

H.H. and C.S. Brimley: Brother Naturalists

ELOISE F. POTTER

Late at night on 31 December 1880, two young men, recent immigrants from England, registered at the National Hotel across Edenton Street from the State Capitol in Raleigh, N.C. With them were their parents, Joseph and Harriet Brimley; two sisters; and one of two living brothers. The family had left the depressed agricultural economy of the village of Willington, Bedfordshire, expecting to find prosperity in the Sunny South described to them by an official of the North Carolina Department of Agriculture, Immigration and Statistics. Instead they found, in the words of H.H. Brimley, "unpaved streets, ruts hub-deep, frozen solid and covered with snow, and the temperature down mighty close to zero." Although there were some board sidewalks, the hotel lacked running water, and that in the pitcher on the washstand was frozen solid. The Brimleys pulled up the carpets and used them for blankets to keep from freezing that first night in North Carolina. Later they discovered that the public water supply came from wells under the sidewalks and that cows and hogs roamed the streets. "However," H.H. concluded, "there was a restless, pulsing air about the place and its people that impressed me" (Odum 1949).

After trying briefly to farm the rocky piedmont soil near Method, between what is now west-central Raleigh and Cary, H.H. turned to teaching in a one-room log schoolhouse near the present site of Meredith College. This venture also was unsuccessful, primarily because his English accent was not compatible with the southern drawl of his students (Cooper 1979).

Although not blessed with much in the way of formal education or worldly possessions, Herbert Hutchinson Brimley and Clement Samuel Brimley were endowed with incredibly inquisitive minds. Immediately upon their arrival in North Carolina, they began studying the wildlife, especially the birds, as they had done earlier in England. Sometime in 1882 or 1883, they acquired a 50-cent book entitled *Taxidermy Without a Teacher* and began experimenting with mounting and modeling animals. Soon they were businessmen, "Brimley Bros., Collectors and Preparers." While catering to the wealthy men in big cities who prided themselves on having large collections of bird skins and eggs, the Brimley brothers set their lives upon a course that would greatly enrich the knowledge of zoology in North Carolina and strongly influence several generations of young scientists.

In 1881 the N.C. Department of Agriculture, having outgrown its space in the Briggs Building on Fayetteville Street, purchased the old National Hotel for use as an office building. The department had been founded on 12 March 1877, and Leonidas Lafayette Polk, the first commissioner of Agriculture, almost immediately established a museum to display the agricultural products of the state. Since 1875 the Briggs Building had also housed the Geological Survey and the mineral collection maintained by Washington Caruthers Kerr, state geologist. This had often been referred to as the "geological museum" or the "state museum." The mineral cabinet, founded upon instructions from the General Assembly by Kerr's predecessor, Ebenezer Emmons, dated from at least the mid-1850s. First placed on display in the State Capitol, the

mineral cabinet was transferred to the Department of Agriculture on 20 February 1879, when the legislature required the commissioner to keep a “museum or collection to illustrate the agricultural and other resources and the natural history of the State.” Thus the North Carolina State Museum was founded as part of the N.C. Department of Agriculture and remains so to this day.

When the time came to move the Agriculture Department into the former National Hotel building, the museum was assigned part of the space for its displays and collections, including remnants of exhibits the Board of Agriculture had sent to various expositions in this country and abroad. As the time approached for the 1884 State Centennial Exposition at Raleigh, the Board hired H.H. Brimley to mount a series of fishes for display, and he also made a collection of waterfowl from Currituck Sound (see “Old Times on Currituck” in *North Carolina Wildlife Conservation*, March 1943).

Although the Brimley brothers founded their taxidermy business primarily, as H.H. put it, “to keep the justly celebrated wolf from the not-too-securely fastened door,” the partnership gave them a marvelous opportunity to collect and study the animals of North Carolina, about which very little had been published at that time. The year 1884 marks not only H.H.’s first employment by the Department of Agriculture but also the Brimley brothers’ first contribution to the North American scientific literature, “Notes from middle North Carolina,” which appeared in Volume 9 of *Ornithologist and Oologist*.

When planning for North Carolina’s participation in the great World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893, the State World’s Fair Commission selected H.H. Brimley to collect and prepare native animals for display. He assembled and installed the Fish and Fisheries Exhibit, including appropriate aquatic birds, and remained in Chicago throughout the exposition. By legislative direction, the voluminous and valuable collections were, upon their return to Raleigh, deposited amid the already overcrowded and unusable jumble at the State Museum. The clutter included the disassembled bones of a Right Whale known as “Mayflower.” In an attempt to improve the situation, the Board of Agriculture in 1894 engaged H.H. Brimley for the task of articulating and mounting the 46-foot skeleton, which now hangs in the front lobby of the State Museum. Because the budget lacked funds for such services, Brimley was hired for 3 months as a “fertilizer inspector.”

On 15 April 1895, the State Museum entered a new era when H.H. Brimley was appointed its first full-time curator and sole employee. As he wrote later, “I became expert with a feather duster and pushed a wicked carpet sweeper! I had no funds beyond my princely salary of \$75 per month.” Not yet employed by the Department of Agriculture, C.S. continued to operate the taxidermy business and was sometimes assisted by his older brother on a part-time basis until 1907 or 1908, when the growing museum demanded all of H.H.’s energies. By that time the museum occupied the entire second floor of the Agriculture Building plus two annexes, one added in 1893 and another in 1897. The staff had grown to three with the addition of an assistant curator, Tom Adickes, and a janitor, Bob Alston. By 1900, Curator Brimley was able to report holdings of “more than 100,000 specimens illustrative of North Carolina.”

H.H. collaborated with Hugh M. Smith in preparing the 1907 volume, *Fishes of North Carolina*, published by the N.C. Geological and Economic Survey. Between 1900 and the beginning of World War I, much of Curator Brimley’s time was spent

preparing displays for expositions: the Charleston Exposition (1901), the Louisiana Purchase Exposition at St. Louis (1904), the Boston Food Fair (1906), and the Jamestown Exposition (1907). He was selected as a member of the International Jury of Awards at both the St. Louis and Jamestown expositions, and he was appointed Executive Commissioner to the Panama Pacific Exposition, which was to have been held in 1915 but was canceled because of the war.

In 1914 the Hall of (Human) History, which had become a part of the State Museum in 1894, was transferred to the N.C. Historical Commission. Three years later, a new suite of offices and service rooms was added to the Museum of Natural History.

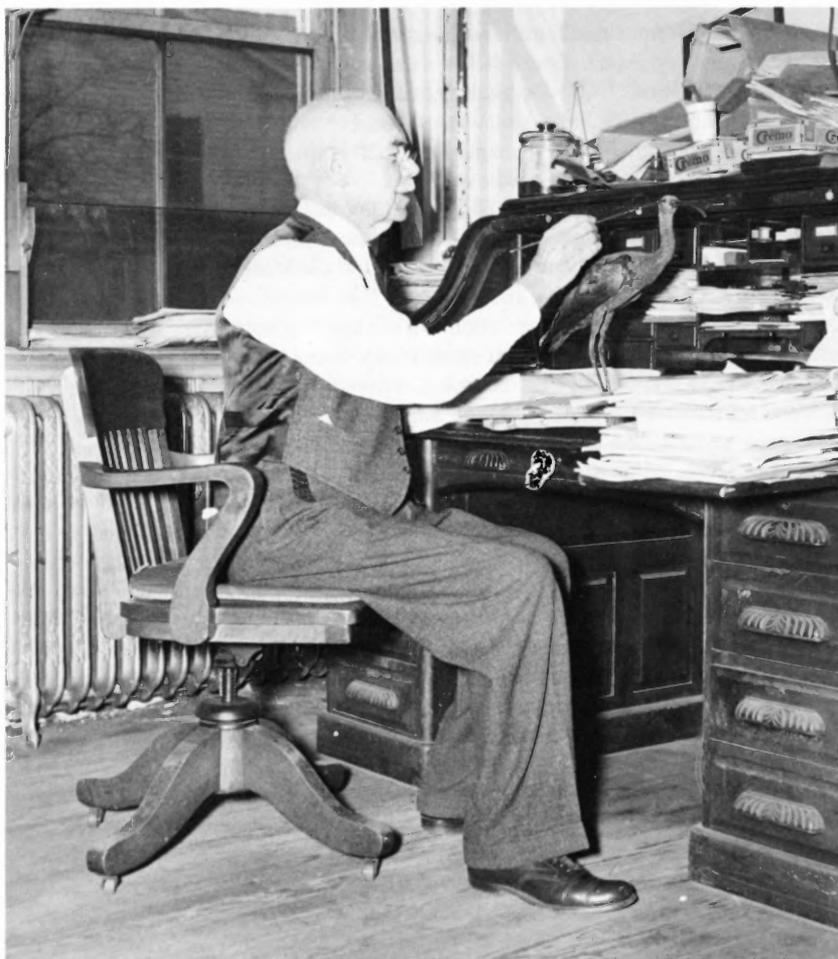
Although an obsessive hunter and fisherman, H.H. was also an outspoken conservationist and advocate of wildlife protection. He worked hard to convince the legislature to replace the confusing array of local statutes with strong, well-enforced state laws. It was only natural that H.H. would become the friend and ally of T. Gilbert Pearson, founder of the North Carolina Audubon Society and later president of the National Association of Audubon Societies (1920-1934). In the early 1900s Pearson and the Brimleys collaborated on the writing of one of the first state bird books ever produced in the South, *Birds of North Carolina*. Printed and ready for binding in 1913, the signatures were destroyed by a fire in the printing plant. The work, published by the N.C. Geological and Economic Survey, finally appeared, with additional notes, in April 1919.

Pearson and both the Brimleys often expressed themselves in poetry. C.S. was noted for his extemporaneous verses. H.H. and Pearson enjoyed going afield together, and their correspondence is filled with the kind of irreverent humor that can be exchanged only by those who truly admire and respect each other.

In December 1919, C.S. Brimley entered the service of the N.C. Department of Agriculture's Division of Entomology to take charge of the "Insect Survey" he and Franklin Sherman Jr. (North Carolina's first state entomologist in 1900) had been working on since the turn of the century. Sherman, as C.S. later wrote, "revived my long flagging interest in insects." This revival produced numerous scientific papers and, ultimately, *The Insects of North Carolina*, written by C.S. Brimley and published by the N.C. Department of Agriculture in 1938. Other workers on the "Insect Survey" through 1925 were J.C. Crawford, R.W. Leiby, C.L. Metcalf, Z.P. Metcalf, T.B. Mitchell, and M.R. Smith (Cooper 1979).

The former National Hotel building was demolished in 1922 so a modern Agriculture Building could be built on the site. The enlarged museum reopened there on 17 August 1925. In 1928 H.H.'s title was changed to director, and in 1934 he, with only 8 years of formal education, was elected to full membership in the American Ornithologists' Union, thus becoming one of the select assemblage of 150 nationally recognized bird students. H.H. remained director of the State Museum until 1937, when he was succeeded by Harry T. Davis; but in retirement Brimley served as the museum's curator of zoology.

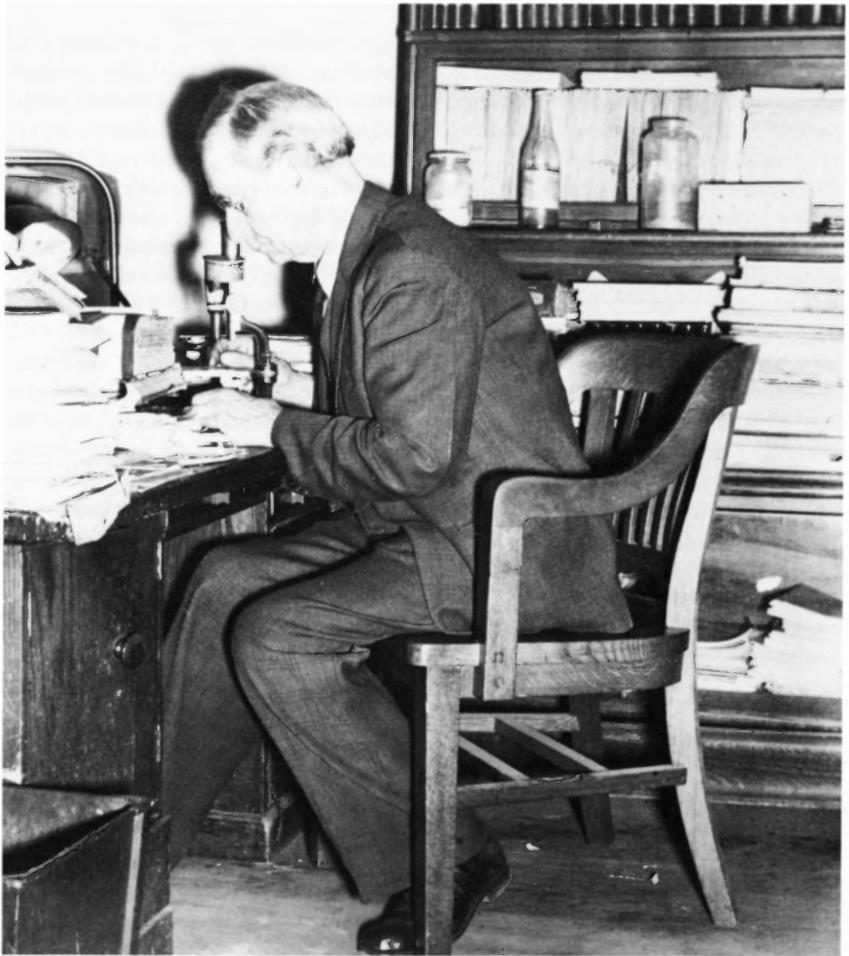
H.H. and C.S. were among the founders of the North Carolina Academy of Science, Raleigh Natural History Club, Raleigh Bird Club, and the North Carolina Bird Club. C.S. was, at the time of his death, the only person without a college degree ever to serve as president of the N.C. Academy of Science. On 6 March 1937 he was elected the first president of the N.C. Bird Club, now Carolina Bird Club. The following year



H.H. Brimley puts the finishing touches on a Glossy Ibis mount at the N.C. State Museum, March 1942. (NCSM photo)

he, with a formal education perhaps equivalent to completion of one year of college, received an honorary degree of Doctor of Laws from the University of North Carolina in recognition of his many contributions to the natural sciences.

During his years as director emeritus, H.H. collaborated with C.S. Brimley and T. Gilbert Pearson on the 1942 edition of *Birds of North Carolina*, wrote many articles for *The Chat*, served as president of the North Carolina Bird Club (1942-1944), and continued to prepare specimens and models for the museum, including a 75-pound Channel Bass, a 594-pound Blue Marlin, and the True's Beaked Whale skeleton and models (mother and fetus) put on display in 1943. Throughout his career H.H.



C.S. Brimley studies insects through a microscope at the N.C. Department of Agriculture, July 1942. (NCSM photo)

participated in civic and professional organizations. He served as president of the Raleigh Rotary Club and was active in Boy Scout work. He rarely missed the annual meetings of the American Association of Museums, where in 1929 he gave a presentation, later published in *The Museum Years* (November 1930), on obtaining, preparing, and mounting whale skeletons. He also belonged to the Museums' Association of Great Britain, American Society of Mammalogists, and American Museum of Natural History.

Of the two Brimley brothers, C.S. was the more prolific writer and the more scientifically oriented. For more than 60 years, he kept remarkably detailed records on

the flora and fauna of the Southeast, and he published more than 150 popular and scientific papers in the fields of entomology, herpetology, ichthyology, ornithology, and mammalogy. His publications reflect his fascination with small animals—insects, other invertebrates, frogs, toads, salamanders, and wood warblers (Potter and Lee 1981). H.H., on the other hand, liked the big animals—ducks, geese, gulls, terns, herons, pelicans, hawks, owls, deer, whales, sharks, and game fish. His taste may have been shaped, at least in part, by the sense of showmanship required for designing good exhibits. H.H. was among the first museum preparators to place mounted animals in natural settings. Some of his work is preserved in the Brimley Room and elsewhere in the N.C. State Museum. His model of the 1200-pound Ocean Sunfish (*Mola mola*) remains one of the museum's most popular exhibits.

Although the Brimleys are most closely associated with Raleigh, the State Museum, and the Department of Agriculture, their influence spread throughout the state. At the invitation of C.A. Schenck, director of the Biltmore Forest School, C.S. Brimley prepared a series of lectures on zoology for presentation to the students there. The outline was later published by the school (Brimley 1913). H.H. was an honorary member of the Zoology Field Club, a students' organization at the Woman's College of the University of North Carolina (now UNC-Greensboro). Each spring for nearly 20 years, H.H. and Mrs. Brimley went to Greensboro for his annual talk. After Archie D. Shaftesbury founded the Woman's College Marine Laboratory at Beaufort, H.H. Brimley and T. Gilbert Pearson made frequent summer visits, leading activities such as visits to heronries and offshore boating trips. Following one such visit, Uncle Gilbert



T. Gilbert Pearson, Mrs. Pearson, H.H. Brimley, and Bessie Love Brimley enjoyed fishing trips together. This undated photograph appears to have been taken in the late 1930s. (NCSM photo)

wrote a poem called "The Dreamer," dedicated to H.H. Brimley, and sent it to the students at the laboratory. This poem, which teases H.H. for preferring hunting to office work, was published on the inside back cover of *The Chat* (May 1946).

Colleagues showed their esteem for H.H. and C.S. Brimley by naming animals for them. These include the fish *Notropis brimleyi*, the frog *Pseudacris brimleyi*, the salamander *Desmognathus brimleyorum*, two millipeds, and several hymenoptera. C.S. described several new species and subspecies of Southeastern herpetofauna, but only two of these, *Necturus lewisi* and *Pseudotriton ruber schencki*, have stood the test of further taxonomic studies (Cooper 1979).

Both H.H. and C.S. Brimley continued to collect and publish the results of their field work until shortly before their deaths less than 4 months apart in 1946.

H.H., who was born on 7 March 1861, died at Rex Hospital in Raleigh on 4 April 1946 at age 85, following more than 60 years of service to the State Museum. He was survived by his second wife, the former Bessie Love; two sons, Arthur H. Brimley of Asheville and Robert E. Brimley of Charlotte; one brother, Clement S. Brimley, assistant state entomologist; and one granddaughter, Miss Mary Ellen Brimley of Charlotte. The funeral service was held at Christ Episcopal Church of which he was a member. A fitting requiem was added to the service at the graveside by the calls of Blue Jays, his special favorite among the birds (Shaftesbury 1946a).

Bessie Love Brimley, who shared H.H.'s love of fishing, reared the two sons of his first marriage to Edith Taylor, a member of one of several English families who came to North Carolina about the same time the Brimleys did. Bess was also instrumental in persuading Eugene P. Odum, one of the many young zoologists influenced by H.H. and C.S. Brimley, to collect her late husband's writings for publication by the University of North Carolina Press. *A North Carolina Naturalist: H.H. Brimley* appeared in 1949. Bess remained active in Carolina Bird Club until her death on 17 November 1950 (Anon. 1951).

H.H., C.S., and their brother Fred, who remained in England when the family emigrated, all attended the Bedford County School at Elstow, the old home of John Bunyan, just outside Bedford. In an affectionate tribute to his brother, C.S. Brimley (1946) wrote: "Herbert did well in sports, particularly football and swimming. In his studies he distinguished himself in mathematics but not much in other subjects due I think to a lack of interest, not to lack of ability. After he left school both he and Fred took clerical jobs at Howard's Iron Works in Bedford, but indoor work did not suit H.H. . . . Both Fred and he rode bicycles and H.H. won prizes at several local meets. These were the old high bicycles with a very small hind wheel and a very high front one throwing the center of gravity far forward, so that if the front wheel struck the slightest obstacle it was apt to cause the bike to revolve on its axis throwing the rider head first on the hard road.

"He and I collected bird eggs in an amateurish way. . . . Our three great finds were a nest and eggs of the Golden-crested Wren in Sheerhatch wood, one of the Long-tailed Tit in the Spinney, and a set of three eggs of the Mute Swan taken on an island in the River Ouse. As a swan was assumed to be a tough customer, the party of three, H.H. and two friends went along well armed for a swan was supposed to be able to break a man's leg with one blow of its wing. However, the expedition came off safely. The swans bluffed a little, but the eggs were secured without difficulty and divided equally

among the lucky three. In later years we have often collected all sorts of things in company with one another. He was a good man and a pleasant companion. Even to the end there was a kind of elder brother-younger brother relationship between us.”

C.S., who was born 18 December 1863, died at his home in Raleigh on 23 July 1946. He was survived by his wife, the former Annie Roberts of Johnson County, N.C.; two sons, First Lieutenant Ralph Brimley, U.S. Army, Washington, D.C., and Edwin Brimley of Orlando, Florida; and three grandchildren. Funeral services were conducted by the Rev. M.O. Sommers, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, and burial was in Oakwood Cemetery, Raleigh (Shaftesbury 1946b).

Harry T. Davis served as director of the N.C. State Museum until his retirement on 1 July 1966. The third director was William L. Hamnett, who was followed on 1 July 1974 by the present director, John B. Funderburg Jr. Although the museum remains in the annex to the Agriculture Building, it is today quite different from the way it was in the 1940s. The rear portion of the museum building was rebuilt between 1952 and 1954, and the front portion in 1965. In 1975 a completely new heating, ventilating, and air conditioning system was installed, and one opening in the floor of the mezzanine was closed to provide additional exhibit space. The North Carolina Maritime Museum, formerly called the Hampton Museum, at Beaufort, N.C., came under the administration of the State Museum on 20 June 1959. A new building for this facility was dedicated in May 1985. The State Museum acquired two floors of the Old Health Building for offices and scientific collections. Renovations were completed in early 1985, but a shortage of space remains a major problem. In the summer of 1985 the front lobby was renovated to enlarge the Tail of the Whale bookstore and gift shop, to provide an open area for receiving large groups of visitors, and to afford a better view of the Right Whale skeleton.

The museum, which serves approximately 300,000 visitors per year, was accredited by the American Association of Museums in 1979, and plans are being made for a new wing on the present building and a science education center on Blue Ridge Road. At present there are 30 full-time employees, several part-time employees, and numerous volunteers engaged in scientific research, publications, educational services, and preparation and maintenance of exhibits. The North Carolina State Museum of Natural History is a lasting, growing memorial to the Brimley brothers, and its scientific journal, *Brimleyana*, is named in honor of these two distinguished naturalists.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The North Carolina State Museum of Natural History provided access to documents and photographs that were very helpful in preparation of this biographical sketch. John B. Funderburg Jr., Roxie C. Laybourne, and David L. Wray shared some of their personal recollections of the Brimley brothers. In addition, Dr. Funderburg read an early draft of the manuscript. I am grateful for all the help I have received.

LITERATURE CITED

- Anonymous. 1951. Mrs. Bessie Love Brimley. Chat 15:16.
Brimley, Clement S. 1913. Outline of Lectures on Zoology. Biltmore Forest School, Biltmore, N.C., and Darmstadt, Germany.
Brimley, Clement S. 1946. “H.H.” Chat 10:42-43.

- Cooper, John E. 1979. The brothers Brimley: North Carolina naturalists. *Brimleyana* 1:1-14.
- Odum, Eugene P. (Editor). 1949. *A North Carolina Naturalist: H.H. Brimley, Selections From His Writings*. Univ. North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill.
- Potter, Eloise F., and David S. Lee (Compilers). 1981. *Contributions of the North Carolina State Museum of Natural History and the North Carolina Biological Survey, 1884 — 1980*. N.C. State Mus. Nat. Hist., Raleigh.
- Shaftesbury, A.D. 1946a. Herbert Hutchinson Brimley, 1861-1946. *Chat* 10:43-45.
- Shaftesbury, A.D. 1946b. Clement Samuel Brimley, 1863-1946. *Chat* 10:62-64.



H.H. Brimley worked in a taxidermy laboratory that has been reconstructed at the N.C. State Museum as part of the Brimley Room. This exhibit, funded by the Raleigh Woman's Club, preserves many of his best works in the lovely golden oak display cases originally made especially for them.