



75 YEARS



of The American Nature Study Society

Helen Ross Russell

Helen Ross Russell was recipient of the 1982 Literary Award of the NYSOEA.

The horse and buggy was a dusty means of transportation when America's oldest environmental education organization came into being on January 2, 1908. Now a space shuttle frequently orbits the earth as members think about Diamond Jubilee observations of the American Nature Study Society in 1983.

Deliberations were heated in that organization meeting at the University of Chicago where some founders had to argue down those who, clinging to classroom and laboratory as the primary means of science education, did not want "nature study" in the name. For the first president, Liberty Hyde Bailey (that name having been conferred by his abolitionist Vermont grandfather on his father and then passed on to him), it was the observing on field trips that was vital. That is why he fought for "nature study," declaring that:

"Nature study should not be unrelated to the child's life and circumstances . . . It is astonishing when one comes to think of it, how indirect and how removed from the lives of pupils much of our education has been . . . Surely the best education is that which begins with the materials at hand."

These "materials at hand" were the frogs children could spot staring back at them from the lily pads, the horseshoe crabs crawling up the shores they could watch on the high tides or the goldenrods they could smell. Bailey, a Michigan farm boy who became the innovative dean of the New York State College of Agriculture at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, took his stand for this direct involvement of students in his book, *The Nature-Study Idea*, published in 1913 by The MacMillan Company.

"Nature-study ought to revolutionize the school life, for it is capable of putting new force and enthusiasm into the school and the child," Bailey wrote.

"Nature study" then was not the benign term one might have thought. It was provocative and the founders knew this when they chose it for the new organization's name and the first secretary, the Columbia University biology professor Maurice Bigelow, founded the *Nature Study Review* in 1905. It was logical for him to name Bailey to the editorial board along with C. F. Hodge, professor of biology at Clark University in Massachusetts and author of "Nature Study and Life."

At this time science materials for teachers were practically non-existent and the few science books for children were commonly anthropomorphic, sentimental

or moralistic. To change these conditions some educators were borrowing high school equipment and watering down content meant for the older students so they could present it to elementary school children.

IT WAS A PROTEST

It was to protest these conditions and to provide teachers with valid, usable materials that Bigelow founded *Nature Study Review* (now the Society's quarterly journal, *Nature Study*). From the beginning articles dealt with physical science, geology, astronomy, moon study and weather as well as human hygiene, plants and animals. Articles discussed things like



Two participants at the ANSS urban workshop in Bridgeport, Connecticut, in 1975 use a stool for a surveying turntable in a mapping activity.

Photo by Marshall T. Case



Author Edwin Way Teale (left), ANSS president, confers with Richard Westwood, editor of Nature Magazine (since merged with Natural History) and former president, and unidentified man at 1953 annual meeting.

techniques for making gardening a learning experience and for using museums as supplementary resources.

Two years after the magazine was founded, Professor Bigelow wrote an editorial asking if readers were interested in forming a "Nature Study Society." Letters came in from throughout the United States and Canada with suggestions and also nominations for members of an organizing committee. The result was the founding meeting at tail end of the American Association for the Advancement of Science meetings in 1908 and what clearly was the logical choice for president, the Renaissance and charismatic education leader, Liberty Hyde Bailey.

Renaissance in being a researcher on the palms, *Cucurbitacææ* and the genus, *Rubus*. Charismatic in, among other things, as Cornell dean, attracting more foreign students to the agriculture college than any other college in the country. At the time of his election as president he was director of the New York State Nature Study Project started in 1894 by the state legislature to stop the city-bound exodus set off by the 1891-93 depression.

THEY WROTE "UNCLE JOHN"

He, Anna Botsford Comstock and John Spencer (who conducted the Junior Naturalist Clubs) toured the rural schools trying to convey insights and understandings about the land and its resources so that people would want to stay on the farms. The trio traveled by horse and

buggy, a mode Bailey thoroughly approved of because it gave them time to share ideas, see things and think. "Contentment and happiness," Bailey said, "are the results of thinking and one thinks much when one sees much."

Spencer was the "Uncle John" so many youngsters wrote to about their outdoor experience; teachers often allowing these to count for language exercises. Spencer "requested the teachers not to correct the letters, because he wished the children to be thinking about the subject matter rather than the form of expression."

This is what Comstock wrote about him in her preface to her 937-page book, *The Teaching of Nature Study*, still used in schools 75 years after it was published, an outgrowth of Cornell University's leaflets, "Home Study Nature Study Lessons." These were started by Bailey and written by Comstock from 1903 until 1911 when the book came out.

Her writing also led to her becoming editor of *Nature Study Review* in 1913. She was also the Society's fifth president. A leader, an author, artist, teacher, in fact, the first woman on the Cornell University faculty. It could not have occurred to any of the Society's founders to have excluded her because she was a woman.

REACHING OUT

Quite the contrary. Inclusion, a reaching out and bringing people in, was the goal of the Society: and even though it

met with, and was an affiliate of, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, there was only one requirement for membership: If you believed in the things the Society stood for, you were welcome. Soon there was obvious diversity as the band of college professor founders were joined by high school and elementary teachers, scout leaders, authors and people with simply personal interest in nature.

In its first two decades the American Nature Study Society had two other woman presidents: Bertha Chapman Cady and Edith Patch. Edith Patch, like Anna Botsford Comstock, was a maker of history when she was appointed to the new position of state entomologist of Maine in 1901.

Bertha Chapman Cady also wrote for children, but this writer remembers her as a slender, radiant white-haired guest of honor sitting on the stage with E. L. Palmer, Roger Tory Peterson and President Malvina Trussell at the golden anniversary celebration of the founding of the *Nature Study Review* held in Atlanta, showing joy and pride in the organization whose beginnings she had helped foster. When



Roger Tory Peterson, the famous bird artist, as president in 1952-53, conducts the ANSS annual meeting. A former president, author Edwin Way Teale, is seated at his right.

we sent her photographs of the occasion, her daughter wrote to thank us and say that Mrs. Cady had "literally lived for that night" and a few mornings later had simply failed to waken.

The American Nature Study Society has meant a great deal to many of its members. E. L. Palmer, author of the Cornell Rural School Leaflets from 1919 to 1952 and of the superb reference book *Field Book of Natural History*, credited a Home Study Leaflet written by Anna Botsford Comstock with awakening his

interest in nature as a boy in a rural school in upstate New York. He also cited the American Nature Study Society as a place which provided him with the opportunity to learn and broaden his horizons. In fact, Palmer's relationship to the American Nature Study Society serves as an example of what membership can mean at different stages while it reflects the changes that occur in a lifetime. As a young man Palmer enjoyed the privilege of learning from and working with the great leaders of that period: leaders with whom he made friends at society meetings like William Gould Vinal, ANSS president nearly 60 years ago (affectionately known as Cap'n Bill by his students and Society members), and enjoyed all the support and challenge that comes from the exchange of ideas with one's peers. As years passed he and his contemporaries inherited the leadership. When he led a field trip at a Society meeting the turnout was impressive and represented the same cross section as his years of membership: the young, new leaders, now called environmentalists and ecologists, welcoming the chance to be a part of a now famous Palmer field trip and the established leaders who had taken up the torch.

THE FAMOUS NATURE WALKS

Field trips led by members were always an important part of the annual meetings. Who could resist a botany trip led by Bailey or a field trip on teaching possibilities led by Anna Botsford Comstock? Or at a much later date, an all day exploration with the man of all seasons, Edwin Way Teale, author of *North With the Spring* and other books, on the Indiana dunes to gain the appreciations and understandings necessary to help in the fight to gain National Park status for this beautiful area?

But organizations must change. A half century after the American Nature Study Society was founded the United States was rapidly becoming an urbanized country. Urban field trips were added to the program. The shift in emphasis was well represented by the two field trip days held at the annual meeting in Washington, D.C. in 1974 when, in addition to a "traditional field trip" to the Chesapeake Bay area to study the ecology and problems of wetlands, the group had another all day field trip in the city of Washington. This one was led by Gerry Schneider, an urban environmental educator with a strong commitment to people. Schneider took fellow members to visit the Adams Morgan Community Center, a project



That gavel being handed by outgoing president Glidden Baldwin to his successor, Dr. John Gustafson, in 1962 at the Philadelphia Museum of Natural History, is made from the walking stick used by the first president, Liberty Hyde Bailey, on a botanical trip to Ireland in 1908. The scroll has the signature of almost every ANSS president.



Author Edwin Way Teale (center) shown with Charles E. Mohr at the 1956 annual meeting, served as ANSS president in 1947-48. Mohr served two years beginning in 1944.

which started as a summer day camp program for black children and grew into an all year family natural history project in a store front and to the Anacostia Museum, a community-located and operated projection to the Smithsonian Institute which features black history coupled with the natural history of urban Washington.

THE CHANGE IS URBAN

In 1975 we conducted our first two week urban environmental workshop in Bridgeport, Connecticut. It started with a blind hike opening the eyes of many persons, not only to the role of other senses, but also to a new appreciation for the courage of handicapped people who step forth on crowded city streets. Time and again there was a reporting of fear and even panic. Repeatedly, someone said, "I could never have done it if I hadn't trusted my partner." So in the very beginning the stage was set for an awareness of both natural history and human relationships.

Because the course lasted two weeks, ongoing experiments that focused on things like natural recycling, energy relationships, litter problems, the city's influence on weather, parks' influence on cities, human territorial reactions, water and the city, could be carried out. A trip to a vacant lot in the ghetto area provided an unexpected bonus, when this neglected piece of land not only produced an amazing variety of plants and invertebrate animals in beautiful interwoven patterns including the whole story of ants, reproducing aphids and the complete life history of lady bird beetles on one giant burdock. It also provided an opportunity to explore the various patterns of land use when a delegation of Puerto Rican women came to see what we were doing on the land which the city had promised to them for a minipark and stayed to discuss the needs of their community in terms of decisions on park planning.

PLAN HUMANITIES WORKSHOP

The most recent American Nature Study Society workshops were held at the Pocono Environmental Center at Dingman's Ferry, Pennsylvania. These three-day weekend programs under the direction of then Society president Jack Padalino, focused on *Outdoors in Winter*. The 175 participants selected from more than 200 applications really kept the PEEC and the Society staffs stepping.

In addition to workshops and national conferences the Society has been holding area meetings. Area meetings were a part of the program when the American Na-

ture Study Society was founded. Travel was slow and relatively expensive and there were no grants available to help defray expenses. In returning to a similar economic situation we are rediscovering what our early founders knew: that a small meeting where persons with common interests can all participate can be more productive than a large one dominated by a few.



Two ANSS presidents get together at an annual meeting, Roger Tory Peterson (left), the bird artist, and Edwin Way Teale, author of North With the Spring and other books.

The *Nature Study Review* was discontinued in 1920. *Nature Magazine* then became the official organ of the society. When this merged with *Natural History* a newsletter kept members informed while they received *Cornell Rural School Leaflets*, *Canadian Nature* or the *Kansas Naturalist*. Under the editorship of Stanley Mulaik, professor of the University of Utah in Salt Lake City, the Newsletter grew into a quarterly journal, *Nature Study*. Over the years hundreds of members contributed to the Journal, but the responsibility for the magazine was carried by Stan and his wife Dorothea until 1974 when John Gustafson, professor of biology at Cortland State College, became editor.

Today, with the help of an editorial board, the magazine is focussing on specific topics such as endangered species, nature centers, the sea around us, plants, and nature study and the handicapped. A future issue will be devoted to the humanities and nature.

A newsletter on current issues is written by Ruth Yarrow of Ithaca, New York; a poet, mother, homemaker, part-time teacher, and former naturalist at High Rock Park, Staten Island, NY. It is mailed at intervals that are geared to Society programs, job situations, and environmental issues and reaches a membership whose diversity Maurice Bigelow, Anna Botsford Comstock and Liberty Hyde Bailey could never have dreamed of, but whose common concern for the environment, for people and for good interpretation would have met all of their dreams and expectations.

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NATURE STUDY

The trees and the skies and the lanes
and the brooks
Are more full of wonders than
all of the books
And always out-doors you can find
something new;
You never are lacking for something
to do;
You never hurt others, or get in the road
In taking the pleasures by
nature bestowed;
For there's room on the shore where
the great tides roll,
And freedom and peace that are good
for your soul;
There's hardly a way you can have
so much fun
As in being out-doors with the brooks
as they run,
With the birds as they fly, and the stars
as they shine,
With the drift of the years as they
rise and decline.
It doesn't cost much and it doesn't
take long
To get your ear tuned to the mighty
world's song.
It brings in its train no unpleasant regrets,
And the farther you go, the better it gets.
So, come where the wild things are
waiting outside
And let your soul taste of the
joys that abide.

James G. Needham