

[Speech by T. W. Stanton, given at the 50th anniversary meeting of the Geological Society of Washington, Feb. 24, 1943. Transcribed from a handwritten manuscript in the GSW archives.]

The Geological Society of Washington 50 years ago.

Although I had a small part in arranging for it I am not sure I reached that first meeting of the geological Society of Washington before it adjourned. The meeting was held February 25, 1893 in the office of the Director of the United States Geological Survey on the second floor of the building at 1330 F Street, the site now covered by the National Press Building. Early on that day someone at the Geological Survey telephoned me instructions to notify all interested men in the old National Museum and the Smithsonian Institution that they were invited to attend a meeting that afternoon to organize the Geological Society. That meant the paleontologists and chemists of the Geological Survey and the members of the national Museum's geological department.

In those days a telephone call was a real event to us. We did not have a telephone on every desk. In fact there were not more than three or four telephones in the whole Museum Building but there was a code of gong signals by which the operator could call individuals to the phone. When the signal came for me that day I had to walk half the length of the building and climb a stairway to reach a telephone on the wall just outside of Dr. Merrill's office. The message to me mentioned the names of the men to be invited but I did not hear Stanton among them so I did not go. Later the man at the other end of the line assured me that I was expected to attend and he intimated that he had found me even dumber than he had thought me to be.

When I came to Washington from Colorado in 1889 the bulk of my geological reading had been in the reports of the exploratory surveys that immediately preceded the US Geological Survey. Hayden's Survey of the Territories, Kings Exploration of the 40th Parallel, Wheelers Survey West of the 100th Meridian, and Powell's Survey of the Rocky Mountain Region. You may perhaps imagine the thrill it gave me to find that a majority of the geologists responsible for these reports were still active and here in Washington. The list is S. F. Emmons, G. K. Gilbert, Arnold Hague, W. H. Holmes, E. E. Howell, A. C. Peale, J. W. Powell, and C. A. White all of whom were among the founders of this Society.

Major John Wesley Powell, a one armed veteran of the Civil War, was then Director of the United States Geological Survey. I still remember the music of his voice and the rhythmic melody of his words when in a public lecture I heard him describe that first adventurous voyage through the Grand Canyon of the Colorado.

Three other members of the early surveys, Gilbert, Emmons and Hague were presidents of this Society. Gilbert's presidential address, entitled "The Origins of Hypotheses" after nearly half a century is still well worthy of re-reading as a model example of the scientific method of attacking a problem and a very high type of scientific writing.

I will not bore you with an attempt to call attention to all the other notable men who were among the original members of the Geological Society but I must mention a few of them. First in the list I would name Charles D. Walcott who came to Washington in 1879 as one of the first minor appointees of the new Geological Survey. He served this Society as its first president for two years. During his presidential term he succeeded Major Powell as Director of the Geological Survey and after 13 strenuous years in that office he retired to the more peaceful atmosphere of the Smithsonian Institution where he was Secretary for the rest of his days.

Then there were Becker, Cross and Eldridge, Hayes, Campbell and Diller, F. W. Clarke, Hillebrand and Merrill, Darton, Keith and R. T. Hill, Lindgren, McGee and Bailey Willis, G. D. Harris, Knowlton and David White, W. H. Dall and Lester F. Ward.

Too many of these names probably do not mean much, but to me they recall vivid memories of many things.

McGee was a conspicuous figure in those early days. He was the man whose first name was W J without any periods or punctuation. And there were no stops nor pauses in his activity either. He was the only man, I believe, who ever belonged to all the Society's affiliated with the Washington Academy of sciences. His list was Academy, Anthropological, Biological, Chemical, Entomological, Geographic, Geological, Historical, Medical and Philosophical and at the same time he was on the governing boards of three of them. His closest rival as a joiner was Major Powell, who for some reason failed to join the Entomological and Medical societies.

During the first two years of the Geological Survey's history, a brilliant group of young geologists came to Washington and joined the Survey. They were Alfred H. Brooks, Harold B. Goodrich, Walter C. Mendenhall, Chester W. Purington, Charles [illegible], George Otis Smith, Arthur C. Spencer, Josiah E. Spurr, George W. Stose, Joseph A. Taff and T. Wayland Vaughan. You will notice that among these there were two future Directors of the US Geological Survey. Soon after arriving here several members of this group, feeling the need of an additional outlet for their ideas and activities, came together in a very informal Society which they called the AAA -- letters that may have stood for Ambitious Assistants Association. The few years later this Society evolved -- or shall we say the degenerated -- into the Pick and Hammer Club.

Other things were happening in those eventful early years. At the beginning of the fiscal year in which the Geological Survey was organized, Congress cut in half the usual appropriation for the Geological Survey and that caused among other things immediate suspension of all fieldwork and the [exodus?] of a considerable number of geologists from Washington. During the winter and spring of that year many government bureaus, including the Geological Survey, were preparing exhibits for the Columbian Exposition -- the First a which was held in the summer of 1893.

A couple of years later Knowlton and I made a joint field excursion to the Great Plains and Rocky Mountain region's where to our mutual satisfaction we solved the Laramie

problem and determined the boundary between the Cretaceous and the Tertiary. Unfortunately neither the problem nor the boundary stayed fixed very long and for many years after that Knowlton and I seldom agreed on any subject.

Speaking of that old controversy reminds me that in this very month of February 1943 I have received fresh from the press a paper by Roland Brown in which he solves the Laramie problem and determines within the limits of a few feet the boundary between Cretaceous and Tertiary in the Denver region. Brown's conclusions in their main features so nearly coincide with the conclusions I reached 30 or 40 years ago but I think possibly he may be nearly right. But even if Brown's opinion should have to be revised I hope that before this Society celebrates its first Centennial someone will have said the last authoritative word on the Laramie question and removed the Cretaceous-Tertiary boundary from the realm of controversy. Even when that happens and is reached I am sure that geologists will still find plenty of important questions to debate.