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George Spencer Morris

BY WITMER STONE

OF the seven young men who in 1890 organized the Delaware Valley Ornithological Club, George Spencer Morris, although the youngest was excelled by none in his devotion to the interests and welfare of the society, and to the end of his life the Club was one of his chief interests. He served as Secretary and President and on all the important committees, and in every Club activity he was in the forefront, helpful, generous and loyal in attendance both at meetings and on field trips, so that what we have accomplished, and what position we have attained today are in no small degree due to his energy and devotion.

Morris was born at Olney, Philadelphia on July 11, 1867, the son of Samuel Morris and Lydia Spencer both members of the Society of Friends of which the former was a minister of note. Through his father he traced his ancestry direct to Anthony Morris (1654-1721) who came from England in 1682 to join a colony of Friends at Burlington, N. J., and who, on his way up the Delaware, passed the site of the future city of Philadelphia to which he returned a few years later and became Mayor, as did his son Anthony. Among the other ancestors in direct line were Capt. Samuel Morris, who signed the non-importation act and commanded the Philadelphia Troop of Light Horse in the

Revolution and Samuel B. Morris, grandfather of George Spencer, who was one of the founders of Haverford College.

On his mother's side George was connected with Edward Harris of Moorestown, N. J., friend and patron of Audubon.

As we are wont to trace back our characteristics to ancestral sources we would attribute Morris's general interest in natural history to the wide spread love of nature so firmly established at all times in the Society of Friends and nurtured in their schools, while direct influence came to bear upon him through an aunt, Beulah Morris Rhoads, a devout lover of nature especially of plant life. Direct interest in birds came, doubtless, from his love of hunting, the traditions of Harris and Audubon and the possession of a copy of 'The Birds of America' which he read and reread with reverence and admiration.

Morris enjoyed to the full the rough life of the sportsman, the fisherman and the canoeist, but back of all the pleasure of physical exercise and the contest of skill between the hunter and his quarry he saw the beauty of nature through the eyes of the artist and poet. His skill in depicting nature with the brush was notable, and while he did not attempt verse, much of his admirable prose writings are in substance poetry. Doubtless his interest in the outdoors could be traced back to Capt. Samuel Morris who, besides his activities in the Revolution, was a fox hunter and a founder of the State In Schuylkill Fishing Club; while his artistic ability was inherited from his father, who in early life drew and painted with skill.

George attended school at Haddonfield, N. J., and later went to the famous Quaker boarding school at Westtown, Pa., which has developed so many noted naturalists. Following his artistic bent, after graduation, he became an architectural draughtsman and later went into business as an architect, first with William S. Vaux, Jr., and later with Richard Erskine. In 1895 he married Lydia Ellicott, who with one son and four daughters survive him.

All his life he lived on the Morris estate near Crescentville on the Tacony Creek, first in his father's house "Olney" and later in his own home "Birdfield," which he built nearby. Here from early childhood to manhood he acquired his intimate knowledge of the home birds. Every thicket, every stretch of creek, every

piece of woodland became identified in his mind with certain birds or with the capture of certain specimens, constituting as years went by that charm of association—sentimental if you will—which forms such a delightful side of nature study.

Later on with kindred spirits he established camps in the New Jersey pine barrens, one at Catoxen on a branch of the Rancocas Creek, near Medford, where the Club held several field meetings, and the other at Four-ways on the Egg Harbor. Here it was possible to live the life of the back woods whenever a day or two could be spared from the activities of business; when trees could be felled, meals cooked over the camp fire, a little game obtained, bird lists made up or the wild creatures of the woods tracked in the winter's snow.

All these things appealed strongly to him and those who have shared such experiences with him will ever recall his keen enjoyment, his delightful companionship, his generous disposition, his lovable personality..

Morris took the responsibilities of life seriously. He was an active member of the Society of Friends, and in many ways contributed to the welfare and happiness of others. He was particularly interested in the proper training of boys and organized a boys' club at his home, where neighborhood lads were aided in developing an interest in nature and outdoor sports and in proper living. He was also a director of the Boy Scouts of Philadelphia and Vice President of the Philadelphia Sketch Club. He became an Associate of the American Ornithologists' Union in 1887, and was chosen a Member in 1903. He joined the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia in 1890, was elected to the Council in 1913 and Curator in 1921 while he was Vice Director of the Ornithological Section from its organization in 1891. In the D. V. O. C. he was Secretary, Sept. 1891–Jan. 1892, and Oct. 1892–Jan. 1893, President, 1893–1894, and chairman of the Publication Committee.

Besides his bird studies on the home acres at Olney, Morris spent much time in early life at Haddonfield, N. J., where lived his aunt Beulah Rhoads and her step-son Samuel N. Rhoads. The latter, a few years his senior, shared many of his early ornithological experiences. Together they visited Beach Haven, N. J., and

made collections of the sea birds just before the millinery slaughter all but exterminated them, and later Morris was a regular visitor to Cape Charles, Va., where wild life was still largely undisturbed, and at Eaglesmere in the mountains of Pennsylvania. In 1889, yielding to the urge for wider fields, he spent some months in Florida in the vicinity of Tampa Bay and made the acquaintance of many birds entirely new to him, and finally in 1892, he, with Rhoads and J. W. Evans, visited Washington and British Columbia, collecting mainly on Puget Sound and American Lake. A trip to England at the time of his marriage in 1895, gave him personal acquaintance with the birds of Old England, which he knew well from literature, and in later years, canoe trips through the wilder streams of Maryland and Virginia were his delight. Here he found the Carolina Wrens in all their glory and the golden Prothonotary Warblers flashing among the cypress swamps.

While a keen field student, the gun always appealed to Morris rather than the glass as the proper weapon for the ornithologist and he could not picture his favorite Audubon with a pair of binoculars. At the same time he was a very careful and moderate collector, made no attempt to secure large series and was heartily in sympathy with every effort for bird protection serving as a director of the Pennsylvania Audubon Society.

While Morris wrote well he published but little, most of his writings appearing in 'Cassinia' in the maintenance of which he took great interest. In 1895 he published 'Notes and Extracts from a Letter of Edward Harris' in 'The Auk'; while on his return from the Florida trip in 1890 he published an account of it in 'The Student,' and to 'Recreation' for April 1910 he contributed 'A Flood-water Cruise through a Cypress Swamp.' He wrote a number of papers dealing with outdoor life and bird study which he read before the Club or other societies but which he never published, among the best of which are the ten bird biographies which he contributed to the Club's proposed work on the 'Birds of the Delaware Valley.'

To those of us who had been so closely associated with him it was sad to see the approach of the illness that eventually caused his death, and we missed him at the Club meetings when he was compelled to spend his last winters in the milder climate of Florida.

His interest in bird life continued, however, and we received most interesting letters describing the winter birds of Miami.

He remained in Philadelphia for the meeting of the American Ornithologists' Union in November 1921, and, left for Miami early in the following month. His condition in the spring became suddenly worse, and he returned early in April, reaching home just as the northern spring was at its best and the woods full of bird song and blossoming plants. He spoke to me of this and of all the beauties of his home surroundings and after a few days, on April 12, he passed away, happy that he had been able to return to the spot with which his entire life had been so intimately identified.