

JOHN WOLF, ILLINOIS NATURALIST

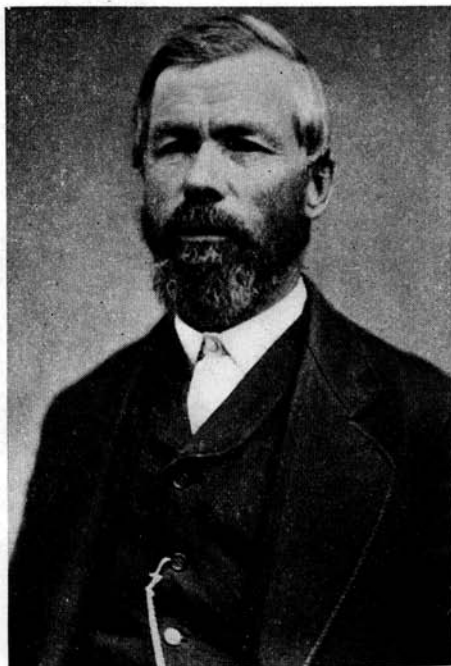
MARGARET MIDDLETON

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A FADED DOCUMENT inscribed in German, from the United States Consulate at Bremen, under the date of May 30, 1833 is a passport "guaranteeing to John Wolf and wife and seven children of Mittelsinn, Department of Urbs, Bavaria, satisfactory traveling conditions and friendly reception to the United States"; this passport, issued to the father of the Illinois naturalist, plus obituary notices and the recollections of two of his nephews, one niece, and a few older residents of Canton, furnish practically all of the foundation for this biography of Professor John Wolf, noted Illinois Naturalist.

John Wolf was born in Mittelsinn, Bavaria, on January 28, 1820, in the abovementioned family of seven children—six boys and one girl. It is interesting to note that all of the brothers were named John, though they were called by their middle names in order to distinguish them from this John. In 1833, the whole family, crossing the Atlantic Ocean in a sailboat, came to this country and settled near Bedford, Pennsylvania. It is probable that they farmed, since one son later became a very successful farmer southeast of Canton, Illinois, near Monterey.

The family migrated to Illinois in the Civil War period and settled in Canton. According to a newspaper article written at the time of his death and to reports of several older residents of Canton, the brothers took up the occupation of cobbler and John carried on a shoemaking business in a small brick building on West Elm Street. However, Mr. Charles Wolf, a nephew of John Wolf's, thinks this report erroneous. According to him, the "eldest son (Reverend George Wolf, who died at Garden City, Kansas, some years ago after a notable career as minister, author and missionary to the Indians of California) was a cobbler who later mastered seven languages. Another brother was apprenticed (bound out as they then called it) to a shoemaker. He



JOHN WOLF
1820-1897

mastered six languages and became also an expert at penmanship and freehand pen-and-ink drawing which he taught in business colleges. If the father had been a shoemaker, the son would not have been 'bound out' to learn the trade. His history and that of his brother George led to the assumption that the family were shoemaking people and that Professor John Wolf was a cobbler."

John and his sister Barbara remained at home and cared for their parents until the death of the latter in the late sixties. At one time John was engaged to be married to Miss Mary Glass, but they quarreled and he remained a bachelor. Throughout his life he had a deadly fear

of women. After his death, a close friend wrote: "What has happened to him in heaven, where there are so many (women), is a matter of deep conjecture."

It was during the period of his life at home as youth and man that John merged into a naturalist and became a linguist. That he attended any institution of higher learning is a matter of doubt. In fact, he always was held up as an example of self-education. Newspaper reports of his death say that "He was self-taught, loving learning for its own sake and, especially attracted toward the natural sciences, he ploddingly, perseveringly, untiringly read, studied and examined until his chosen field was fairly conquered." Where or how he got his books or what became of them is not known. His nephew has a faint impression that he taught a country school for a period. He could read fluently in thirty languages but could speak only a dozen correctly, which was a great sorrow to him.

Mr. Charles Wolf writes me that "It is a matter of record that John Wolf went to the Black Hills as an accredited government assayer when gold was discovered in that region in 1874. He remained there for several years and returned to Canton with forty thousand dollars—a fortune in those days." Does this perhaps refer to Wheeler's expedition in Colorado in 1873 on which he was a field assistant?

On his return to Canton, Mr. Wolf invested in a small one-story brick building on Elm Street just back of what was then the Hoblett Bank. His building was rented as a tailor shop for many years and produced part of his income. He never worked after his return but devoted his life to his beloved hobbies—botany and geology. He spent his entire time in the collecting, studying, classifying and cataloging of botanical, entomological and geological specimens.

About this time he started his museum over Blackadore's harness shop midway on the north side of the public square in Canton. It was then that he began to be called "professor" by the general public. His museum was not large but consisted of collections of specimens made partly by himself and partly obtained by exchanges with other naturalists. His collection of the flora and minerals of Illinois was most comprehensive and accurately classified and was unsurpassed

for many years. It probably never was surpassed by later botanists. He was not a world traveler but roamed widely over the State of Illinois with a large tin vasculum strung over his shoulder for the carrying of specimens. Children, who had overcome their fear of this "crazy" scientist, often accompanied him on his collecting trips. His Illinois collection was ever the main feature of his museum, though he made it more cosmopolitan by adding corals, sea-shells, stone-age relics, ores, and geological specimens from far and wide. Mr. Charles Wolf recalls his giving him in later years, some rare trilobites and some beautiful calamites which John Wolf "fondled as if they were diamonds." He also recalls going with him on one of his fall rambles when he was eight years old and John about fifty-six. "He was so vigorous I could scarcely keep up with him. We ate lunch under a shellbark hickory tree from which the nuts were dropping. After lunch he picked up what seemed to be a perfectly huge log and used it as a battering ram to jolt the shellbark and bring down a veritable shower of nuts which he left me to pick up while he roamed about inspecting fungi and other botanical phenomena."

Professor John Wolf was six feet tall and powerfully built. His hair and eyes were dark and his complexion was ruddy. He had a long beard, and a rather prominent nose. His sunburnt complexion might have led strangers to think him a drinking man—which he was not. In fact, he had strong prejudices against smoking, drinking and profanity. About town he always wore a somewhat shiny Prince Albert coat and a scuffed black silk hat. Being generally immersed in his beloved hobbies, he was somewhat unsocial and consequently often misunderstood. An interesting anecdote tells of an invitation he received to visit a famous scientist in Washington, D. C. He dressed in his usual costume, packed his traveling paraphernalia in a handkerchief, and set out for the distant city. Upon arrival at the home of the scientist, he was met at the door by the butler who was not going to admit him. He finally did, but Mr. Wolf was not asked to stay!

A few mannerisms and idiosyncrasies, which he was too independent to correct, placed Mr. Wolf in the category of a "prophet without honor in his own land." Present residents of Canton re-

member being frightened by him as children for they thought he was crazy! However, he was well-known to the Smithsonian Institute where there is a good sized sheaf of correspondence between Dr. George Vasey, first Curator of the United States National Herbarium and Mr. Wolf. He was also a close associate of Professor Starr of Chicago and a friend of Asa Gray of Harvard from whom he received honorable mention for specimens contributed.

A notable activity of his late years was research work in genealogy—in the course of which he traced his own lineage to the House of Guelph (Welf), a family which rose in the eleventh century and later contested fiercely with the Ghibelines for dominance in Bavaria and Italy, the Guelphs putting rulers on various European thrones, including the Bavarian and English. George of Hanover, who ascended the English throne in 1714, was a Guelph. The blood of the Guelphs flowed in the veins of Queen Victoria and flows today in the veins of her great grandson who sits on the British throne.

Dr. J. E. Coleman, in a short history of Canton, wrote that "John would sit in his chair on the sidewalk in front of his office most of the warm afternoons with eyes closed, going over materials in his mind for a book he was writing on philology. He completed the book before he died and it looked like an engraving, so accurately and neatly was it printed by hand." This book, however, was never published.

Mr. Wolf appears to have published but little. The card catalogue record of the United States Department of Agriculture Library is as follows:

- A list of the Mosses, Liverworts and Lichens of Illinois. Bulletin of the Illinois State Laboratory of Natural History, Vol. 1, Part 2, pp. 18-35. 1878.
- List of Trees and Shrubs in Fulton County. Geological Survey of Illinois, Vol. 4, pp. 109-110. 1875.

He discovered two new grasses, both of which were named after him: *Sporobolus Wolfii* (*Vilfa minima*) and *Graphephorum Wolfii* (*Trisetum Gilfilii*).

Professor Wolf died at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Delbert Williamson, where he boarded, August 27, 1897. He was a deeply religious man and a lifelong member of the Presbyterian Church. He left his collections and real estate to the First

Presbyterian Church of Canton. There is a plaque to him on the communion table of the church. Before his death he had found that it did not pay to exhibit his treasured specimens and many of them were ultimately sold. The Presbyterian Church later presented his collections to the Canton High School, where it was literally "thrown around" in the attics of the school for years. The past year, with the aid of the Canton Board of Education, Superintendent Ben Kietzman and Principal Oliver L. Rapp, I have been attempting to clean and arrange these specimens in a museum in the high school. Many have disappeared and most of the labels and all of the catalogue are missing. The Illinois grass, moss, lichen, and fungi collections, which were in a deplorable condition, have been loaned by the Board of Education to the Botanical Herbarium of the University of Illinois for ten years and is being cared for there.

John Wolf led an unselfish life and was loved by all. His charitable work among the poor was unostentatious, but nevertheless he assisted many families through hardships and suffering. The following is taken from a tribute "to the life and character of John Wolf by a friend," published in the Canton Daily Register after his death:

"To him the study of nature was a perpetual delight. The tiny blade of grass, the minute petal, the little pebble told a story that appealed most strongly to his nature and that fastened him spellbound, entranced. The woods were his temples, the fields his shrines and he did homage there to the universal God, whose works are in no other sphere more wonderfully illustrated than in the great domain of nature.

"For years he traveled over hill and dale, neither asking nor seeking pecuniary rewards, only intent on adding to the rich store house of his chosen profession. His was an unselfish life and he gladly made personal sacrifices that science might be the gainer. He lived not for himself but for others. Posterity will not forget him. Science, enriched, ennobled by his labors, will ever do him tribute. Humanity, the beneficiary of his kindly heart, will ever claim him as his own."—G. B. Grant.

To Mr. Wolf's niece, Mrs. Laura Snyder of Canton, Illinois, and his nephew, Mr. Charles Wolf of Seattle, Washington, the writer is indebted for most of the facts recorded here.