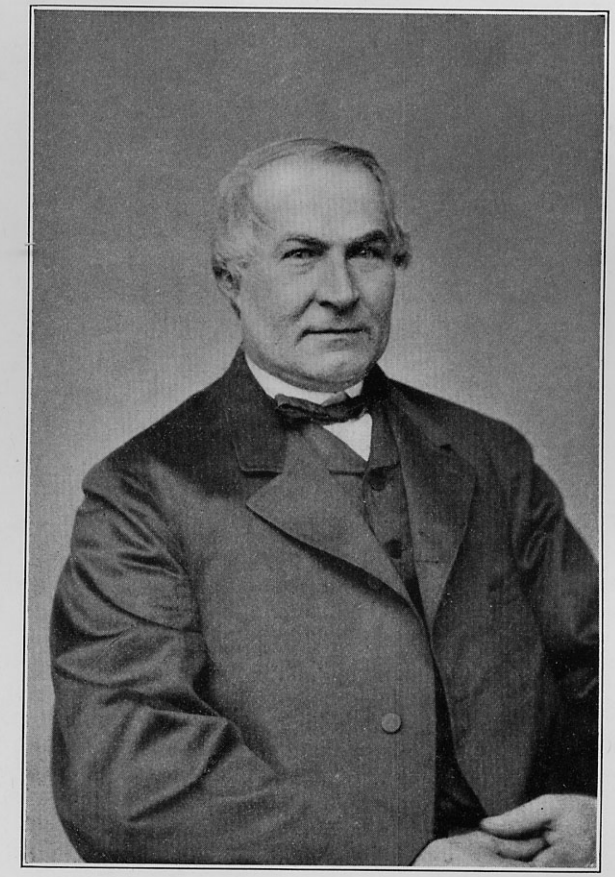

JOHN KRIDER
TAXIDERMIST

CASSINIA

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Some Old Philadelphia Bird Collectors and Taxidermists

BY SPENCER TROTTER

"Chris" Wood

During the middle years of the last century there was a type of man—type of mind would probably be a happier way of expressing it—individuals of which appeared here and there in a community, though always sparingly and often in unexpected walks of life. This race or type is apparently now extinct. It was my good fortune to know quite intimately one of these persons, to spend many hours in his company, and to become more or less familiar with this attitude of mind. Christopher D. Wood, or "Chris" Wood as he was always called, was a typical old-time bird collector and taxidermist. I first made his acquaintance in the summer of the year 1875. The picture that "Chris" Wood's name calls up is that of a man of medium hight, possibly a trifle under the average, of spare build, a rather prominent nose, dark chestnut hair with a tendency to curl, and a drooping reddish moustache. His eyes were blue—a sort of light china blue. The color of his eyes was further impressed

upon me by a circumstance which showed the peculiar streak of realism that often runs through minds of such men as "Chris". He owned a dog—a white and orange-blotched English setter called "Prince," in which he took great pride. I persuaded my father to paint a small portrait of this dog, for which "Chris" would give me a considerable number of bird skins. The dog, of course, was the prominent feature in the picture, but father painted in the middle background the small figure of a man with a gun, hardly more than an inch or so in height, which "Chris" took to be a portrait of himself and complained that the eyes of this man in the picture were dark (they were mere little pin-point spots), while his were blue. He was further dissatisfied with the shading on the dog's belly, saying that he always kept "Prince" very clean and the picture showed him to be dirty where he should be snow-white.

"Chris" lived in a small house on the north side of Market Street west of Thirty-fourth. His taxidermic shop, on the ground floor front, I can still see perfectly, and it had a smell peculiarly its own. I can see it again whenever I get a whiff of raw bird-flesh and arsenic. Back of a counter, littered with the materials of his craft, stood "Chris," in a cardigan jacket, skinning birds. I can see him very clearly as I write this—always cheerful and friendly to the boy who must have bothered him many times. I am somewhat hazy as to a row of glass-door cases, containing mounted specimens back of where he stood, but there were drawers under the cases—deep drawers filled with bird-skins thrown in helter-skelter without labels. Mrs. "Chris," a short darkish woman, used to urge "Chris" to "laybil" his specimens, but "Chris" knew where each one had been taken and the approximate date, so he said, and I believe that he was fairly accurate, though there were several hundred bird-skins in those drawers. I used to spend afternoons rummaging among these specimens and bought a good many, some very interesting ones. Twenty-five cents was the price for a fairly common species of small bird, though I paid him ten dollars for the hybrid swallow which I had described. "Chris" did a fairly good business, I think, mounting birds that were brought to him by sportsmen, and he was always

quite reasonable in his charges. He had little of the artistic instinct and his specimens were rather conventional mounts, but they came pretty close to the natural form and characteristics of a species. He was a fast and skilful worker and would strip the skin off a small bird, dose it with arsenic and push in the cotton while he talked away—one bird after another in quick succession—and the skins were all remarkably good, quite free from blemishes of any sort. I do not remember if he tied the wings—I think not in many of the smaller kinds—and he never wrapped them in any way to dry into form, just gave each one a few dextrous pinches and tossed it on the counter. Yet, as I say, they were all good skins.

"Chris" had no technical knowledge of birds. I doubt if he knew anything about genera, or what such a thing as a genus meant. He had that primitive sort of knowledge about birds that was characteristic of the early field naturalists—botanists, ornithologists and entomologists alike. It was a lively interest in the differences between one kind of animal and another, a curiosity about habits and distribution of species, a native love for color and form, and a very deep-seated feeling for the background—woods and fields and streams. I imagine this was Audubon's attitude of mind, tinged with his artistic temperament, and also Alexander Wilson's to a large extent, influenced by his poetical nature. Neither of these persons were what we of to-day would call strictly "scientific". The Bartrams, Townsend and Nuttall were probably men of the same type. "Chris" was neither artist nor poet visibly, but though he never expressed himself, no one knows what inward satisfaction possessed his soul, for as Stevenson has said "the ground of a man's joy is often hard to hit".

When the migration was on, "Chris" was out every day. The Clifton Woods on the ridge to the right of the old West Chester railroad, between what are now the stations of Primos and Secane (then Oak Lane and Spring Hill) was a favorite collecting ground of his. I have passed by these woods every day for the last thirty years. They have been much thinned out, and their southern side opened up for building, but the sight of them often evokes a memory of "Chris". Darby and

Crum creeks were also haunts of his, and the Lazaretto Woods on Tinicum ("the Lazarette," he used to call it). Linwood (Marcus Hook) near the Delaware state line, was another place he used to tramp over. I have known him to walk all the way out to the Clifton Woods and back again day after day during the height of the spring migration. He sold very few of the specimens he got on these trips and in the later years of his life he was much straightened for money, but still he would tramp far afield for the pure love of it. He had a wonderful eye for birds and a quick ear for their notes, but that was not remarkable since he spent his whole life in their pursuit. He was an entirely unlettered man and had many curious notions and expressions. I remember one day in the autumn many years ago, when I was loafing with him in his shop, he forboded a winter of great sickness because Red-headed Woodpeckers had appeared in unusually large numbers in the country about Philadelphia. "I never knew it to fail", he said. This is probably a remnant of some old folklore. In his earlier youth "Chris" Wood had collected birds in Panama and had suffered from an attack of Chagres fever. When only sixteen years of age he enlisted in the Rush Lancers (during the Civil War), so he told me, and was in several desperate cavalry charges.

The last I saw of "Chris" was the year I entered Swarthmore College (1889). The college collection of birds needed overhauling and I got him to come out and put the mounted specimens in shape. He seemed downcast and in poor health. The date of his death I do not know; it was not long after this, perhaps a year or so. I was busy at the college and do not remember having gone to his shop after that year. He had hardly reached the middle years of life when he died. He was altogether an interesting personality—a genial, kindly soul, and I owe him now many pleasant memories. Where his grave is I do not know, but wherever it may be, surely that exquisite, though forgotten verse of the poet Gray would be a fitting elegy—

> There scatter'd oft, the earliest of the year,
> By hands unseen are show'rs of violets found;
> The redbreast loves to build and warble there,
> And little footsteps lightly print the ground.

John and Joe Krider

Personally I knew little of the Kriders. John Krider's old gun shop, still standing at the northeast corner of Second and Walnut streets is an ancient landmark of local ornithology, and I remember the second story—a dingy cubbyhole where "Charlie" Wood, a brother of "Chris," presided as taxidermist. Charlie struck me as very different from "Chris"—much more of a melancholy cast of mind, but I really did not know him very well and saw him only a few times. Krider's shop was a rendezvous of the "gunning" fraternity and among them were many ornithologically inclined sportsmen. It was quite natural for men of this type to be interested in birds in a quasi-scientific way. This attitude of mind is reflected in that rare old book of D . Elisha Lewis, "The American Sportsman," and to a lesser extent in Frank Forester's "Field Sports". Such books are in a sense unique and altogether representative of the type that frequented Krider's shop. John Krider, himself, published a small book under the title, "Forty Years' Notes of a Field Ornithologist", with a sub-title as follows—"Giving a Description of All Birds Killed and Prepared by Him". It bears the imprint of 1879 from the press of Joseph H. Weston—Philadelphia—and is an annotated list, with the scientific names then current, of 335 species, beginning in the old style with the rapacious birds and ending with the guillemots and auks. The specific names all begin with a capital letter, the name of the describer following. It is by no means a local list, much of the matter relating to Iowa, where Krider and his son Joe spent their summers collecting. Ruthven Deane and I visited the old shop some years ago and were each given a copy of this book by Mr. Lee Siner, the present incumbent. Joe Krider also was a characteristic field man and a good collector, though like his father entirely unscientific.

One of these kindred spirits that I came to know was Charlie Westcott. He was an out-and-out sportsman with a strong bias toward ornithology. Charlie was in no way professional, however. At one time he was in the gun business, I think with the old firm of Philip Wilson. Westcott used to collect in a casual sort of way, shooting warblers along Crum Creek during

the migration, but I do not remember that he made skins. He just went out for the fun of it and gave his specimens to Krider or to the Woods. I met Westcott at the Academy of Natural Sciences in 1878, where he was making copies of various bird pictures on plaques from several of the larger works of ornithology. He was among the first who imported the Laverack setter into this country—a race of dogs bred in and in to such an extent that they had become degenerate. Westcott's famous dog "Pedigree" had a wonderful nose, but in every other respect was an idiot and quite useless in the field.

Other Taxidermists

I remember once meeting in "Chris" Wood's shop an old fellow named Ben Child who was a bird collector of the same ilk. I knew nothing further about him except that "Chris" seemed to regard him as an encroacher upon some of his collecting haunts. On Ninth street above Arch, on the east side, was a taxidermic shop kept by a man named Galbraith. He made some very good-looking mounts, but I do not recall any skins. My father purchased several mounted specimens from him as models for paintings—one of them, a Meadowlark in excellent pose, was the subject of a picture called, "On the Alert". Among other birds, which were used as the subjects of paintings, was a Junco, a Blue Jay, a Baltimore Oriole, and a pair of California Valley Quail (*Lophortyx*), all of which I fell heir to when father had finished with them. I remember carrying the Baltimore Oriole home from the studio in a bitter cold wind one afternoon in February, the paper blew away and the specimen never quite regained the original set of its tail feathers. This was somewhere about 1875.

There was another taxidermist on Thirteenth street above Market but I never knew him nor was in his shop. Dave McCadden has kindly given me his business card which I insert here as a specimen of the craft:

JAMES TAYLOR,
No. 36 N. THIRTEENTH ST.,
ONE DOOR BELOW FILBERT,
PHILADELPHIA.
PRESERVER OF
BEASTS, BIRDS, REPTILES,
FISH & INSECTS,
IN A SUPERIOR MANNER AND WARRANTED.
☞ Old Birds cleaned and repaired.

This particular card has an interesting history. It was found wrapped up in a copy of the Philadelphia Ledger for December 8th, 1858, which was used as part of the stuffing in the old bison, that long stood in the exhibition gallery of the Academy at Broad and Sansom streets and later in the Nineteenth street gallery.

All of these men, with the exception of Westcott, were professional collectors and taxidermists. There were others, not ornithologists in the real sense of the word, who took up the pursuit in a purely amateur way. One of these was John McIlvaine who lived on Baring street. He was a delightful old gentleman and I remember him always as wearing a high silk hat, even in his home. He made very artistic and natural mounts of birds, especially of warblers, in various characteristic poses. I met him once on the train, on a May morning, going out to shoot warblers at Grubb's Bridge (now Wawa). If I remember rightly he had a cane gun. The cane gun was much in vogue among collectors near the city in those days. I had one that generally hit me in the face and the bird usually flew away. The ramrod, too, was a jointed affair—and one was forever leaving the stock at home. This, I think, was the experience also of Dr. Coues—who refers to it in his "Field Ornithology" as having "only two recommendations. If you approve of shooting on Sunday and yet scruple to shock popular prejudice, you can slip out of town unsuspected. If you are shooting where the law forbids destruction of small birds—a wise and good law

that you may sometimes be inclined to defy—artfully careless handling of the deceitful implement may prevent arrest and fine."

All this is a ramble among old memories—very pleasant memories to me. The latter-day attitude toward bird-life has put an end to the business of the professional bird-collector and few, if any, now ply their trade. There is no longer a market for such a commodity as a bird-skin. There are taxidermists still among us—born artists in their line—and far superior to the old-fashioned bird-stuffers. The money side of it was undoubtedly a very important element in the business. The conditions have changed. We value the bird for its life, its beauty of form and color, its song, its fascinating ways, far more than the mere possession of its skin. And yet there are some of us still, those of us who were born back in the last century, who have what Tom Montgomery once described to me as the absolutely illogical desire to get out and shoot specimens. It came upon him in the spring; it comes upon some of us at various seasons—always with the same old tingle of enthusiasm. And I very much doubt, if it is altogether so illogical as Montgomery imagined. It was this same tingle of enthusiasm, this desire to secure the specimen, that made life so worth while to this interesting and almost forgotten type—the old-time bird collector.