

## The Straus African Expedition of 1929

A member of the Oscar Straus branch of the family recently asked what had become of the bird specimens collected by Sarah Lavanburg Straus on her expedition to Africa in 1929 for the American Museum of Natural History. This seemingly simple question set me off on a journey of exploration and discovery that could not have been more interesting.

The first information I was able to gather about this trip was from an article published May 8, 1929 in *The New York Times*, "Mrs. Straus Back From Africa Hunt, Encountered Many Perils in Trip for American Museum of Natural History." The article reports that the four month journey took Sarah, her grandson Edward Schafer, ornithologist Rudyerd Boulton and his ethnomusicologist wife Laura on a 15,000 mile adventure. They had to make their own roads for about 1,000 miles through the jungle and build trestle bridges along the way. Much of the trip was accomplished on foot. Sarah was almost trampled by a herd of elephants and narrowly escaped being knocked down by a charging rhinoceros. She saw lions at close range and more than 150 ostriches standing together at one time.

In a letter dated November 15, 1928 the Director of the American Museum of Natural History Dr. George H. Sherwood wrote to Sarah's son Roger W. Straus, "... I want to thank your mother for giving the Museum this opportunity to secure greatly desired material from Africa and we appreciate the fact that she desires to have her expedition to Nyasaland of direct benefit to the Museum."

Sarah Straus was the 68 year old widow of Oscar Solomon Straus in 1929. She, her grandson Edward "Ned" Schafer and researchers Rudyerd Boulton and his wife Laura spent four months in Central Africa, first on a photographic safari and then on a collecting expedition. During the expedition more than 900 bird specimens were collected. Laura Boulton collected insect specimens as well as recording native African music. The trip was documented by photograph and film. Ned is credited with taking many of the photographs. In a *New York World Telegram* article of February 9, 1945, Ned was said to be an "outstanding hunter and angler." Unfortunately, a search of the museum collections has failed to turn up the films.

An e.mail query to the American Museum of Natural History got me in touch with the ornithology collections manager, Paul Sweet. Not knowing how the museum and it's field researchers work, my original naive questions were whether any of the



Sarah Straus on the barge "SS Nuer" on the Upper Nile in Sudan

bird specimens had been used for display and what had become of them? The answers were far more complicated and interesting than I expected.

Although the museum had an active research and collecting program in Africa, the 1929 annual report of the American Museum of Natural History states, "The generosity of Mrs. Oscar Straus and Mr. Edward Schafer enabled the Museum to send Mr. Rudyerd Boulton to collect birds in Uganda and Kenya Colony, followed by four months field work in Nyasaland, from which region the Museum previously had no collection." An article in *Natural History Magazine*, Volume XXIX, Jan-Feb, page 105-6 reads, "On January 10, the Straus expedition sailed



Edward "Ned" Schafer accompanied his grandmother Sarah on the expedition

for a four months' trip to collect birds for the American Museum. The party, which included Mrs. Oscar Straus, her grandson Mr. Edward Schafer, and Mr. and Mrs. Rudyerd Boulton plans to go up the Nile through Uganda by automobile to Nairobi, and spend about two weeks visiting the big game fields there."

I had the opportunity to visit the American Museum of Natural History in New York City and to see the photographs and

some of the bird specimens collected during this expedition. Mark Katzman is the museum's special collections supervisor. He was most helpful; facilitating my visit, granting me access to the photographs and written material about the expedition and then having excellent copies of the photographs made for the Straus Historical Society. Mary LeCroy, Research Associate in the Department of Ornithology arranged to show me the bird specimens. She patiently explained how field work is accomplished; how a bird is caught, skinned and preserved, and how an expedition documents its work. Whatever meager understanding I now possess about bird taxonomy is directly due to Mary's ability to bring her vast knowledge to my elementary level. She wrote, "These birdskins were prepared as scientific studskins, and probably would not have been mounted for display, but rather stored in our collection for scientific study by specialists. While mounted specimens are of great use in preparing exhibits for the public, by far the largest part of our collection is stored in insect-proof and light-proof cabinets, where they remain accessible to scientists from all over the world. The Straus expedition specimens are still serving that purpose in our collection."

Although Rudyerd Boulton was associated with the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh, he seems to have been at the American Museum of Natural History when the Straus expedition was proposed. It appears he was doing research there but not affiliated with the museum. Perhaps it was a case of being in the right place at the right time. Shortly after his return from Africa,

he returned to the Carnegie Museum as Assistant Curator of Ornithology. To show their appreciation for the loan of Mr. Boulton to the American Museum of Natural History, the Curator-in-Chief proposed to present a "series of the duplicates of the collections of birds, which Mr. Boulton will acquire." The museum in Pittsburgh received approximately 200 bird specimens.

Robert Gengewere, a Carnegie Museum Archivist, granted permission for me to quote from an article written by Rudyerd Boulton, Volume 4, May 1930. In it, Boulton is referring to the area traveled during the Straus African Expedition of 1929 "Orchid-festooned forests - unmapped volcanos which pierce soft layers of low-hanging clouds, sifting and filtering down steep ravines - giant mahoganies, strangling figs, and tree ferns - it is not often that a naturalist is permitted to have a laboratory so romantically equipped, yet such was the workshop awaiting Mrs. Boulton and me in central East Africa, where we were to pursue our problem: the study of distribution and causes of distribution of the birds of the mountain rain forests. To reach our field of operations was fascination in itself, but that is another story. Up the Nile we went from Cairo, by train and river steamer, and across the Sudan, Uganda, and Kenya by motor with the Mrs. Oscar Straus Expedition of the American Museum of Natural History. As we traveled, we shot with camera and movie the big game - elephant, giraffe, wildebeest, kongoni - of these incomparable plains. Then an east-coast steamer took us from Mombasa to Beira, the thriving port of Portuguese East Africa, and a biweekly train chugged its way from the coast to



Sarah Straus with a Grants Gazelle  
Khartoum Sudan

the Shire Highlands in Nyasaland, a snug little protectorate of the British Empire. From there a monthly government mail steamer transported us and our ton and a half of equipment the length of Lake Nyasa to Mwaya in Tanganyika Territory at the head of the lake. Our five-thousand mile preface was ended, and our work was at hand."

Sarah Straus and her grandson Edward Schafer returned home in May 1929. Rudyerd and Laura Boulton continued their field work in Nyasaland, collecting on Mt. Rungwe north of Lake Nyasa. From there, they moved to the Union of South Africa and Southwest Africa for an additional four months. They continued collecting bird specimens, this time exclusively for the Carnegie Museum.

Boulton named a small African warbler with a chestnut throat for Sarah Straus. It is *Apalis chapini strausae*. Dr. James P. Chapin, Ph.D., was the Associate Curator of Birds of the Eastern Hemisphere at the American Museum of Natural History

when the expedition took place. It is common for scientists to name new species to honor people and Boulton seems to have done just that. This warbler species lives at 5,600 - 8,000



Drawing from: Urban, E.K., C.H. Fry and S. Keith 1997 *The Birds of Africa*, vol.5  
London, Academic Press, 669pp

feet above sea level. It is a small insect eating bird with blackish feathers and a chestnut colored throat.

Rudyerd Boulton moved to the Field Museum in Chicago in 1931. Their Bird Catalogue of August 30, 1946 notes, "... some of the interesting birds (Boulton) collected on the Straus Exp. near Mt. Cameron and in S. Nigeria." An e.mailed response by David Willard of the Field Museum states that there are 655 bird specimens in the Field Museum collection that were collected during the Straus West African Expedition in 1934. The 1945 *New York World Telegram* article reports that Sarah Straus financed an expedition for the Chicago Field Museum in 1935 at the age of 74. The additional specimens Mr. Willard mentioned must have been from this second expedition.

A *New York World Telegram* article of February 9, 1945 tells of Sarah's love of travel and adventure. In 1935, at 74, she returned to Africa, funding an expedition for the Field Museum of Chicago and led by Rudyerd and Laura Boulton. On this expedition the party "Took 700 small mammals, 300 phonograph recordings of native African music, 1000 still pictures, 15,000 feet of motion pictures and 700 varieties of birds."

"We got lost in the Sahara on our way back to Dakar after the expedition," Mrs. Straus reported with a chuckle, "and it was days before we could find our bearings again. We had planned our return trip so that we'd be back before the stormy weather but our calculations went wrong and we ran into a series of sandstorms that buried our station wagon. There was nothing we could do but sleep on the hard sand in blankets and dig our way out in the morning. None of us was strong enough to dig out the car, and, besides, we didn't have any shovels. Luckily, another party of hunters came along and got us out of our predicament after the storm had passed."

The article, written when Sarah was 83 years old, reported that she would return to Africa again if her doctors permitted it.

This article could not have been written or photographically illustrated without the assistance of: Mark Katzman, Special Collections Supervisor and Mary LeCroy, Research Associate, Department of Ornithology of the American Museum of Natural History in New York, Bernadette G. Callery, Museum Librarian, Carnegie Museums in Pittsburgh and David Willard, Collections Manager - Birds, Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago. Thank you all.