

Charles Sheldon & Mt. McKinley National Park

Boone and Crockett Club

Member, Charles Sheldon (1867-1928) has been sometimes described as "the most famous American hunter." He represented a new breed of hunter-naturalists and his interest and work in areas of conservation were monumental. More than any other individual, he is credited with the establishment of Mt. McKinley National Park. Following are his comments on this effort:

"While hunting through the area along the north slope of the Alaska Range in the summer and fall of 1906, I conceived the idea that this magnificent region should, at an appropriate time in the future, be set aside by Congress as a national park.

"During the greater part of a year which I spent in this region in 1907-8, I traveled over it and studied it with the idea of so locating lines for the limits of a national park as to involve a vast game preserve of all wild animals inhabiting the region.

"During the next few years various members of the Boone and Crockett Club urged the Game Committee to consider the question of a game preserve in Alaska. I was chairman of the Committee and although I frequently told the members that the place for a game preserve was the region adjacent to the north slope of Mt. McKinley, yet I held that the favorable time had not yet arrived to attempt congressional legislation toward that end; that before undertaking it with any hope of success the situation must so develop that the Alaskans themselves would support such a project."

Over the next several years the development of support for the Mt. McKinley project became an obsession of Sheldon's. With eventual endorsement of James Wickersham, the delegate from



ABOVE: CHARLES SHELDON, AS PICTURED IN *The Wilderness of Denali*.

LEFT: A REPRODUCTION OF THE SYDNEY LAURENCE PAINTING THAT ILLUSTRATES THE DUST JACKET OF THAT BOOK.



Alaska, and after a tremendous amount of lobbying, the plan was submitted in early 1916 to Stephen T. Mather, in charge of national parks in Washington as a plan originating with and endorsed by the Boone and Crockett Club. This was the beginning of a year-long effort to push the project through Congress, an effort which included enthusiastic work in Washington and elsewhere by many Boone and Crockett members, especially Sheldon and John Burnham. Madison Grant was also heavily involved and he wrote:

"Because of the ceaseless activity of Mr. Sheldon and Mr. Burnham, the bill finally reached and was passed with some small amendments on February 19, 1917. On the next day the Senate, which had already passed the bill, concurred in the amended House bill. After necessary formality of obtaining the signature of the Secretary of the Interior, the bill establishing Mt. McKinley National Park was personally taken from the office of the Secretary

by Charles Sheldon to the White House. On February 26, 1917, the President of the United States signed it and presented the pen with which he affixed his signature to Mr. Sheldon."

Charles Sheldon wanted the national park containing Mt. McKinley to be named "Denali," the Indian name for the peak. On this he was overruled. He never published his journals of his 1906-8 Alaskan adventures during his lifetime. Sheldon died of a heart attack shortly before his 61st birthday in 1928. His close friends and fellow Boone and Crockett Club members, Dr. C. Hart Merriam and Dr. E.W. Nelson, edited his Alaskan journals and they were published by Scribners in 1930 with the title, *The Wilderness of Denali*.

Charles Sheldon authored two books during his lifetime describing his experiences as a hunter-naturalist in *The Wilderness of the Upper Yukon*, published by Scribners in 1911 and *The Wilderness of the North Pacific Coast Islands* published by Scribners in 1912.

Independently wealthy as a result of wise investments, Sheldon was able to devote much of his life to exploring, studying natural history and most importantly fighting to preserve North America's wildlife and wetlands. He was very active in Mexico in the decade between 1912 and 1922 but it remained until 1979 for his Mexican journal to be published by the Arizona Desert Bighorn Sheep Society under the title, *The Wilderness of Desert Bighorns and Seri Indians*.

Much of the material for this article was obtained from a scrapbook of articles and manuscripts on Mt. McKinley National Park collected between 1899 and 1930. It includes many original letters and notes in great detail and was the personal copy of the eminent biologist, Dr. C. Hart Merriam. This scrapbook has been obtained by the Boone and Crockett Club and is now part of the library at our headquarters in Missoula.



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