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William Gambel, M. D.

BY WITMER STONE

The history of American ornithology or of the men to whom it owes its development is always fraught with interest to those of us who continue to cultivate the same study and to follow in the footsteps of predecessors whose minds ran in the same channels, whose thoughts are now our thoughts, and whose enthusiasm arouses our sympathy.

This is my excuse for presenting some rather disconnected fragments relative to the life of one of our early ornithologists whose name is familiar in the nomenclature of several of our western birds, such as Gambel's Sparrow, Gambel's Quail, etc. William Gambel was a leader among the bird-men of his time and a pioneer in exploration west of the Mississippi. But he has left us no record of his life and I have been unable to find any relatives who might supply it. Indeed, I have found but two men who knew him personally. Consequently of his birth and family I can say nothing. He seems, however, to have been born somewhere in eastern Pennsylvania or southern New Jersey and to have early attracted the attention of Thomas Nuttall, who no doubt encountered him on some of his excursions in search of plants and birds and who encouraged and

guided him in the pursuits in which both were interested. Young Gambel was brought to the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia, and was probably employed there for a short time. When little more than twenty-one years of age he undertook a trip across the continent at the instance of Nuttall some three or four years after Townsend's return. He took a much more southerly route, exploring the Raton Mountains of northern New Mexico and passing thence from Santa Fé to the Colorado River, then in the wilds of Old Mexico, and through southern California, returning round the Horn in 1845, stopping, as Townsend had done, at Valparaiso. From California he sent to Nuttall descriptions of some of his ornithological discoveries, comprising Nuttall's Woodpecker, Mountain Chickadee, etc.

About August 15, 1845, Gambel and his specimens arrived in Philadelphia. Cassin, writing to Baird on this date, says: "Eureka! Gambel is here with his California birds and others—not very many, but some of the most magnificent specimens I ever saw. He has four new species in addition to those already described: a queer little *Parus crested*, but totally distinct from *bicolor*; another which he calls *Parus* but is hardly of that genus—more like *Setophaga*; an extraordinarily large, long-billed bird which he calls *Promerops*; a new *Mergulus*, like *Alle*, but entirely distinct, with others that need examining. He has also most beautiful specimens of well-known birds, and others not so well known, as *Sitta pygmaea*, *Tyrannula saya*, *T. nigrescens*, *Sialia occidentalis*, etc. Decidedly the gem of his collection is a most superb specimen of *Leptostoma longicauda* Sw., a beautiful cuckoo-like bird which walks on the ground, but I have not time really to tell you about it. His *Lophortyx gambelii* Nutt. is splendid, and I can find no description of it in books to which I have access. His description of four new species will be made next Tuesday evening.

"Unfortunately he has made it an object merely to make one good series, which I shall try hard to get the Academy to buy. Of many birds he has but one specimen, though of several species he has duplicates—of *Sitta pygmaea* and *Parus minimus*—he and I have done little else for two afternoons and evenings

but examine these specimens—last evening till 12 o'clock—and I am now going to meet him again.”

Later he writes:

“Gambel is exceedingly wild about describing, and it is already very difficult to get him to examine birds that he has concluded are new—concluded, I mean in the woods of California without books—with scarcely knowing the names of late ornithologists. The birds that he has described are not examined at all, and now the four of which he read descriptions last Tuesday evening I have not time to examine, as the paper is to be reported on next Tuesday. I apprehend there will be more work for you, and possibly some additional synonyms for your collection (Baird was making a list of synonyms), and the most doubtful bird, too, probably at least, he has called after me, *Mergulus cassini*.”

In the winter of 1845-6 Gambel began to study medicine under Dr. S. G. Morton, while at the Academy he seems to have aroused the animosity of John Cassin, who was a good deal of a politician in the Society. Gambel was a candidate for Curator in the year 1847, but was defeated by the late Dr. Joseph Leidy, whose cause Cassin espoused.

In 1848 Gambel, who had received his medical degree, decided to make another trip to California, and Cassin's politic methods are amusingly shown in one of his letters to Baird. He says “I have taken much pains to cultivate Gambel lately merely because I knew he possessed a very unfavorable impression of me, and I wished to correct it.” Evidently the possibility of more novelties from the far West which might not come under his care went a long way to heal a personal breach, of the merits of which we know but little. However, only misfortune came of Gambel's second trip, as he perished in the California mountains when only thirty years of age. During his short career Dr. Gambel served as Recording Secretary of the Academy, 1848-49, and on the Publication Committee, 1845-49. His accounts and descriptions of western birds, running through Vols. I-IV of the Academy's Proceedings, and some republications in the Journal, constitute his only contributions to science, but they stamp him as a naturalist of more than ordi-

nary ability, a fact which is confirmed and emphasized by those who knew him personally. Beside the record of his death, which appears in the Academy Proceedings, along with a faded clipping from a local paper giving the meagre details, we have likewise a letter from his young widow thanking the Academy for their resolutions upon his death, and a record showing that she loaned the Curators Dr. Gambel's journal of his last trip—a manuscript which I have failed to trace, but which if still extant must be fascinating reading.

In conclusion I am fortunate in being able to present an account prepared for me by the late Gen. Isaac J. Wistar, one of Dr. Gambel's companions on a portion of this famous expedition and recently president of this Academy, which gives a graphic idea of what he must have experienced.

“On April 5, 1849, when in appearance he was probably about thirty years of age, Gambel left Philadelphia in company with Isaac J. Wistar, to whom he was introduced on that day, and who was about to essay an overland journey to California. Wistar had just returned from Florida, where he had assisted in the organization of a company of thirteen young men called the Georgia and Florida Company. The party had arranged to rendezvous at Independence, Mo., then a celebrated starting point for fur traders and trappers, and also for the Santa Fé wagon trade, as soon as the grass should be sufficiently grown to maintain animals. It had also arranged through suitable detachments for the concentration at that point of the necessary wagons, mules, harness, provisions, ammunition, tools, etc., and it was also hoped that Gambel might be admitted to their number.

“The two men traveled by the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad to its then western terminus at Cumberland, Md., thence by the National Stage Road to Wheeling, and thence by various steamboats *via* Cincinnati, Cairo and St. Louis to Independence, situated four miles from the Missouri River landing of that name and twenty miles from the State boundary, then the United States frontier line against the Indians and the western limit of permitted settlements. It was then considered by the Company that all preparations having been confined to the sup-

posed wants of thirteen men for six months, no addition to their number could be made with safety, but a satisfactory place was found for Gambel in a Virginia Company of five men, one wagon and eight mules, which had been admitted for mutual protection to travel with the Company, and was glad to receive an additional recruit.

“After some necessary time in camp near Independence, occupied in completing preparations, breaking in teams, securing spare poles, axles and covers, etc., the two parties, of whom only Gambel exceeded the age of twenty-two years, made their departure on May 1st and crossed the frontier line on the 2d. The journey through the territory constituting the present States of Kansas and Nebraska, then an unbroken wilderness uninhabited except by Indians, was pursued with the usual incidents of Indian attacks (from Pawnees), stampedes, difficult streams and the other numerous obstacles of that early day, till June 2d, when at a point on the Platte River some hundred miles above Grand Island the party overtook a large ox-train of 70 or 80 men led by the well-known Captain Boone, of Kentucky. This train, like many others, had suffered severely and lost several men from cholera, which closely pursued the immigration across the plains, and did not cease its ravages till the highlands near the base of the Rocky Mountains were reached. They were anxious to secure the permanent company of a medical man, and proposed to associate Gambel with them, accepting his medical services as full equivalent for his proportion of guard mounting and the usual labor in camp and with the teams. The proposal was eagerly accepted by Gambel, who thus saw his way open, not only to a less arduous and laborious life, but for the better prosecution of his researches in natural history. The oxen traveled more deliberately, the men were generally older and less ardent, and he hoped for, and was promised, a considerable increase of his leisure time. The Virginians readily agreed to his wish, gave him his just proportion of the common outfit, and commended him warmly to his new friends, who seemed to be a substantial and agreeable lot of men.

“On June 3d, having the faster or more active teams, the Georgia and Florida Company, accompanied by the Virginians,

pulled out, passed and left the Kentuckians, and the two parties never met again. After numerous vicissitudes and the loss by various casualties of many men and animals, the former succeeded in passing the Sierra, and descended into California before the snow fell with but one surviving wagon, about half the original stock of mules and a serious and lamentable loss of men. Terrible suffering and loss of life ensued among the rear of that year's immigration, especially among those who reached the Sierra after the snows, and lost or were obliged to abandon their teams. Nothing was heard of Boone's train till the following spring, when the writer of these lines met two of them at Nye's ranch, now Marysville, who made the following statement, which, as far as known to this writer, was the last ever heard of Gambel.

"Boone's train, after losing many teams and wagons in the great graveyard of the Humboldt River desert, arrived late in the season at the Sierra and were overtaken in its mazes by the snow. Delaying for it to disappear, more snow fell, all pasturage disappeared, and after feeding their cattle for a few days on flour, all signs of the trail itself were buried and lost. They then, too late, abandoned their cattle and wagons, made snowshoes, and endeavored with the aid of friendly Indians to cross the mountains with such provisions as each man could carry. Most of them perished and were no more heard of, but Boone, Gambel and three or four others succeeded in making their way to Rose's Bar on Feather River, where Gambel almost immediately died of typhoid fever, resulting no doubt from hardship and privation.

"The present writer soon after entered the free service (*coureur des bois*) of the Hudson Bay Company, and was for some years absent in the mountains of the far Northwest, chiefly on waters of the Peace and Liard, and has never since met or heard from any of the other survivors of Boone's company, who at this late day, after the lapse of more than half a century, have all doubtless gone to join the majority on the other side of the river."

The only mention of Gambel's last expedition that I can find in Cassin's letters to Baird is under date of March 12, 1851, when he says: "Beesley, who accompanied poor Gambel, has

returned within a day or two; I have not seen him." This refers to the late Thomas Beesley of Beesleys Point, N. J., but none of his surviving relatives could tell me anything of Gambel, nor could the late Dr. S. W. Woodhouse, who knew him only from meeting him at the Academy, and never heard him mention his family or personal history.

Two brief sketches of Dr. Gambel that have only recently come to my attention give a little additional information about the ornithologist.

One of Dr. C. S. Sargent* is based mainly upon information received from General Wistar similar to that given above. Dr. Sargent states positively that Gambel was born in New Jersey but General Wistar was not certain about this when I talked with him. To the details of travel given me by General Wistar he adds the following in his letter to Dr. Sargent: "Gambel was a genial, kindly man and delightful companion but averse to the rough life, hard work and short commons then inseparable from such a journey. He was about twenty-eight at the time of his death, and had he lived to cultivate more congenial pursuits at home, would certainly have attained increased distinction as a naturalist. His taste for natural science was great, his attainments considerable, and his work even in youth valuable."

The other sketch is by Thomas Meehan,† who says: "He passed the early part of his life in Philadelphia, with his mother and sister, who were in humble circumstances. He pursued successfully a course of study in the medical department of the University of Pennsylvania, taking the degree of M. D. in March, 1848, adopting for his inaugural thesis "Organic Forms or Species." His death occurred on December 13, of the following year. His services to science commenced in 1842, when at the solicitation of Mr. Nuttall, whom some think was his uncle, he made an overland trip to California" with a party of trappers according to Sargent.

The newspaper clipping to the Philadelphia *North American*, above referred to contains the following:

*Silva of North America, Vol. VIII, p. 33.

† American Wild Flowers and Ferns, Series 2, Vol. II, p. 62.

“Dr. Gambel journeyed to the upper crossing of the Kansas with a small party of gentlemen from Georgia, Florida and Virginia, after which his company joined Indiana Company, No. 1, of which I had command, and continued with us until we reached Ft. Kearney, on the Great Platte. There he separated and joined a company commanded by Capt. Boone, of Kentucky, which followed the trail opened by Hudspith’s Company, crossing the Sierra near the head of Sacramento Valley. * * * * * His loss is as sad as it is premature, and he sleeps at peace beneath the towering pines which cluster on a sunny hillside stretching up from the Rio del Plumas. He has departed early, but not unhonored. Philadelphia owes to his memory a lasting tribute of respect for his science, virtue, worth, talent and energy.

D. B. Woods.

As Mr. Meehan says : his lonely grave in what was then the great Pacific wilderness seems, sadly suggestive of the lines of Bryant.

“ Take the wings
Of the morning, traverse Barca’s desert sands
Or lose thyself in the continuous woods
Where rolls the Oregon, and hears no sound,
Save his own dashings—yet, the dead are there.”