

An Inspiration To Us All

The Boone and Crockett Club's Place in the History of American Conservation

By John F. Reiger

One night in 1999, while working on the expanded edition of my *American Sportsmen and the Origins of Conservation*, a flood of memories came back to me about how I first learned of an

organization called the Boone and Crockett Club. My introduction came in late 1967, while I was riding in a train back to school in Evanston after a trip to the Chicago Public Library, where I had just checked out James B. Trefethen's book, *Crusade for Wildlife*, a history of conservation in America published a few years earlier. I was a history doctoral student at Northwestern and needed to find a dissertation topic.

Opening the book and after turning only a few pages, I came across a photograph of George Bird Grinnell smoking his pipe, with the caption, "One of America's greatest and least appreciated pioneer conservationists." Somehow, I knew in that instant that I had found my dissertation topic, and a lot more besides. As mystical as it may sound, I seemed, at that moment, to be taken over by a feeling that it was my responsibility to bring Grinnell out of the shadows — at least as far as academic historians were concerned — and into the light, where I could test Trefethen's essentially undocumented claim for Grinnell's importance.

But before I could research and write a dissertation on Grinnell and his role in conservation, I had to find his personal papers. After some

investigation, as well as help from Trefethen, I discovered that the main body of papers had been willed to John P. Holman, a Fairfield, Connecticut, Boone and Crockett Club Member, and though much younger, a close, personal friend of Grinnell in his last years. But because Grinnell was born in 1849 and died in 1938, I knew that by the late 1960s, if Holman were still alive, he would have to be very old! It was, therefore, with some anxiety that I called Fairfield information to see if they had a current telephone number for him. Imagine my excitement when the operator gave me the

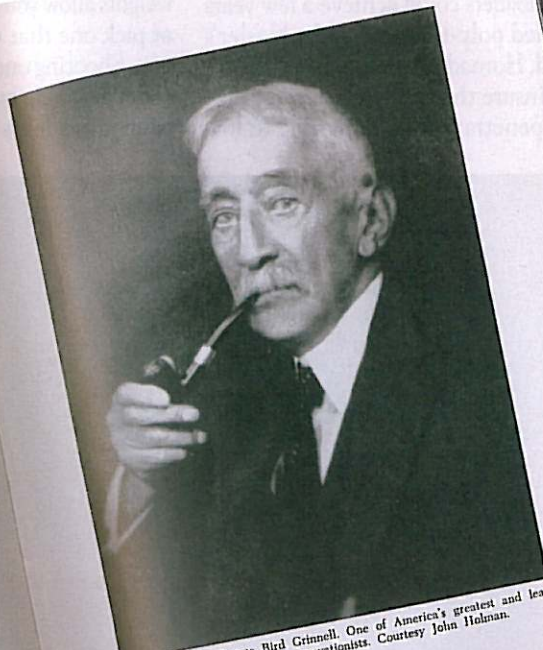


PLATE IV. Dr. George Bird Grinnell. One of America's greatest and least appreciated pioneer conservationists. Courtesy John Holman.

Crusade for Wildlife
Fremont County and that Jim Gehman
at they were observed. The announcement
nell, "to a stampede from the region by all
eat hunters." (82)
are, however, poachers began drifting back
:en from Montana. Gehman turned back
rties who were innocent of the law at the
ests when violations were found. He trailed
han a hundred miles to bring him back to
court. One poacher made the mistake of trying
the constable. Gehman killed him, with most
d Paton received numerous threats, with most
he poachers being vented on the Colonel, but
turned his back on a charging bear was not
by words. The law continued to be enforced.
in the Legislature in January, 1890 and was
man of the Game and Fisheries Committee of the
his leadership, the committee drew up a general
the new state that was far advanced over those of
lder states of the Union.
oming was one of the more important big-game
:cause of the association with it of so many of its
e Boone and Crockett Club took an especial in-
game-law situation there. For reasons best expressed
ess by Professor Osborn, law enforcement, in spite of
of Pickett and his associates, was a difficult problem.
interest is highlighted by correspondence between Pres-
velt and Major W. Austin Wadsworth, then president of
In 1902, Wadsworth received a letter from Wyoming and for-
se writer complained of game-law violations and for-
t to the President for his opinion on possible federal ac-
er discussing the matter with Pinchot, since federal forest
ere involved, T. R. returned the letter, stating that "if the
ure of Wyoming sees fit to ignore this violation, as a club
not compel the observance of the laws." (157) The Club,
er, followed up by authorizing its secretary to write to the
Guides Association at Jackson Hole for the names of the
ors. The outcome of this action is unknown, but it does
onstrate a willingness on the part of the Club to intercede in
l law enforcement if such intervention should have proved
ful.

number, and after calling and explaining my mission, I heard the elderly voice on the other end say, "Yes, I am John P. Holman. When are you going to come and see me to talk about Dr. Grinnell?" (Grinnell had received both an A.B. and Ph.D. from Yale, and Holman never failed to use the respectful title when referring to his older friend.)

On arriving at Holman's house, I found that it sat back in a small grove of trees very close to Interstate 95, where the whoosh of traffic could be continually heard. Despite this intrusion of the modern world, the colonial-style house was filled with old books and furnishings from the turn of the century or before, and seemed to be a kind of time capsule from an earlier age. I was soon to find that its occupant, the man I had come to see, who was then well into his 80s, was also from another time. After greeting me, Holman began immediately to talk about how he came to know Grinnell and how they shared a love for hunting and the outdoors. He was particularly proud that Grinnell had praised his 1933 Boone and Crockett Club-approved book, *Sheep and Bear Trails*, about hunting Dall's sheep in Alaska and grizzlies in British Columbia.

Holman then directed me to sit in a huge leather chair next to his, because that was Dr. Grinnell's favorite. It was in that "place of honor," as Holman called it, that Grinnell would regale his young friend about what it was like to grow up in still rural, upper Manhattan near the home of the late John James Audubon, where Grinnell hunted and fished with the great painter's grandchildren, and studied natural history with his widow, Lucy, who became like a second mother to him; what it was like to cross the continent in 1870 on the just-completed transcontinental railroad and have the train stopped for three hours in eastern Nebraska by bison crossing the tracks; what it was like to join the Pawnee and the famous scout, Luther North, in 1872 for the tribe's great bison hunt; what it was like to ride with George Armstrong Custer in the Black Hills in 1874 when his expedition discovered gold that would help to lead to Custer's annihilation on the Little Bighorn two years later; what it was like to hear the news that his friends in the Custer command had been wiped out on an expedition that he had nearly joined; and, finally, what it was like to become friends with a young Theodore Roosevelt in 1885, and two years later, to join him in founding the Boone and Crockett Club.

The hours of that first interview with John Holman passed like minutes, but I still

had to know if Grinnell's papers were extensive enough to support dissertation-level research. Holman told me that he had given the papers to the Connecticut Audubon Society, whose museum was just down the hill from his home. After entering the small room where the papers were stored, I found to my amazement that the collection began in 1886 and included 38 letterbooks, most of which contained about 1,000 pages of Grinnell's letters that had been pressed onto the page, leaving an imprint, before being sent out. One of the first letters I found in a letterbook picked at random was to "My dear Roosevelt," and I realized that I had discovered one of the great primary source collections of conservation history. It is those letters, and the issues of the weekly newspaper, *Forest and Stream*, which Grinnell owned and edited from 1880 to 1911, that I would use to document his preeminent role in early conservation. And a huge part of that importance came, of course, from his friendship with Theodore Roosevelt, who would go on to lead the movement to preserve and manage — i.e., "conserve" — "natural resources," to use that term in its broadest sense.

But before we can fully understand why and how Grinnell and Roosevelt came together in December of 1887 to create the Boone and Crockett Club, we have to examine their backgrounds, and the social and intellectual milieu from which they came. Grinnell and Roosevelt were both self-styled "sportsmen," individuals of the upper classes who hunted and fished primarily for recreation, rather than commerce or necessity. These sportsmen-conservationists differentiated themselves from countless other men who hunted and fished by their demonstrated commitment to saving wildlife and habitat for the future, a dedication that often brought them into conflict with other Americans who seemed — at least to the sportsmen — to be only interested in the immediate, and complete, exploitation of all facets of the natural world.

By the 1870s, this eagerness to perpetuate the traditions of sport hunting and fishing, and the context in which they took place, led sportsmen to found national newspapers emphasizing conservation issues, to establish organizations of like-minded individuals for protecting wildlife, including fishes, and to lobby state legislatures, and finally Congress, for the passage of laws that would force all other hunters and fishermen to accept the gentleman's "code of the sportsman," as I call it, as the only correct way to pursue game.

It is those letters, and the issues of the weekly newspaper, *Forest and Stream*, which Grinnell owned and edited from 1880 to 1911, that I would use to document his preeminent role in early conservation. And a huge part of that importance came, of course, from his friendship with Theodore Roosevelt, who would go on to lead the movement to preserve and manage — i.e., "conserve" — "natural resources," to use that term in its broadest sense.

The development of this self-imposed, European-derived code meant that a sportsman should adopt a kind of contract with his quarry. Eventually, this one-sided "agreement" would mean that game should not be killed in the breeding season or sold for profit; that it should be taken only in reasonable numbers, without waste; and that it should be pursued solely by means of sporting methods. The individual fish, bird, or mammal was to have a "fair chance" of escape, even though its capture was made more doubtful as a result. Sportsmen came to condemn fishing for trout with worms instead of artificial flies, shooting at ducks on the water before they could take flight, or hunting whitetail deer on snowshoes when the animals were mired down in deep drifts. In other words, a "true sportsman" of the upper classes came to see himself as superior to the great majority of hunters and fishermen at least partly because of the generous spirit he supposedly manifested toward the game.

To many today, the fact that so many of the early sportsmen-conservationists came from privileged backgrounds may offend some egalitarian sensibilities. TR, Grinnell, and Gifford Pinchot, Roosevelt's Chief Forester after TR became President and a

fellow Boone and Crockett Club Member, all came from a group of Americans who have been called "patricians," the old upper class. Like their namesakes in ancient Rome, they had been "socialized" from early childhood to believe in themselves as leaders, and as stewards of the well-being of those beneath them on the socio-economic ladder.

Instead of spending their lives in self-indulgence, as so many of equal wealth have done before and since, they chose to give up a large portion of their adult lives to public service. In so doing, they became models for their own time — and for ours.

It was at least partly because of his American version of noblesse oblige, or "noble obligation," to "improve" society for those who lacked the wealth, education, and social standing to improve it themselves, that Roosevelt decided to enter politics. As a young member of the New York legislature, he had taken an interest in the creation of the Adirondack Forest Preserve in 1885, but it was not until after he had become involved in an on-going crusade to give adequate protection to the neglected Yellowstone National Park, created on paper in 1872, that he initiated his career as an active conservationist. George Bird Grinnell was the man most responsible for bringing about this involvement, the genesis of which was his book review in *Forest and Stream* of Roosevelt's *Hunting Trips of a Ranchman*, published in 1885.

Although Grinnell had some favorable things to say about Roosevelt's volume on his early ranching experience in the West, the reviewer's overall tone was negative. Not surprisingly, the publication of the critique on July 2, 1885, brought an irate Roosevelt to Grinnell's office in New York. The editor must have made a strong case, for as he recalled later, Roosevelt "at once saw my point of view." More importantly, this was the beginning of a life-long friendship between the two men and the first of many discussions during which Grinnell urged TR to join his campaign against the market hunters in the West, who were even inside Yellowstone National Park slaughtering big game like elk and deer for the commercial hide market.

For years, even before meeting Roosevelt, Grinnell had been demanding in his *Forest and Stream* editorials that a truly national sportsmen's association, one committed to passing and enforcing laws to preserve game and habitat, must be established. After Grinnell became intimately associated with TR, he personally emphasized

the need for an effective sportsmen's society, to do for the larger mammals what the Audubon Society — founded by Grinnell in 1886 — was doing for birds. Roosevelt agreed.

The result of these conversations was the founding of the Boone and Crockett Club, named after two of America's most famous hunter-heroes, in December 1887, by Roosevelt, Grinnell, and other prominent sportsmen. The Boone and Crockett Club would play an all-important role in the creation and administration of the first national parks, forest reserves, and wildlife refuges. In addition, "those Halcyon Days," as Roosevelt called the early Boone and Crockett period, were the formative years of his development as the future leader of the conservation movement.

With its interest in the preservation of big game, the Club soon turned its attention to Yellowstone National Park. When that book review brought Grinnell and Roosevelt together, the editor of *Forest and Stream* had already spent several years in crusading for the reserve. There was still no real administrative structure for the park, however, and individuals continued to kill the wildlife, cut down trees, break out the geyserite mineral formations, and attempt to establish private concessions around

the leading "attractions" like Yellowstone Falls and Old Faithful.

A letter by TR, published in *Forest and Stream* on December 5, 1892, is noteworthy because it shows that he was already thoroughly committed to the idea that natural treasures like the Yellowstone region should be preserved for all Americans and their descendants, and not handed over to a minority only interested in commercial exploitation and personal aggrandizement. He stated:

"I have just read the article 'A Standing Menace,' printed in the *Forest and Stream*, in reference to the attempts made to destroy the National Park.... I heartily agree with this article. It is of the utmost importance that the Park shall be kept in its present form as a great forestry preserve and a National pleasure ground, the like of which is not to be found on any other continent than ours; and all public-spirited Americans should join with *Forest and Stream* in the effort to prevent the greed of a little group of speculators, careless of everything save their own selfish interests, from doing the damage they threaten to the whole people of the United States, by wrecking the Yellowstone National Park. So far from having this Park cut down, it should be extended, and legislation adopted which

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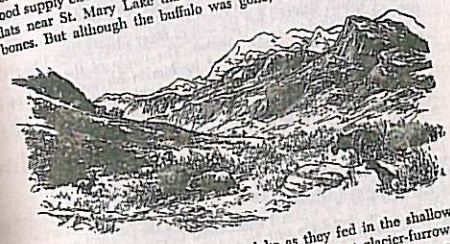
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 diversity of the vegetation—with snowberries, bear grass, mountain ash, wild roses, penstemons and a host of other wild flowers accentuating the somber hues of the spruces and pines.
 No less spectacular than the scenery was the wealth of animal life, and, as a naturalist, Grinnell was struck by its abundance and variety. The last of the local bison had been killed off just one year earlier by Indians faced with famine after their traditional food supply elsewhere was wiped out by white hunters. There were flats near St. Mary Lake that were almost carpeted by bleached bones. But although the buffalo was gone, the black hulk of the



moose could be seen near every lake as they fed in the shallows; beaver lodges dotted the shorelines; and the great glacier-furrowed crags and alpine meadows were flecked with mountain goats and sheep. Elk were less abundant than moose, but they were there in numbers. The ranges of the white-tailed and mule deer overlapped, and both species were common in the thickets fringing the meadows. The puma was common, and the timber wolf was much in evidence. (211) Black bears were not rare, but they were outnumbered by grizzlies. The lakes teemed with lake trout, whitefish, and waterfowl and the woodlands were alive with songbirds and four species of grouse. At a time when game nearly everywhere else was on the decline, Grinnell must have felt that he had found the sportsman's Valhalla. Of all of the big-game animals of the United States, only the recently departed bison, the pronghorn and the caribou were missing from the scene, and antelope still abounded on the plains adjacent to the mountains. (27)

In spite of foul weather that hampered their hunting activities

To point out that Roosevelt took Grinnell's ideas and incorporated them into his evolving conservation creed in no way diminishes the central place TR holds in American environmental history. When it came to reform, Roosevelt prided himself on being a "doer," a man of action. Grinnell, on the other hand, was a creator and amalgamator of ideas...



PLATE III. Theodore Roosevelt. Under his administration American conservation gained its first real momentum. Courtesy Archibald Roosevelt.

would enable the military authorities who now have charge of it to administer it solely in the interests of the whole public, and to punish in the most vigorous way people who trespass upon it. The Yellowstone Park is a great park for the people, and the representatives of the people should see that it is molested in no way."

After years of campaigning to protect America's first national park and, in fact, define what a national park should be, Yellowstone's defenders finally achieved victory after a bison poacher was caught inside the reserve killing some of the very last of this species on earth. A combination of a behind-the-scenes lobbying effort by the Boone and Crockett Club and a *Forest and Stream* editorial barrage that included photographs of slain bison in the snow resulted in the passage of the "Act to Protect the Birds and Animals in Yellowstone National Park," signed by President Grover Cleveland on May 7, 1894.

The bill had been introduced by later Boone and Crockett Member, Iowa Congressman John F. Lacey, and when it became law, it established the precedent for defining Yellowstone and all future national parks as inviolate wildlife and

wilderness preserves. This was the goal that Grinnell had been fighting for in his *Forest and Stream* editorials even before the creation of the Boone and Crockett Club. In his front-page editorial of December 14, 1882, titled "Their Last Refuge," he had eloquently written: "Here in this Yellowstone Park the large game of the West may be preserved from extermination; here... it may be seen by generations yet unborn. It is for the Nation to say whether these splendid species shall be so preserved, in this, their last refuge."

In *A Brief History of the Boone and Crockett Club*, published in 1910, Grinnell explains that "the attempt to exploit Yellowstone National Park for private gain in a way led up to the United States forest reserve system as it stands to-day," because "as a natural sequence to the work that they [the Club's leaders] had been doing" in regard to Yellowstone Park "came the impulse to attempt to preserve western forests generally." Since their original concern had been the park, it might seem odd that concrete results on the forestry question were obtained three years before the passage of the park-protection bill. The reason for this was simply that the battle over the park took place in a public arena against determined Western opposition, while the results in forestry were achieved by circumventing the

popular forum. Nevertheless, the interrelationship of the two issues is shown by the fact that the first forest reserve President Benjamin Harrison chose to set aside in 1891 was the Yellowstone National Park Timberland Reserve adjacent to the national preserve. "In essence," says one observer, "the Yellowstone became the birthplace for both national parks and national forests." He might have added that the systems for managing both were created largely by members of the Boone and Crockett Club. Today, National Forests and Grasslands contain an amazing 192 million acres and are home to most of the wildlife in the western states.

As in the case of saving Yellowstone Park from exploitation, Grinnell had led the Boone and Crockett Club on the forest-protection issue with editorials in *Forest and Stream*, some of which had been written even before the Club had been founded. Here is another example of the fact that many of the ideas that Theodore Roosevelt later made national policy after he became President originated in the fertile mind of George Bird Grinnell, TR's fellow Boone and Crockett Club Member, friend, and adviser. In fact, a phrase that the Roosevelt administration would become famous for in the area of natural resource conservation can be found in a *Forest and Stream* editorial of January 26, 1882, titled, "We, the People." In calling for the leaders of all



In their selfless devotion to preserving the natural world for generations of Americans they would never know, Grinnell, Roosevelt, Pinchot [pictured here with TR], and Leopold, among others, were far greater hunter-heroes than the two men for whom their Club was named.

“preservationist” (like Muir) or a “conservationist” (like Pinchot). While this dichotomy may apply in some cases, true conservationists like George Bird Grinnell and Theodore Roosevelt knew that “natural resources” — using that term in its broadest sense — must be conserved under a variety of administrative schemes. They would fight just as hard for the scientific utilization of national forests as for the preservation

of natural conditions in national parks. And they would continue to love to hunt, while at the same time campaigning for the establishment of wildlife sanctuaries. Neither man felt any inconsistency in his position, because there was none. They knew that one had to be both an “aesthetic conservationist” and a “utilitarian conservationist,” depending on the issue involved.

The “wise use of natural resources,” a phrase the Roosevelt administration would come to popularize, meant that every unit in the conservation program — from national forests to national wildlife refuges — benefited from continuous, scientific, apolitical management, an ideology first developed by George Bird Grinnell decades before. And “management,” of course, could mean no public use at all, if the area in question was one of special ecological concern.

It is clear that the conservation legacy of the Boone and Crockett Club contains at least two parts. First, there is the gift of the land itself, the tens of millions of acres brought under federal protection. Second, there is the administrative philosophy, and structure, created to preserve and manage that land.

Even though I have focused in this address on the early years of the Boone and Crockett Club, it should be emphasized that the organization continued to have a huge impact after TR left the Presidency in 1909. Among the major achievements for which it can take some or most of the

credit are the creation of Glacier National Park in 1910, and Mount McKinley (later Denali) National Park in 1917, the passage of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act in 1918, the establishment of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in 1930, and the provision of much of the funds in the 1950s to save the habitat of the Key deer in Florida. In more recent years the Club has continued its good work by preserving large blocks of habitat in the West, and especially in funding wildlife research in order to develop better management strategies.

As stated earlier, the Club’s legacy is the land preserved “for generations yet unborn,” to use Grinnell’s eloquent phrase, as well as the sound administrative ideology for managing that land. But there is another dimension to the Club’s legacy, which, like the protected lands left behind, continues to benefit us, and those who will follow us. Grinnell, Roosevelt, and other Boone and Crockett Club leaders are excellent role models for those of us who care about the future of the natural world.

The proof of that statement is the large number of Americans that Roosevelt, in particular, has inspired over the years. These include everyone from presidents like TR’s cousin, Franklin, John F. Kennedy, and Bill Clinton to ordinary citizens like myself and the members of the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, a national advocacy coalition that seeks to remind Americans that “Conservation”—in the words of Theodore Roosevelt—is a “National Duty.” The coalition’s members, which include the Boone and Crockett Club, have as their collective mission, “To ensure that America’s lands, both public and private, will always provide clean water, healthy habitat, bountiful fish and wildlife populations, and opportunities to fish, hunt and enjoy the outdoors.”

The Boone and Crockett Club creed, as personalized by TR, even inspired Aldo Leopold, author of the classic *A Sand County Almanac* and “father of the American land ethic,” who joined the Club in 1923. In Leopold’s *Game Management*, published in 1933, he applauded the coming of what he called “the Rooseveltian era” and “the Crusader

the state legislatures to push for “the conservation of our game and fish,” Grinnell argued that “laws prohibiting the destruction of game in its breeding season and of fish on their spawning grounds are not for the advantage of any narrow class or clique,” but “are for the good of us, the people.” Conservation, like all governmental policy, Grinnell exhorted, should be for “the greatest good to the greatest number.”

To point out that Roosevelt took Grinnell’s ideas and incorporated them into his evolving conservation creed in no way diminishes the central place TR holds in American environmental history. When it came to reform, Roosevelt prided himself on being a “doer,” a man of action. Grinnell, on the other hand, was a creator and amalgamator of ideas, who, as James B. Trefethen of the Wildlife Management Institute once observed, “was a pusher rather than a leader, working behind the scenes and quietly steering the energies of more active public officials into constructive channels.”

After TR became President, his administration established 5 national parks, 18 national monuments, and 51 national wildlife refuges, but its focal point was the forest, as the most all-inclusive, “practical” issue in conservation. Using the well-known antagonism between philosopher John Muir and forester Gifford Pinchot as their model, some historians have insisted upon categorizing every environmental activist as either a

for conservation,... who insisted that our conquest of nature carried with it a moral responsibility for the perpetuation of... threatened forms of wildlife" and, by implication, the habitats upon which they depend. This acceptance of responsibility, Leopold believed, "constitutes one of the milestones in moral evolution."

As mentioned earlier, the Boone and Crockett Club's creed has also influenced countless ordinary citizens like myself. In fact, I would be remiss in concluding this article without citing how the example of public service represented by members of the Club, especially Grinnell and Roosevelt, inspired me to leave the security of a full professorship at the University of Miami in Coral Gables, Florida, for the unknown, and very insecure, world of environmental advocacy as Executive Director of the Connecticut Audubon Society.

When I accepted the offer of a five-year term in 1983 from the organization I had first learned about in John Holman's living room so many years before, I had no idea where it would lead. But I knew I had to seize the chance to "make a difference," as we used to say in the 60s, in the "real world" beyond the University.

What would Grinnell or TR have thought of me if I had not "climbed into the ring" — as Roosevelt might have put it — and passed up a possible opportunity to achieve great things in the conservation field, rather than simply writing about the past deeds of others? At the very least, if I took the offer I would not have to wonder in my later years about what might have happened if I had only accepted, in 1983, the challenge of directing one of the Northeast's leading environmental organizations.

In the end, I am happy that I accepted the five-year challenge, for Connecticut Audubon helped to accomplish a great deal in that time, including the stopping of massive lead deposition in the Housatonic River and the creation of the first national wildlife refuge in the Northeast in over ten years.

I discovered that devising legislation and lobbying state legislators and members of Congress were far more difficult than I had ever imagined as an academic. When in doubt I often relied on my knowledge of how the early Boone and Crockett Club leaders had handled the same, or similar, issues. To some degree, their experience became my experience, and I discovered firsthand how useful a knowledge of history can be,

and why historical models are so important. In their selfless devotion to preserving the natural world for generations of Americans they would never know, Grinnell, Roosevelt, Pinchot, and Leopold, among others, were far greater hunter-heroes than the two men for whom their Club was named. By emulating these conservation giants — whether we hunt or not — those of us today who care about nature and its wild things can be heroes in our own right.

But for me, at least, there will always be one who stands out above the rest, whose framed photograph is on the wall next to the big chair in my study. In looking at it from time to time, I remember that train ride back to Evanston in 1967 and my vow to bring George Bird Grinnell into the light, where we could all appreciate his importance. If he were alive today, I like to think that he would believe I had fulfilled my pledge. ■

* This article is an abridged version of an address delivered by the author to the Boone and Crockett Club at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., on December 11, 2003. Portions of the speech first appeared in the third, revised and expanded, edition of the author's *American Sportsmen and the Origins of Conservation*, published by Oregon State University Press in 2001, and are printed here with the permission of the publisher.

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