

FORMATION OF THE SASKATCHEWAN NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY

by MARGARET BELCHER*

The recent anniversary celebrated by the Saskatchewan Natural History Society marked the end of its first 25 years of activity. The provincial organization, however, is not the oldest natural history society in existence in Saskatchewan, nor indeed was it the first in this area to form an association of naturalists on a regional rather than a local basis. Before Saskatchewan became a province, and indeed until 1909, there existed a Territorial Natural History Society, and, from 1912 until at least 1917, a Saskatchewan Naturalists' Club whose annual report was printed as part of the Report of the Chief Game Guardian. The history of these early societies remains to be written.

Several local societies, as well, can claim the distinction of being older than the Saskatchewan Natural History Society. The Prince Albert Society's records go back to 1914, although the society did not remain active and was reorganized in 1954. The Regina Natural History Society, established in 1933, has a record of unbroken activity since that date, and still meets as it did 41 years ago on the third Monday of each month.

The immediate ancestor of the provincial society, however, was the Yorkton Natural History Society, organized in 1942 with Mrs. Isabel Priestly as president of the club and editor of its modest little



Mrs. Isabel Priestly

mimeographed bulletin the *Blue Jay*. For several years before this, the Yorkton group had "watched birds and had some pleasant times together", as Mrs. Priestly was later to write, but it was felt necessary to organize formally as a society if a real contribution was to be made to the community. Nevertheless, it remained Mrs. Priestly's conviction that "there is no need for a natural history society to be an alarmingly highbrow affair."

From the first issue, the *Blue Jay* was characterized by Mrs. Priestly's unaffected and sensitive appreciation of

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ature. Trained as a scientist, this charming and cultivated woman was able to establish a friendly bond with amateur naturalists across the province, who welcomed the bulletin as a means of sharing their observations. Her premature death on April 3, 1946, was a serious blow to the Yorkton Society and its publication. The freshness of Mrs. Priestly's observations of the prairies lingers in the last entry in her notebook, written only two weeks before her death: "April 8. Lovely morning. Walked out along the tracks to pond on west road. Meadowlarks singing, juncos everywhere, blue jays around fir trees. Ponds frozen over. No ducks or redwings, just one brewer's. On way home heard blue jay singing."

Following Mrs. Priestly's death, Cliff Shaw, a reporter for the *Leader-Post* who had been an active member of the Regina Natural History Society before coming to Yorkton, carried on her work as president and editor. By the summer of 1948, however, it was becoming difficult for the Yorkton Natural History Society to continue the publication of the *Blue Jay*. Although the Provincial Museum had undertaken the mimeographing of the bulletin, the Yorkton group found it increasingly hard to gather material and to assemble it in time to meet deadlines. Several numbers of the bulletin had been late and some had not appeared at all. Interest was rapidly falling off, and there were consequently fewer contributions. These difficulties prompted Mr. Shaw to enquire whether the Regina Natural History Society might help publish the *Blue Jay*. The Regina Society asked for a written proposal for consideration, and accordingly, on August 28, 1948, a letter was drafted by one of the active young members of the Executive of the Yorkton Society, Stuart Houston, and sent to the President of the Regina Society, Dr. George F. Ledingham, biology professor at the

Regina College of the University of Saskatchewan. The proposal was a simple one — an invitation to the Regina Society to share with the Yorkton Society the sponsorship of the *Blue Jay*, "thus making it the official bulletin of both Regina and Yorkton societies."

The Executive of the Regina Natural History Society met on September 7 and agreed to help ensure the publication of the *Blue Jay*. However, instead of Yorkton and Regina sharing the sponsorship of the *Blue Jay* as the official bulletin of both societies, as had been suggested in the Yorkton letter, the formation of a Saskatchewan Natural History Society with branches in various towns was proposed. Members of these branches would automatically become members of the provincial society and receive the *Blue Jay*, and half their fees would go to each of the two organizations.

Although the proposal for a provincial natural history society was made in Regina, there is no doubt that the idea of a provincial organization had been germinating for some time in the minds of *Blue Jay* subscribers scattered widely over the province. In fact, Mrs. Priestly had expressed such a sentiment in an editorial in 1943, saying that she would like to see "many more local clubs, all of which could then unite to form a federation of Saskatchewan naturalists."

The Yorkton Natural History Society consequently received with enthusiasm the proposals made by Dr. Ledingham on behalf of the Regina Society and approved them at a meeting held on September 30, 1948. The Yorkton Society thereby handed over to the provincial association the right to publish the *Blue Jay*, but it wished to make it one of the terms of the agreement that the association undertake to continue the name "Blue Jay" and to retain the dedication to the late Mrs. Priestly. The Yorkton society

also wished to publish a valedictory issue explaining its decision to turn over the publication to the provincial organization. It was agreed that Lloyd T. Carmichael, a science teacher at Scott Collegiate in Regina, should become editor, with an annual honorarium of \$100, and that the Regina Society should name a secretary and ask Fred G. Bard, Director of the Provincial Museum, to become the head official (an honour that Mr. Bard later declined).

On October 1, 1948, there were 133 paid-up subscribers and 119 to whom renewal notices had been sent. However, few contributions had been received for the next issue of the *Blue Jay*, and the Regina Executive therefore offered to help Yorkton publish its "valedictory" number, marking the end of the seven-year period during which it had kept its friendly little bulletin alive. Beyond this immediate assistance, there was disagreement in the Regina Society on the form and extent of aid to be given the *Blue Jay*, for some members of the Executive felt that the Regina Society did not have adequate financial or personal resources to publish a bulletin, and that such over-commitment of resources might lead to the breaking-up of the Society. Accordingly, it was urged that support should be sought not so much from the Regina Natural History Society as an organization as from those of its members who were also subscribers to the *Blue Jay*. These persons and all other subscribers in the province should have a say in establishing policy for the bulletin, and even in the decision of whether to retain the name "Blue Jay". Therefore no commitments would be made in advance, said Dr. Ledingham in his letter of October 19 to Mr. Shaw, and policy matters would be left to members of the new organization.

Some thought had already been given, however, to the form the new

organization might take. Instead of relying upon the leadership of a single person as president, or even of a few persons in executive positions, Dr. Ledingham thought, it should draw upon all those people active in natural history, biology or conservation perhaps through having a special category of members known as fellows or directors with special responsibility for the continuance of the *Blue Jay*. While a friendly, informal association of members should be maintained, some formal status had to be given the Society, with incorporation under the Benevolent Societies Act, provision for levying fees and receiving donations, the naming of any officers needed to act for the Society, as well as the formulation of a constitution.

At first the membership fee contemplated was a modest 50 cents, and in retrospect it seems a courageous gesture for the Society to have considered paying an editor \$100 with a paid-up membership of only 133! The policy of a low membership fee has been retained over the years by the Saskatchewan Natural History Society with the intention of making membership open to all sincerely interested persons.

The final issue of the *Blue Jay* as the official organ of the Yorkton Natural History Society was published late in 1948, and it included an announcement that an open meeting would be held in Regina to discuss the formation of a provincial society, and a questionnaire seeking to ascertain members' interests in natural history. The questionnaire was taken seriously, for members realized that the very future of the bulletin depended on their response. Over 90 replies were received from the current membership of 133. The largest number of these gave their special interest as birds and mammals, but many added plants, or insects, or Indian artifacts and archaeology, or geology, or taxidermy,



Cliff Shaw

and a considerable number of more catholic tastes stated their interest in any" or "all" aspects of natural history! When asked for suggestions on how to handle material, readers recommended more sketches and photographs, more help for students and beginners, contributions from authorities in special fields, but also full use of all notes received from amateurs, a non-technical approach that would be at once simple and personal, more reviews of books, and so on. Some people, however, simply said: "I like the *Blue Jay* as it is."

Suffice it to say that the interest shown by the returned questionnaires justified the calling of a meeting to form a provincial society, and the date was set for January 24 in Regina.

The old Regina College on Scarth Street, at 8:00 p.m. on a Saskatchewan winter evening when the January cold draws people indoors, was the setting for the institution of the new society. Present at this founding meeting on

January 24, 1949, according to the Society's minutes, were the following members: Cliff Shaw from Yorkton, Leonard Dreger from Lang, Dr. G. F. Ledingham, Fred G. Bard, Mr. and Mrs. Dick Bird, Miss E. Barker, Fred Lahrman, Mr. Scott, William Whitehead, L. T. Carmichael, Fred S. Robinson, W. A. Brownlee and James Gerlitz from Regina.

Dick Bird and Cliff Shaw made the operative motion that a provincial natural history society be organized, and it was decided that the aims of the Society would be "to publish the *Blue Jay* and to foster an active interest in natural history." Though expanded into a more elaborate statement in later revisions of the Society's constitution, these simple aims still constitute the basic objectives of the Saskatchewan Natural History Society.

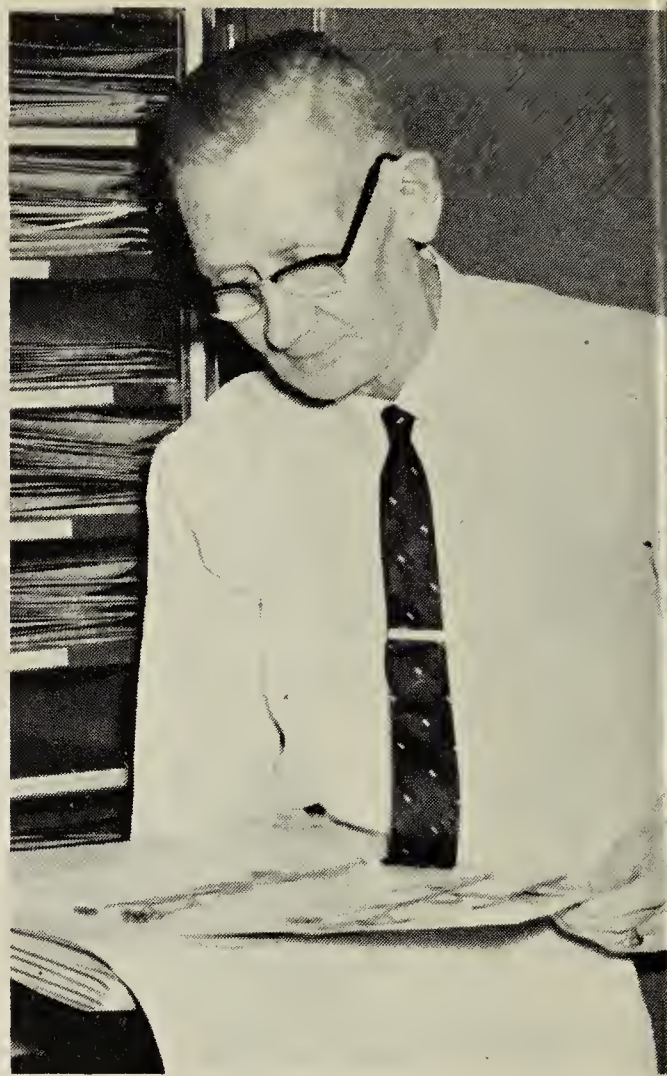
By a second motion, the name of "The Saskatchewan Natural History Society" was approved, and subsequent motions established officers and directors and appointed Lloyd Carmichael as Editor-in-chief with an annual honorarium of \$100.00. The Yorkton Natural History Society sanctioned the release of the 25 cents of the 50-cent subscription-membership fee which had previously gone to the Yorkton Society to finance its operations, and thus the formal connection between the *Blue Jay* and its first sponsor was terminated. The annual fee for membership in the new society was set at \$1.00, this fee to include a one-year subscription to the *Blue Jay*. Fred G. Bard, Director of the Provincial Museum, offered mimeographing services to the value of \$100, to meet half the cost of printing the *Blue Jay*.

The provisional executive named to serve until a members' meeting could be called to ratify a constitution and formalize the formation of the society, included Dr. George F. Ledingham of Regina as president, Cliff Shaw of

Yorkton as first vice-president, Maurice G. Street of Nipawin as second vice-president, William Whitehead of Regina as secretary-treasurer, and Lloyd T. Carmichael of Regina as editor. In addition, 12 directors were named at this meeting and a subsequent executive meeting, and their names appeared on the masthead of the next issue of the *Blue Jay*: H. C. Andrews (Principal of the Normal School, Moose Jaw), R. (Dick) Bird (Regina), E. W. Brooman (Prince Albert), A. C. Budd (Experimental Station, Swift Current), Judge L. T. McKim (Melfort), Lloyd Peterson (Indian Head), Stuart Houston (Yorkton), E. W. Van Blaricom, K.C. (Tisdale), R. J. Priestly (Regina), F. S. Robinson (Regina), W. A. Brownlee (Regina), and Fred G. Bard (Director of the Provincial Museum, Regina). Dean W. P. Thompson, President-Elect of the University of Saskatchewan, consented to be the first Honorary President.

It was agreed that the *Blue Jay* would be continued as a quarterly, and it was carefully stated that its subject matter would not be scientific, but would consist chiefly of actual field reports and observations of the members.

When we look back from the vantage point of 25 years, certain items from the early minutes and correspondence of the Society assume special significance. For example, it is of interest that an idea advanced by the Yorkton Natural History Society for an annual rally of all members at some central point of interest was realized six years later when the first summer meet was held at Fort Qu'Appelle. This activity of the Society, now a yearly event, encourages personal contacts among the members, particularly those who live distant from an organized local natural history club. Or again, in the light of later discussions of ways of cooperating



Lloyd T. Carmichael

with fish and wildlife organizations in the province, it is interesting that a letter from the Fish and Game League was read at the first meeting of the Executive, suggesting the possibility of the merging of the two organizations. The decision of the Executive to decline the offer for the time being, though agreeing to cooperate with the Fish and Game League in other ways, decisively influenced the future role of the Saskatchewan Natural History Society.

In March, 1949 the *Blue Jay* appeared for the first time in its new role as official publication of the Saskatchewan Natural History Society. The number carried Bob Priestly's expression of appreciation to those who were carrying on his wife's work. He wrote that from the time the *Blue Jay's* growth seemed a positive fact "it was Mrs. Priestly's belief that it should



George F. Ledingham

become the official organ of a society of wider scope. There was no provincial organization and the formation of one seemed unlikely, hence her approach to the Provincial Museum for joint sponsorship in September, 1945. That her one-time dream is about to become realized is a great source of satisfaction to our children and myself."

The next important step in the organization of the Society was the convoking of the first annual meeting in Regina on October 21 and 22, 1949. Rather ambitious plans were made for a two-day session combining the business meeting, concerned with adopting a constitution and electing officers, and an educational programme of films and talks. Through this meeting it was hoped to strengthen the Society and increase the

membership, for although "first-year enthusiasm" was still running fairly high in Regina, it was felt that people from other parts of the province were not giving the help expected of them.

At the business session, held on the evening of Friday, October 21, Dr. George Ledingham presided and W. A. Brownlee acted as secretary. Bill Whitehead, as secretary-treasurer of the provisional society, reported receipts of \$341.25 (including a carry-over of \$75.00 from Yorkton) and expenses of \$257.94 (including \$75.00 paid to the Editor). It was noted that with a subscription list of 383, the cost of each copy of the *Blue Jay* was 17 cents!

In the discussion of the draft constitution proposed by Fred Robinson and Dr. Ledingham, the most lively

item was the question of the Society's name. The name of "Saskatchewan Nature Club" suggested in the draft constitution met with considerable resistance, and a motion was made to change it to "Saskatchewan Natural History Society." A further motion, recorded in the minutes as carried, proposed submitting a list of suggested names to all members of the Society through the *Blue Jay* and asking them for further proposals. However, when the next *Blue Jay* appeared, the question of the Society's name was not raised, and the constitution printed in the bulletin simply stated that "the name of the Society shall be 'The Saskatchewan Natural History Society'." Although this designation has been retained for 25 years, a number of attempts have been made during that time to re-open the question of the Society's name.

The Annual Meeting asked the officers of the provisional society to carry on for the year 1949-50; thus President W. P. Thompson remained as Honorary President, Dr. Ledingham as President, C. Shaw as

First Vice-President, and Maurice Street as Second Vice-President. In addition, there were five "executive members" from Regina — Fred Robinson, Fred Bard, Dick Bird, Bill Brownless, Bill Whitehead, and 15 directors (as required by the new constitution) who were given one, two and three-year terms — E. W. Brooman (Prince Albert), H. C. Andrews (Moose Jaw), Judge L. T. McKim (Melfort), E. W. Van Blaricom (Tisdale), A. C. Budd (Swift Current), L. T. Peterson (Indian Head), R. J. Priestly (Victoria), C. S. Houston (Yorkton), R. C. MacKenzie (Regina), W. Yanchinski (Naicam), A. Ward (Burnham), A. McPherson (Saskatoon), Mrs. Marion Nixon (Wauchope), Mrs. J. Hubbard Jr. (Grenfell), R. P. Stueck (Abernethy).

Thus formal status was given to the organization that had come into being informally on January 24, 1949, in the small but enthusiastic gathering of persons prepared to make the personal commitment necessary for the formation of a provincial natural history society.



" . . . pond on the west road . . ."

Stuart Houston