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WITMER STONE

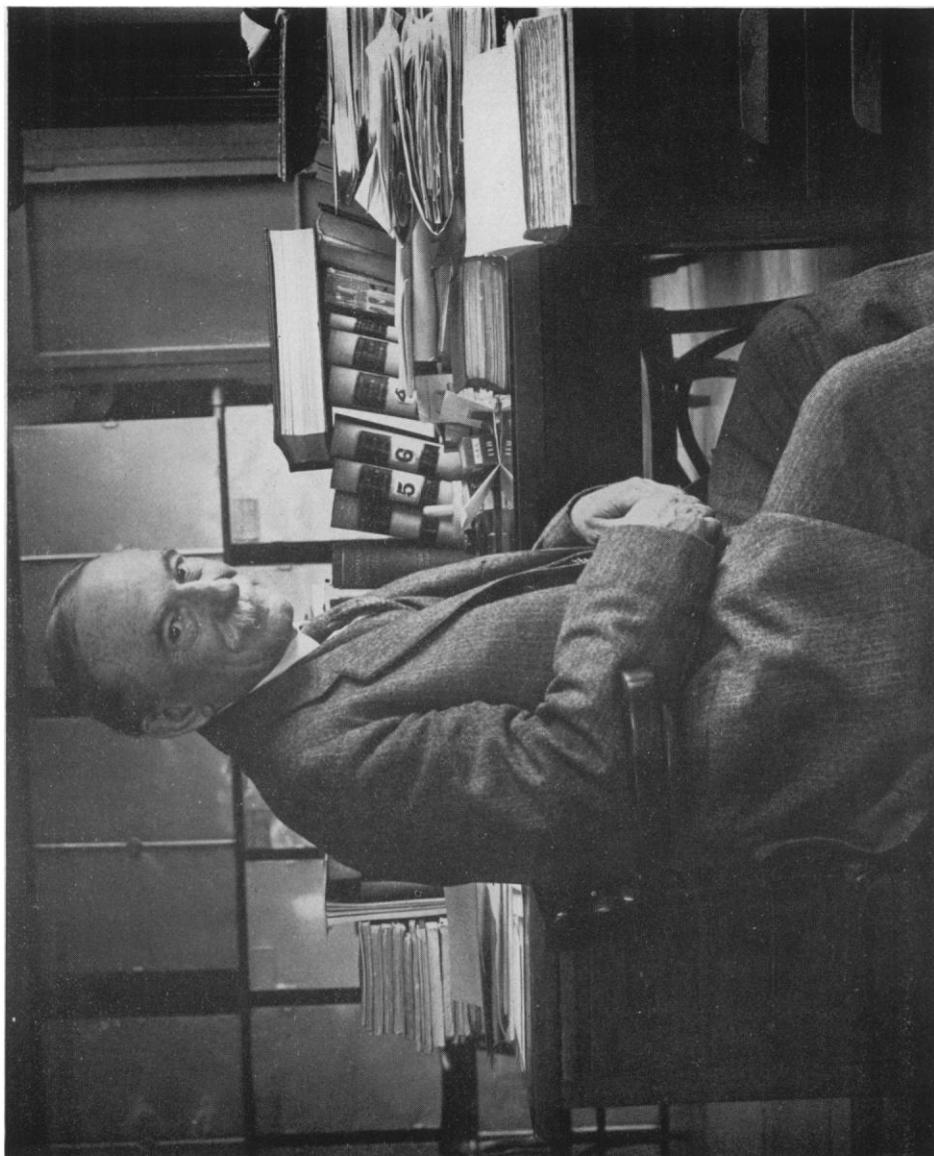
(1866 to 1939)

BY WHARTON HUBER

In the passing of Dr. Witmer Stone on May 23, 1939, the American Society of Mammalogists lost a founder and former president; the world, one of the few remaining great naturalists; those of us who knew him, a staunch friend and sympathetic counselor. His broad knowledge of natural history made him an authority in many of its branches. Although he was primarily an ornithologist, his "The Plants of Southern New Jersey with Especial Reference to the Flora of the Pine Barrens," is an outstanding work in botany. Mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, insects, and land mollusks all had their niche in his mind. For twenty-five years, 1912-1937, as editor of *The Auk*, the publication of the American Ornithologists' Union, he wrote hundreds of reviews of recent publications. His biographical sketches of early American naturalists give us vivid pictures of these pioneers in the natural sciences. He always wrote well; but in "Bird Studies at Old Cape May", his last large work, we find him at his best. Dr. Cornelius Weygandt says: "Witmer Stone was not only of the brotherhood of Wilson and Audubon and Nuttall, but a fellow of Thoreau and Burroughs, Richard Jefferies and W. H. Hudson."

Witmer Stone was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, September 22, 1866, the second son of Frederick D. Stone and Anne E. Witmer. He was educated at the Germantown Academy and at the University of Pennsylvania, class of 1887. He received the following degrees from his alma mater; A. B., 1887; A. M., 1891; Sc. D. (Honorary) 1913; Alumni Award of Merit, 1937. While in college he was elected secretary of his class, an office he continued to hold throughout his life.

For some time after graduation from the University of Pennsylvania he acted as assistant in the library of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania,



Walter Stone

where his father was librarian. It was in March, 1888, that he became connected with the Museum of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia. For over fifty-one years Dr. Stone served the Academy in the following capacities: Conservator Ornithological Section, 1891-1918; Assistant Curator of the Museum, 1893-1908; Curator of the Museum, 1908-1918; Executive Curator, 1918-1925; Director, 1925-1929; Emeritus Director, 1929-1939; Curator of Vertebrates, 1918-1936; Honorary Curator of Birds, 1938-1939, Vice President of the Academy, 1927 to the time of his death.

He married Miss Lillie May Lafferty, August 1, 1904. It was an ideally happy union.

In 1877, while at Germantown Academy, he met Stewardson Brown, a schoolmate, who was later Curator of the Department of Botany at the Academy. Witmer Stone, his brother Frederick D. Stone, Jr., Stewardson Brown, and his younger brothers, Herbert and Francis H., formed the Wilson Natural Science Association. This organization met in Stone's house where weekly sessions were held and where papers were read with all the formalities of a more serious organization. A room was also set aside for the housing of the collections. A few of the bird and mammal skins from this collection were later presented to the Academy. A specimen of *Peromyscus* from it now before me was collected in August, 1887, at West Bradford Township, Chester County, Pa., where Stone spent many of his summers at the home of his uncle.

Dr. Stone's first visit to the Academy was made when he was a small boy. These visits continued throughout his early youth on Saturdays and holidays, when he spent much of his time browsing through the collections then exhibited to the public. When he took up his duties at the Academy, he found the bird and mammal collections in the deplorable condition that I well remember. The few study skins were housed in the old packing boxes that were then serving as storage cases for types and historic specimens. The specimens were covered with dust and grime from the city. The greater part of the collection was mounted and exhibited to the public in long rows of wall cases, where moisture, mold, and the ravages of insects were taking their toll yearly. Dr. Stone rescued these historic specimens by reducing the types and duplicates to study skins and housing them in insect-proof cases. Many of the grotesquely stuffed mammals that surely would have been destroyed later, but for Dr. Stone, proved to be types described by Le Conte, Du Chaillu, and others. His instinct as a collector saved for the future the great bulk of the historic specimens—a service that will never be forgotten. Many years of his busy life were spent in this salvage work, and in the identification and arrangement of specimens.

Some of Stone's writings were of a popular nature on North American mammals. His technical papers covered various regions in the United States, Alaska, Ecuador, Hawaii, Borneo, Liu Kiu Islands, and Sumatra.

Dr. Stone was a ceaseless worker, seldom putting down his pen until

midnight. His splendid private library at home gave him easy access to references for his nightly work. Always a pacifist in his relations with fellow workers in the Academy, he was ever ready to give of his valuable time, dispensing either counsel or cheer. His dominant traits of kindness and helpfulness together with the use of diplomatic methods instilled a spirit of coöperation and loyalty in the staff. With all of the seriousness of his work there was always a lighter side, where a merry twinkle of the eye or a hearty laugh showed the buoyancy of spirit beneath the surface. This keen sense of humor and a memory that seldom failed, except in the last few years, made his desk a focal point for fellow workers. It is an inestimable privilege to have known Witmer Stone.

In a paper read before The Delaware Valley Ornithological Club, October 19, 1939, "An Appreciation of Witmer Stone," James A. G. Rehn writes: "One of my vivid recollections is of working with him for many months in the salvaging and rehabilitation of a very large and very famous collection of reptiles which came to the Academy on the death of its owner, Dr. Edward D. Cope, who was probably one of that limited group we call the greatest scientists America has produced. Like many great scholars, Dr. Cope had always been too absorbed in his work and its results to look properly after his tools, and in consequence the alcoholic preservative on his priceless specimens was of varied and uncertain strength, and of all imaginable shades of color. By gently pouring this off we could ascertain the character and consistency of the residue, a word I use advisedly for what was found in numerous cases. The tedium of this work was greatly enlivened by Stone's vivid classification and nomenclature of the various color shades and consistencies referred to as "gorum," "gee," and "goo," to be found in the five gallon glass jars used to receive the discarded solution.

Again, on the departure of one of our members for permanent residence on the West Coast, a four page newsheet was carefully hand printed with a pen by Stone, giving in humerous vein the current doings at the Academy and in the Club, with want ads, personals and cartoons, and sent to keep the absent one informed.

Looking back through the years those of us who knew Witmer Stone as a daily associate, can recall many instances when his humor, as vivid as in boyhood but always kindly, and never malicious, lightened our burdens, made the task shorter, the problems easier to solve, the long trudge shorter."

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