

Proceedings of the Iowa Academy of Science

Volume 68 | Annual Issue

Article 46

1961

The American School of Wildlife, McGregor, Iowa 1919-1941

Harriet Bell Carlander

Copyright © Copyright 1961 by the Iowa Academy of Science, Inc.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/pias>

Recommended Citation

Carlander, Harriet Bell (1961) "The American School of Wildlife, McGregor, Iowa 1919-1941," *Proceedings of the Iowa Academy of Science*: Vol. 68: No. 1 , Article 46.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/pias/vol68/iss1/46>

This Research is brought to you for free and open access by UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Proceedings of the Iowa Academy of Science by an authorized editor of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uni.edu.

The American School of Wildlife, McGregor, Iowa 1919-1941

HARRIET BELL CARLANDER¹

Abstract. The American School of Wildlife Protection was established at McGregor in August, 1919, and continued every summer until 1941. The school grew out of a summer meeting of the Iowa Conservation Association in 1918. This Association and the McGregor Citizens Association set up a five-day session in 1919. The 1920 session lasted one week and all later sessions were two weeks in length. Faculty was drawn from Iowa State College, the State University of Iowa, colleges of the midwest, and state and federal conservation agencies. Major fields covered were Indian lore, botany, geology, forestry, entomology, and ornithology. No textbooks were used, no examinations required, and no credit given.

Desire for a national park for the midwest and intensified interest in conservation following World War I were factors in the establishment of the Wildlife School. It was the first of its kind in the United States and set a pattern which was followed in other parts of the country, notably Colorado.

The American School of Wildlife Protection, which lasted for twenty-three years, developed from a summer meeting of the Iowa Conservation Association at McGregor Heights in July 1918. The Iowa Conservation Association had been founded in 1901 as the Iowa Forestry and Conservation Association. Drs. Louis Pammel and G. B. MacDonald of Iowa State College, Bohumil Shimpek and Thomas MacBride of the State University of Iowa were among the founders. Their purpose was to promote conservation and to establish a system of state parks in Iowa. Annual meetings were held in March, but by 1917 the members felt the need to supplement the March meeting and met in Iowa City from July 12 to July 15, 1917, for a number of lectures by prominent scientists and a Saturday field trip led by Dr. Shimpek (1).

The 1918 summer meeting was held on McGregor Heights with the McGregor Citizens Association cooperating to entertain the visitors. (Letter from F. S. Richards to Dr. Pammel, July 3, 1918.) Dr. Pammel wrote, "It was the most successful meeting we have ever had." (Letter to F. S. Richards, July 23, 1918.) Mr. W. H. C. Elwell, a prominent pearl buyer and merchant of McGregor, furnished rock sturgeon for a picnic. A launch trip on the Mississippi and a program of lantern slides were two of the activities. On a field trip to the home of Miss Althea Sherman at National, about ten miles from McGregor, the members saw the "swift tower" which had been constructed for the observation of chimney swifts. Miss Sher-

¹2322 Knapp Street, Ames, Iowa.

man told Dr. Pammel that she would be glad to have visitors, but that July was not a very good time to observe birds around McGregor (letters in Pammel Papers).

The 1918 meeting included many people interested in state and national parks as well as conservation. It was decided to plan a two-week meeting for August, 1919. The Reverend Mr. George Bennett, field representative of the Conservation Association and chief promoter of the summer meetings, wrote, "The plea for a longer stay was that such a gathering might develop into a summer school for wildlife protection" (2).

The years following the First World War were a time of intensifying interest in conservation and preservation of natural areas in the United States. Americans were beginning to realize that the beauty spots of the nation were fast disappearing as factories and homes filled the landscape. People of the Upper Mississippi Valley were promoting a national park for the Midwest, and the site most often considered was the region around McGregor, Iowa, and Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin. This enthusiasm for a national park was one of the elements leading to the establishment of the Wildlife School.

Despite the earlier decision to have a two-week meeting, the program for 1919 ran from July 27 to 31. It began with a Sunday picnic and speeches in a large tent on the Heights. About a thousand people attended. At an evening service in the Methodist Church with the Congregationalists cooperating, Dr. Shimek gave an address on "Conservation, an Ethical Force" (3).

On Monday, Dr. Pammel, as chairman of the Iowa State Park Board, was in charge of a conference on "The Importance of the Conservation of Water Supplies and Parks in the Northern Mississippi Valley." Delegates came from Illinois, South Dakota, and Iowa, and included Dr. Stephen A. Forbes, director of the Illinois Natural History Survey; Carlos Avery of the Game and Fish Commission of Minnesota; C. F. Curtiss, Dean of Agriculture at Iowa State College; Mrs. C. H. McNider of Mason City; and Dr. Thomas MacBride of Iowa City. Governor W. L. Harding of Iowa presided and gave one of the principal addresses. There was a discussion on "the most practical way to secure legislation to bring about the creation of natural parks in the northern Mississippi Valley to supply the urgent needs of the commonwealth of these northern states" (4). In the evening there was a community supper with toasts to the National Park which everyone was sure would soon be established. A lotus lily for which McGregor had become famous was given to each of the 150 guests. The discussion of "National Parks for the Northern Mississippi Valley" continued on Tuesday morning (5).

On Tuesday afternoon the first session of the School of Wildlife Protection and Propagation began with a welcome from the McGregor Heights Outing Association and symposium of addresses by the faculty. That first year the faculty was composed of Dr. L. H. Pammel of Iowa State College, botany; Dr. George F. Kay, State University of Iowa, geology; Dr. Bohumil Shimék, State University of Iowa, dendrology; Dr. T. C. Stephens, Morningside College, ornithology; and Professor Charles R. Keyes, Cornell College, Indian lore. Florence Clark wrote in the *North Iowa Times*, "Our people have had as daily companions, men and women of the broadest education and culture. In the Faculty House on McGregor Heights were five of the biggest, finest men in Iowa. . ." (6).

The experiment in carefree, outdoor education was considered so successful that at the end of the week a board of directors was set up to plan for the next year's session. The date fixed for the 1920 school was the week beginning Sunday, August 17. Members of the first board of directors were the five faculty members and five members of the McGregor Heights Outing Association, Fred G. Bell, F. S. Richards, T. A. Jayne, T. J. Sullivan, and L. P. Bickel (7).

Another organization which grew out of the 1919 meeting was the "Win the Park Board", which Governor Harding agreed to head. Other members of the board were L. H. Pammel, Joseph Kelso, J. W. Ford, and E. R. Harlan of the State Conservation Commission, F. G. Bell of McGregor, and C. H. McNider of Mason City. Governors of other states were asked to create similar boards (8).

The first session of the American School of Wildlife Protection as an independent organization was held in August, 1920. The staff was much the same as in 1919, with the addition of Dr. Harry Oberholser of the U. S. Biological Survey, Washington, D. C., and Dr. LeRoy Titus Weeks of Emmetsburg, Iowa, an Episcopalian rector and ornithologist. The people of McGregor paid the expenses of the school and the faculty served without pay. It was decided at the 1920 session to charge a five dollar fee. Students under eighteen were charged \$2.50. During the entire life of the school this charge remained the same.

Dr. W. T. Hornaday of the American Museum of Natural History, New York, was a patron of the Wildlife School and gave a collection of books and pamphlets to start a library. Elizabeth Daubenberger of McGregor was appointed librarian (9). In 1921, Rene Millar of Canada collected \$14.70 from students to be used for books (10).

An amusing note appeared in the *North Iowa Times* in Sep-

tember, 1920. Called "An Echo of the American School", it told of a program given for the Elkader Audubon Society. Reports were made on "Wild Adventures of Two Wildlife Students", "Dr. Pammel and Dr. Shimek and Their Work with Trees and Flowers", "General Report on the Week's Studies", and Birds, Bird Hikes and Dr. Weeks, the Bird Man." These reports must have summed up rather well the activities of the 1920 session (11).

Starting in 1921 the sessions of the school were two weeks in length. Field trips were an important part of the program. There were many special Days, such as "Farmer's Day", "Boy Scout Day", and "Kodak Day". Every evening there was a special program of general interest in the large tent. No textbooks or examinations were required and no credit was given. Everything was done for the fun of being outdoors and the desire to learn about conservation.

Those who came to attend the wildlife school stayed in cottages or tents on the Heights, or in hotels or private homes in the town. Meals were served in a tent and there was a larger tent for meetings (12).

The teachers were among the most outstanding scientists in Iowa and the midwest. They included Dr. Melvin Gilmore, an expert on Indian life. He was teaching at North Dakota University when he started to come to McGregor; later he went to the Museum of the American Indian in New York and then to the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. Dr. Gilmore instituted an Indian corn roast as one activity. He showed the students how the Indians cooked corn and potatoes. One year the corn roast was held in the rain, but that did not seem to keep anyone away (13). Professor Charles Keyes, an expert on archaeology from Cornell College, Mt. Vernon, was a popular teacher. He did a great deal to promote interest in the Effigy Mounds which have since become a National Monument.

Dr. George Kay, geologist from the State University of Iowa was dean of the faculty for several years. Dr. Pammel and Dr. Shimek attended often and helped with classes and field trips. Dr. G. B. MacDonald, head of the Forestry Department at Iowa State College and long-time secretary of the Iowa Conservation Association, taught forestry courses. Professor Floyd Paddock of Iowa State College taught courses in entomology, especially emphasizing bee culture.

Dr. D. W. Morehouse, famous astronomer and president of Drake University, came to the school as a guest in 1924. He was so impressed that in 1925 he offered his services as a teacher and returned year after year (14). Harry Canfield and "Cap" Culler from the Federal fishery station at LaCrosse, Wisconsin,

were frequently on the program, as were members of the Iowa Conservation Department, the Department of History and Archives, and the State Historical Society of Iowa (Programs of the Wildlife School).

People of all ages attended the Wildlife School. In 1922, Mrs. J. F. Mills of Madison, Wisconsin, attended with her daughter. She was a great bird lover and camera enthusiast. On "Kodak Day" she took several pictures with her twenty-five-year old camera. Mrs. Mills was seventy-seven years old (15). At a later session there was an eight-year-old boy who could imitate the songs of fifty birds (16).

In 1922 the Heights Inn was opened to accommodate the tourists who came as a result of the publicity about the school (17). An ornithologist who taught at the school in 1938 and 1939 said that one of the pleasantest memories he had of his days there was the wonderful fresh catfish he had for breakfast at the Inn (personal interview).

In 1923 Dr. Pammel organized a conference on Aquatic Resources in connection with the school. Dr. Harry Oberholser, Congressman Gilbert Haugen, and Carlos Avery attended. One of the reasons for the conference was the effort to have a wildlife refuge established along the Mississippi River. The newly organized Izaak Walton League was urging such action. F. G. Bell of McGregor wrote to Dr. Pammel in July 1923, "Mr. Dilg [national president of the Izaak Walton League] is up the river now rousing the river towns and organizing Izaak Walton chapters. I am sending you some of the reprints of his article on Winniesiek Bottoms" (letter in Pammel Papers).

The year 1924 was a banner year on McGregor Heights. There was a homecoming celebration, the national meeting of a group called The Bookfellows, and the Wildlife School. The Bookfellows attracted such people as Herbert Quick and Willa Cather. An Indian pageant bridged the end of the Bookfellows meeting and the beginning of the Wildlife School. An encampment of Winnebago Indians added a colorful note to the school that year. Ruth Suckow, who was perhaps Iowa's most famous author, attended the Wildlife School in 1924. A brochure of the school shows a picture of her talking to Professor Paddock about bees.

As a result of the Bookfellows meeting it was decided to build a permanent pavilion on the Heights. The Wildlife School agreed to pay the equivalent of the yearly rent on the huge tent toward the cost of the pavilion.

In this brief paper I cannot go into a year by year description of the program carried on at the school, but the general pattern did not vary much through the years.

The Wildlife School had a tremendous vitality which enabled it to outlive its founders and early promoters. The Reverend Mr. George Bennett, whose special dream it was, died during the session of 1928. He had been the school's director every year since its founding and was seventy-six years old at the time of his death. Dr. Pammel died in 1931. But the school continued, even during the years of the depression. Its life fits into the period between World War I and World War II; the last session was held in 1941. Gas rationing and the pressure of war work ended it, and it has not been started again (18). Throughout its entire history it attracted outstanding scientists and educators to its staff, although, to my knowledge, salaries were never paid. Travel and living expenses for faculty were paid by McGregor citizens.

The American School of Wildlife Protection was the first of its kind to be held in the United States. Other states and other institutions within Iowa copied the pattern. In 1923 and 1924, Colorado Conservation conferences were held at Boulder in connection with the summer session at the University of Colorado. The programs were very similar to the Wildlife School (19).

In Iowa, both the State University and Iowa State College had short courses and conferences stimulated by the Wildlife School. At one time there was some discussion about having the state schools take over sponsorship of the Wildlife School in the same way they cooperated at the Lakeside Laboratory at Lake Okoboji (Pammel Papers). A two-day school was held in Backbone State Park, in part sponsored by the citizens of Strawberry Point (20). The present-day Conservation School held for teachers each summer at Springbrook State Park may be a descendant of the McGregor school.

I have studied the Wildlife School from the viewpoint of one who never attended. It has seemed to me an imaginative and most successful venture in conservation education. Many of the people involved are worthy of biographies of their own. I have talked to many persons who did attend the school and hope to talk to many more. The ones I have interviewed have spoken of the school with great affection and enthusiasm and regret that it is a thing of the past. I would be very happy to hear from anyone who has either first-or second-hand knowledge of the school. I would like to find out whether the school influenced any young people to choose conservation or the biological sciences as a profession, and what effect, if any, it had on the teaching of natural science in Iowa and elsewhere.

The Wildlife School was important to the town of McGregor, both financially and culturally. I think it was also important to

Iowa, because it was the forerunner of the camping programs which have become so popular through the country in many fields of study, from science to music and dramatics. There are people in McGregor who would like to see it revived, perhaps as a three-day conference.

McGregor Heights is still there and the view of the Mississippi River is still beautiful.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express my thanks to Mrs. W. A. Myers of McGregor, Iowa, for her help in finding materials, especially the programs of the Wildlife School. Mrs. Myers knows more McGregor history than anyone else, and attended almost every session of the school because her family had a cottage on McGregor Heights.

Mrs. A. P. Kehlenbeck, curator of the Iowa State University History Collection in the Iowa State University Library, was most generous with help in using the voluminous Pammel Papers in the history collection. My appreciation goes to her and to Dr. Earle Ross for suggesting the Pammel Papers as a source of information.

Many members of the staff of the Department of History and Archives, Historical Building, Des Moines, have been very helpful, particularly Mr. Jack Musgrove, the employees of the newspaper department, and the librarians. I am grateful to all of them.

References

1. *Iowa Conservation*, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 3, Iowa City, 1917, and *ibid.* Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 37-40.
2. *Iowa Conservation*, Vol. II, No. 3, p. 47, Iowa City, 1918.
3. *North Iowa Times*, July 31, 1919.
4. *North Iowa Times*, July 24, 1919.
5. *North Iowa Times*, July 31, 1919.
6. *North Iowa Times*, July 31, 1919.
7. *Iowa Conservation*, Vol. III, No. 3, p. 49, Iowa City, 1919.
8. *North Iowa Times*, July 31, 1919.
9. *Iowa Conservation*, Vol. IV, No. 3, p. 77, Iowa City, 1920.
10. *Iowa Conservation*, Vol. V, No. 4, p. 86, Iowa City, 1921.
11. *Iowa Conservation*, Vol. IV, No. 3, p. 78, Iowa City, 1920.
12. *North Iowa Times*, July 31, 1919.
13. *Iowa Conservation*, Vol. VI, No. 3, p. 38, Iowa City, 1921, and *ibid.*, Vol. VII, No. 3, p. 39, Iowa City, 1922.
14. *North Iowa Times*, May 7, 1925.
15. *Iowa Conservation*, Vol. VI, No. 3, p. 43, Iowa City, 1922.
16. *North Iowa Times*, August 13, 1925.
17. *Iowa Conservation*, Vol. VI, No. 2, Iowa City, 1922.
18. *North Iowa Times*, Centennial Edition, October 1956.
19. *Iowa Conservation*, Vol. VII, No. 3, pp. 39-40, 1923.
20. *Iowa Conservation*, Vol. VII, No. 3, pp. 45-47, Iowa City, 1923.