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Early Wildlife Conservation and Education Efforts in Virginia: Correspondence of A. Willis Robertson

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ABSTRACT

Although best known for his work as a member of the U.S. House of Representatives and his leadership in enacting the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration (Pittman-Robertson) Act, A. Willis Robertson was first and foremost an outdoorsman who led the Virginia Game Commission (now, Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries) from 1926-1932. During his tenure as Chairman at the Game Commission, over 40,000 pieces of correspondence crossed his desk. These letters, both personal and political, covered topics of local game sustainability, wildlife management education, and his work with grassroots organizations. From our review of over 3,100 letters from 1928-1932, three themes are apparent: 1) Robertson encouraged local participation in conservation efforts (with focus on initiating chapters of the Izaak Walton League of America), 2) he directed efforts to restock depleted populations of native fauna, and 3) his political conversations spurred important conservation measures. In this paper, we present examples for each theme to demonstrate the conservation efforts of A. Willis Robertson during a time when such actions were essential first steps to recovering and sustaining the game populations now present in the Commonwealth.

Key words: Game Commission, Izaak Walton League of America, Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, wildlife management.

INTRODUCTION

Before A. (Absalom) Willis Robertson (Fig. 1) served as Chairman of the Game Commission (1926-1932) in Virginia, he had been an avid outdoorsman, a state senator, an army veteran, and a county attorney. One of six children and the son of a Baptist minister, Robertson was born in May 1887 in Martinsburg, West Virginia, where his interest in hunting and fishing as a youngster likely led to his lifelong support for natural resources and conservation. Robertson was employed as a lawyer until his election to the Virginia state senate in 1915. He volunteered in 1917 to serve in the U.S. Army as a first lieutenant after completing Officers Training Camp during World War I. In 1919, at the rank of major, Robertson was demobilized and returned to the state senate. After he resigned as state senator, Robertson became the Commonwealth attorney for Rockbridge County, Virginia in 1922. Throughout this time, he also was active in the American Legion, the Kiwanis Club, and the Masons (Heinemann, 2014).

Virginia's Commission of Game and Inland Fisheries, founded in 1916, comprised four individuals, including a fisheries commissioner, John S. Parsons and M. D. Hart who took the role as Chief Clerk of the Game Commission. The new agency lacked game and fish wardens at its inception. Wardens were later appointed through recommendations from town councils and held positions in nearly every county in the Commonwealth (Thompson & Francl-Powers, 2013). In 1926, Governor Harry F. Byrd appointed Robertson as Chairman of Virginia's Commission of Game and Inland Fisheries. During his six years in this position, Robertson received correspondence regarding conservation topics from local citizens, sportsmen, and government officials which today includes more than 40,000 archived documents currently held by the

Fig. 1. A. Willis Robertson, Chairman of Virginia Game Commission, 1926-1932 (from U.S. Senate archives, 1956; courtesy of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service National Conservation Training Center library).

Library of Virginia (LOV). For this paper, we examined approximately 3,100 documents in this collection (thought to be LOV duplicates), that are currently held in the Richmond headquarters office of the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (VDGIF). We highlight three major components of letters he wrote: (1) his grassroots efforts to spur conservation activities, with special focus on the Izaak Walton League of America; (2) his direct efforts to increase depleted populations of native wildlife in Virginia; and (3) his political conversations to encourage wildlife conservation and sustainability. Through his personal and professional correspondence, we can gain insight into how Robertson encouraged others to initiate and sustain wildlife management and conservation practices.

GRASSROOTS EFFORTS: THE IZAAK WALTON LEAGUE OF AMERICA

As Chairman of the Game Commission, Robertson's influence was far-reaching but he understood the importance of building a base of supporters who could work at the local level. Robertson's correspondence revealed his support for and expansion of the Izaak Walton League of America (IWLA). The IWLA was founded nationally in 1922, focusing on outdoor conservation (IWLA, 2016). Robertson played a critical role in helping to establish IWLA chapters throughout Virginia, starting in 1928. He worked closely with Lynchburg, Virginia IWLA President, Mr. M.B. Mount, who shared Robertson's conservation interests. As recorded in the archived correspondence, Robertson spoke at meetings to spark enthusiasm throughout the public - specifically sportsmen - and sought to boost membership in local chapters.

The Izaak Walton League chapters in Virginia proved to be assets in these early conservation efforts. Their chapter meetings included professional speakers with national reputations to educate sportsmen and the public. Robertson frequently contacted employees from federal agencies (e.g., U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Bureau of Fisheries [now part of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service]) to speak to local chapters in Virginia. This ensured that accurate and current information was directly disseminated to the target audiences.

At a more memorable meeting, Robertson organized several professionals to speak. These professionals included:

> "…Mr. Titcomb, head of the Connecticut Department of Fish and Game and the greatest fish expert in the U.S. who will speak on trout and bass; Mr. Leach, head of propagation of the U.S. Bureau of Fisheries, who will speak on fish nurseries, Mr. Talbott Denmead of the U.S. Bureau of Biological Survey, who will speak on migratory birds; Major Kelley, head of the U.S. Forest Service who will speak on the national forests in Virginia with reference to conservation…" (Personal correspondence between Robertson and Mr. W.B. Moss of the Roanoke IWLA chapter, May 15, 1928).

Robertson's early correspondence with the IWLA chapters focused on sustainability of species that were hunted and fished. The path to sharing this message was establishing the many local chapters to act as conduits for information from and to the local level.

A major topic of discussion between Mount and Robertson was the proposed locations for each new chapter. Through correspondence, they carefully mapped out ideal IWLA chapter locations throughout Virginia and contacted potential leaders. On one occasion where Robertson suggested to Mount to help establish a chapter in Scott County, Virginia, Mount sent a statement to Senator Craft (R-Virginia, 1922-

unknown) that expresses just how much potential the IWLA could have throughout the state.

> "The Izaak Walton League is a national organization devoted to the preservation of outdoor America. At the present time there are thirteen chapters in Virginia; a number of others are in process of organization. The League is operated without profit and has no political affiliations. I know of no other state where there is a greater opportunity for the constructive conservation of wild life." (Personal correspondence between M. B. Mount and Senator Craft, February 11, 1929).

Furthermore, correspondence of Robertson and Mount with the extension bureau of the IWLA Chicago chapter indicated their desire to establish a state-level chapter in Virginia, the better to act as a conduit for messages sent by the national organization. Their efforts in establishing multiple IWLA chapters were successful because more chapters appeared throughout the state between 1928-1929 (e.g., Brookneal [personal correspondence between M.B. Mount and A.W. Robertson, October 29, 1928], Bedford [personal correspondence to VA Chapters from M.B. Mount, February 18, 1929]). Additional chapters were located in Gordonsville, Nelson, Norfolk, Lynchburg, Altavista, Roanoke, Blacksburg, Appalachia, Abingdon, and Big Stone Gap (Newspaper clipping attached to a personal correspondence between M.B. Mount and Robertson, January 27, 1929).

Robertson often acted as the intermediary for IWLA chapters and lawmakers or Game Commission officials who could make wildlife management decisions. The chapters discussed proposed regulations, and chapter leaders provided local feedback directly to Robertson. In 1929, such correspondence addressed the destructive predatory behavior of an invasive carp species introduced from Europe (National Park Service, 2016). Carp introduction cost the IWLA and Game Commission thousands of dollars annually in their efforts to restock fish species that were impacted by carp predation. The IWLA's resolution stated:

> "Be it therefore resolved by the Izaak Walton League of America in convention that it is opposed to the propagation or stocking of carp and that same should not only be discontinued at once, but such efforts as are possible should be made to rid such streams and lakes as are chiefly adapted to game fish, of this objectionable and destructive variety of fish" (Personal correspondence between IWLA and all state Game and Fish Commissioners on June 27, 1928).

Later in Robertson's tenure as commissioner, he continued to receive input from IWLA chapters regarding contemporary issues. In 1932, the Charlottesville chapter commented on the length of Wild Turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo*) seasons:

> "I feel it would be desirable for citizens of Albemarle interested in an open season on turkeys to send us a petition indicating the length of the season desired. It is our intention of our commission to provide an open season, but we would welcome information concerning the local wishes on its length. It has been reported to me that the Izaak Walton local chapter of Charlottesville favors only two weeks." (Personal correspondence between Robertson and G.M. Dillard on May 10, 1932).

This working relationship and continuing correspondence between Robertson and various chapters of IWLA emphasized that changes in Virginia's game species laws began at the local level.

GRASSROOTS EFFORTS: OTHER EDUCATIONAL OUTLETS

As the IWLA chapters grew in number and participation across the Commonwealth, Robertson fielded many questions from citizens wishing to become more involved in education and conservation. In our reading of these letters, it became clear that citizens from Virginia and elsewhere sought advice about three main educational endeavors: 1) Maintaining populations of hunted species (how the citizen could contribute to conservation of a particular wild population), 2) educating citizens about hunting and fishing regulations (how to justify the laws and regulations), and 3) educational outreach by citizens (how the citizen could personally educate others).

1) Maintaining populations of hunted species

William C. Adams, Director of the Massachusetts Department of Conservation in 1928, visited Robertson in Virginia, seeking advice about game farms and fish hatchery operations. Robertson was closely involved with the Virginia State Game Farm that bred and released Northern Bobwhite (*Colinus virginianus*) for hunting. Adams wrote to Robertson, recognizing the farm's apparent successes.

> "This game farm and his [Mr. Coleman, the game warden who tended the farm] work is Virginia's one great contribution to the progress in wild life conservation. I say this not unmindful of the other splendid things which you are doing that have put Virginia in the forefront of conservation states. I think you ought to know this for it is a great help and inspiration to any of us in the work to have these opinions from the outside." (Personal correspondence between William C. Adams and Robertson, August 20, 1928).

In a similar vein, Ross Leffler (President) and other members of the Pennsylvania Board of Game Commissioners visited this farm to gain insight on Robertson's breeding methods:

> "First, let me state that from the standpoint of obtaining knowledge on your method, our trip was a complete success, as I earnestly believe that you have accomplished something in this line, which will take a great many years for other persons to accomplish. The efficient manner in which the farm is operated is to me a complete revelation, and I fully realize that only through management such as you have, has it been possible to achieve the remarkable results which you are able to show." (Personal correspondence between R. Leffler and Robertson, May 22, 1928).

2) Educating citizens about hunting and fishing regulations

In 1928, Robertson wrote to Fred Doellner, General Manager of the IWLA in Chicago, and described not only the importance of the rules pertaining to hunting but also the benefits of educating sportsmen on the reasons for the need for such regulations.

> "One great trouble that we are having is getting the sportsmen of Virginia to look upon wildlife conservation from the standpoint of the greatest good to the greatest number of people. Where game is plentiful in one county the hunters of that county want a longer season and a larger bag limit than their neighbors in adjoining counties have. In many other ways people in various sections of the state want special rights and privileges which may be desirable from their point of view but which are dangerous from the standpoint of constructive conservation thruout [sic] the state. Most of our troubles may be attributed to a lack of information concerning practical conservation and the only way by which our people may be reached with an educational program is through the establishment of League chapters in all sections of the state." (Personal correspondence between Robertson and Fred Doellner September 4, 1928).

Letters between Robertson and Mount emphasized the importance of working directly with the citizens, so that they understood the management decisions and supported the measures. Mount voiced his concern to Robertson about citizens, especially sportsmen, who were seemingly unaware of the management efforts by the IWLA and Game Commission. Individuals who lacked concrete information about these organizations were wary of what their local conservationists required of them through laws and regulations. However, because efforts to sustain wildlife actively involved these cautious individuals, they became more accepting of the laws to sustain or increase local wild populations. In Nelson County, fishermen living near the streams with stocked trout stated that they:

> "…were looking forward to their distribution; almost without exception they had agreed to refrain from fishing in those streams next year, if that should seem advisable, and to co-operate in every way in preventing illegal fishing. The fact that these mountain people have shown such an attitude is an indication that such work in fish culture has real educational value; I am satisfied that the establishment of nurseries in various parts of the State will help no little in creating interest among the people who live along the streams and that their interest will prove an important factor in restoring satisfactory fishing conditions." (Personal correspondence between Mount and Robertson, October 15, 1928).

3) Educational outreach by citizens

A Blackstone, Virginia game warden contacted Robertson in 1928 requesting approval and delivery of live quail [Northern Bobwhite] for use in his educational exhibit at the Nottoway County Fair. Robertson provided suggestions to educate the public on the importance of not only birds but also the dangers of *Felis catus* (Domestic or Feral Cat) as a predatory species. Robertson further recommended that the game warden supply posters that explained the dangers of both domestic and feral cats to wildlife, stating:

> "…that the average cat will kill fifty song birds a year, will hunt both day and night and recognizes neither closed seasons nor bag limits. Another poster should call for the protection of song birds, stating that insectivorous birds will eat 100 insects per day…In other words, the birds are the farmer's best friend…" (Personal correspondence between Robertson and W.L. Irby, Blackstone, Virginia game warden, September 19, 1928).

In its nascence, not all wildlife management tasks were completed directly by agency employees. Therefore, educated citizens were (and remain) an integral part of successful management. For example, correspondence documented back-and-forth conversations with a citizen, Mr. Gathright of Covington, Virginia who actively stocked fish (fingerlings) in local streams. Robertson's office provided both the young fish and written guidance to assist in their rapid growth.

> "…greatly appreciate your kindness in agreeing to plant some 200 rainbow in the headwaters of Smyth Creek. I know that this will be greatly appreciated by the local citizens interested in the restocking of this stream…We are requesting in our new budget the sum of $150,000 for fish culture work for the next thirty months and if wisely expended, this should produce some results…" (Personal correspondence between Robertson and Gathright, October 3, 1929).

Whether the initiation of conservation efforts originated by citizens reaching out to the Game Commission or the Game Commission working with individuals or groups of citizens, there was obvious support for conservation by both the agency and the end-users. Each constituency was dependent on the other for success, and this realization led to continued and specific correspondence and financial backing. The combined successes fueled continued efforts of citizen conservation efforts.

DIRECT EFFORTS TO RESTOCK NATIVE FAUNA

Robertson was trying to grow the conservation movement during a challenging time: the Great Depression. Further, populations of hunted and trapped species such as White-tailed Deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*), Wild Turkey, Black Bear (*Ursus americanus*), and American Beavers (*Castor canadensis*) had been depleted, and some nearly extirpated (R.L. Walker, VDGIF Agency Outreach, pers. comm., March 22, 2016). In his writings, Robertson worked closely with others to ensure the successful restocking of native species across the Commonwealth. One of Robertson's goals was population sustainability, i.e., stocking a sufficient number of individuals to ensure natural reproduction. One example was when Robertson arranged for the purchase of 100 wild turkeys by the Game Commission, which he sought to have distributed in Lynchburg (city) and Campbell County:

> "It is the desire of our Commission for these turkeys to be planted in sections suitable for their propagation and in which for some cause of [sic] another turkeys have become virtually exterminated. If possible, they should be released on some tract of 1500 or more acres where they can have suitable protection for at least two years in order to give them an opportunity to propagate." (Personal correspondence between Robertson and Mount, December 29, 1928).

The relationships Robertson formed with other conservationists helped achieve success in such stocking efforts. As part of a successful stocking program, Robertson advocated research in animal husbandry, general behavior, and disease control. Robertson received a copy of a letter to the Dean of the College of Agriculture, Virginia Polytechnic Institute (VPI), from M.G. Lewis, county agent of the Extension Service. The letter addressed the importance of research studies as suggested by Robertson:

> "I understand that Mr. Robertson is interested to the extent that he will arrange to furnish necessary breeding stock and what equipment is needed in addition to that already available on the V.P.I. poultry farm. It would undoubtedly be of value to students taking poultry husbandry to have the opportunity to learn a few of the essentials in this connection…" (Personal correspondence between Dean Price, the College of Agriculture, V.P.I. and M.G. Lewis, county agent of the Extension Service, January 11, 1929).

Robertson was not shy when it came to sharing his successes:

> "You may likewise by [sic] surprised to learn that three years ago there was not a deer in Roanoke County, but, owing to our restocking efforts, we not only have a large number in that

> County but they have extended from Roanoke into the adjoining Counties of Montgomery and Craig. We have likewise had good success with the deer released in Scott and Wise where there have been no deer for the past fifty years." (Personal correspondence between Robertson and G.M. Dillard, Scottsville, Virginia, November 21, 1932).

LOCAL AND STATE POLITICAL CONVERSATIONS

In 1928, the issue of stream pollution was a topic of discussion in the growing, vocal conservation community. At a time when many Virginia streams appeared to be devoid of aquatic life due to impacts from mining and heavy metals operations, Robertson played a substantial role in river restoration (R. L. Walker, VDGIF Agency Outreach, pers. comm., March 22, 2016). Mount alerted Robertson to the issue of "still slop pollution" (excesses from alcohol fermentation on a large scale; recall that this was the era of Prohibition). Mount was concerned that fish in the affected streams would be decimated. Robertson reached out to many government officials and conservationists to help gain control and resolve this issue. He responded to Mount:

> "…and have today written the Attorney General and the U.S. Director of Prohibition for Virginia, requesting that they each issue instructions to their leading officers not to pollute our mountain streams with confiscated liquor, beer and mash. I am glad that you brought this to my attention as it had never occurred to me before, but I can well understand how such a pollution would be entirely possible and result very detrimentally to the fish in small streams." (Personal correspondence between Robertson and Mount, June 15, 1928).

Several months later, Robertson organized a conference that included many industrial representatives as well as government leaders, with the goal of reaching a friendly resolution to the serious matter of stream pollution:

> "I am also requesting the paper mills at Buena Vista, Salem and Pearisburg, and the rayon plants at Roanoke, Covington and Waynesboro, and the chambers of commerce of the three last named cities to send representatives to this meeting. I have also requested the Governor to attend the conference, and likewise requested the following agencies to be represented: Commission of Conservation and Development, Commission of Fisheries, and the State Board of Health." (Personal correspondence between Robertson and Mount, August 18, 1928).

In Robertson's efforts to curb stream pollution, he wrote many letters to private citizens – many with roles in local governments – encouraging their personal involvement. He worked to raise funds and hired professionals to conduct surveys on the suspected polluted streams (i.e., providing scientific data to substantiate citizens' concerns).

> "…There is no doubt whatever about cooperation on the part of the University of Virginia and I talked with General Cocke this morning and he was delighted to make the V.M.I. laboratories [sic] available to us and said that we would have the hearty cooperation of the heads of the Chemistry, Biology and Engineering Departments at V.M.I." (Personal correspondence between Robertson and Richard Messer, Chief Sanitary Engineer, Dept. of Health, Richmond, VA, April 4, 1929).

> "…Mr. Harry A. Bailey who has been employed be [sic] the co-operative stream pollution committee to conduct a survey of our streams. Mr. Bailey will use the laboratories of the V.M.I…" (Personal correspondence between M.B. Mount and Rev. James J. Murray of Lexington IWLA Chapter, April 25, 1929).

> "…Fortunately, the committee of which I am chairman has been able to secure the services of a Mr. Bailey, formerly of Minnesota, and he will be in charge under the immediate supervision of the Chief Sanitary Engineer of our State Board of Health of the technical end of our stream pollution work." (Personal correspondence between Robertson and Hon. William Knox, Manager, Nimrods of America, April 30, 1929).

Although Robertson could secure assistance from dependable citizens to conduct pollution surveys, and secure them working spaces in a university laboratory (in this case, at Virginia Polytechnic Institute), one limitation to his Commissioner position was his inability to change the laws. Robertson was the first to point out the deficiencies in laws and law enforcement, and indicated an earnest desire to change them:

> "...I can say definitely, however, two thinks [sic] in which we need your help: viz, (1) the raising of an adequate budget to continue the work for two years after February, 1930; (2) the strengthening of the state pollution law... I do not yet know what this budget will amount to but it will probably be not less than $20,000... Section 3196 which carries the penalty provides for a fine of not less than five nor more than two hundred and fifty dollars. A fine of five dollars for a pollution which may cause the destruction of thousands of fish is absolutely ridiculous. To investigate and ascertain the facts concerning the pollution of the Covington paper mill in the James river, for instance, means an expenditure on our part of from five to ten thousand dollars. This investigation has to be made before there could be a successful prosecution under Section 3195 since the court would require us to establish beyond a reasonable doubt both the nature and the effect of the pollution in question and this effect was injurious to fish or fish spawn. After making such an investigation, let us assume that the paper mill would refuse to take any steps to prevent their pollution. We would then have a warrant sworn out before a justice of the peace who upon proof of the law violation could impose a fine of only five dollars, which would relieve the offending company from all further responsibility for any violations prior to the issuance of that particular warrant. You can therefore well see how a manufacturing interest inclined to ignore and violate the law could exhaust the resources of the state in prosecutions of this character by the payment of small fines..." (Personal correspondence between Robertson and Max Fleischer of the Gordonsville IWLA Chapter and general superintendent and secretary of Inglewood Farms, Inc., August 19, 1929).

In situations like this, Robertson saw the "ridiculous" penalties that current laws impose, but as Chairman of the Game Commission, he lacked the ability to directly change the current laws. Perhaps it was frustrations like this that spurred Robertson to move towards an elected position, where he could effectively change the laws to better sustain wildlife.

With this state experience under his proverbial "belt," Robertson was elected to the United States House of Representatives in November 1932. From 1933-1946, he served as Chairman of the Committee on Wildlife Conservation. The skills acquired through his state appointments and collaborations fostered through his correspondence would serve him well on the national stage (Heinemann, 2014).

ROBERTSON'S CONTINUING LEGACY

Today, it is widely acknowledged that A. Willis Robertson's most sustaining contribution to conservation was the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act, also known as the Pittman-Robertson Act (1937). VDGIF historian R. L. Walker (pers. comm., March 22, 2016) believes that one of the main reasons that the Pittman-Robertson Act continues to benefit conservation is because of the following clause in the act: "...and which shall include a prohibition against the diversion of license fees paid by hunters for any other purpose than the administration of said state fish and game department..." Wildlife Restoration Act (Pittman-Robertson PR) of 1937.

Representative Robertson co-sponsored this bill, which imposed an 11% tax on sporting arms, ammunition, and archery equipment, and a 10% tax on handguns (Federal Funding for Fish and Wildlife, 2015). This brought in significant funds (e.g., $484,765,728 reported in 2009; Andrew Loftus Consulting, Southwick Associates, Inc. 2011) that provides assistance to state projects for purchasing land, improving existing lands, and supporting wildlife research (Our Wildlife Legacy, 2012). From 1939-2014, this act has collected more than 8 billion dollars, which, in part, has led to the purchase of more than 16,000 km^2 of wildlife-enhancing habitat, and establishing private landowner agreements to help manage 160,000 km^2 across the nation (The Wildlife Society, 2014). In Virginia, these funds bolstered early restoration efforts for White-tailed Deer, specifically providing additional support to purchase and reintroduce these deer into the western portion of the Commonwealth in the late 1930s and early 1940s (Gooch, 2001). They also have helped restore Northern Bobwhite in the Commonwealth (Stewart, 2012). More recently, allotted funds from this tax diverted more than 7 million dollars in Fiscal Year 2012 (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2013). Money from this Act fully funds state hunter education programs, encouraging safe and ethical decisions while hunting (Gooch, 2001).

This legacy is founded on Robertson's experience in grassroots education, commitment to citizen education, and fostering an understanding and respect for the wildlife around them. Robertson's correspondence reveals positive conservation efforts on local and state levels. Our investigation of just a fraction of the 40,000 documents from the Robertson archives revealed a glimpse into the field of conservation in its infancy.

Currently, the 40,000 documents held by the LOV are not in any digital format, nor are they accessible by the general public. The 3,100 papers we reviewed had been digitally scanned and were available for viewing because a platform was available. We recommend that future efforts at the LOV focus on digitizing all 40,000 documents and making them accessible to researchers.

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