

From N. Freedom to the Smithsonian

Tales of Earlier Days

By **Bob Dewel**

There's something about North Freedom. Recently we wrote of Phil Lange, left by his birth family to be raised by a North Freedom couple, but who went on to live a significant life in public service. Today we write about another North Freedom youth and his significant service to the nation.

Alert readers will remember my recent mention of Dr. Wetmore of North Freedom who, with three others, drew up the agreement by which baby Phil Lange would be left with a Freedom couple by his birth family when they moved away. That was in 1914. In this story we write about Dr. Wetmore's son, but the time period is earlier—Alexander Wetmore was 28 by the time Lange was born, and long gone from North Freedom.

A Young Ornithologist

Why is Alexander Wetmore important? I'll give you one teaser: This North Freedom youth later became Secretary (read Director) of the prestigious Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. Impressive though that may seem, it was not the greatest of the many achievements of this North Freedom and Baraboo High School youth. There won't be room in this article to touch on most of them.

As far as we know, Phil Lange and Alex Wetmore never met. Wetmore was born in North Freedom in 1886. Though he

regularly walked to Baraboo to attend high school, he left with his Mother in 1904 for reasons of her health, and graduated in Independence, Kansas.

While still in North Freedom, however, the 13 year old wrote the first of what would become a lifetime of hundreds of scientific articles. It is reproduced not only in Joe Ward's recent "North Freedom, the First 100 Years", but also in Ken Lange's article published in 1989 in a scientific journal related to the Passenger Pigeon.

Young Wetmore's article serves as a forecast of his future dominance in the field of ornithology. Titled "My Experience with the Red Headed Woodpecker", it is written in a scholarly and discerning style rarely found in a youth hardly into his 'teens. Significantly, for the aspiring young scientist, it was published in the October, 1900 issue of "Bird-lore". This later became the familiar Audubon Magazine.

Additional Youthful Activities

Apparently the Woodpecker article caught the attention of Bird Lore Editor Chapman. The first nationwide bird count was being organized, to take place around Christmas, 1900. Perhaps Chapman invited the 13 year old to participate, or perhaps Wetmore volunteered, but he was the only bird-counter in Wisconsin to participate in that first year, along with dozens from other states.

Ken Lange says that Chapman had a reason for the December count—It seem that there was a rather gruesome custom of shooting birds randomly around Christmas time—a curious way to celebrate the season. Chapman proposed that instead there be a national bird count. Twenty-five states participated, with young Wetmore being Wisconsin's only reporter.



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Dr. Alexander Wetmore

Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution

The event was successful enough however that the following June Chapman sponsored a breeding bird count, when the birds were nesting. Joining young Wetmore in a joint report was his young friend James Seeley. Seeley later became the father of Anne Forbes of Baraboo. Levi Crouch, pioneer builder of downtown Baraboo, was Wetmore's uncle.

Their count was impressive. Lange reports that among those listed were 58 species and 268 individuals. Included were 10 Northern Bobwhites, plus smaller numbers of Hawks, Merlin, American Kestrels and Sapsuckers. Lange says that the Merlins are gone, and some other species are less frequent visitors.

Such was the beginning of a lifelong devotion to ornithology. This youth who served his formative years in North Freedom, became perhaps the world's leading authority in that specialized field. He achieved this in many ways, as we shall see in the article which follows in about a week.

Joe Ward, Ken Lange, and Mary Farrell Sieve contributed to this article, among others. Especially active today in the local bird habitat is the International Crane Foundation, as well as the Leopold Foundation and the Range Preservation Association. Wetmore would be proud that his home county participates, as would naturalist John Muir, who lived but a few miles east in Columbia County.