

C. HART MERRIAM: “FATHER” OF THE ORGANIZERS OF THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF MAMMALOGISTS

When C. Hart Merriam was asked in 1884 to run the newly formed office of Economic Ornithology in the Division of Entomology, United States Department of Agriculture, he immediately started gathering together a group of young, eager naturalists. In the first year, the office was removed from the Division of Entomology, and by 1888, was known as the Division of Economic Ornithology and Mammalogy. Merriam’s vision of a continent-wide biological reconnaissance was coming closer to realization. Immediately, Merriam invited a medical school classmate, Albert K. Fisher, to join him as Assistant Ornithologist and added Walter B. Burrows, W. W. Cooke, and F. E. L. Beal as “economic ornithologists.” Soon he added Vernon Bailey, E. W. Nelson, Wilfred Osgood, and T. S. Palmer, and still later E. A. Goldman, Ned Hollister, H. H. T. Jackson, Marcus Ward Lyon, Jr., Gerrit S. Miller, and Walter P. Taylor, among others. From this coterie of Merriam-trained “students,” there emerged the group that was to formulate plans for and organize The American Society of Mammalogists. Thus, directly or indirectly, C. Hart Merriam was the “father” of the organizers of the ASM.

Merriam realized that by bringing young people to work with him in Washington, he could train them in proper field techniques, including note-taking, preparation of specimens, and acute field observations. He believed that this type of training was lacking in college curricula at that time. As pointed out in the first *North American Fauna*, Merriam’s mission was to map the geographic distribution of all mammals and birds in North America. To do this, he needed a large group of well-trained, field-biologists.

It is of interest to note how some individuals came under Merriam’s supervision. For example, Merriam learned about a young farm boy in Elk River, Minnesota,

who was a skilled collector and prepared well-made mammal specimens. He contacted this boy, Vernon Bailey, and asked if he could provide him with a specimen of a shrew. When Bailey sent him 60 shrews and a variety of other mammals, Merriam was convinced that he needed his help and originally hired him as a field agent.

Many years ago, Wilfred Osgood told me how he became associated with Merriam. Osgood was a student at the newly-formed Stanford University. To keep in school, he took odd jobs, including baby-sitting for David Starr Jordan’s son. Jordan, then president of Stanford, was impressed with Osgood’s interest in birds and mammals and on one of his trips to Washington had the opportunity to tell C. Hart Merriam about Osgood. Merriam indicated that he needed good young men such as this. Jordan conveyed this to Osgood. At the completion of the school year, Osgood gathered together all available funds and went to Washington, and directly to Merriam’s office. To his chagrin, Osgood learned that Merriam would like to have individuals such as he, but in actuality had no funds for such. Taking pity on Osgood who had come so far and having used up all his monetary assets, Merriam put him on temporary hourly work. Eventually, he was able to set up a special civil service exam to hire an assistant. Osgood promptly took and passed the exam and was placed on the Survey’s payroll.

Clinton Hart Merriam’s rise to promise was sudden and spectacular. At age 16 he served as naturalist on the Hayden Survey to the Yellowstone region. At age 18 he started 4 years at Yale’s Sheffield Scientific School and by age 23 had his M.D. from Columbia University. During his tenure in medical school, he helped organize the Linnæan Society of New York and became president of that organization. At age 21,

he published his 150 page “review” of the birds of Connecticut. He practiced medicine for only 6 years—between ages 23 and 29. By 1881, age 26, Merriam’s attention was directed to mammals and in 1884, while still practicing medicine, he published his much proclaimed *Mammals of the Adirondachs*.

One of his students, Wilfred Osgood, summarized the feelings of many when he wrote (*Journal of Mammalogy*, 24:435, 1943) about Merriam: “Perhaps his greatest contribution to his time lay in his perfecting of methods, in the use of large series of specimens, in the persistent emphasis upon exactness of geographic data, in the demonstration of a previously unsuspected importance of cranial characters in the finer divisions of mammalian classification, and in his steadfast belief in the combination of

field and laboratory studies.” Osgood goes on to say that Merriam “was a most extraordinary character, dynamic, productive, and original,” with considerable charm and originality and a “certain indefinable magnetism about him which caused men of his iron or even greater stature to be drawn to him quickly.” However, many of his associates suffered from his hard-headedness and contradictions and Osgood said that “in the Biological Survey he occupied a pedestal, but he did not pose, for he detested insincerity.”

Although he was already in retirement, C. Hart Merriam was honored by his peers by being nominated and elected the first president of The American Society of Mammalogists.

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