

Nuggets of History

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PROFILE OF A NATURALIST

Rockford Naturalist: Milton Mahlburg
Curator Burpee Museum of Natural History
by Hazel M. Hyde

"It was a day like all days except that you are there," was a familiar opening to a series of stories about historic spots and interesting people. This is the way I felt as we approached the Burpee Museum of Natural History. It is housed in a Victorian Mansion of great architectural interest built in 1893 by Rockford's industrialist Fletcher Barnes. The house itself is worthy of a whole story. In 1938 the Rockford Park District purchased the building and had offices on the first floor. It was 1972 when the Park District relocated their offices in a new building in Sinnissippi Park.

Going inside, February 24, 1981, we were met by Mr. Milton Mahlburg, curator of the museum. First we congratulated Mr. Mahlburg on his recent honor. Rockford Chapter Daughters of the American Revolution presented a NSDAR Conservation Medal to him, January 16, 1981. On the same day his wife, Norine Mahlburg, was recognized as a new Member of the Rockford Chapter DAR.

Then Harold and I explained how we happened to come at this special time for an interview and tour of the museum. March 15, my slide presentation of "Memoirs of a Naturalist-Herbert Stoddard" was to be the program for Rockford Historical Society dinner meeting. Mrs. Gertrude Mead had told me that Milton knew Herbert Stoddard personally. Mr. Stoddard, in his later years, returned to Rockford several times, usually near Christmas to visit his sister, Mrs. Rupert J. Stibb, still living in Rockford at 324 Vale Avenue, aged 86. An exhibit of a wild turkey furnished by Herbert Stoddard is to be seen in the museum. Certain birds in the Burpee Museum were collected by Mr. Stoddard. Mr. Mahlburg presented me with a slide of Mr. Stoddard outside the Rockford Museum.

In order to give the interview some substance we talked about the museum. The Burpee Museum of Natural History was established in 1941 on the two top floors of the building. I recalled several visits during the time when the lower floor was occupied by Park Board Offices. At one of these times, there was a meeting of the Rockford Natural History Society in the basement with a program on photographing birds. Another time Rockford Chapter DAR had a tea in the basement with a tour by all members whose interest would cause them to climb the elegant stairsteps.

Museum support was derived from trust funds provided by the late Harry and Della Burpee. After the Park Offices were removed, the Park District still furnishes housing, utilities, and ground care. Other support is furnished by private gifts. The Burpee Gallery administers the trust



Milton and Norine Mahlburg (Mr. & Mrs. Milton Mahlburg) On Occasion When He Received from Rockford Chapter DAR the National DAR Conservation Medal, January 16, 1981, And Norine Was Recognized As A New Member of Rockford Chapter of the DAR

funds provided when the museum was established. The Rockford Natural History Association is the museum's membership organization. It is incorporated to promote the museum through contributions and membership dues.

We were walking as we discussed the various collections. Milton began by showing some of the older items. The original collections were acquired in the nineteen forties. The Beattie Collection, which was principally birds, had been displayed for a time in Rockford Public Library.

When I first came to Rockford in 1936 the Mandeville House was still standing in the small Mandeville Park on Montague Street. Interest in the collection there was sparked for me by the fact that my principal at the former Montague School for about three years was Miss Dorothy Mandeville. I had wondered what had become of the diversified collections of the Natural Study Society's Mandeville House Collection. Mr. Mahlburg talked about its removal to the Burpee Museum.

Milton Mahlburg is a skilled taxidermist and new specimens began to come in. These he prepared for exhibit.

Milton had an active interest in all natural phenomena,



Burpee Museum of Natural History
813 North Main Street

flora or fauna. He roamed along Rock River, fishing and hunting. His youthful interests sounded much like those of Herbert Stoddard.

Milton was born November 23, 1907 in Rockford. As a youth, Milton was fascinated by all wild life, both plant and animal, and loved to explore the countryside, especially along Rock River. It was only much later that he would think and speak in terms of habitat. Observation became his tool for gaining knowledge. He developed a curiosity about the rocks and trees and different formations in ledges. Geology was not a subject to study but rather a phenomena to explore. All these insights into nature he gained in day by day roaming along Rock River or across the fields. So a fish, a toad, a frog would excite him and he could sit or stand quietly and learn about them. Flowers, ferns, lichens were objects to observe. All this came out in our conversation about the days when he was a boy. Milton commented, "I gained my knowledge the hard way, through experimenting rather than by the college study road."

In the Burpee Natural History Museum here in Rockford there can be seen many Indian relics and artifacts. One very interesting exhibit that fascinated me was a skeleton. It was excavated by Mr. Mahlburg in the yard of a Methodist Church. Some readers will remember that Dorothy and Dick Corrigan made slides of this exhibit and I projected it as a part of a program for Rockford Historical Society, Rockford Chapter DAR, Garden Department of Rockford Womens Club, Brown Hills association and other groups. The way Milton acquired this valuable treasure was that someone was removing an old cedar tree and found this skeleton. The tree was close to 100 years old and growing through the bones. The skeleton has been estimated to be about a thousand years old. No goods or artifacts were found with it. Milton says beheading was not common. Perhaps the head was



Milton Mahlburg Beside Wild Turkey Provided By
Herbert Stoddard

saved for ceremonial purposes or as a trophy by a war party.

Seeing is not the same as understanding. So, Milton Mahlburg makes a great contribution to the education of the many young people who are brought to the museum by their teachers. Over a period of years he has helped many a youth to sharpen his observation. Milton made mention of the many finger prints on glass cases and said there had been a large group through just a short time before our arrival. "You can always tell which exhibits awakened the most interest as you start to remove finger prints," he said.

Retired Keith Country Day School teacher Theo Van de-Mark thought back to the days of her teaching when I interviewed her March 17, 1981. She said, "Anything in local history or nature, it was always to Mr. Mahlburg that I turned." She chatted on: "Some children were afraid of snakes. So when they stood on stools and looked at the snake exhibits at the Burpee Museum he would tell them, "If you don't know what kind of a snake it is, stay back and be cautious. But don't be filled with horror about snakes because many are helpful and harmless." When taking young or pre-school children, we just went down to see one thing. Perhaps it was a pelican that had wandered into our territory. In the course of talking he would explain why a pelican was not native to our area but that it was natural that one might wander to this place. Mr. Mahlburg was helpful at the time when warblers would come in large numbers and great variety. Keith is close to Sinnissippi Park, and hundreds of these small birds would come. We would go to the museum and he would show three or four different warblers. He told the children to notice the



Coyote (or Timber Wolf) at Rockford Museum
of Natural History

flight, the kinds of trees and shrubs they frequented and their markings. Then, he would say, you can begin to identify some of them.

Emerson spoke of "the cave of memory", so interviews with persons who had worked with Mr. Mahlburg or had known him for a long time contributed to a greater appreciation of his personality. Mrs. H. H. Carlin (Louise) in an interview, March 2, 1981, said she had done a modest amount of volunteer work over a period of five years about 1966, just sitting in the museum office and answering the telephone. Louise was secretary of Natural History for two years. She is a former science teacher.

Louise said, "He is the most encyclopedic source of anything about nature that I've known in Rockford or for that matter other places." She went on to say people would call about birds, rocks, Indians, or geological history. He would be able to respond or direct the person to a source of information. He was a well spring of information about Indians even back over a thousand years. If it hadn't been for Milton Mahlburg, Rockford would not have had this fine natural history museum. She spoke of the days when you entered by a side door and went upstairs because the Rockford Park Board offices occupied the first floor. Mrs. Carlin remarked, "I'm glad Rockford Chapter DAR gave Milton Mahlburg that national conservation medal. His work certainly merits recognition." Once a person on Eighteenth Avenue called saying squirrels were stripping and eating their backyard cedar fence, she recalled. Milton knew a solution and was willing to help. He learned about nature by exploring, experimenting, and reading. He began early to try experiments in taxidermy and gradually in-



Road Runner

creased his skill.

Marie Sauber Engberg (Mrs. Roy), a retired science teacher, who taught in Lincoln Junior High School before her retirement in 1950 and later taught for about six years at Keith Country Day School, said in an interview, "Milton Mahlburg is so innately modest that he won't tell much about himself." She commented that his youngest daughter Marie is her namesake. She remembered that he has devoted himself to that museum. His salary was meager at first, and he had children and a wife to support. Marie spoke of the Nature Study Society at Old Central High School. Evelyn Fernald was influential in getting Milton established in the museum. W. P. A. paid a part of his salary. Various other people had some interest in nature and were influential in the action taken to start a museum. Among these were Jennie and Ada Waldo and Aleta McEvoy. There had been a museum started in South Rockford and there were birds preserved in Mandeville House. Then there was the Alligator that used to be in the Old Rockford Public Library. It is still to be seen in the Burpee Museum. You know that if people see an unfamiliar bird or something on the river they call Milton Mahlburg. The Audubon Society Films Programs is another facet of his interest. He is an authority in the field of history and the answer to many questions concerning it is on the tip of his tongue.

When Arvel Eldridge and John Mullen found a rare yellow bullfrog while out fishing, Mr. Mahlburg gave them sound information about it. Mr. Eldridge has made the frog available for scout troops, school pupils and the general public to see. When the frog dies a natural death Milton Mahlburg will add it to the items that represent the flora and fauna of this area.

Norine Zorman was born June 16, 1917, Onawa, Iowa. She became a nurse and this led to her coming to Rockford during the polio epidemic of the 1940's. Norine and Milton were married in St. John's Church, Onawa, March 4, 1946. They

have four children: Suzanne Elizabeth, William, Marie Florence, and Robert Paul. Over the years she has come to understand and to share Milton's love of nature.

Local history is made up in a large measure by the biography of Rockford's citizens and their varied contributions. People often walk past or drive near the city's historic buildings without thought of the men and women who made them possible. Modest men like Milton Mahlburg who had the unique ability of arousing people to be aware of the common and uncommon aspects of our area are often accepted as just doing a job, without appreciating the skills, time, and persistence that have made a great contribution to our community. From contributions brought in by others and his own ingenuity in collecting Milton has made something solid and enduring in Burpee Museum of Natural History.

T. BARNEY THOMPSON

Scholar, Telegrapher, Minister, Newspaperman
by Elizabeth Ahlgren

Stephen Mack homesteaded the Rockford area in 1829, but the first real settlement came in 1834. Closely on the heels of these early settlers came B.J. Gray who started the first newspaper in 1840. His radical Whig publication, called the Rock River Express, served a population of 300.

In 1852 the first Swedish immigrants arrived. Between the years 1870 and 1890 these enterprising settlers started twenty factories devoted to furniture making and related industries. Along with these industries three newspapers began which eventually evolved into the present Rockford Newspaper, Inc. They were the Daily Register and Gazette, 1877; the Rockford Morning Star, 1888, and the Rockford Daily Republic, 1889.

Into this community of 12,000, populated with Swedish settlers and many English people from the eastern seaboard, in 1909, T. Barney Thompson arrived. His years of active newspaper work, from 1914-1952, cover a period of great change in the country and the city, to papers in general and even in the coverage of news. This is the story of that most fascinating man.

* * *

Thomas Bjerne Thompson was born January 20, 1876, in Nashota, Wisconsin, to parents of Norwegian descent. For the family it was a constant struggle to carve out a living from the stoney Wisconsin countryside.

As a youngster Barney became acquainted with the local telegraph operator, who impressed him first because he always had a large supply of very sharp pencils in his pocket and he was the only man in town who wore a white shirt every day. Barney's biggest problem in school was

penmanship. The popular method at this time was the flowing Spencerian hand which he couldn't seem to master. The telegraph operator taught him the Palmer method which he used because it was faster. Over-night Barney became number one in the penmanship class.

The only industry in the little town of Nashota was the railroad. So it was on the railroad that boys, when they finished their meager schooling, went to work. Because of this friendship with the telegraph operator Barney decided on a career other than road work. He went to work at fourteen on the telegraph job and worked at it for four years. However, this didn't satisfy him and he felt the need for more education.

At this time the country was feeling a religious quickening personified by the great evangelist, Dwight L. Moody. This, together with his strict Lutheran upbringing led Barney to consider the ministry. In 1894 he attended the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago. Wilbert W. White, assistant principal under Moody, recognized Barney's ability and encouraged him to attend Northfield School for Boys in Mt. Hermon, Massachusetts, for a good secondary foundation. This school was also founded by Mr. Moody.

While attending Northfield he was obliged to find many different ways of earning his way. He found that his training as a telegrapher stood him in good stead and during the summer months he was in constant demand by reporters covering the conferences. They needed him to send their stories. He sent messages and news to such well known publications as The New York Tribune, The Springfield Republican and The Boston Herald. Perhaps this way, without even realizing it, he picked up some of the points of good newspaper writing.

He also preached in Congregational pulpits in rural New England on Sunday and was rewarded with the daily collection. He was very lonely and homesick at first as he was older than the other boys. He found it difficult to return to studying again. However, he mastered his work so well that before long he was tutoring the less gifted boys in Latin.

Mr. Thompson was graduated from Northfield in 1899 as valedictorian of his class and was awarded cash prize for his scholarship from Cambridge University, England. The next fall he entered Beloit College, Beloit, Wisconsin. During his undergraduate days at Beloit he was student pastor at the famous Old Stone Church at Rockton, Illinois. He was graduated with a Bachelor of Arts, Magna Cum Laude, from Beloit College in 1903.

His first pastorate was at Watertown, Wisconsin. It was there on September 21, 1904, that he married a fellow classmate from Beloit, Annie Winifred Teall. He next served as assistant minister at the Plymouth Congregational Church in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. In 1909 he accepted a call to serve the First Congregational Church at Rockford, Ill.

This church closed for two months during the summer and for this period Mr. Thompson delivered lectures on Dramatic Interpretation on the Redpath Chautauqua Circuit. These Chautauqua Trail lecturers spend the summer months

touring medium-sized cities and provided talks on every kind of subject. They were held in large tents with a circus-like atmosphere. Mr. Thompson was in good company as his group included Dr. Frank Gunsaulus and William Jennings Bryan.

In 1912 he became active in the Bull Moose Party during the Republican Party split of that year. It is interesting to note how the three Rockford papers lined up for this presidential campaign. The Star was Democratic, supporting Wilson. The Register Gazette, the conservative paper, was for Taft. The Republic, always liberal Republican, supported Teddy Roosevelt. It was during this period of political activity that Mr. Thompson became acquainted with Medill McCormick, later U.S. Senator, whose wife played a most important role in Barney's newspaper life.

Mr. Thompson became known as an eloquent speaker. In 1912 following a mine disaster, a debate was arranged between Mr. Thompson and the famous agnostic, Clarence Darrow. The offering was to go to the families of the mine victims. The topic was "Is Life Worth Living?" Mr. Darrow was at his pessimistic best and the debate was considered a suicidal one for Mr. Thompson. There was no formal decision at the end of the debate but Mr. Darrow graciously conceded that Barney had won. In any case, the standing-room-only crowd seemed convinced that life was indeed worth living. Evidently Mr. Darrow enjoyed the debate as twice more he and Mr. Thompson tangled on the debate platform. The second debate was intitled "Is Civilization a Failure?"

Early in his ministry at First Congregational Church, Barney Thompson started writing a weekly religious column for the Rockford Daily Republic called "Saturday Pulpit". He lived right around the corner from the paper's office and often would hang out there when not busy. C.L. Miller, the editor, took to him and his liberal thoughts and spotted him as "all newspaperman." Mr. Miller and Harry Johnson, the publisher, were getting older and were eager to retire so they offered Barney the job of editor.

Barney's first answer was an emphatic no. He was fascinated by printer's ink but trained for the ministry and liked his calling. However, he agreed to take a summer job as a reporter so Miller could see how he worked and Mr. Thompson could see whether he would take to newspaper work.

Miller was a fine editor and scholar but he had no formal education. It amazed him the way Mr. Thompson could write his column the first time in good form for the typesetter. By fall the newspaper game was in his blood and Mr. Thompson purchased an interest in the paper and joined the staff. On January 1, 1914 his name appeared on the masthead and he was a newspaperman.

The decision to leave the ministry was a hard one for Mr. Thompson but it was not an act of faithlessness. He felt that his words would reach more people in the newspaper than in the pulpit. He was also eager for an opportunity to stay in the Rockford area and put out permanent

roots. Ministers aren't known for permanency of location.

An editorial from the December 31, 1913, issue of The Republic announcing Barney's appointment ended "He has been an eager and conscientious champion of causes he considers improving and deserving; and he may be depended on to be as liberal and progressive in an editor's chair as he was in a minister's pulpit--and just a little more."

This new editor did not go unnoticed by the rival papers, one of which suggested that now The Republic would undoubtedly start their day by assembling for prayer. An answer to this appeared in Barney's first editorial, January 2, 1914. He remarked that he realized that this was an expression of good will; however, The Republic did believe in prayer and he added, "There was no formal prayer meeting at The Republic office this morning...the Republic family, and the many thousands of homes which The Daily Republic lives represent a most beautiful fellowship begs to be thought of as belonging to the generous circle of friends."

Rockford in 1914 was already well known for the manufacture of high quality furniture and, with the prewar boom, was turning to mechanics and machine tool manufacturing. It was, as always, a predominantly Republican town. The Daily Republic was a small fighting, progressive paper with very little money. It was printed in a building owned by the Fisher family on the same site as the present News Tower.

In 1917, partly as the result of combined effort of all the papers, the Army training camp, Camp Grant, was built at Rockford. This had much to do with the change and growth of Rockford as many people who were stationed there or came to visit soldiers decided that they liked the town and stayed. After World War I the population had grown to 80,000.

Rockford throughout the 1920's continued to be considered a very "newsey" town, and all the big Chicago papers and chains maintained correspondents here. During prohibition it was a way station for liquor runners. This brought much violence to Rockford but, in turn, brought many good journalists who might not have been attracted to a small town, and many of them stayed. When the veteran reporter and editor, John Grimes, arrived in Rockford in 1919 he earned the vast sum of \$18 a week from The Republic, but the Hearst papers paid him more than this to also report for them.

The Republic tried to be a paper of the people. It was concerned with what they did and what was happening to them. Before the depression Rockford was a booming, building town and The Republic had no time for special crusades. The staff was much too busy using its time and energy just reporting what was going on in town. The citizens of Rockford at this time felt a definite relationship and responsibility toward the paper. They felt that it was their duty to keep the paper informed on what was happening, and The Republic traded on this in an attempt to keep a human outlook. A notation on the front page of The Republic of this period announced that the phone number had been chang-

ed but for "our friends" to make note of the new one in case they should have any news to report.

Barney was a fiery liberal and built a fighting spirit into The Republic staff. In a solidly Republican town he organized support and helped elect J. H. Hallstrom, a socialist, as mayor in 1921, on the Labor League ticket. The campaign was a torrid one against the old line politicians. The Republic was a Republican paper, meaning a liberal Republican, so many of the strong Republican politicians in Rockford considered its editor perhaps too liberal.

Hallstrom, while a fine mayor, was inclined to be hot tempered and cantankerous. Barney was always a little worried about what he might do to hurt his political career. During his re-election in 1929 it happened. The fourth ward was a strong hold for anti-Hallstrom supporters, and a rally was scheduled there for election eve. Hallstrom had a cold, so Barney offered to speak for him--hoping to way-lay trouble. However, Hallstrom went to the rally and Thompson went to bed. That night Hallstrom's patience became exhausted and he called the whole 4th ward "Polecats"! Barney was greeted the next morning with a big, black banner in The Morning Star which read "Hallstrom calls 4th Ward Skunks". Hallstrom's goose was cooked and he was defeated. Two years later he ran again, and, with advice to curb his temper, and help from Barney, was elected then and again two years later.

There was nothing Barney Thompson liked better than to stir up a little excitement in staid, conservative Rockford. The story is told of an art exhibit which was brought to Rockford in the early Twenties. Included in the objects d'art was a slightly draped female figure by artist Robert Henri. This was immediately consigned to a closet in the Art Hall. However, Barney got wind of it and The Republic carried a reproduction of it on the front page. This started a controversy which raged in all the papers and among the citizens for weeks.

In 1922 Mr. Thompson was unhappy to find that each day's newspaper was full of murder, crime, accidents and violence as if there was nothing beautiful, good or hopeful in the world. He decided to start a column to express only "kind, uplifting, affectionate thoughts." This first appeared on June 2, 1922, on the front page. Barney hoped that by placing it there it would stand out and take an equal place with the news of the day. At first it was given a line newshead each day but the community began to know it as "the column on the left side of the page" so it was named and copyrighted "Column Left."

He tried to present a cross-section of the community ideas in this column. Since in early years letters to the editor were not numerous, these went into his regular column with appropriate comment. Opposing views and political discussions were welcome and this heightened the community interest. Above all else his aim was to be both truthful and fair. He hoped to reflect a philosophy to live by in the modern world. Later this column was moved to the back

page to leave more space for live news, but the column remained until his death always in the column to the left.

On August 18, 1928, the two other leading Rockford newspapers, The Morning Star and The Register-Gazette, merged to form the Rockford Newspapers, Inc. with the express purpose of sinking The Republic. In this apparently hopeless situation Barney appealed for help to his old friend, Mrs. Ruth Hanna McCormick, widow of Senator McCormick and daughter of Mark Hanna, campaign manager for President McKinley. Within 28 hours of The Star-Register-Gazette merger, The Republic announced that Mrs. McCormick had purchased all of the Republic stock except that owned by Mr. Thompson. The fight was on.

The competition was terrific with much vying for the best crusade. Great effort was put forth to scoop the other paper no matter what the cost. Despite this tempestuous news contest there was more affection than you might have expected of newsmen. This was demonstrated by a tribute that Mr. Thompson wrote during this period of Roscoe Chapman, editor of the Star.

(To be continued in next issue)

WATER POWER SCRAMBLE
by W. Ashton Johnson
(Concluded from previous issue)

After the death of Mr. Manny the firm name was changed to Talcott, Emerson & Company. The N. C. Thompson Company was launched on the water power in 1857, and in 1860 John P. Manny, a cousin of John H. Manny who had perfected a combination reaper and mower, licensed the Thompson company to produce his machine.

Some of the other early day manufacturies in the water power district were: M. Bartlett & Company, a flouring mill; Thomas Derwent Company, millwork fixtures from native pine; Bertrand & Sames, manufacturers of hand cultivators; Trahern & Stuart, threshing machines (later forming the Trahern Pump Company; D. Forbes & Company, Malleable Iron Works; The Nelson Knitting Company (Nelson & Gent); Rockford Bolt Works; Rockford Brass Works; Blakeman & Dobson, dairy appliances such as barrel churns, butter-workers and stock tanks; and the Eclipse Gas Stove Company.

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