

Gathering of the Elders, April 15-17, 1988

Ralph W. Dexter: A History of the American Nature Study Society

Introduction of Ralph Dexter, by Paul Spector:

This society is no different than any other organization. We have many people like that, and one of them is Dr. Ralph Dexter, who is the organization's historian. Ralph has served as the Society's historian for twenty-three years, so he has personally seen and gone through a lot of the materials that have been generated during that time. Fortunately, at times like this-- meetings like this, we get to see the results of all his good work, and hear about the many things he's put together over the years.

Dr. Dexter is Professor Emeritus at Kent State, where he's taught at the biology department for forty-eight years. I imagine teaching in one place for that long, and the number of students that go through your doors, and the changes you see over that time has got to be really rewarding. He's had a special interest in the history of science, and has taught and written about the subject, has many special interests in the area of biology. So Ralph is really the perfect person to start us off this morning, and give us an overview of the American Nature Study Society. Ralph. (applause)

Ralph Dexter:

Thank you--thank you all. It is indeed a pleasure to speak once again to the American Nature Study Society. I believe the first time I attended a meeting, Roger Tory Peterson was serving as president that year, and I remember very distinctly, the address he gave as president. I attended very regularly for many years, as long as we held our meeting in conjunction with the American Association for the Advancement of Science [AAAS] which always came, in those days, during Christmas week. Since Christmas week is a holiday for all academics, it was very easy to get to those meetings, and many of us did. Once the AAAS moved out of the Christmas week slot, into February and later January, it became much more difficult for the academics to get away. So unfortunately, I haven't been keeping up in later years the way I did previously.

Now this morning, I'd like to give a brief historical sketch of our society. In the late nineteenth century, and early twentieth century, the need for more and better nature education became apparent. Among the early publications were books by Wilbur S. Jackman, 1891, 1896, 1904, especially the volume on, "Nature Study for the Common Schools" published in 1904. C.F. Hodge, in 1902, published "Nature Study and Life". And Liberty

Hyde Bailey, in 1903, "The Nature Study Idea", and also, in 1905, his "Outlook to Nature". In 1905, Maurice A. Bigelow, of Columbia University, established a "Nature Study Review". Response to this periodical prompted Bigelow to propose forming a Nature Study Society in 1907. Immediately following the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, held in Chicago in December 1907, an organizing committee met on 2 January, 1908. L.H. Bailey was chosen as chairman, but he was unable to attend because of illness. Otis Caldwell served as vice-chairman, and M.A. Bigelow as secretary. A constitution was adopted, and officers were elected: Liberty Hyde Bailey became president, M.A. Bigelow secretary/treasurer; there were five vice-presidents, and ten directors elected. Thus was established the American Nature Study Society, which was eventually incorporated at Washington D.C. in 1938. This is now the oldest organization for nature and environmental education in the United States.

It has consistently followed the Agassiz philosophy of "Study nature, not books". Now that's not to be taken literally, as was explained last night. But basically, it's hands-on study of nature, and the precepts set forth by Liberty Hyde Bailey, and his pioneering work on "The Nature Study Idea". The original objectives of appreciation, and the study of nature remain the central theme. In recent years, the scope has broadened to include environmental education in its broadest sense. The revised constitution of April, 1986, states that this society is, quote, "a professional society for nature leaders and teachers, and to promote nature and conservation education programs. From the very beginning, the method has been learning by first hand observations, to understand the natural world and the study of objects in nature and natural processes, rather than the generalized principles of science. In due time, conservation of natural resources come into focus, and was promoted by such guidance as given by E. Laurence Palmer, for public school education. Brief historical accounts of the American Nature Study Society, and it's accomplishments have been published by Shaw, Palmer, Russell, Gordon, Howard Weaver, Russell, Dexter, and Chase. From the beginning, the society has been affiliated with that group; our affiliation continues to the present day.

In 1926, Liberty Hyde Bailey served as president of the AAAS. Also, for a period of time, a western section of the society met with the Pacific division of the AAAS. We have also been associated with: the National Association of Biology Teachers (holding joint meetings, on occasion); the National Association of Science Teachers, the National Association for Environmental Education, and the Alliance for Environmental Education, to which we are an active affiliate. Our treasurer, and former president, Dr. John Gustafson, present in the audience, once served as president of the Alliance, and in recent years, we have co-sponsored projects and events with that group. In 1983, we

cosponsored The First National Congress for Environmental Futures, held in Burlington, Vermont, with the Conservation Education Association, and coordinated by the Alliance for Environmental Education. We have also been affiliated with international groups concerned with nature education and conservation. Since 1963, we have been a member of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources. We have had Canadians on our Board of Directors since 1983; we have been an affiliate of the Canadian Nature Federation since 1986, and we have held meetings in Canada for nearly a quarter of a century.

The society has had several different official publications. In recent years, in addition to the ANSS Newsletter, the journal Nature Study has become our principal activity. The Nature Study Review served as an official organ between 1908 and 1923. M.A. Bigelow, the founder, remained as editor for the first five volumes. In 1910, the journal was transferred to the American Nature Study Society. Four Years later, the Comstock Publishing Company of Ithaca, New York, produced the journal with Anna Botsford Comstock as editor. In 1924, the Nature Study Review merged with Nature Magazine, published by the American Nature Association, which had been founded in 1923. Dr. Richard W. Westwood served both as president of the Association, and as editor of the magazine. Official notices and special inserts for our society were included in issues of that publication. In 1960, Nature Magazine, in turn, merged with Natural History, and our affiliation ceased at that time.

Between 1943 and 1947, Dr. Richard L. Weaver, as our secretary, founded and produced a mimeographed newsletter. In 1947, this was extended, and entitled, The American Nature Study Society Newsletter, with Weaver continuing as editor. In 1954, the title was modified to American Nature Study Society News, with Stanley Mulaik as editor, assisted by John Gustafson. In 1964, a quarterly journal, Nature Study Society News (Journal of the American Nature Study Society) began with Stanley Muliak and John Gustafson continuing as editors. In 1974, Dr. Gustafson became the senior editor, and the next year, the name of the journal was changed to Nature Study, as it is today. The American Nature Study Society Newsletter is now a quarterly and is sent to all members, in addition to our regular journal.

At certain periods of time, the Cornell Rural School Leaflets, Canadian Nature Magazine, and the Kansas School Naturalist were also regarded as official publications of the American Nature Study Society and these publications were also sent to our members in addition to our regular journal. Special publications were the First Yearbook of American Nature Study Society, published in 1924; Nature Education in Elementary Schools, published in 1925; and Nature Study for Conservation, by Dr. John Brainard, in 1971; and City Critters, by Dr. Helen Ross

Russell in 1976. The Cornell Rural School Leaflet was founded and edited by Dr. E. Laurence Palmer between 1919 and 1952. A special teachers number, edited by Dr. Palmer, and Eva L. Gordon, was issued in September of 1950, and was entitled "Nature Writings". It contained articles or reprints by Louis Agassiz, David Starr Jordan, Wilbur S. Jackman, Liberty Hyde Bailey, Anna Botsford Comstock, E. Laurence Palmer, James G. Needham, and Eva Gordon. It also included a list of all the leaflets covered between 1920 and 1951.

Special projects of our Society have included cooperation with the American Nature Association and the National Association of Biology Teachers, to form a conservation committee, to produce the Conservation Handbook, under the direction of Dr. Richard L. Weaver, published in 1958. And the "Eyes on Nature" kit, for presenting slide showings, organized by John Brainard in 1966. Also, special projects of national importance have included the Eva Gordon Award for Childrens Science Literature, since 1964. I've listed all these in my appendix, for the 20 recipients of this prestigious award given through the present. In the spring of 1988, a workshop entitled "The Write Stuff: for Children and Nature", was held to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the creation of the award, in 1963. Also, in early 1988, a new honor (as you know from last evening), the Liberty Hyde Bailey Award, rewarding excellance in teaching, writing, or interpretation of nature, was given to our former president Ruth Melvin, in our event last evening, at our "Gathering of the Elders" program, sponsored by this society, and the Holden Arboretum.

Nationally known presidents of our society, over the 50 years, include many prominent personalities in the field of nature and education. I will not read all of them... the list is lengthy, but we might call to mind a few especially prominent people, such as: Liberty Hyde Bailey, of Cornell; Clifton Hodge of Clark University; Otis Caldwell, University of Chicago; Anna Botsford Comstock, of Cornell University; William G. Vinal, author and authority on nature camping and nature guiding; E. Laurence Palmer, of Cornell University; Edith M. Hatch, who established the the Department of Entomology at the Maine Experiment Station; Charles Mohr, authority on life in caves; Edwin Way Teale, author of many popular books on nature; Richard Westwood, president of the American Nature Association, founder of Nature Magazine; Roger Tory Peterson, whom we heard last evening (world's number-one bird watcher, as you all know), and originator, author, artist, and editor of the Peterson Field Guide Series that we all use, beginning with his classic, "Field guide to the Birds", published in 1934.

I recall the day, during our zoology seminar at the University of Illinois that was held for our section of ecology, when one of the graduate students came in with this first edition of the Peterson Guide. Arthur W. Twomey (later affiliated with the

Carnegie Museum) brought it in, and said, "Here is the latest guidebook to bird study". Of course, we didn't realize it then, how important that was going to become. As Dr. Peterson said last evening, if you have a copy of that first edition in mint condition, it's worth over a thousand dollars today. But we took time out from our seminar to examine this first issue, first edition of the guide; the first in the long series of the Peterson Guides.

Then, to continue; Richard L. Weaver who was director of Audubon Camp in Greenwich, Connecticut, that some of you may have attended; Stanley Mulaik, University of Utah, and so forth, a very impressive list.

In 1975, Cornell University offered to house the archives of the American Nature Study Society in the J.M. Olin Research Library, where our archives reside today. All officers, and past officers, are encouraged to contribute their society documents to these archives, to make them available for future historical research on the American Nature Study Society. I thank you.

Paul Spector:

Thank you Ralph. One of the things we want to encourage throughout the day, is a sense of informality, and contributions from folks in the audience. We're right on schedule, and we'd love to take any comment or contributions they would like to make. We'd love to hear them.

Phyllis Busch:

I have a question. Dr. Peterson said the Bird Nature Study Society--is that an offshoot of the American Nature Study Society?

Dexter: Dr. and Mrs. Stanley Mulaik founded that.

Busch: I know that, but I thought it was an offshoot of the American Nature Study Society.

Dexter:

Well, in a sense--Stanley was one of our presidents, he was an editor, and he and his wife were the founders. So in a sense, it's an offshoot because they were from this group.

Busch: They are doing so well, it's amazing.

Spector: Other questions or comments?

Ruth Melvin: What was the date when the association with AAAS was terminated?-- When we stopped meeting [with them]?

Dexter:

I can't give you that date off-hand. Some years back--I was on the council of AAAS for a number of years. Every year we debated, "Should we continue meeting at Christmas time?" There was a great deal of opposition to meeting at Christmas time, because, you know, people wanted to be with their families, they wanted to go visit relatives, and they had other plans and things to do. And they resented giving up this free period to come to a professional meeting. So we always had opposition to meeting during that Christmas week, and they would vote on it year after year, but we always succeeded in holding it--we had the majority vote to hold it. But finally the opposition (laughter) won, and they decided for various reasons to move the meeting date to another time.

So they moved first to February, which was a great mistake, because February is a horrible month. One of the arguments against Christmas week, was the bad weather you might expect--is February any better? (laughter) February is no better, and attendance dropped way down, because it was shifting from a time when all the academics were available to a time when relatively few could get away. And then, being in a time with relatively bad weather in many parts of the country, the attendance was poor. So they moved it from February, back to January, and every year it became earlier and earlier. Now I think it's back to the first week in January; they're only a step away from Christmas week. Maybe someday, they'll take the final step, and go back to Christmas week, which would be great for teachers, because all teachers, and all academics are available during that week. That's the one time of the year when everyone is available for professional meetings. These other dates in February, late January, the middle of January, and early January are inconvenient for many people. I think it was a mistake--I think they realize the mistake. So maybe in the future we may get back Christmas meetings. After all, the weather is no worse in Christmas week than in January or February.

Audience member: Or the middle of April! (Laughter) [a reference to the blustery weather during the "Gathering of the Elders"]

Verne Rockcastle:

There is another point, and that is, that those meetings grew just too big to be handled. When it came up toward 15,000 people in attendance, you couldn't even hold it in one place, you couldn't hold it in one hotel. And groups such as the American Meteorological Society, the American Criminological Society, American Society of Zoologists; they were all meeting at the same time. Now these separate groups hold their own society's meetings, and it's much more efficient.

Ralph Dexter:

The AAAS announced to societies,

"Please have your own society meetings at your own time and place. Now you can come and join us; we'll have a section for mathematics and chemistry and physics and biology, and geography, and geology, and medicine. We'll have a section for every science; everyone is welcome. But we will have general meetings and no special society meetings."

So the ornithologists, and the anthropologists, and the ecologists, and zoologists, etcetera all scheduled their own separate meetings at their own convenience. But, of course, these people still congregate for the national AAAS meeting. They have more symposia, more public lectures, more workshops, that sort of thing, rather than research papers. So that is the present emphasis at the present time. But, we have continued our affiliation, and we have met at the time of the AAAS national meeting. We are one of the few that have retained that affiliation.

Paul Spector:

Thank you Ralph. Now I'd like to reintroduce Frank Knight, who is the current president of the American Nature Study Society. Frank has put together some thoughts on Liberty Hyde Bailey, and as I think he will tell you, we've also discovered some others who've had some very interesting connections and work with Bailey. So Frank, why don't you take over here?