

# THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY JOHN ELY BRIGGS

VOL. XXIV    ISSUED IN SEPTEMBER 1943    No. 9

COPYRIGHT 1943 BY THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA



## Prologue to a Career

Charles Cleveland Nutting was a preacher's son three times over on his father's side. His father, grandfather, and great grandfather were all ministers. It seems that Charles must have disappointed his father, Rev. Rufus Nutting, Jr., by taking more interest in taxidermy than formal theology and in Darwinism than Calvinism. His four sisters, however, should have softened the reverend's regrets. Two of them married ministers, a third was a home missionary in Utah, and a fourth had two sons who became, respectively, a Chicago preacher and a missionary to China, and, in turn, begot more missionaries.

Margaretta Leib Hunt, Charles's mother, came from a family of lawyers and military men. Her grandfather, Judge John L. Leib, was marshal of Michigan Territory in 1830. Brigadier General Henry Jackson Hunt, a commander of artillery for the North during the Civil War, was her cousin, and she had other cousins at West Point.

On May 25, 1858, Charles was born in Jacksonville, Illinois. He was the fourth of seven children who were, in chronological order, Millicent, Caroline, William, Charles, Edwin, Helen, and Anna. Edwin lived only a few days, so the group finally included two boys between two older and two younger girls — so arranged, according to Mother Nutting, to keep the boys "straight".

At the time Charles was born his father was professor of Greek at Illinois College, where he was made Doctor of Divinity. Dr. Rufus Nutting was said to be an excellent classical scholar, but he was remembered primarily as a minister. He took his religion seriously. Though ordained as a Congregationalist, he adopted the more rigorous creed of Calvinism and reared his family in strict Presbyterianism. In Blackburn College at Carlinville, Illinois, where he taught after leaving Illinois College, he became involved in a theological controversy and resigned in 1866. He was a kindly, generous father, but expected implicit filial obedience.

Charlie had merry blue eyes, golden hair, a fair complexion with rosy cheeks, and the knack of experimenting himself into trouble. While still at the "tender" but scarcely fragile age of four, he took a horsewhip and decided to make some

colts jump a fence. He had driven them into the corner of a fenced-in lane and was trying to get action when a kick in the face flattened his nose. Contrary to his mother's convictions, his physiognomy suffered little permanent damage.

Stories of the Civil War so inspired the boy that one day he pretended a pumpkin was a "Rebel". Seizing a large carving knife, he led a vigorous attack on it and succeeded in cutting off the end of his finger. At the time his mother was entertaining some ladies, and apparently his father had warned him to avoid getting hurt so as not to bother his mother. At any rate he intruded upon the party with more solicitude than alarm. "Don't be frightened, Mother," he remarked. "I didn't mean to, but I cut my finger off." Unable to associate his manner with valid tragedy, she told him to run along and play. Recalling the incident in after years, Professor Nutting used to claim that he was one of the youngest veterans of the Civil War.

Before he was very old, Charlie's active mind turned to eggs, butterflies, spiders, and birds. His mother wanted him to be a physician, but his interests were in collecting. He forced his younger sisters, whom he bossed and teased into adoring him, to swallow their qualms, and set them to catching hideous spiders for his collection. Once,

finding a bird's egg in a tree and having difficulty with its transportation, he popped it in his mouth, then started down. Unfortunately, he hit his chin on a limb and made an unsuspected discovery. The egg was rotten.

Sometime between 1866 and 1872 the Nuttings moved to Indianapolis, Indiana, where Charles attended high school. There he came under the influence of David Starr Jordan, future president of Leland Stanford University and famous naturalist, who was then teaching science in the Indianapolis high school. No doubt Charlie's innate enthusiasm for nature study was greatly stimulated by that contact. With two other boys he planned an exploring trip to Central America. They were going to paddle down the Mississippi and across the Gulf of Mexico.

Reverend Nutting returned to Carlinville as professor of Greek and Charles entered Blackburn College. He was a member of the Philomathean Literary Society, took part in plays, sang in the church choir, and wrote humorous essays and plays for the local paper. Perhaps the most decisive event in his college life was the enrollment of Lizzie Hersman in Blackburn College. She was an amiable girl with blue eyes, fair complexion, and light brown hair that curled about a madonna-like face. Charles fell in love with her.

As a student he seems to have maintained his scientific interests, under the direction of Professor Charles Robertson. He read scientific works, became a disciple of Charles Darwin, and collected over a hundred varieties of birds in the woods about Carlinville.

Upon graduation in June, 1880, he spent a year in Colorado where his brother Will was employed as an assayer. Charles worked as a smelter paymaster at Leadville and Red Cliff. He also helped survey the route of the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad. It was a rough life, not without considerable danger, but his father thought a year of "roughing it" would be good for Charles. The young naturalist did not intend to neglect his avocation. Before starting West he respectfully solicited the Smithsonian Institution for an order to collect bird skins. He guaranteed "good work, *reliable labels*, and reasonable rates."

It is not likely that he received an order, but no doubt he did some collecting. His first regular commission from the Smithsonian Institution seems to have been in 1882, though the first specimen in the collection of birds that he eventually made for the United States National Museum is listed as being from Summit County, Colorado.

Having obtained a Master of Arts degree from

Blackburn in 1882, he realized his boyhood ambition to explore Central America. Hired for the Smithsonian by Dr. Spencer F. Baird and under the direction of Robert Ridgeway, ornithologist, Charles Nutting went to Costa Rica early in 1882, landing at Punta Arenas on February 13th. He went alone and returned after many hardships with rare bird skins of which the National Museum now owns over three hundred.

The solo hunt in Costa Rica was only the first of many Nutting scientific expeditions. With him it was a habit-forming experience. The very next year, in 1883, he went to Nicaragua, again to collect birds. He planned to go into certain localities where no white man had yet penetrated and lived to return. His mother, hearing this and knowing what he had risked in Costa Rica, was disturbed at his departure on the new adventure, was convinced, it seems, that he would never return alive. And for some time she referred to him as "my poor dear Charlie".

He survived very well, finding the natives much less fierce than reported. He took his piccolo along and, according to the story, stopped in native villages, played tunes for the children, and was given board and room for the night. The food was scarcely what he was accustomed to eat at home, but Nutting always claimed an ability

to eat whatever was set before him without question. To this he credited his popularity with natives wherever he went all over the world. He so thoroughly believed in the value of the accomplishment that in later years he forced his own children to learn it too.

This expedition, like the first, seems to have been very successful. Despite the superstitions of the natives, he secured a large stone idol from an island in Lake Nicaragua, and at serious risk explored the crater of a volcano. With a rope tied around his waist he inspected the crusted lava until he could stand the heat no longer and shouted to be pulled up. The natives, thinking the mountain had spoken, ran away. Fortunately, the upper end of the rope caught on a bush and after a while one of the men crept back and hauled out the inquisitive naturalist.

He returned with hundreds of specimens to Washington, where he worked with Robert Ridgeway classifying the different species of birds. In 1885 he collected more skins in Florida. The total number of his birds in the National Museum amounts to 938. He kept for his private collection hundreds of duplicates.

It seems that Nutting intended to pursue his scientific studies at the University of Illinois. About this time, however, his father, still a teacher

at Blackburn College, judged a debate at Iowa City. While visiting on the campus of the University he met Professors Samuel Calvin and Thomas H. Macbride. Reverend Nutting was so impressed by their character and ability that he persuaded his son to attend the University of Iowa.

Charles C. Nutting seems to have arrived in Iowa City late in 1885. His name appears in the catalogue as one of three post-graduate students in 1886. What courses he took are not definitely known. Apparently he studied histology under Professor Calvin and may have assisted him in the laboratory. The *Vidette Reporter* announced on March 20, 1886, that "Mr. C. C. Nutting, a graduate of Blackburn University, is taking a short post-graduate course here in the laboratories of the natural sciences. Mr. Nutting was for several years connected with the Smithsonian Institution. His presence here is quite a compliment both to Profs. Calvin and Macbride, and to our institution."

As a graduate student, Nutting was remembered as rather good looking, with a pink complexion, light brown hair already rather thin, a long mustache, sideburns, intense and expressive blue eyes, and a rather boyish face. He was heavy-set and strong. Self-confident and perhaps



a little self-conscious, he took himself seriously, tried to seem older than he really was. He liked to be the leader of the group he was in; he loved to talk. He always had schemes in mind and was a hard, impulsive worker. At the house where he boarded he entertained everyone with stories of his travel experiences. One girl was afraid of him. He could not understand why until it developed that her mother had warned her to beware of "traveling men".

His energy and aggressiveness impressed Professor Calvin and circumstances made an opening for him on the University faculty. Increasing enrollment in science courses and the growing museum led to the recommendation in June, 1886, that Nutting be employed at a salary of \$900 to be curator of the museum and laboratory assistant.

Before beginning his new duties in September he married his college sweetheart, Lizzie B. Hersman on August 10, 1886. They rented a house on East Market Street between Clinton and Dubuque streets. Thus C. C. Nutting began his long career at the State University of Iowa at the dawn of the period of growth and rising reputation to which he was destined to contribute.

WILSON L. TAYLOR