

FRANK ELLIOT PARSONS, 1882-1968

by G. B. RAGLESS

When the above gentleman died towards the close of last year at the age of 86 years, it was the passing of one of the few old-time ornithologists in Australia.

He was born in Adelaide, the eldest of seven sons, and was educated at Prince Alfred College. Upon leaving school he attended the Adelaide School of Mines with the object of becoming a metallurgist. He went to Kalgoorlie for practical experience, but upon returning to this State decided to forsake mining to become a surveyor. His father was head of a growing firm of surveyors, land agents and auctioneers, which he joined, as did several of his brothers. Early in this century his interest in ornithology was aroused and he joined this Association in 1912, becoming its President in 1923, 1929, 1934 and 1939, and was later made an Honorary Life Member.

He was noted for the fine preparation of bird skins which eventually became the property of the S.A. Museum. His journeys included trips to Birdsville (1920), Eyre Peninsula (1923 and 1925) and many to the Murray Mallee and the South-East of South Australia. He was a contemporary of many of the greats of early ornithology in this State, such as Ashby, Cleland, McGilp, Mellor, Morgan, Sutton, White and Zeitz. He sent specimens to Gregory Mathews in England, helping that ornithologist in his great work on Australian birds. Two letters from Mathews in 1916 have survived. The first lamented the non-receipt

of a package, presuming it had been lost by enemy action; the second joyfully announcing its safe arrival.

One of the specimens became known as *Pomatostomus ruficeps parsonsi* (Chestnut-crowned Babbler). Other subspecies named after him were *Climacteris erythroptis parsonsi* (White-browed Treecreeper) and *Calamanthus fuliginosus parsonsi* (Striated Field Wren).

It is not generally known that Frank Parsons was the first ornithologist to observe the Mallee Whipbird. After visiting him a few years ago, I made the following entry in my notebook regarding a part of our conversation.

Mallee Whipbird. Mr. Parsons claims to have seen a bird in either 1914 or 1915 about 10 miles from Loxton, S. Australia, while surveying in the hundred of Pyap. He was resting while the men were cutting a line in the Mallee when the bird came close to him and erected its crest. Years later when he saw the bird to the north of Pinnaroo, he remembered his earlier experience. He is quite positive of this sight record.

Upon my asking him why he had not publicised this observation, he replied, "Mine was only a sight record." This extreme modesty was a feature of his markedly retiring nature. In 1920 in Victoria this bird was discovered by ornithologists of that State, and in 1932 Mr. J. A. Ross secured a specimen.

In the early 1920's Mr. Parsons became interested in the feather tracts of Australian birds, and his great work on their Pterylography was the result. A few years ago the original was presented to the C.S.I.R.O. Wild Life Division, but the Libraries Board of South Australia has made facsimile copies available, known as "Occasional Papers in Zoology No. 1." The writer of this tribute has in his possession a small sketch book containing Frank Parsons' first efforts in this direction, which gave the artist confidence to tackle his major production. All the diagrams are executed with extreme care and accuracy, as befits one who was an expert surveyor-draughtsman.

About 1936 he turned his main interest to Australian butterflies, and his versatility was such that he became an authority in this field. He made several trips to Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern Territory in search of specimens. In Central Australia he found a new form which was

described and named by his companion, Frank Angel, *Ogynis hewitsonsi parsonsi*.

In his young days he was an above average tennis player, while in later life he played bowls and billiards with exceptional skill. For many years he suffered from osteoarthritis, and it was only with the aid of two walking sticks that he was able to move about. Despite this handicap, which he accepted uncomplainingly, he remained very active and had the front seat of his car moved back to enable him to drive. He facetiously referred to his vehicle as the "A.I.F. Car."

His death was brought about by a strain while on field work upon his beloved butterflies near Marino, by overtaxing his heart. When the work of South Australian ornithologists is studied and compared, the name Frank Parsons will certainly rank among the very highest.

See photograph p. 86.



Frank Elliot Parsons. See p. 107.