



# 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*