George Bird Grinnell:
The Father of American Conservation

by Shane Mahoney

Glacier National Park

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Editor's note: This is the 4th in a series of articles about The North American Wildlife Conservation Model. The series is dedicated to helping hunters and anglers throughout the United States and Canada appreciate their own history of achievement in wildlife conservation and to encouraging greater commitment to the cause. The model includes many outstanding individuals who were committed to wildlife, and here we are highlighting one of them.

On April 12, 1938, *The New York Times* published a lengthy and detailed obituary for one George Bird Grinnell, a Brooklyn-born easterner who had made 40 trips to the American West and had become a respected authority on the Plains Indians.

Yet as the *Times* obituary noted, this was but one part of a remarkably capable man who led a long, vigorous and incredibly productive life. George Bird Grinnell was many things: scientist, hunter, explorer, naturalist, entrepreneur and author. Above all else, however, he was and remains one of the most influential conservationists in North American history.

He seldom took and never sought credit for his achievements though, and as a result his reputation is often overshadowed by the more powerful and directed personalities of Theodore Roosevelt, John Muir and Gifford Pinchot. Yet careful study of conservation's formative years shows that Grinnell did more to publicize the loss of wildlife species and contributed more foundational ideas for creating policies and organizations to address this destruction than any other individual.

Initially as a contributing author and later as editor of *Forest and Stream* (precursor to *Field and Stream*), Grinnell helped channel hunters' growing concerns over diminishing game populations into a powerful movement for the rational use and protection of nature. A man of great intellectual scope and broad sensitivities, he simultaneously championed the causes of wilderness protection and sustainable use of wildlife through hunting and fishing. Grinnell saw the concept of enlightened self-interest as the best means for long-term conservation.

These ideas reflect influence by the writings of the great scholar and conservation prophet George Perkins Marsh. However, Grinnell took Marsh's ideas into the popular domain and began a relentless process of education and activism for the protection and conservation of the natural world. His writings were often extremely far-sighted, many of them prescient of environmental problems with which we have only recently begun to grapple. In this regard he greatly influenced virtually all the other champions of conservation who rose to prominence during his lifetime.

It might reasonably be argued that Grinnell was the mentor of Theodore Roosevelt. Certainly he criticized the rapacious destruction of forests decades before other conservation leaders. In his scientific training and expertise, his personal knowledge of wildlife, hunting and the disappearing American frontier, and his concern for all of nature, George Bird Grinnell was a unique and essential ingredient in the founding and character of the North American Wildlife Conservation Model.

The Early Years

George Bird Grinnell was born September 20, 1849, the eldest child of George Blake

Grinnell, a successful businessman whose commercial enterprises encompassed dry goods and investment banking for wealthy families, including Union Pacific Railroad magnates, the Vanderbilts. During his early childhood the family moved several times, first from Brooklyn to Manhattan and then, when he was 7 years old, to Audubon Park, an estate of wild land belonging to the widow of the famous naturalist John James Audubon. Playing in the large barn Audubon constructed to house his specimens, Grinnell observed and was greatly impressed by the collections and oddities of natural history the great man had acquired; and he often visited with Audubon's sons Victor and John as they worked and discussed matters of natural history. He was also much enthralled with his uncle Tom Grinnell, a keen hunter and naturalist in his own right, who kept a large collection of mounted birds and mammals.

"Grandma" Audubon ran a small school in her home, which Grinnell and his siblings attended. He was later to attribute much of his interest in hunting and natural history to her early influence. Kindly, moral and apparently inordinately capable, she reinforced the self-restraint that his father and grandfather preached to him throughout their lives.

Grinnell spent days reading Audubon's accounts of his 1843 journey to the Yellowstone country and his disgust at the slaughter of

buffalo he witnessed along the way. The ongoing devastation of wildlife in the Great Plains appalled Grinnell, too, when he began traveling through the West. Observing the carnage firsthand drove home the principles of restraint and enlightened self interest, which became the backbone of his conservation ethic.

Grinnell's early childhood seems to have been idyllic, surrounded as he was by nature and enthusiastic teachers who spurred his passion for the outdoor life. At the age of 11 he started his hunting career, stealing away with a boyhood friend to fire a large and very weighty British musket at robins and other small birds. He eventually received a new double-barrel shotgun of his own that afforded him the first real opportunity to learn the art of shooting. It was something he would become quite proficient at and eventually practice in the most untamed regions of the continent.

Until he married, at age 53, Grinnell returned from his many excursions in the untamed West to the monied comfort, familiar surroundings and rich store of memories of his family's home at Audubon Park. His first long absence from home was not for western exploration however, but to attend military boarding school at age 14. Showing little promise in academic study, Grinnell did well in military training, but was not inclined to follow the family tradition and attend Yale University. Nevertheless in 1866 this is what he did, in accordance with his father's demands. While performing modestly and receiving one suspension at Yale for climbing a lightning rod and painting the face of the college clock, he graduated with his Bachelor's degree in 1870. Despite this halting start he returned to Yale and received a doctorate in paleontology in 1880.

In the intervening decade he commenced his great and life-changing excursions to the American West. He would return to Yale once more, in 1921, to receive the commendation of his peers for a life of diverse and extraordinary accomplishment.

The prankster—by now the most disciplined thinker and capable protagonist in the conservation movement, as well as the white man most respected by the native hunting tribes of the Great Plains—was granted an honorary doctorate of literature.

A Man for All Seasons

Grinnell's journeys to the West did not begin as hunting trips for buffalo or grizzly but for the bones of long extinct animals. In the same year he entered Yale University, Othniel C. Marsh, the nephew of George Peabody and long-time director of the Peabody Museum, was granted the first chair of paleontology in the United States. In 1868 Marsh had discovered the bones of a tiny extinct horse in Nebraska, which provided exciting support for Darwin's highly controversial theory of evolution. Wishing to return to the region in hopes of making new discoveries, Marsh organized an expedition in Grinnell's graduating year for which the 21-year-old volunteered and was accepted.

On June 30, 1870, he commenced his first great adventure in the lands of the Sioux and Cheyenne. Like all first trips, the Marsh expedition was to have a lasting impression on Grinnell. The young New Yorker was astounded by what he saw. His train was stopped for three hours by migrating buffalo in Nebraska, and he got his first taste of the violent engagement of white and native societies when a teenage Cheyenne boy was killed making an attack on some hunters. He saw Indian platform graves and barely escaped raging grass fires, saw his first beaver (these were already extremely rare in the East), collected fossils and marveled at the abundant wildlife and the talents and lifestyles of trappers and frontiersmen. He reveled in the rugged outdoor experiences and the camaraderie of men unharnessed by the trappings of civilization.

His writings from this time also reflect his deep love of the hunt and his capacity to appreciate the sheer beauty

and grandeur of wild and unspoiled lands. His memories of fireside gatherings after a vigorous day afield are testimony to his love of the land and the cultures of men who made it their obsession and home. While his keen scientific eye was always turned to gathering new insights, his soul and heart were expanding in the western frontier, beginning to form in him a fevered commitment to the preservation of wildlife and the hunt.

His descriptions of verdant valleys and their coursing rivers, of mountains sun-metalled against the evening skies, of plump trout gasping silver on the banks, of fattened bucks quivering where they fell beneath swaying pines, and of men bonded to one another by the smell of sweat and their daring capacity to live from the land—Grinnell's childhood leanings were now being bent by the frontier into something of unyielding strength. Rising virtually from that land, bloodied by the struggles of humanity and nature, was a new vision for man's place in the natural order of things. It would become known as conservation.

His first great trip westward also reinforced Grinnell's ambivalence toward the business world and heightened his desire for a life of science and adventure. Thus while he assisted his father with the family brokerage firm for a few years following the Marsh expedition, he continued at the same time to indulge his passion for collecting birds and bones, improving his taxidermy skills, supplying specimens to the Peabody Museum, and maintaining close contact with the great paleontologist himself.

He continued his adventuresome ways as well, experiencing his first buffalo hunt in 1872 with the Pawnees and cavalry scout Luther North, who was to become a mentor and close friend. In 1873 he reluctantly took over the direction of his father's company, but saw it dissolve a year later when the stock market collapsed. With his freedom now assured, the 25-year-old Grinnell returned to Yale to work free of charge as

Professor Marsh's assistant and eventually commence his doctoral studies.

During this period of personal turmoil and change, Grinnell began to submit hunting stories to *Forest and Stream*. For more than 40 years Grinnell would use this publication, first as contributing author and then as editor and publisher, to convince the public that a new approach to nature was required. In countless essays and editorials, Grinnell espoused the sustainable use of wildlife and the need for a system of national parks. He also argued for the preservation of wilderness and extolled the virtues of the hunter and angler, celebrating the lifestyle itself while discouraging the senseless slaughter of wildlife and destruction of wild lands. He saw no divide between hunters and wilderness preservation. Indeed, he thought them inseparable components of a reasoned approach to conserving nature.

By the time he returned to Yale, Grinnell was also developing the empathy for Native Americans for which he is so well known. In narrative rich in detail but bereft of moralizing, Grinnell described the Indian as a full persona, full of contradiction, vice and virtue; in other words, as a complete human being. His description of a buffalo hunt with the Pawnees leaves little doubt of his admiration for their hunting skills, nor of his ability to record and appreciate the everyday aspects of their lives.

If only it were still possible to ride with abandon amongst the thundering herds, to hear their bellows and avoid their vicious charge; to smell the great throng of animal life and choke on the dust thrown from the shuddering prairie; and to see the bronzed horsemen astride their glistening, wide-eyed ponies, their lances thrusting and bows drawn, their long black hair flowing behind them, determination and courage etched in their faces. To see their wondrous

horsemanship and share in their engagement with eternity—oh what we might give today for just one such chance!

By the time he was 40 he had learned much of the Indians' expressive sign language, as well as several of their spoken tongues, and had already amassed volumes of notes on their mythology and cultural histories. Without his efforts much of what we know of these great peoples may have been lost forever.

His trip to the Black Hills of South Dakota in 1874 with General George Armstrong Custer may have been particularly influential on his views of man and nature. Grinnell accompanied the expedition as a fossil collector and may not have known that the real purpose of the expedition was to confirm rumors of gold in the area. But the sheer size of this force—some 1,200 soldiers, 600 wagons, more than a thousand mules and horses, cannons, Gatling guns, a 16-piece brass band, one woman, Calamity Jane, and three journalists—was clear enough indication of the white man's intentions in the area; namely, to secure it at all costs.

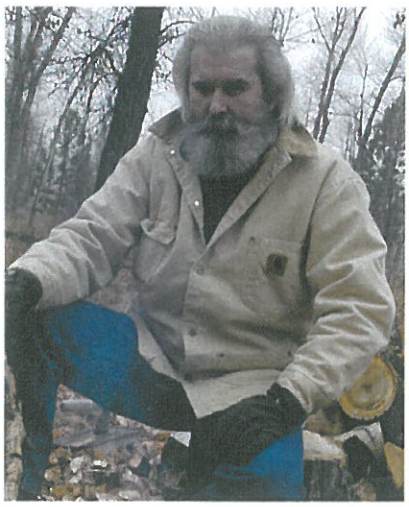
Seated around a campfire on the evening of July 26, Grinnell, the army scouts Luther North and Lonesome Charlie Reynolds and two prospectors shared stories and an after-dinner pipe. During the conversation one of the prospectors showed the gathering a small vial of gold dust collected that day. It helped launch an invasion of white men into that region and ignite the hostilities that would lead eventually to Custer's demise at Little Bighorn. Charlie Reynolds predicted a disastrous outcome and would die with Custer in that battle two years later. In this manner Grinnell would lose one of his dearest friends and the best hunter he ever knew. Ironically Grinnell was also invited to travel with Custer on that last campaign in 1876, but Professor Marsh decided there was too much work to be done at the

Peabody Museum. Given that he always rode in the company of Reynolds, it is likely that Grinnell, had he gone, would also have died.

As he completed his reports on the birds and mammals of the Black Hills and catalogued his fossils, Grinnell must have sensed what the gold strike would mean to the region and its wildlife, and to the Sioux and Cheyenne who lived there. Perhaps in this way he was making the connections between disappearing wildlife and disappearing human cultures, and recognizing that hunting of all kinds would disappear if human greed and development were left unchecked.

Whatever the reason for his prescience, his works on Native Americans earned him the respect of social activists, politicians and scholars alike, and, most significantly, of the Native Americans themselves. That he could have achieved so much in this realm, while at the same time helping establish a completely new order in the use of natural resources, is bristling testimony to Grinnell's extraordinary capacity for work and innovation.

The story of George Bird Grinnell, father of American Conservation, will be continued in the next issue of *Bugle*.



A riveting orator, passionate hunter and widely respected scholar, Newfoundland native Shane Mahoney has lectured extensively in North America and Europe on wildlife conservation and nature.