

ROBERT KENNICOTT,
AN EARLY PROFESSIONAL NATURALIST IN ILLINOIS

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ABSTRACT.—Robert Kennicott, active in the 1850's and 1860's, was among the few professional naturalists in Illinois. He achieved this status at a time when most naturalists pursued their study as an avocation. The information about Kennicott is primarily from the Kennicott-Baird correspondence in the Smithsonian Institution.

It is well-known that many scientists have embarked on their careers when they were boys. Today potential field biologists begin as bird watchers, or as assistants in the high school lab as collectors of pond water and caretakers of aquaria. They are eager entrants in science fairs, and often they are Boy Scouts who go in for long canoe trips and wilderness camping. In the nineteenth century, as boys, future naturalists were collectors of bird's eggs, butterflies, fossils, snakes, and other natural objects, or they hunted birds and small animals that were so commonly found in rural and small-town America. I have asked my natural scientist friends when they became interested. With one exception they said that it was at the age of ten or twelve or fifteen. The exception is a man whose interest was not aroused until he was well along in college, and he became a parasitologist—a closet scientist, not a field biologist.

My thesis is demonstrated by the life of Robert Kennicott, an Illinois naturalist of the middle nineteenth century. He was a protégé of Spencer F. Baird, the assistant secretary of the Smithsonian Institution. There was an extensive correspondence between the two. The Smithsonian very kindly provided me with microfilms of the correspondence, which consists of more than a thousand items. Fortunately I was able

to get the microfilms enlarged and Xeroxed so that reading Baird's somewhat crabbed writing, and struggling with Kennicott's unconventional spelling was possible.

Robert Kennicott was born in 1835 in New Orleans. His father was John Kennicott, a physician. I have not so far been able to trace the antecedents of John Kennicott, and I do not know why he was in New Orleans, but shortly after the birth of Robert, the family moved to Illinois, settling on a farm about fifteen miles north of the Chicago Loop, near a brother who had already established himself there.

Dr. Kennicott engaged in practice and drove his horse and buggy all over the muddy (or dusty) trails of the prairie to care for his patients. He was also a farmer and horticulturist, eventually devoting all of his time to the business of raising shrubs, fruit trees, and shade trees, selling them throughout the region. The Kennicott home itself was surrounded by trees, and was called The Grove. It was one of the many small stands of trees that were to be found at intervals on the flat, grass-covered land.

Dr. Kennicott was a believer in education, but not an especially strong supporter of schools. He and his wife taught the rudiments to the children, and they were seldom sent to school. The Doctor thought that children could learn more from being in contact with nature and by engaging in manual labor.

Robert Kennicott was not a very strong boy physically, and bouts of not clearly defined illnesses seemed to occur when he did go to school. For this reason, and because he did not have much faith in formal schooling, Dr. Kennicott let his son stay home, and

encouraged him to be outdoors as much as possible. Robert did his share of the work, especially during the busy fall and spring planting seasons. At the same time he began to collect insects and bird's eggs, and to capture mice, squirrels, snakes, and frogs. Many of these animals were put in cages so that their habits could be closely observed. Kennicott's companion on his rambles was often a half-breed Indian who hunted birds, and ran a trapline in the winter.

At The Grove were also domestic animals, and the wild birds were fed and their nesting places were carefully protected. One strange pet was a four-foot tall Sandhill crane. It had the run of the place, followed the children around, and was always present when plowing and digging were going on because it relished the insect larvae, mice, shrews, and moles that were turned up.

As time went on, Dr. Kennicott turned more and more to his horticultural interests, and participated in the affairs of state and regional associations. Through these contacts he came to know Dr. Jared P. Kirtland, a leading naturalist and practicing physician of Cleveland. Dr. Kennicott told Kirtland about Robert, and the latter was put in touch with Professor Baird at the Smithsonian. Robert was also invited to spend a half-year in Dr. Kirtland's home on the shore of Lake Erie. Dr. Kirtland tutored the young man, and taught him how to identify and classify natural history objects. Robert was also introduced to the standard works on natural history that were in Dr. Kirtland's library.

Professor Baird's special duty at the Smithsonian was to direct the natural history museum. To get specimens, Baird made contacts with natural history enthusiasts in many parts of the country. The Professor was a kindly man, very patient and deliberate, and he encouraged his correspondents in their collecting activities.

Some of the younger men became practically members of the Baird family, because they were brought to Washington to work in the museum at the identification and classification of the flood of material that came in. The men were invited to the Baird home, and Mrs. Baird and her daughter took an interest in their welfare.

A close relationship developed between Kennicott and the Professor. Throughout his life Robert wrote to

Baird about all of his problems, and Baird answered fully, giving his advice when he thought it desirable, but refraining when he thought Robert should make up his own mind. But more importantly, Baird, in his letters to Robert, gave practical instruction about what to collect, how to preserve specimens, and how to identify and classify them.

As Robert approached his nineteenth birthday, he was troubled by the necessity to decide on a career so that he would be financially independent of his father. At The Grove Robert was doing farm and nursery work, but spending most of his time exploring the countryside and collecting specimens for his own cabinet and for the Smithsonian museum. To the latter he sent off, usually by railway express, live animals and snakes in crates and baskets, fish and frogs in alcohol, insects mounted on boards, and bird skins and animal pelts packed in boxes. Kennicott also began to keep a written record of his observations of the habits of these creatures as he observed them in the field. Although Baird encouraged these activities, he kept always before Robert the idea that natural history should be an avocation, and he urged the young man to complete his schooling and prepare himself for entrance to medical school in Chicago.

On the other hand, Robert's father was continually suggesting that his son should pursue his natural history interests. He introduced Robert to another friend, Dr. Philo Hoy of Beloit, Wisconsin, a man who spent as much time at natural history as he did at medicine. He was nationally known as a specialist in bird identification and classification. At Dr. Hoy's invitation Robert spent a spring season at Beloit, and learned to collect and skin birds.

It was through the influence of his father that Robert got his first job as a field biologist. In 1854 he was employed by the Illinois Central Railroad to survey the natural history along the right-of-way from Chicago to Cairo. Robert received no salary, but his transportation was free, and Baird supplied a small sum toward his expenses in return for the specimens that Robert sent to the Smithsonian. He accumulated sufficient material for Baird to ask him to spend the winter in Washington arranging the specimens. Dr. Kennicott also got his son to try his hand at writing, and several of Rob-

ert's articles were printed in *The Prairie Farmer*, an agricultural and horticultural paper published in Chicago. Dr. Kennicott was also active in the affairs of the Illinois Agricultural Association and other groups that were trying to get the state legislature to organize and pay for a comprehensive natural history survey. Dr. Kennicott wanted his son to be named the head of the survey, but the whole project fell through when the legislature balked at the expense. A private survey was organized by the Illinois Natural History Society, but Robert was not named director. He and his father felt the survey was not very good, and that Robert would have done better with it.

In the meantime Baird saw that Robert was not going to give up his attempts at a professional career in natural history, and when he read Robert's articles for *The Prairie Farmer*, he persuaded the United States Patent Office, which published an annual volume of material of interest to farmers, to pay Robert for a work on wild animals that were "injurious and beneficial" to agriculturists. It was generally believed in the 1850's that most wild animals were "varmints," and that they ruined crops and should be exterminated. Robert, in common with most informed men, did not believe that squirrels, skunks, and other small animals were wholly injurious. He put his point of view succinctly when he wrote, "Before waging war on any animal, let us study its habits, and look well to the consequences which would follow its extermination." Robert's work occupied more than a hundred pages in the Patent Office reports. It is still pleasurable to read, because Kennicott's remarks were drawn from personal observation of the animals in both captivity and the wild state. His style of writing was lively and anecdotal, and he refrained from using technical terms. These articles were also printed in the reports of the Illinois Agricultural Association.

By this time Robert had a clear hope of supporting himself as a naturalist, and although he did try to go to medical school, he dropped out because he said that his eyes went bad on him. As a matter of fact he far more enjoyed doing the writing for the Patent Office publication, and he quickly recovered his health after he withdrew from medical school and returned to The Grove to work on his articles.

Through his association with the doc-

tors of Chicago his abilities as a naturalist became known, and he was employed by Northwestern University, just being organized, to provide a natural history museum, a job for which he was paid. At the same time Robert was also cooperating with the doctors and other men who had organized the Chicago Academy of Sciences. For both organizations Robert went on field trips, one of which was to the Lake Superior region. Through connections made there, he later went on an extensive collecting trip through northern Canada in the territory where the Hudson's Bay Company operated. His well-written journal of his experiences is a fascinating natural history and adventure chronicle that deserves to be better known.

On these trips he was supported not only by Northwestern and the Chicago Academy, but by the Smithsonian Institution. He had also become the salaried director of the Academy's museum and hoped to make it a "Smithsonian of the West." By the time he was twenty-five years old, Kennicott was a self-supporting professional naturalist. (This is about the age when today's scientists get their Ph. D.'s and start on their careers.) Kennicott's greatest success as a field biologist was in Canada, and through the reputation he made there he was recommended by Baird to direct the survey of Alaska that was undertaken by the Western Union Telegraph Company in 1865. The purpose was to build a line up the west coast of North America to Alaska, over the Bering Straits, and across Siberia to Europe. His salary was \$2400 a year, and he was also given stock in the enterprise. That it failed is another story. Certainly Kennicott's part in the survey, and the collections of natural history objects he made established him as one of the leading explorers of the day.

But perhaps there had been bodily weakness during his youth, and the illnesses he suffered then were a part of the reason for the heart failure that killed him, at the age of thirty-one, while he was in Alaska. The reports of Kennicott's expedition describing the natural resources were widely quoted when the Senate discussed and finally ratified the treaty whereby the United States acquired Alaska from Russia in 1867—and that is another interesting story.

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