

Wetmore Published in National Geographic

Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

The recent story about a North Freedom youth, Alexander Wetmore, is not complete. In it we told of the 14 year old who not only had a story on birds published in the leading ornithology magazine of the time, but also how at that tender age he, and he alone, represented Wisconsin in the first national bird count, around Christmas 1900.

We also mentioned that Wetmore eventually became the sixth Secretary (read: Director) of the prestigious Smithsonian Institution on the Mall in Washington D.C. There is far more to tell about this significant Sauk County scientist, but first we have to complete his early life story. Though he attended Baraboo High School, he did not graduate here, for his Mother's health required a move to Independence, Kansas, at age 18. We must now share his high school education and further educational pursuits with that State.

Much of the material in this article is obtained from Oehser's "In Memoriam", reproduced for us in Joe Ward's book "North Freedom, the First 100 Years". The author tells of Wetmore's subsequent educational pursuits, beginning at the University of Kansas and proceeding to a PhD from George Washington University in Washington D.C. in 1920. Later in life he was awarded honorary degrees from the University of Wisconsin, Ripon College, and other institutions.

His activities in Washington during this time period included ornithology positions too numerous to mention, but including work with

the leading biologists of his time. In 1920 the relatively young man led expeditions to many Pacific Islands, and published the first of many articles in the National Geographic in 1923. In later years he visited and worked in dozens of nations worldwide until 1975, not long before his death in 1978. His Will gave generously to the Smithsonian.

1925 found the 39 year old scientist promoted to Assistant Secretary of the noted Smithsonian Institution. Among his other activities, he served in that position for 20 years, assuming the full position of Secretary in 1945. He was only the sixth person to assume that prestigious position in the 125 years of its history—it was founded in 1820. Under his direction the popular National Air and Space Museum was added, as well as the Tropical Research Institute.

There is no way that we can properly condense Oehser's seven page Memoriam in this article. Wetmore's life was dedicated to ornithology, and he was also a hands-on scientist, leaving hundreds of mounted specimens. It seems impossible to find a branch of that discipline of which he was not a significant leader and publisher, with 155 known articles in his long career.

Oehser says "some 56 new genre, species and subspecies bear scientific names given in his honor". For a time he was our representative to the Pan American Union. He was a Trustee of the National Geographic Society as early as 1933. A glacier in Antarctica is named in his honor. He discovered 189 new species of birds previously unknown.

Despite his departure from Sauk County in the early 1900's, Wetmore has had local connections. The counts of breeding birds in June, 1901 and in 1902 in those early years were made jointly with his North Freedom friend, James Seeley, who was to later become the father of Anne Seeley Forbes of Baraboo. Wetmore had relatives in the pioneer Levi Crouch family. Many bird counting groups now follow their example, including the Crane Foundation and its extended Bird-a thon count.

Local scientists who have conferred with Wetmore in his later years include Ken Lange and George Archibald, co-founder of the International Crane Foundation. Lange mentioned him extensively in an article titled "Alexander Wetmore's Wisconsin Years". Aldo Leopold had many contacts with Wetmore in the Depression years. Lange and Mossman, authors of "Breeding Birds of the Baraboo Hills" dedicated their 1982 book to Wetmore.

Alexander Wetmore died in 1978 at the age of 94. A tall slim gentleman, he was respected if not revered by his associates. It was a long time since he and Seeley roamed the hills and valleys of the Town of Freedom, some areas of which may be just as pristine today. He would be pleased at that.

Wetmore was tall
And distinguished
In appearance.

