, and it can well be imagined that Uncle John was a congenial and much esteemed personality. He mentions having a lot of fun in Washington, though he omits mention of his personal contacts with Professor Baird and others of the Smithsonian staff with whom he was constantly in communication while in the field.

Sailing on the *Illinois* from New York on April 6, 1857, the Government party of about 200 men reached San Francisco, *via* the Isthmus and the Pacific steamer *Golden Gate*, on April 30. Five days later, Uncle John received a six weeks leave of absence which he characteristically used by striking off immediately into the wilds of Oregon on a solitary hunting and exploring expedition, returning overland on muleback. The letter containing the interesting account of this trip is the one

recently published in full by the Southern California Historical Society in the current issue of its Quarterly. It is hoped that enough interest may be aroused in Xantus as a result of this publication to warrant printing other letters in the collection.

Of the 185 men of the surveys assembled finally at Los Angeles, 50 were assigned to locate boundaries in the Mesilla Valley and the Gadsden Territory purchased

Fig. 36. John Xantus de Vesey; born 1825, died 1894. This portrait, from the files of the Smithsonian Institution, was taken about the time of the Civil War.

two years before from Mexico, 50 were to report at San Diego for the establishment of headquarters for the Mexican Boundary Survey, 71 remained in Los Angeles (then a pueblo of 500 inhabitants) to begin at the Ocean and work inland on township and section lines, while the balance proceeded with a large pack train to the Fort Tejon headquarters, there to establish the draughting and map construction bureau. Xantus states that he was chief of the sketching department of this bureau, with five draughtsmen under him, and it may be that he had charge of the topographical mapping. This is a far cry from the lowly duties of a hospital steward, which tradition has it was his work both in the middle-west and in California, and with which it is entirely impossible to reconcile his own clear statements. However, his official duties, whatever they were, never seemed to interfere in any way with the steady flow of collections forwarded by him to Washington.

The published letters end with his arrival at Fort Tejon in July, 1857, but his California narrative is carried forward in great detail in the "Utazas", published in Budapest in 1860. This book, titled "Travel in the Southern parts of California," has been translated under Professor Joseph Grinnell's direction by E. H. Yolland, and the manuscript, not yet published, is now in the Bancroft Library. While it is valuable chiefly from the standpoint of history and ethnology, it contains as well some natural history, though space cannot be spared here for an abstract of this matter. Suffice it to say that a close reading of the translation fails to reveal a single reference to the great Condor (*Gymnogyps californianus*) that must have been almost constantly in sight around Fort Tejon while Xantus was making his famous collection of birds there. In one of his Philadelphia Academy papers he does make a more or less indirect reference where he states in volume XI of the Proceedings, on page 189: "Many additional species of raptores and water birds were seen but could not be obtained, and though many of these were readily recognized, I have not felt at liberty to mention them in the list, which consists entirely of species actually collected within a few miles of the Post, and now in the Museum of the Smithsonian Institution."

During his residence of nearly two years at Fort Tejon, Xantus not only furnished a wealth of material on which important findings were based by many eastern systematists, some of whom did not overlook to commemorate his name in the nomenclature, but he described three new birds and at least one new plant himself from this point. The association of his name with the original descriptions of *Syrnium occidentale* Xantus [= *Strix occidentalis occidentalis* (Xantus)], *Tyrannula hammondii* De Vesey [= *Empidonax hammondii* (Xantus)], and *Vireo cassinii* De Vesey [= *Vireo solitarius cassinii* Xantus], published in the Proceedings of the Philadelphia Academy for 1858 and 1859, is well known, and his later gifts to science in the same publication of four new birds from Cape San Lucas are equally familiar to students. His botanical descriptions, however, do not seem to be so widely known. He records in the *Utazas* that in 1858 there was published in Philadelphia over his name a "Botanical Memoir of Southern California," and he makes a passing reference to *Salix cascarilla* Xantus. The present writer has been unable to trace this title, and nothing whatever other than this slight reference can be given in this place.

Having attracted favorable attention in Washington and elsewhere to his versatile scientific qualifications, Xantus was transferred from Fort Tejon early in 1859 and given a responsible assignment in Lower California with the United States Coast Survey. Professor Baird has given in an undated memorandum to the President of the Hungarian Academy of Science an admirable summation of

Xantus' relations with the Government during this and subsequent periods, which, though there are slight repetitions, is worth transcribing here in full. Professor Baird says:

Our relationship with Mr. Xantus commenced in 1855 when he was in the employ of the Medical Department of the United States at Fort Riley, a military post in the interior of Kansas. By this Department he was transferred in the spring of 1857 to Fort Tejon in California,... where he remained until the end of 1858. At this time the United States Coast Survey, desirous of establishing a tidal station at Cape St. Lucas, and of placing it in charge of a man of scientific training, was induced, through the efforts of this Institution, to offer the position to Mr. Xantus, who accepted it and proceeded to his post of duty early in 1859. Here he remained until the summer of 1861, in the meanwhile visiting and exploring the lower part of the peninsula of Lower California, the adjacent islands in the Gulf, Tres Marias Islands, Mazatlan, etc., when the tidal series being completed he sailed for San Francisco. In October of 1861 he visited Hungary, and coming back in 1862, was immediately assigned by the Surgeon General of the United States to a responsible position in his office. Recently, at the earnest solicitation of men of science in this city, he has been appointed United States Consul at Manzanillo, in western Mexico, to which place he will proceed in a few days.

During the period of time from 1855 to 1861, this Institution has been in constant, at least monthly correspondence with Mr. Xantus, receiving all the collections made by him... . A reference to the annual reports of this Institution since the date mentioned will show the estimation in which the results of his labors have been held. It will be sufficient to say here that his collections are believed to have been much larger and more complete than any ever made before in America during the same period of time by any one person. No department of Natural History appears to have been neglected by him, and the scientific journals of the United States bear constant reference (and will for some time to come) to materials gathered by him and entrusted by the Smithsonian Institution to various naturalists for elaboration. The total number of boxes of specimens received from him at the two points alone of Fort Tejon and Cape St. Lucas amounts to 120, and his catalogue of objects collected to about 10,000. When it is remembered that in general only birds and mammals were numbered separately, a bale of plants, a box of shells or insects, a jar of fishes, reptiles, crustaceans, etc., each bearing but a single number, the enormous aggregate of specimens gathered may readily be imagined.

To the above memorandum the late Dr. Chas. W. Richmond shortly before his death added the following note:

In the National Museum are eight field registers or catalogues of specimens covering Xantus' activities in Cape St. Lucas and general vicinity from April 20, 1859, to December, 1860, amounting in all to 6,033 entries. There are also four field registers relating to his collections made in western Mexico from January, 1863, to February, 1864, numbering about 3,000 entries. The registers from Fort Tejon, California, are missing.

In the National Museum Library is a bound volume of letters from Xantus, numbering at least 600 pages, dated from February 1, 1857 (Fort Riley, Kansas) to June 3, 1864 (New York).

The high value of Xantus' many years of gratuitous and constantly faithful service to vertebrate science, which even a mere recital of the above brief memoranda so graphically subscribes to, cannot be overestimated. His prolific pioneering enriched the opportunities of such broadly visioned technicians as Baird, Cassin, Lawrence, and a host of others, for a better organized understanding of the entire biota of regions then but little known. When it is remembered that his almost unparalleled activity in the field was only incidental to a more or less full routine of other interests, it is obvious that Professor Baird's succinct memorandum can be interpreted as little less than a veritable tribute to an esteemed and respected subordinate. Xantus

can of course never be entirely forgotten, but a republication in English of his own writings, of which the present paper is the briefest possible abstract, cannot fail to make better understood the real importance of his place in the early development of natural history in America.

The D. R. Dickey Memorial Library of Vertebrate Zoology, California Institute of Technology, March 21, 1934.

BIRD NOTES FROM SOUTHERN ARIZONA

By BERRY CAMPBELL

During the months of July and August, 1933, my wife and I made a general vertebrate collection in southern Arizona, mostly in the vicinity of Pena Blanca Spring, Santa Cruz County, but also in Miller Canyon, Huachuca Mountains, and near the town of Patagonia. Some specimens were taken as we traveled between these points, and a few were given to us by ranchers. The first of these localities is in the broken country to the west of the Santa Cruz Valley. It is about seven miles west of Nogales and three miles north of the international boundary, as the crow flies. The elevation is close to 4000 feet. Three canyons, two of which are rather small, empty into a large open wash. At this junction is situated Pena Blanca Spring. The water flow is small but constant and has been led into a tank, twenty by twenty by five feet, which serves as a reservoir for a cattle trough. There is a slight overflow the year around. Thus local animal life that needs it is insured a constant water-supply. A mile or so below the spring, the canyon again "boxes" up. On the United States War Department maps, the name of this spring and canyon is erroneously given as "Pino Blanco."

The Pena Blanca area is characterized chiefly as Upper Sonoran grassland. Only in the favorable localities such as in ravines and the larger canyons and on the north facing slope are brush and trees to be found. However, as the country is quite broken, these situations are common enough to make a fair stand of live oak, walnut, and sycamore possible. The latter species is particularly abundant in the neighboring Walker Canyon. The rainy season in this region lasts from early July to late September. At this time the grass grows knee deep where grazing is not too heavy.

Though at first glance the district looks to be Upper Sonoran, the following list of the more indicative birds seen or collected before July 15 shows some interesting paradoxes:

Cyrtonyx montezumae mearnsi Nelson
Columba fasciata fasciata Say
Coccyzus americanus occidentalis Ridgway
Tyto alba pratincola (Bonaparte)
Otus asio cineraceus (Ridgway)
Otus trichopsis (Wagler)
Micropallas whitneyi whitneyi (Cooper)
Cynanthus latirostris Swainson
Dryobates scalaris cactophilus Oberholser
Antrostomus vociferus arizonae Brewster
Phalaenoptilus nuttallii nuttallii (Audubon)
Tyrannus vociferans Swainson
Myiarchus tyrannulus magister Ridgway
Myiarchus cinerascens cinerascens (Lawrence)
Myiarchus tuberculifer olivascens Ridgway
Myiochanes richardsonii richardsonii (Swainson)
Pyrocephalus rubinus mexicanus Sclater
Tachycineta thalassina lepida Mearns
Sitta carolinensis nelsoni Mearns
Phainopepla nitens lepida Van Tyne
Dendroica nigrescens (Townsend)
Setophaga picta picta Swainson
Tangavius aeneus aeneus (Wagler)
Icterus parisorum Bonaparte