



THE TRAILBLAZ



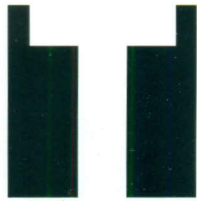


ZERS

Seventy-five years ago, before there was an Ontario Nature or a Federation of Ontario Naturalists, there was the Brodie Club and a novel idea *by* **D'Arcy Jenish**

MEMBERS OF THE BRODIE CLUB,
FOUNDED IN 1921, FROM LEFT TO RIGHT:
NORMA MARTIN, NORMAN MARTIN,
SANDRA EADIE, PAUL AIRD,
FRED BODSWORTH AND BRUCE FALLS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TOBI ASMUCHA



Thirty-two men were present that night – February 17, 1931 – and a good number smoked, so a thick, blue haze soon hovered over them. The occasion was the 167th meeting of the Brodie Club, a group of professional and amateur naturalists who met every second Tuesday on the third floor of the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) for the sole purpose of listening to a talk on some aspect of natural history. The proceedings began at 8:30 p.m. with a roll call and the approval of minutes from the previous two meetings. Then J.R. Dymond, a University of Toronto (U of T) professor and director of the ROM's department of zoology, rose and addressed the gathering. He proposed that natural history clubs across the province be approached about forming a Federation of Ontario Naturalists that could speak with one voice to promote conservation. After a lengthy discussion, the members approved and, for good measure, decided that the new organization's guiding principle should be this: "That every species, except such as was shown by science not to merit any protection, should be considered the heritage of all classes."

Before adjourning for the evening, they also appointed a three-member committee, consisting of Professor Dymond, his U of T colleague Allan Conventry and the ROM's ornithologist, Lester Snyder, to pursue the idea. Their efforts soon yielded results. A London dentist and well-known naturalist W.E. Saunders attended the Brodie Club meeting of March 3, 1931, and agreed to serve as the first president. Local natural history societies soon began offering their support. At a March 31 meeting, Dymond reported that they had received 10 responses, all favourable, from clubs and individuals, which represented most of the province's natural history community.

The founding meeting of the Federation of Ontario Naturalists (FON) was held May 15, 1931 and a tentative constitution was drafted. The document was presented at the first general meeting, held shortly after Labour Day that year, and by October the newly founded FON was making its voice heard throughout the province. The federation sent out 100 letters to individual and club members asking for comments on a set of recommendations to be presented to a provincial game commission then conducting a review of laws to protect wildlife. It was a modest start, but FON took hold and endured and, in February 2006, will celebrate its 75th anniversary. The organization has also grown in size and stature. Currently, the federation, now called Ontario Nature, has more than 25,000 members and supporters and is widely recognized as a major force for the preservation of wildlife and the promotion of sound ecological practices.

By a happy coincidence, the Brodie Club, named after William Brodie, Ontario's first provincial biologist, will achieve a milestone of its own in February. The club, which meets in the U of T zoology building on the second Tuesday of every month from September to May, will hold its 1,000th meeting, an accomplishment that would surely surprise some early members. Few of them envisioned the organization lasting till the end of the century, which is evident from a tongue-in-cheek paper that zoologist J.G. Oughton, an expert on snails, delivered at the 300th meeting on January 10, 1939. Oughton informed the members that he had consulted professional guides to the future and learned that the first meeting of the new millennium would be held in Hades. "All the familiar personalities were present," he noted, "though some had turned to theologians."

That the club has survived so long is not surprising, however, to some of the 42 currently active members. "There are two amazing things about the Brodie Club," says Marc Johnson, a PhD student in botany at U of T and, at 27, the club's youngest member. "First, members of the organization have contributed enormously over the years to the study of nature and natural history. Second, the speakers we get are world class." Paul Aird, a retired professor of forest management at U of T, also describes the club as amazing, though for a different reason. "We have no president, no vice-president and no business," he says. "It's always been a small group of people interested in nature and natural history."

The Brodie Club is also remarkable for how little it has changed over the years. Amateur naturalists joined with staff members in the ROM's zoological department to found the organization – initially called the Toronto Naturalists Club – and they held their first meeting on November 22, 1921. The handwritten minutes, preserved in the archive of the museum, reveal that eight men attended and they were moved by a spirit of egalitarianism. "It has no officers," the minutes state, "everyone having an equal standing, both as regards membership & in the discussion & business of the club."

The most significant change occurred at the 38th meeting, on December 4, 1923, when members decided to name the organization after William Brodie, a singularly appropriate choice. A commemorative poem written about him, in 1909, shortly after his death, describes Brodie as a man with wild hair, a bold, high forehead, a shaggy brow, deep-set eyes and a grizzled beard that partly hid his lips. He was born in Scotland in 1831, grew up on a farm hacked out of the forest in what is now the Toronto suburb of Markham and was educated by his mother in the family's log home.

Brodie taught school for five years, practised dentistry in Toronto for 33 years and in his spare time tramped up and down the city's then rustic Don River Valley observing wildlife. He was an amateur entomologist who specialized in the study of plant gall insects and parasites, and between 1877 and 1909 he published 42 scientific papers on the subject, mostly in two periodicals, *Canadian Entomologist* and the *Biological Review of Ontario*. He also accumulated an enormous collection of specimens, 68,000 in all, including insects, butterflies, reptiles, plants and seeds, which he sold to the Ontario government for \$1,000 in 1903, though he had a hard time getting paid. The collection formed the basis of the newly established Provincial Museum, which eventually evolved into the ROM. The government hired Brodie to manage the specimens, and in this role he became known as the provincial biologist.

Nothing quite as significant as the name change occurred for almost 60 years, until January 1980, when the club finally decided after a lengthy debate to begin admitting women. Bruce Falls, a former FON president and, at 81, the Brodie Club's longest-standing member, says the constitution is silent on the issue of gender and for decades there was no pressure to admit members of the opposite sex, though women visited occasionally, which produced some uncomfortable moments. "In the mid-1960s we had a guest from overseas who came and gave a talk and he brought his wife," says Falls. "Everybody was embarrassed. They didn't know quite what to do, but they were nice and polite to her so there was no problem. Word of the visit got around to some ladies who were interested in nature and they formed their own club."



THE BRODIE CLUB, WHOSE MEMBERSHIP NEVER RISES ABOVE 50, HAS NO PRESIDENT, NO OFFICERS AND NO BUSINESS, SAVE A COMMONLY HELD LOVE OF NATURAL HISTORY

Its organizer was a woman named Doris Spiers, whose husband, Murray Spiers, was a member of the Brodie Club. She and a group of like-minded women formed the Margaret Nice Club, which they named after a well-known amateur ornithologist from Ohio. But the new club folded once the Brodie Club opened its doors to female members, the first of whom was Sheila McKay-Cuja, then a young botany student at U of T.

Whether the Brodie Club was an all-male preserve or a mix of men and women – it now has about a dozen female members – it has always included professional scientists and amateur naturalists, whose participation has generally been regarded as mutually beneficial to both. Professor Dymond addressed the issue in a talk he gave at the 300th meeting, declaring that “this was one of the most important features of the Brodie Club, that it established a working contact between the professional and the amateur, each of which complemented the other, creating a broader outlook on both sides.”

The club has also included more than its share of characters over the years. Fred Bodsworth, a renowned naturalist and author of the celebrated book *The Last of the Curlews*, joined the organization in the late 1940s shortly after arriving from the Lake Erie village of Port Burwell, Ontario, to join the *Toronto Star* as a reporter. One of Bodsworth’s first stops was the ROM, where he went to meet the resident ornithologist, Jim Baillie, a lovable and popular man whose second-floor office was always open to visitors.

Baillie introduced Bodsworth to the club and its members, including a mammalogist named Stu Downey, who had only one leg but could get around on a pair of crutches, even in the woods, faster than most of his able-bodied friends. Then there was Professor Coventry, known as “Covers” to students and friends alike. “He was a real outdoorsman,” Bodsworth recalls, “who slept outdoors as often as possible in the warm weather and ran around barefoot all summer. There was nothing he hated more than people who broke bottles and left the glass lying around.”

The other thing Bodsworth remembers about these men is that they all smoked, and most of them preferred pipes. “Covers smoked a great, curved-stem pipe,” he says. “These guys would get together in

the Brodie room on the top floor of the museum and the place would be blue with smoke. It’s hard to imagine these days how a gang of educated people could create such an atmosphere. That room probably still smells of smoke.”

Nevertheless, Bodsworth enjoyed their company and admired their devotion to the study of natural history. Some members, like 80-year-old Norm Martin, who joined in 1955, have travelled to the far corners of the province to pursue their passion. Martin and his wife, Norma, both biologists by training, spent more than four decades studying the forest communities of Ontario. Their fieldwork, conducted from spring through fall, involved walking representative slices of forest, 6 metres wide by 335 metres long, to count and catalogue the trees, plants and birds. In 1990, they published a seminal work, *Biotic Forest Communities of Ontario*, of which two subsequent editions have been published.

Other club members have found fascinating phenomena in their own backyards. The Brodie Club minutes of September 22, 1936, report that Lester Synder provided an account of a pair of sparrow hawks nesting atop a building near King and Simcoe streets in downtown Toronto. “Mr Snyder,” the minutes report, “pointed out that the gravel roofs, spires, etc. presented a habitat not dissimilar to that in which the Sparrow Hawk is usually found.”

The members of the club have been unwavering in their dedication to the conservation of wildlife and have taken up issues both large and small. At a meeting in September 1936, they asked G.S. Bell to investigate a newspaper report that municipal officials had extirpated poison ivy in local parks by allowing goats to feed on it.

On occasion, the club has ruffled a few feathers in the name of protecting wildlife. Early in 1931, the well-known naturalist Jack Miner embarked on a public campaign to reduce the populations of hawks and owls in Ontario, which he believed to be out of control and threatening small animals. Miner lived at Kingsville on the shore of Lake Erie, a flyway for the birds, and during the fall migration he made a practice of shooting as many raptors as possible.

Club members responded by compiling and distributing a four-page leaflet titled *The Brodie Club Examines Jack Miner’s ‘Facts About Hawks,’* the only document the organization has ever published. It was a devastating critique, based on scientific evidence, and Miner was furious. “Jack Miner was God almighty in Ontario when it came to birds and nature,” says Bodsworth. “He tried to sue for libel, but the club had no officers so there was no one to sue.”

Apart from that episode, the club has ticked along in relative obscurity for 85 years. The members have never sought attention for themselves or their work but have been driven instead only by a desire to enhance their knowledge and understanding of natural history. They have been selective about who they invited to join the club and have never let their membership rise above 50. That, combined with a low turnover, means that the current membership is ageing. For now, at least, members have no concerns about the future of the club. In fact, the more youthful members are confident it will endure. “We have a number of members between the ages of 30 and 50 and they’re not leaving anytime soon,” says Johnson. “And so long as I’m in Toronto, I’ll be a member.”

D’Arcy Jenish is a Toronto writer and author of *Epic Wanderer: David Thompson and the Mapping of the Canadian West*.