

# WILLIAM A. BROWNLEE (1901 - 1987)



William A. Brownlee was at heart a conservationist, who demonstrated his commitment throughout his life in his work and in his recreational activities. He first learned to appreciate nature in the lovely rolling countryside of the Moose Mountains where he grew up, and when the Saskatchewan Natural History Society was planning its summer meet there in 1959, he wrote invitingly in the *Blue Jay* about that area as one of the province's beauty spots. He talked especially about the abundance of native trees and shrubs, although there were no conifers in the park except those that had been planted there. Modestly, he did not mention the part that he himself had played in setting out little seedlings in the early 1920s, which have since become avenues of tall mature evergreens. His wife, Helen

Brownlee, tells us that he retained his joy in nature until the end of his life, and never tired of looking out from the windows of his home where he spent his last days. Sitting there in his chair, he would call her, for example, to "take a minute" to look at the beauty of a birch tree in their garden during an ice storm.

William Andrew Brownlee was born 15 May 1901 in the High View District, in what was then the Northwest Territories. His parents, William and Elizabeth Brownlee had come as pioneers to Cannington Manor from Enniskillen, Northern Ireland. In the Arcola-Kisbey history book, published in 1987 (shortly after Brownlee's death), Brownlee tells the family story, with this description of life on the farm during his boyhood years:

Work on the farm was carried out with horses and horse machinery until about 1916 when gasoline tractors and some newer machinery began to replace horse power. Cattle were kept and required a lot of work. There was the cutting of native grass for winter feed, stacking, hauling, and spreading in the feed lot in winter. Pumping water was okay if the small engine and pump jack worked!

Brownlee left the farm to go to the Manitoba Agricultural College in Winnipeg. Later he was employed for three seasons with the headquarters staff at Kenosee (Fish Lake) and in 1927 he was sent to the Long Lake Ranger station north of Kisbey as a forest officer who served both as a ranger and a game guardian.

William Brownlee married Helen Thonger of Kisbey in 1929 and they moved the following year to Indian Head where Brownlee worked with Norman Ross, the Superintendent of the Forest Nursery Station. Their son, John Andrew, was born there in 1931. In 1935 Brownlee was taken on staff by the Saskatchewan Department of Natural Resources and he continued to work out of Indian Head until 1942, when he went to Yorkton. In 1946 he was transferred to the Game Branch of the Department in Regina. In 1952 he moved to the Federal Department of Indian Affairs where he was employed until his retirement in 1966. With Indian Affairs he went to the Red Pheasant Reserve at Rose Valley and then to the Nut Lake Reserve. When he retired he and Helen returned to Regina.

W.A. Brownlee first came to the attention of other Saskatchewan naturalists when he moved to Yorkton and joined Isabel M. Priestly's enthusiastic newly-fledged Yorkton Natural History Society. The year he moved to Yorkton (1942) was the year in which that society and its newsletter publication, the *Blue Jay* came

into being. In the next few years the name of W.A. Brownlee appeared frequently in the *Blue Jay* — as a director of the Yorkton Natural History Society, as a contributor to its notes, or as a member of the Yorkton Christmas Bird Count (that he went on with his young son).

W.A. Brownlee was also a founding member of the Saskatchewan Natural History Society which was organized in 1949 in Regina, by which time Brownlee was living and working there. He was thus able to serve as one of the directors of the new provincial society. At the first annual meeting he acted as secretary and from that time on he continued to be involved in the Society's work. Perhaps long-time members of SNHS remember him best as the provincial director from Rose Valley and after his retirement and return to Regina, as the society's president, in which office he served for two years (1967-69). He had also, for a short time in 1951, served as president of the Regina Natural History Society. As president of SNHS he encouraged young naturalists and when the annual meeting was in Regina he had a houseful of boys and girls from the Junior Natural History Society in Saskatoon billeted in his basement. The loyal commitment of the early members of the natural history societies in the province laid the foundations for the strong conservation-oriented organization that the Saskatchewan Natural History Society is today.

In speaking to us about her husband, who died in Regina on 13 February 1987, Helen Brownlee told us of the tribute Al Hochbaum had paid him during a memorable visit to Delta in 1952. "I'll never forget him," said Hochbaum of Brownlee, "What a naturalist!" — *Margaret Belcher*, 2601 Winnipeg Street, Regina, Saskatchewan S4P 1H8 and *George F. Ledingham*, 2335 Athol Street, Regina, Saskatchewan. S4T 3G4