With These Two Hands

Robert J. Boles

Children today, with their mechanized toys, TV sets, playgrounds equipped with all kinds of rides, and lighted baseball diamonds and tennis courts, will find it hard to imagine how a lad of over sixty years ago kept himself occupied and entertained.

This was no chore for young Richard Schmidt, however. The “conveniences” mentioned above didn’t even exist when he was born on January 25, 1909. His father loved the land, and believed that hard work on the farm would occupy a person’s time, and provide for an honest, healthy living, even though there might be little money for anything else.

Richard, too, soon learned to love the land, and to work long and hard in the fields, but he also developed a great appreciation for the plants and animals about him. He especially enjoyed the birds, and spent some of his spare time carefully studying their shapes, behavior, and graceful maneuvers while in flight. These observations, along with native artistic ability, were to be of great help in what later proved to be his life’s work, the field of taxidermy.

Cover: Imagine the skillful hands and artistic ability required for skinning out a day-old bobwhite quail, and mounting it in this lifelike position.

It was a mounted owl that a friend received as a Christmas gift which first opened up such a world to him. He stood, open-mouthed, staring at the life-like stuffed skin that appeared to look fiercely back at him. “This is the kind of work I want to do,” he felt like shouting.

Armed only with boyish enthusiasm, he decided to give it a try. A sling shot is not a very adequate collecting weapon for securing a specimen on which to work, and there simply wasn’t enough money to buy a gun. The stories he had read of Daniel Boone and the early pioneers gave him an idea. Why not make a gun? So, in 1922, at the age of 13, he built himself a matchlock pistol. The finished gun took two boys to fire—it—one to hold it and to aim, the other to touch a match to the priming. No self-respecting bird was going to sit and let itself be collected with such commotion going on, so Richard decided a more sophisticated weapon was needed. With an inventive mind and the aid of the school encyclopedia, he converted the matchlock pistol into a cap-and-ball pistol, with a trigger and hammer lock. Now even cottontail rabbits fell prey to the young collector.

Richard now felt that he was ready to study taxidermy in earnest. As far as he could find out, the Northwestern School of Taxidermy was THE SCHOOL in which to enroll to acquire the skills he needed for the field he had chosen. Two formidable
obstacles stood in his way. First, the tuition called for the staggering sum of ten dollars (which he didn't have), and second, he would not only have to secure his father's permission to enroll, but he would also have to try to borrow the money from him. With more hope than faith that he would get the money and the permission, he approached his father. The answer was short and to the point—there was nothing practical about stretching the skin of a dead bird over a wad of inedible cotton, and any further requests of such a nature would receive a more emphatic answer in the form of a spanking. Richard's world was shattered, but he had been brought up to respect his father's wishes. Much as he wanted to enroll in the taxidermy course, the subject was dropped, never to be brought up again.

Instead, he scraped and saved, lowered his sights, and, a year later, having saved up a dollar and a half of his own money, he bought a book entitled "Home Taxidermy for Pleasure and Profit." With no outside help, other than his new book, he mounted his first bird—a Swainson's hawk a friend had given him.

Richard's father accepted his son's deep interest in taxidermy, and behind his seemingly gruff and stern manner was a feeling of pride in his son's perserverence and skill in something he believed in and wanted to do. His mother was more of a problem. "Bird stuffing" was not something to be done in her house, and Richard was banished to the barn to work by the light of a kerosene lantern. The young man continued to make sly suggestions about a more cheerful and warmer place to work, and no one knows today whether it was his hints, or the sight of his third specimen, a tiny, pretty screech owl that did the trick, but he was given permission to do his work in the summer kitchen that his mother had already vacated for the winter. Much to his mother's surprise, Richard left the place as clean as he had found it, and was rewarded by being given permission to mount future specimens in his room.

After missing school for a semester, during which Richard helped his father with the farm, hunted rabbits to help put meat on the table, and ran a trap line to bring in a little cash, he returned to school for the spring semester of 1927. By a
stroke of luck, his new principal, Herman Janzen, was an artistic taxidermist. The tutoring that the aspiring young man received for the next five semesters in the field of taxidermy by this fine teacher and understanding man greatly influenced the course of his life. Little did he know that in later years he would have the opportunity to visit some of the finest laboratories and discuss techniques with some of the most famous names in the taxidermy field.

Richard was fortunate enough to marry an understanding and tolerant young woman, for living with a budding taxidermist wasn’t always easy. She well deserves the dedication he made to her in one of his books, “How to Mount Birds,” which reads “... and to my wife, Katharina, who spent altogether too many lonely hours with the children while I was burning the midnight oil in my taxidermy studio.”

Even farming, which Richard understood well, sometimes became a problem. After working on his birds until two or three o’clock in the morning, rising before daylight to do the chores and start on the day’s farming duties called for almost superhuman willpower and endurance.

It was only natural that Richard’s sons would also develop a love of the outdoors, and they accompanied him on numerous collecting expeditions to obtain rare and elusive specimens for mounting. Unlike most farmers, Richard actually looked forward to
Richard at 15 with two of his earliest mounts.

Rainy days, for then he could work in his laboratory without feeling guilty of neglecting the farm work.

Restrictions on the possession of mounted birds were much less stringent in the 1920's than they are today, and even before his marriage to Katharina the collection of mounted specimens in the Schmidt household had reached such proportions that by the fall of 1929 the first group of visitors, a troop of Boy Scouts, came to see the display. This group was but the first of many to come to the farm for an "educational museum tour."

As Richard's museum collection became better known, the great number of visitors began to affect the privacy of his family, so the problem was temporarily solved by moving the specimens into an empty room with an outside entrance. Visitors could then come and go with less disruption to their family life. Not only relatives and friends came, but many high schools and colleges began to book tours to the little farm museum. One visitor asked Richard if he had ever mounted a pink elephant. The young man, unfamiliar with the slang for one of the hallucinations of a drunkard, seriously replied, "No, but if you will catch me one, I'll try to do the job."

The Schmidt family became adjusted to the visits of students, oil men, doctors, and distinguished professors and ministers, but an invitation to speak before the Canton Lyons Club in the spring of 1931 came as a distinct shock. What does a young, unsophisticated country taxidermist say to a group of city businessmen, especially when they were drowsy after a big meal? Some of that first attempt did "fall flat," but since then hundreds of people over the state of Kansas will recall seeing Richard's folding, seven-foot-wide display case, filled with examples of his work, and including many of the interesting birds that pass through the state. The speaking engagements were educational and entertaining, and more and more
groups requested him to present his program in Kansas and neighboring states.

Richard’s gentlemanly manner, his patience with young people, and his knowledge of the outdoors resulted in invitations to work as an instructor at various summer camps, so that for some fifteen years he tried the nearly impossible task of camping out with young people, sometimes for weeks at a time, and operating a farm as well. It took a loving and devoted wife to handle many of the farm chores, which often included milking eight or ten cows in 100 degree weather, while her husband was in the Colorado Rockies working with young people.

Many people over the state may remember hearing one or more of Richard Schmidt’s bird talks. A careful listener and observer, he constantly revised his talks in order to make them more educational and entertaining. Conservation and a love of wildlife was woven throughout his talks, as may be seen from the following excerpts from one of his speeches. To add interest, he took his traveling display with him, which included mounted examples of the birds he discussed.
The humming bird is the symbol of smallness and daintiness in everything. It builds a little, round nest out of lichens, no bigger than a teaspoon. Mrs. hummingbird lays two eggs about the size of peas. Their food is the nectar from flowers. One interesting thing is that this is the only bird with a reverse gear enabling it to fly backwards.

Of course you have heard of the worrybird, who flies backward because he doesn't give a darn where he is going; he's only interested in where he has been. I think there are a few people that we could classify as worrybirds, always saying, "When I was young it was so much better than it is now." Since these people don't really build for the future, living only in the past, they contribute very little to society.

Eagles and hawks are the day shift of our police force. They are beneficial and they consume a lot of harmful rodents. If it were not for the birds of prey our farms would be overrun with animals that eat our crops. The eagle is the largest and the sparrow hawk the smallest of our hawk family. Also, the owls that are out at night catching mice and nocturnal insects, help make farming more profitable.

Many people have the idea that birds of prey are harmful to farmers. In fact, certain hawks are called chicken hawks. Generally the name chicken hawk is ascribed to the red-tailed which is a high-flying bird that soars over the fields. When he spots a rabbit or a rodent he will dart down and catch his prey.

Of course we will have to admit that if a hawk nests near a farmstead where young chicks are out in the open she'll catch food for her young where it is easiest to get. That bird will naturally have to be regarded as harmful and be destroyed. But to use such an incident to justify killing all hawks one can find in the woods is as unfair as it would be for a teacher to round up all students for a sound spanking after she caught one naughty child. And how many people today still have their chickens out in the open? Certainly one has no excuse to go out and shoot hawks when all the hens are safely penned up in a large barn.

We have no trouble finding people who are like the eastern kingbird. He is so beneficial that we classify him among the best birds that we have, and we certainly have people whom we can classify among the most beneficial in the community. What then is so strange about the kingbird? Well, when I wake up early on a spring morning I can hear the kingbirds scolding and quarreling. What do they do through the day? Well, scold and quarrel. Kingbirds are possessive of their area, and I have witnessed a kingbird drive a peaceful mourning dove out of her tree. It was as if
it said, "This is my tree and you cannot perch here." Kingbirds drive crows off the farm and they will chase the cat under the porch, and then, in the evening after it is dark, often after I'm in bed, I can still hear kingbirds scolding and quarreling. Now I imagine you already can think of some people who are like this bird. I'm sure that every community has a few people that are honest and good but who scold and quarrel in everything they do.

I am a member of a pioneer class of the Goessel Rural High School which was organized back in 1926. Our athletic team did not win many trophies for our school; we did not even have a gymnasium. Our parents thought we should come home to do the chores rather than to practice football or basketball. But our glee club took the grand trophy, and so when the time came for us to decide on a mascot, what more appropriate emblem could we choose than the bluebird?

In later generations when the Goessel High School built a gymnasium and had a basketball and football team, our mascot got into trouble. The bluebird is not a fighter. When our bluebird boys were licked by the neighboring town's tigers, the newspaper report called our boys bluejays. This was an insult. We as a Mennonite community claim to be a happy, peaceful folk and wanted no relation what-so-ever with the egg-sucking bluejay. Invariably the bluebird and bluejay names were confused.

We have a cuckoo in Kansas with the nickname "rain crow." I remember one day on the farm when it was time to cut the alfalfa. At breakfast the radio weather forecaster said, "No rain in sight." We prepared the mower and I sent my oldest son into the field to cut down the alfalfa. Not long after he had started I heard a cuckoo calling. Looking around, I saw a cloud bank in the west. Quickly I sent one of the younger children to the field to tell Junior to quit cutting alfalfa. That evening we had the first good rain of that spring. Ever since then I have respected the cuckoo, although he is shy and retiring. The Lord says about people like that, "Thy Father who seeth in secret shall reward thee openly." And I think many times when we see people who are not outwardly forward like some others are, we think they're a little cuckoo. Yet, someday they may be better rewarded than those who always bold and confident.

The house wren is an enthusiastic little bird. In fact, Johnny wren is to me the symbol of enthusiasm. When Johnny starts singing he sings so hard that he shakes all over. And when Johnny and Jenny wren start building their home they work so hard that they fill their nest box until the twigs stick out of the opening. I have watched them fill a 14-quart sprinkler can full of twigs. This sprinkler can was upended over a garden post, and they just filled
that can full until the sticks hung out of the opening. They did not shirk their work. Johnny wren is as enthusiastic about his singing as about his work.

One day when speaking to a group of boy campers a little youngster raised his hand and said, “Mr. Birdman. I have read that Johnny wren is a henpecked husband.” I answered, “I read that too; I know Johnny wren is henpecked. But you and I can learn even from that. Let’s not let it get us down if we turn out to be henpecked husbands, let’s just keep singing.”

I used to have a sandpiper in my traveling exhibit, but many times, after a program, especially if I had been speaking to a Lion’s Club or the Rotary Club, an old gray-haired man would come up to me and ask, “Do you have a snipe in your exhibit?” Just by looking into his face I could tell he had, when as a young man in college, lost faith not only in the manner of hunting the snipe, but also in the bird itself. More correctly worded the question should have been, “Now tell me truthfully, is there a bird called the snipe?” For the benefit of such men I took my sandpiper out of the exhibit, and added a common snipe, often called jack-snipe by hunters.

You would be surprised at the beautiful snipe stories I heard when they saw this bird. A professor at the University of Kansas said that when he was enrolled as a freshman at the University, senior boys befriended him and invited him to accompany them on a snipe hunt. And since he thought he knew how to hunt those birds he accepted the invitation. The fellows took him to a sandbar island in the Kaw River on a foggy evening, gave him a lantern and a burlap sack, and told him they would go to the other end of the sandbar to startle the birds to get them to flying in his direction. He should stand there and catch the snipes as they would be blinded by the light. Very slowly he lowered the lantern to the ground so that the fellows could not see he was setting it down, then he ran for the boat. He said he just made it and got off the beach before the other fellows arrived. He rowed to the bank, beached the boat and ran to the dormitory room. The fellows who had taken him on that hunt were pretty mad that they had to swim ashore.

One of my best bird stories was told by a local preacher. After the show he came up and said, “Brother Schmidt, I have a bird story that you did not tell. It's the story of an old maid who knelt by her open window every night and prayed, ‘Lord, send me a man, Lord, send me a man!’ And one night as she was thus praying, she heard out in the distant woods a call, ‘whooo? whooo? whooo?’ Immediately she shouted back, ‘Lord, I don't care who he is, just so he is a man.’”
Not quite up to today's camper standards, but this was one of the best around in Richard Schmidt's early years of collecting.

Richard has always considered taxidermy as a hobby he thoroughly enjoyed. However, as word of his excellent work spread, more and more sportsmen began to ask for his services to mount their trophies. He had now become a commercial taxidermist, and enjoyed a booming business. Even during the worst depression years of the dirty thirties he never needed to look for work. It is understandable that many of his out-of-a-job friends, with all of their unasked-for "free time," envied this busy man. By the late thirties so many big game trophies were brought to him that his farming seriously hindered his taxidermy business. Most men would have dropped one or the other, but not Richard Schmidt. It was the outbreak of World War II and the great demand for farm products which brought his custom taxidermy work to a halt. After the war he did not resume trophy taxidermy for the sporting public.

When the Hesston College Audubon Society brought him a large raccoon to mount in 1928, Richard thought this might be a stepping stone to college employment in the museum field. Perhaps it was, but it took a long time to bear fruit. It was some twenty years later that he was employed to collect and mount the Hesston College Ornithological Collection.

In the spring of 1944 the Kansas Historical Society invited him to Topeka to discuss possible employment. With high hopes of a lucrative taxidermy contract, accompanied by his wife, and two-year-old daughter, Kathryn, he drove to Topeka in his old model A Ford. It was with great disappointment that he learned that all the Society wanted him to do was to wipe the dust off the
Not even Richard Schmidt, with half a century of collecting behind him, has ever seen the bird shown in this picture. The model of a passenger pigeon was carved from balsa wood, with a common pigeon providing the bill, feet and legs, and painted by one of his students, Anne Emerson. Much research of the old records was necessary to get the exact shape, proportions, and colors.

Col. N. S. Goss Ornithological Collection. Such a task appealed to him as a most unchallenging job, and he politely refused the offer.

In the spring of 1949 Dr. R. E. Mohler of McPherson College asked him to join him in presenting a paper on his rare bird and mammal records at the Kansas Academy of Science Convention. He earned a little cash for the trip by drilling post holes with his Ford tractor at ten cents apiece. And, now for the first time in his life, he checked into an expensive hotel, and celebrated by soaking in a tub brim-full of steaming water. It was a never-to-be-forgotten event for a farmer to have his first experience with hot and cold water on tap.

This trip to the Kansas Academy of Science meeting in Manhattan proved to be one of the first of a series of steps that led to his employment by the Biology Department of Kansas State Teachers College at Emporia. It was at a meeting of the Kansas Ornithological Society, of which he is a charter member, and which was meeting in conjunction with the Kansas Academy, that he met Drs. John Breukelman and Ted Andrews, of the Kansas State Teachers College, the two men who were instrumental in his entrance into full time college employment.

On the way home from the meeting a torrential rainstorm occurred. His driver took one look at the bottomless
mud road to Richard's home and
detoured over a graveled road to the
northeast corner of the farm, where
Richard was let out a good three­
fourths of a mile from the house.
Since he could not afford to ruin his
best go-to-church suit and shoes, he
left his clothes in the car and walked
home barefoot, clothed only in his
shorts. As he braced himself against
the wind and walked off into the cold
rain, he heard one of the people in the
car shout, "Tell your wife you played
poker with us on the way home!"

It was in Wichita at the Kansas
Ornithological Meeting in 1956 that
Dr. Ted Andrews approached
Richard about the possibility of
preparing specimens for the Kansas
State Teachers College Biology
Department at Emporia, Kansas. As
a result, he was issued an invitation
to come to Emporia and be
interviewed for possible employment
as the curator of the Kansas State
Teachers Natural History Museum.
At the college Dr. Andrews received
him courteously, and offered
Richard temporary employment at

The skin of the sturgeon shown above, on
display in the KSTC Museum, was fitted over a
balsa wood body whittled out by Richard
Schmidt.

The current gas shortage was no problem
on this visit to the Far North.

$250 a month in the Biology
Department, which he accepted
without bargaining for more pay.
Later he took a Civil Service
examination and was put on
permanent status.
Richard had always been
disappointed with the taxidermy
instruction books that he had seen.
Steps were not clearly explained or
were incomplete, and the
illustrations did not serve their
purpose as teaching aids. For years
he thought about writing his own
taxidermy text, but it wasn't until
about 1945 that he made his first
attempt to write bird-mounting
instructions. This ambitious
undertaking was soon abandoned as
being too difficult. Twenty-five years
later he discovered the long
forgotten, unfinished manuscript
among a group of old papers.
In the spring of 1956, after he joined
the Kansas State Teachers College
Biology Department as taxidermy
instructor, his teaching duties again
stirred the long dormant desire to
write a practical set of taxidermy
instructions, based upon his many
years of experience in the field. It is
interesting that his daughter Kathryn did most of the sketches that appear in the latest revision of his taxidermy manual.

The text for the illustrated manual *Bird Taxidermy* was completed by 1959. After much editing a completely revised text was written in 1961. This revision was used for the next six years in instructing his taxidermy students. A perfectionist, Richard continued to look for ways to improve his manual, and another revised text was written in 1967. By now the material had grown, with more and more illustrations and details, so that it was divided into two parts, Part I—How to Mount Birds, with 210 original illustrations and photographs, and Part II—How to Preserve Birds for Study, with 102 illustrations. At least five additional manuals have also been prepared or are being prepared, dealing with such subjects as how to mount fish, butterflies, and game trophies, rodent skin preparation, and tanning of furs.

Many of Mr. Schmidt's former taxidermy students may be interested to know that the two texts, *How to Mount Fish* and *How to Mount Birds*, came off the College Press in 1971 and 1972, respectively, and may be obtained by writing the Printing Department at the Teachers College.

It is only natural that a taxidermist should dream of someday traveling the world in search of rare specimens to mount. Even as a farm lad Richard had done his share of daydreaming. It was in 1959 his dreams came true,
when Dr. David Parmelle, the ornithologist at Kansas State Teachers College, asked Richard Schmidt to go with him as his field taxidermist into the far North.

In late May, 1960, they arrived at Cambridge Bay, Victoria Island, North West Territory, a "city" of about thirty Eskimo families. It was spring, and many birds were arriving from the south to nest. In the twenty-four-hour daylight they sometimes worked for 18 hours at a stretch. Three hundred and fifteen bird skins were prepared during the summer, as well as 23 mammal skins. A second trip was made in 1962 for further collecting and research.

In the summer of 1968 Jose Gonzalez, of the Universidad Industrial de Santander, Bucaramanga, Colombia, took Richard's taxidermy course. He was so impressed with Mr. Schmidt and his skills and teaching that Richard was invited to come to the University of Bucaramanga to help establish a museum and train a taxidermist.

On January 21, 1970, Richard and his wife boarded the plane in Kansas City for their flight to South America. With little command of Spanish, and working with students who had little or no knowledge of English, proved to be an interesting, if not sometimes comical and near disastrous, adventure. The 6-month employment at the University was an enjoyable experience, and a lasting friendship was formed with his student Hernando Romeroz.

This spring Richard Schmidt will retire from the Biology Department of Kansas State Teachers College.

The inscription on the above award reads as follows: "CONSERVATION EDUCATION AWARD presented to Richard H. Schmidt by the Kansas Wildlife Federation, The National Wildlife Federation, and The Sears-Roebuck Foundation, for outstanding contributions to the wise use of the nation's natural resources—1968."

Needless to say he will be missed. His many mounted specimens over the state, and especially in the Natural History Museum in Breukelman Hall on the Kansas State Teachers College campus, will long stand as a memorial to this gentle, kindly man, who rose from the hard work and limited education of his early years to become an author, college instructor, and world traveler.
SUMMER FIELD COURSE IN ECOLOGY
June 3-24. EB 459 and EB 859 Kansas Ecology. 4 hrs. Graduate and Undergraduate. Class will be off campus, camping and preparing meals in the field. Major ecological communities of Kansas will be visited. Emphasis on the observation and recognition of dominant plants and animals of each area and study of environmental factors controlling each biotic community. Contact Dr. Prophet and Dr. Spencer for additional information.

SPECIAL WORKSHOP IN COMPUTERS
June 24-July 5. GB 875 Workshop in Biological Sciences. 2 hrs. Graduate. Specifically designed for in-service teachers at the high school and college level. An introduction to the use of computers and computer generated materials as instructional tools for teaching biological concepts and processes. No previous experience in computer programming necessary. Contact Dr. Prophet for details.

EB 530. Workshop in Conservation. 3 hrs. credit. June 10-June 28. Seminars, lectures, discussions and field trips dealing with problems and status of natural resources. Especially desirable for teachers. Request information from Dr. Robert Parenti, Biology Department, KSTC. Soil Conservation Districts may offer financial assistance for this course.