

Wyoming Tribune Eagle Column of January 19, 2017: “People of influence can make a real difference”

Occasionally a newspaper editor influences state, even national affairs long term. Such was the case with Frank Bond, who, in the spring of 1882, arrived in Cheyenne at age 25, college degree in hand. He had taken a job with the Wyoming surveyor-general's office where, among other projects, he prepared a site plan for Devil's Tower. In 1890 he served a term in the state's first legislature and by 1895, he had taken on the editorship of The Wyoming Tribune, Cheyenne's daily newspaper. At the time, the city held around 14,000 inhabitants; the entire state's population consisted of about 100,000 residents.

Frank Bond held a lifelong interest in song birds and raptors. In college, he and twin brother Fred collected and preserved more than 500 bird specimens. After college he joined the American Ornithologists' Union, where he became determined to see laws enacted for the protection of non-game birds. He published his first ornithological paper for the union's periodical; when the group drafted a model statute to protect non-game birds, he lobbied to have the Union's model statute adopted in Wyoming.

As editor, “If anyone was in position to proselytize for . . . the bird law,” Chris Madson observes in his article on the proactive bird man in the December 2016 issue of Wyoming Wildlife, “Bond was the man.” As the year 1900 dawned, Bond was successfully selling the model bird law to “the handful of people who had settled in Wyoming.”

The governor supported the idea and Senator Guernsey wrote the legislation, which passed early in the session. Thereafter, bird aficionados journeyed to eastern states, urging emulation of the Wyoming effort. When the Audubon Society was formed, Frank Bond was one of its first members; two months later, he initiated Wyoming's first chapter of the Society in Cheyenne. By then he had acquired a prodigious knowledge of regional wildlife. In particular, he was passionate about Wyoming's songbird and raptor populations.

I write this in my wintery “home away from home,” a trailer that sits on my son's cow acreage in southeastern Texas. When I stroll outside, a few grassland birds take to the air, fly up to cattle partitions or alight on the bare branches of an oak tree. What must it have been like 120 years ago, when great flocks of birds darkened the skies? Bond reported “countless thousands” of Townsend's solitaires in the North Platte Canyon alone. It makes me realize the birds we observe today are mere remnants of their former populations.

120 years ago, when beavers were trapped by the hundred thousands for the sake of top hats for men, women's fashions were no less complicit in out-of-control slaughter. In the case of birds, sometimes their plumes, sometimes entire carcasses, adorned women's hats. Countless thousands lost their lives on behest of the millinery industry. Madson cites sources of the times with statistics that makes your skin crawl.

In 1886, William Dutcher of the Ornithologists' Union reported: “A New York taxidermist informed me that he had in his shop 30,000 bird skins, made up expressly for millinery purposes.” By 1903 he reported that “nearly 80,000 Snow Buntings were found in a cold storage house . . . leading department stores in New York offered for sale such valuable birds as Flickers made up for millinery ornaments.”

Another observer of the feather trade noted, “In 1903 the price of plumes offered to hunters was \$32 an ounce, which makes the plumes worth twice their weight in gold.” A single wholesale house in London sold 1,608 30-ounce heron plumes. “These sales meant that 192,960 herons killed at their nests, and from two to three times that number of young or eggs destroyed.”

Birds were also hunted “for the pot,” regardless for season or limits. Additionally, many farmers

shot raptors and songbirds on sight, the former a perceived threat to poultry, the latter because it was believed they ate the grain before it could be harvested. Soon after its formation the Ornithologists' Union pressed the federal government to undertake research on birds' benefit to agriculture. The government responded by creating a Bureau of Economic Ornithology, which later morphed into the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Frank Bond eventually left the editorship in Cheyenne for Washington, D.C., where he took a post at the General Land Office, forerunner of today's Bureau of Land Management. When Teddy Roosevelt set aside Pelican Island as a refuge for birds, Bond set out—successfully, as history has shown—to persuade the president toward a system of reserves on federal lands. Soon his expertise in cartography made him invaluable in the protection of national parks, monuments, and wildlife refuges.

“It was he who prepared the Executive Orders . . . to the President for the remaining fifty-one reservations,” Madson quotes T. Gilbert Pearson. Not a bad move, don't you think, for a newspaper editor at the turn of the twentieth century.