In Memoriam

OWEN J. GROMME
1896–1991

It was just another rainy fall day in Milwaukee, but when the phone rang with the news of Owen Gromme's death, time, for a moment, seemed to stand still. It wasn't a great surprise. Most of us had known of his long illness. But still, it was a shock, a shock which signaled the end of an era.

A charter member of WSO and a recipient of a Golden Passenger Pigeon Award, Owen Justus Gromme was born in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, July 5th 1896 and grew up along the shores of Lake Winnebago. There during his early formative years he learned the ways of nature from his father and the local hunters, trappers and woodsmen that made this region their home. From his high school assembly room, he watched massive flocks of waterfowl staging on Lake Winnebago (one of the reasons he claims he never graduated from high school.) He shot Greater Prairie-Chickens and geese and spent his days in the wetlands, fields and forests near his home. This was a time of great learning for Gromme and a time that influenced the remainder of his life.

Gromme's life was so productive, so prolific and so full that I would find it difficult to touch upon all of it here. There are however a few areas that were important in Owen's development, a few important mentors, his museum career,
his involvement in environmental issues and his art. I would like to discuss some of these areas and hopefully provide an encapsulated glimpse into the life of the man who deftly put on canvas what Aldo Leopold put so eloquently into words.

During Gromme’s 43 years at the Milwaukee Public Museum he traveled extensively on museum expeditions, collecting, documenting and recording the vast variety of life forms he encountered. Colorful notes both written and in oils and watercolors were made of the specimens he collected and the landscapes he encountered. The longest expedition and the one that truly became a turning point in Gromme’s life was without a doubt, the Cudahy Massee African expedition of 1928–29. This African trip was the dream of the museum’s director, Dr. Sam Barrett, and was to become the bedrock for future expansion and development at the museum, which he envisioned to be one of the premier natural history institutions in the U.S.

Planning was slow and funding difficult to obtain, but Barrett sought the encouragement and advice of one of the country’s leading African explorers of the day, Carl Akeley, who was also one of the Milwaukee Public Museum’s early taxidermists. After several meetings with Akeley, who was then with the American Museum in New York, Barrett ventured forth on an unforgettable and historic expedition across Africa. Barrett was accompanied by his two taxidermists, Irving Perkins and, of course, Owen Gromme. During the ensuing 8 months, they collected an impressive 312 mammals, 1390 birds and thousands of artifacts. In addition, Gromme, who Barrett had designated as artist for the trip, painted nearly 100 field sketches of birds and several dozen landscapes. Before the expedition, Gromme was a keen hunter and taxidermist. With this, his first real, extended and intensive museum expedition, Gromme stepped forth into the realm of painting and evolved into what was termed, a museum man. In Gromme’s own words, a good museum man had a solid background as an all-around scientist, artist, carver, sculptor, lecturer, writer, photographer, bookkeeper, taxidermist and hunter. During Gromme’s years at the museum he became the consummate museum man.

In speaking with Owen he credited three individuals as being influential in his development. The first was his father, the second was Herbert L. Stoddard Sr. and the last, Dr. Sam Barrett. Gromme says with pride that each man had strong character, provided mental stimulation and had massive amounts of integrity. Of all of Owen’s many qualities, it was his own high degree of
integrity that served as a driving force during this museum career and beyond. In addition to collecting birds and creating exhibits for the museum, Gromme began collecting data on Wisconsin's wildlife and documented population fluctuations. He is also responsible for building a major portion of the museum's current scientific bird-skin collection and creating such breathtaking exhibits as the Bonaventure Island group, The Great Blue Heron Group, The Loon Group, The Wisconsin River Peregrine Falcon Group, and most of the bird mounts in the Horicon Marsh Diorama. The fact that Gromme collected, prepared and installed much of this material himself further attests to his abilities as a field collector and an artist.

Although Gromme was kept busy with his field collecting and creating scientifically accurate museum dioramas, he also built a series of mini dioramas or vignettes that were circulated throughout the Milwaukee school system. Gromme created nearly sixty of these exhibits. To attest to their impact and longevity, it's interesting to note that most of these are still being circulated today.

All throughout his museum career Gromme continued to paint, but his stance on environmental issues and conservation of wildlife resources often times proved to be paramount. Early in his career, Owen took to heart a directive by Dr. Barrett who told the young Gromme that "As long as you are an employee of this institution, conservation of natural resources is part of your job." Gromme lamented that to be a guardian of the states resources, he had no recourse but to get involved. Gromme became a conservationist and an activist long before conservation and activism became popular. As a consequence many of his battles were long and lonely. Walter Pelzer, Gromme's close associate and former chief taxidermist at the museum, recalls that Gromme was fighting for sound wildlife laws long before most people even thought about it. Throughout the 30's Gromme's efforts alternated between taxidermy and natural history groupings to environmental causes and the training of potential museum employees.

It was during the 30's that Owen joined forces with Aldo Leopold in fighting for the protection of herons and bitterns. Reports from this period tell of entire nesting colonies of herons which were exterminated by shotgun-wielding fishermen who believed the great birds were detrimental to the states fisheries. This broad misunderstanding of the natural roles of predators was not limited only to herons. Hawks and owls were also considered vermin and were relentlessly persecuted. In 1935 Gromme waged a battle against the Milwaukee Gun Club which had announced a proposed "Statewide

Owen Gromme in taxidermy studio, 1927
Varmint Hunt” in which hawks, owls and crows would be indiscriminately killed, as all had been categorically described as varmints. During the week or so after the announcement of the proposed hunt, the Milwaukee Journal devoted several columns to the issue and within a few days, the hunt was canceled. At a time when most hunters and the general public viewed hawks and owls as nothing short of a nuisance, Gromme was doing all he could to explain their roles in the natural order. As further testimony to Gromme’s commitment to the environment, he built and operated Wisconsin’s first hawk-trapping and banding station at the now famous Cedar Grove site. For the following ten years, museum personnel, under Gromme’s direction, documented the migration patterns of raptors through Wisconsin and formed baseline data crucial to their management today.

When bird populations began to decline in the 70’s and chemical insecticides were found to blame, Gromme in typical fashion, went straight to his favorite means of communication, the daily newspaper to publicly protest the wholesale slaughter of birds. It was not uncommon for Gromme to take on the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources or the Federal Fish and Wildlife Service when it came to matters of managing wildlife resources and refuges. In 1961 he took his fight to save Horicon Marsh to Washington, D.C., and presented his case to then Secretary of the Interior, Stewart Udall. Today, a number of Gromme’s recommendations regarding regulations and management of federal wildlife refuges are still in effect.

Gromme spent over a half century defending environmental causes and donated his time and talents to conservation whenever and wherever needed. Funds from the sales of his original oil paintings and reproduction rights to his prints have netted hundreds of thousands of dollars towards conservation-oriented projects. Gromme helped found and organize the International Crane Foundation in Baraboo, Wisconsin, which is fighting to save the endangered cranes of the world. His painting of Canada Geese entitled “Requiem at Horicon Marsh” helped The Wisconsin Citizens Natural Resources Association fight the federal government’s irresponsible management policies at Horicon Marsh. In 1978, he was also chosen as Ducks Unlimited artist of the year, and the sales from prints of his painting of Wood Ducks entitled “Fall Kaleidoscope”, netted DU $600,000.00 towards waterfowl habitat protection. Most re-
cently, Owen helped form the Wisconsin Peregrine Society and backed the reintroduction of his beloved Peregrine Falcons to Wisconsin by donating reproduction rights to his 1936 peregrine falcon painting to the Society.

Gromme's environmental philosophy is perhaps best summed up in his 1978 commencement address at Marian College in his native Fond du Lac, where he stated "We owe a great deal to those who came before us, and it is our duty to pass on to posterity a world morally and physically as good or better than the one we live in. By every legal means it is our duty to oppose those who out of greed and avarice, or for selfish or other reasons, would pollute, defile or destroy that which means life itself to every living being."

Over the years, many awards have been bestowed upon Gromme. In light of this fact, what I find most impressive is that even though Gromme was a high school dropout, he went on to receive no less than five honorary doctorates for his environmental work and of course his monumental book, *Birds of Wisconsin*. In addition he authored over sixty published articles. What this adds up to is the fact that Gromme lived by the basic elements of success from the beginning: integrity, honesty, hard work and an unflinching quest for knowledge of the natural world around him.

No story about Gromme would be complete without mention of his loving wife, Anne. Anne and Owen met at the museum in 1924 and were married in Briggsville in 1927. For most of Gromme's life she offered her support (and criticism) and looked after all the "other details" so that Owen was free to paint. She screened phone calls and intercepted curious visitors who would stop by "to meet the guy." Anne's dedication to Owen was without a doubt, one of the single most important ingredients to his success. I remember visiting with Anne and Owen one day. I had come up to ask for permission to reproduce his Peregrine Falcon painting to help support peregrine recovery in Wisconsin. Well, as was always the case, Owen had stories to tell, and I loved hearing them. But Anne, who knew why I had come, interrupted Owen after about 45 minutes of story telling and said, "Oh Owen, would you please shut up, can't you see Greg came all the way up here to ask you something?" Owen seemingly unshaken, smiled and said, "Well, what is it you want?" An hour later we'd chosen the painting, and he agreed to donate the reproduction rights to the Wisconsin Peregrine So-
ciety. Normally, we'd end up talking most of the day, and it was generally dark before I returned to Milwaukee. Before I'd leave, Anne would always send me off with a bag of home-made cookies for the ride home. Anne passed away in August of 1991 and like Owen will be deeply missed.

Today, Gromme's legacy speaks for itself. For those of us fortunate enough to live in Milwaukee, we have his life's work here at the Milwaukee Public Museum to admire. His collection of 43 inspired oil paintings at Milwaukee's M&I bank are also available for viewing (by appointment). For the remainder of his followers, there exists a wealth of fine art prints which are available through WildWings of Lake City, Minnesota. The current wildlife art field owes much to Gromme and WildWings for leading the way and establishing the wildlife art print phenomenon.

A further testimony to Gromme's drive and dedication to wildlife art was his involvement in helping the Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum in Wausau develop its annual "Birds in Art" exhibition. This annual exhibit alone has done more to further the growth of the bird art field than any other show or exhibit at any time in history.

Yes, Gromme's life has been prolific, but a deeper look at the man shows a true human spirit undaunted by bureaucracies, ignorance, administrative inadequacies and indifference. On the outside, we saw a man who was tough, outspoken and outgoing, but underneath he was a gentle person who really cared about the people and the world around him. During Gromme's
museum years he demanded perfection from himself and those with whom he worked. He knew the public was paying the freight, so to speak, and he wanted to make sure they got their money's worth. Walt Pelzer, who was taken under Gromme's wing early in his own museum career, says "Owen always gave me free reign... he was never a difficult person to work with. He was always loyal to his people but would chew the hell out of you if he felt there was a cause for it." Pelzer went on to say, "One of Owen Gromme's greatest talents was his ability to get the ball rolling and keep it going. Whenever they needed a sponsor or a donation for a trip, Owen would always go out and get what they needed."

During his museum career, he was much revered by his associates and fought and struggled in the spotlight of controversy because it was his passion. In his own words, regarding environmental issues he once stated, "It's never been easy, but if I'm backed into a corner and someone has to speak up then I won't shy away from it." Gromme's hard stance on matters was a direct result of his curious, persistent, hard-driving and analytical mind and the fact that he thrived on hard work and believed in the future. There is an instance and a quote that perhaps best sums up the personality of Owen Gromme. In 1979, the state DNR wanted the winning artist of the state duck stamp contest to share their financial gain with the state as a prerequisite to entering the contest. Being a staunch supporter of wildlife artists, Gromme verbally assaulted the DNR, stating that this requirement was a classic example of bureaucratic greed and extortion. Shortly afterwards, this requirement was dropped and Gromme's battle won. Former DNR Secretary and Wisconsin Governor Anthony Earl once stated after several dealings with Owen that, "During the time I served as Secretary of the DNR, I had no firmer friend nor more formidable adversary than Owen Gromme. When he was on my side, we could not be defeated, when he was on the other, I could not win."

Throughout my own 15 years here at the museum, Owen has served as a mentor and an inspiration. I still look at his works and marvel at his output and dedication to the museum. But most of all I admire his integrity. This seems to be the key element in the man's life and the source of his being.

Over the years, Owen and I became close friends. We saw things along the same lines and believed in the same future. Perhaps Owen's greatest strength, however, was the friendship that he shared with so many. For those of us who have had the opportunity to know Owen, our lives have been truly enriched.

Interestingly enough, when Owen died, there were still several weeks remaining of the 1991 waterfowl season. At his internment, prompted by an early winter storm, flocks of Sandhill Cranes, Canada Geese and Tundra Swans passed overhead as if to say goodbye to a dear friend. Then at the end of the prayer, geese in a nearby field took to the air, prompted by a volley of shotgun fire. With Owen's deep love for goose hunting, this was perhaps the most appropriate salute.

Gregory A. Septon
Milwaukee Public Museum
Wells Street
Milwaukee, WI 53233
Green-backed Heron by Lisa Herbert.