

# B&C CONSER

**PROFILE: CHARLES SHELDON (1867-1928)**

By Leonard H. Wurman B&C Regular Member

The Boone and Crockett Club's early conservation leaders presented many contrasting styles. Theodore Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot enjoyed the limelight. "Ding" Darling and Aldo Leopold, by the nature of their professions, had no choice but to be public figures. George Bird Grinnell was influential behind the scenes, but as editor of *Forest and Stream*, was inevitably a public figure.

Charles Alexander Sheldon assiduously avoided publicity. Except for an antelope refuge in northwest Nevada and the books he authored, his name is little known. Yet he was a man whose hunting exploits and conservation successes were astonishing.

## Youth

Sheldon was born October 17, 1867, in Rutland, Vermont. His family had been successful in the marble business. Young Charles spent his free time hunting, fishing, and becoming keenly adept at woodcraft. Following four prep school years at Phillips Andover Academy, he entered Yale, where he socialized extensively and competed on the rowing team. By his sophomore year, however, he became a serious student.

Sheldon graduated from Yale in 1890. Blessed with an engaging personality, a predilection for hard work,

and uncommonly good judgment, he would retire wealthy 13 years later.

## Mexico

Sheldon's first job was with a Michigan railroad company where he gained recognition by settling a strike to everyone's satisfaction. Four years later, he went to Albany to work for a railroad equipment manufacturer. Here, he became acquainted with people interested in investing in Mexican railroads and mines. When a group of American capitalists in 1898 joined this Mexican venture, they recruited 31-year-old Charles Sheldon as manager. He became 1/32 owner of the enterprise.

Sheldon took advantage of the Mexican state of Chihuahua's ample hunting opportunities, going after sheep, mule and white-tail deer, lions, wolves, and both black and grizzly bear. The wintering ducks and geese offered what he described as the best waterfowl hunting in North America. On one mountain hunt, his guide was Francisco Villa, a bandit who in 1916 led a Mexican raiding party into New Mexico.

After the railroad was completed, Sheldon concentrated on the mining company. The mine he purchased became the largest silver producer in Chihuahua, and made Sheldon financially independent. In 1902, he left Mexico to settle in New York.

## Northern Explorations

When Sheldon heard that the Bureau of Biological Survey was doing an inventory of Mexican wildlife, he journeyed to Washington to meet with bureau chief Dr. C. Hart Merriam and senior field naturalist Edward Nelson. Both were Boone and Crockett Club members. The three became life-long friends. Nelson had spent four years in Alaska and suggested a study of the white Alaskan sheep, which he had named Dall's after an early Alaskan explorer. This was all the stimulus Sheldon needed. He would research the northern sheep for the Bureau.

Sheldon spent the summer of 1904 in the Yukon, hunting sheep and collecting specimens for the Smithsonian. In his company were the artist Carl Rungius and the British explorer Frederick Selous. Both were also to become members of the Boone and Crockett Club. Selous was collecting for the British Museum. On his way home that fall, Sheldon hunted elk on Vancouver Island.

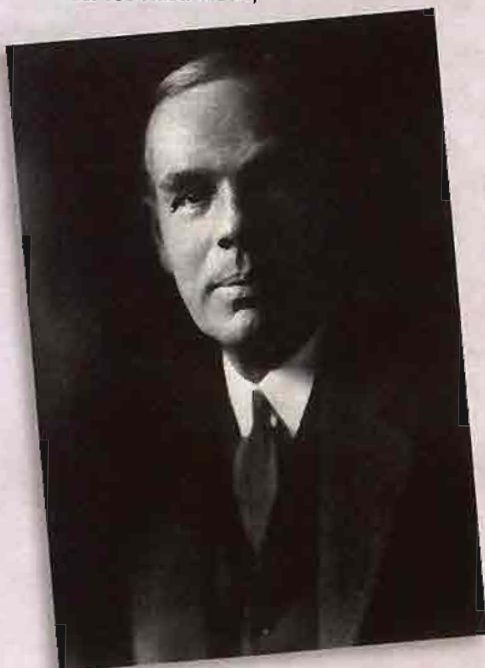
His pattern of hunting was most frequently solo. He hired locals to assist with transportation to the hunting areas, care for the horses, and help with camp chores. He was an extremely competent woodsman. If caught in a snowstorm at dusk, he would not hesitate to sit beneath a tree, brew a pot of tea, and have a snack before heading back to the camp in the darkness. He was not afraid to bivouac overnight.

In early 1905, Edward Nelson sponsored Sheldon into the Boone and Crockett Club. That spring, Sheldon hunted and studied brown bears on Alaska's Montague Island and then spent four months again studying and hunting sheep in the Yukon mountains. He had transformed himself from an amateur naturalist into a dedicated scientist. His description of the color phases and range of Stone's sheep was the authoritative reference for years. Additionally, he collected specimens of many other varieties of wildlife, taking extensive notes. The only firearm Sheldon used for big game, whether sheep or brown bear, was a bolt action 6.5x54R (.256 caliber) rifle. He was very accurate beyond 250 yards using iron sights from the sitting position.

Sheldon was very modest in his descriptions of not only his hunting and shooting prowess, but of his exploits in general, often downplaying the dangers to which he had exposed himself. He had a reputation for remarkable strength and stamina, as well as intellect. He traveled light, taking along a small rucksack in which he kept a squirrel-skin cloak. Except in winter, he preferred a tarp to a tent, with a fire in front for warmth. In camp, he slept in a coonskin robe.

Sheldon spent the summer of 1906 in the region of Mt. McKinley in central Alaska. The majesty of the scenery and the abundance of moose, caribou, grizzly, and sheep astounded him. His guide on this trip was Harry Karstens, who had arrived in Alaska as a gold prospector 9 years earlier at age 18. On the return trip home, Sheldon hunted caribou in the Queen Charlotte Islands off the coast of British Columbia.

The following summer, Sheldon and Karstens returned to Mt. McKinley, built a small log cabin, and spent the winter. Karstens was frequently gone for several weeks at a time to get supplies, either by pack horse or dog sled. Sheldon continued his quest to collect specimens and to study sheep. No matter how late the hour, or how tired he was, he al-



**PORTRAIT OF CHARLES SHELDON FROM AROUND 1925.**

Photograph courtesy of the William Sheldon Collection, Alaska and Polar Regions Department, University of Alaska, Fairbanks.

# VATIONISTS

ways entered the day's activities into his journal. Karstens also led an interesting life. In 1923, he was in the group of four climbers who first scaled Mt. McKinley. When Mt. McKinley National Park was created, Karstens became its first superintendent.

## The Conservation Years

In 1906, Sheldon was appointed to the Executive Committee of the Boone and Crockett Club. Two years later he presented his plans for a 2,200 square mile Denali National Park to the Club. (He much preferred the local Native name of Denali, "The High One," to McKinley.) The timing wasn't right. The Club at that time was nearing the end of its 19-year battle to establish Glacier National Park and didn't wish to divide its effort.

Sheldon married in 1909 at age 41. He and his wife settled in New York and had four children. The only boy, William, earned a Ph.D. in biology, became a well-known naturalist, earned five medals for bravery in WW II, and also became a member of the Boone and Crockett Club.

In 1912, Sheldon became chairman of Boone and Crockett's Game Preservation Committee. The committee immediately addressed the problem of the dwindling pronghorn population, estimated to number less than 17,000. Lobbying finally closed the pronghorn seasons in all states. The Club also raised money to transplant Alberta pronghorn to large enclosures in Oklahoma and Montana. Both projects eventually failed, pronghorn not adapting to confinement within fences.

But the season closures themselves paid off and the population trend was reversed.

Sheldon and the Game Preservation Committee were influential with the passage in 1913 of the Weeks-McClearn migratory bird law. This legislation essentially federalized waterfowl hunting by unifying and coordinating the many different state laws. Five years later, more teeth were put into the law when the Migratory Bird Treaty was signed.

## Denali

Miners and hunters were slowly encroaching on the area Sheldon had proposed for Denali National Park. By 1915, the railroad under construction between Fairbanks and Seward ran along Denali's eastern edge, making commercial entry into the area easier. The National Park Service was formed in 1916 and immediately encouraged the creation of the Alaskan park. Sheldon and his family moved to Washington to increase his lobbying efforts. The Boone and Crockett Club went so far as to throw a banquet for Congress. When the proposal eventually passed both houses, Sheldon hand-carried the legislation to the White House. President Wilson signed it on February 26, 1917, and gave the pen to Sheldon. The park's name, however, was Mount McKinley; the name wasn't

changed to Denali National Park until 1980.

With the constraints of his growing family, Sheldon's hunting and specimen collecting for the Biological Survey became limited. Concentrating on the desert bighorn, he took five trips, lasting from two to six weeks, to Arizona in 1912 and 1913, and to Sonora, Mexico, in 1915, 1916, and 1921. On the last trip, he became the only American to hunt with the Seri Indians on Tiburon Island before civilization's spread influenced their culture. His recorded observations were a major contribution to Seri anthropology. At the finish

**BELOW: A DALL'S SHEEP WITH MOUNT MCKINLEY IN THE BACKGROUND.**

**INSET: CHARLES SHELDON FEEDS A GRAY JAY NEAR HIS CABIN IN ALASKA.**

Photograph courtesy of the William Sheldon Collection, Alaska and Polar Regions Department, University of Alaska, Fairbanks.



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Sheldon wrote the books: "The Wilderness of the Upper Yukon" (1911) and "The Wilderness of the North Pacific Coast Islands" (1912). His best known book, "The Wilderness of Denali" (1930) was edited from Sheldon's notes by C. Hart Merriam and published posthumously. "The Wilderness of the Southwest", a compilation of Sheldon's Arizona and Sonora notes, was edited by Neil Carmony and David Brown and published in 1993. It and James Trefethen's "Crusade for Wildlife" were the basic references for this article.

of this expedition, Sheldon had donated to the Smithsonian a total of 554 specimens, including 120 big-game animals.

Sheldon was involved with several issues specific to Alaska. During the First World War, the cost of transportation, exacerbated by profiteering, had markedly elevated beef and other commodity prices in Alaska, where residents often lived off the land. The yearly big game bag limit

it was eight head taken during the legal season. Although it was illegal to sell game, doing so was a generally accepted practice. To temporarily compensate for the high beef prices, Alaskans petitioned Congress to formally allow the sale of legally taken game and to increase the bag limits.

This didn't go over well with eastern conservationists, many of whom were New Yorkers without much understanding of other local mores and customs. Even several members of the Boone and Crockett Club objected to a loosening of the conservation laws. While Sheldon and Nelson favored a short term relaxing of the laws, another Club member, William Hornaday, railed so loudly and publicly criticized Nelson and Sheldon so vehemently that a bill to ease the rules was buried in a Congressional committee. Alaskans were furious with the Club, and Hornaday's tirade caused the first significant division, albeit temporary, within it.

However, Sheldon did recover the respect of Alaskans when he was asked to rewrite the territory's game laws. The last revision had been in 1908 and was outdated. Among other changes, he proposed an Alaskan Game Commission to manage the resources. The Alaskan Game Law Bill was approved by Congress in 1925 and became the basis for Alaska's game laws after it achieved statehood, as well as the basis for game management programs in other states.

In the years after World War I, elec-

tronic appliances, the automobile, and shorter work weeks all led to an increased utilization of the nation's forests, parks, and camping and hunting areas. The Boone and Crockett Club prevailed on President Calvin Coolidge to initiate a National Conference on Outdoor Recreation, which was held yearly from 1924 through 1928. Sheldon chaired the General Resolutions Committee. Almost all of the conference's resolutions were accepted by the federal, state, and local agencies. Another important result was the conversion of game, fish, and forest administrations from the political to the professional arena.

## National Parks

In their early days, national parks were frequently under attack by speculators and investors on the adjacent lands. One example was the attempt to siphon water out of Yellowstone National Park to irrigate Idaho farmland. In response, George Bird Grinnell founded the Citizens' National Parks Commission. A region that was a good candidate for a future national park encompassed the mountains of the Tennessee-North Carolina border. Grinnell sent Sheldon to evaluate the area. While both state's governors recommended the low altitude, cut-over lands for inclusion in the park, Sheldon's 1927 summary to the Secretary of the Interior urged him to obtain the mountain peaks. This was done and, in 1930, the Great Smoky Mountains National Park was established.

Sheldon would not live to see that day. On September 21, 1928, at age 60 and apparently in perfect health, he died of a heart attack while vacationing at the family's Nova Scotia cabin. In his memory, the Boone and Crockett Club purchased 4,000 acres in the northwest corner of Nevada as a pronghorn sanctuary. The land was given to the federal government, which has subsequently enlarged it several times to 575,000 acres.

Sheldon was the consummate hunter/conservationist. A vastly skilled hunter, excellent shot, and superb woodsman, he became an extremely competent naturalist and an accomplished conservationist. At his death, his personal library contained over 6,000 books. These were subsequently given to Yale University. His friend and fellow Boone and Crockett Club member, John C. Phillips, cataloged these books in *American Game Mammals and Birds*, published in 1930. James Cummins Bookseller republished Phillips' catalog of Sheldon's library as *A Bibliography of American Sporting Books* in 1991. ■

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