

# Charles Edward Howard Aiken

September 7, 1850-January 15, 1936

**C**e never married and had no children to pass along his stories, but Charles Aiken left a legacy that endures to this day. His name is familiar to many in Colorado Springs for its association with the Audubon Society. Indeed, Aiken has been aptly described as Colorado's "pioneer ornithologist."

For though he was by trade a taxidermist and by study a naturalist, archaeologist, and anthropologist, Aiken is best known for the thousands of birds he studied, collected, mounted, and preserved.

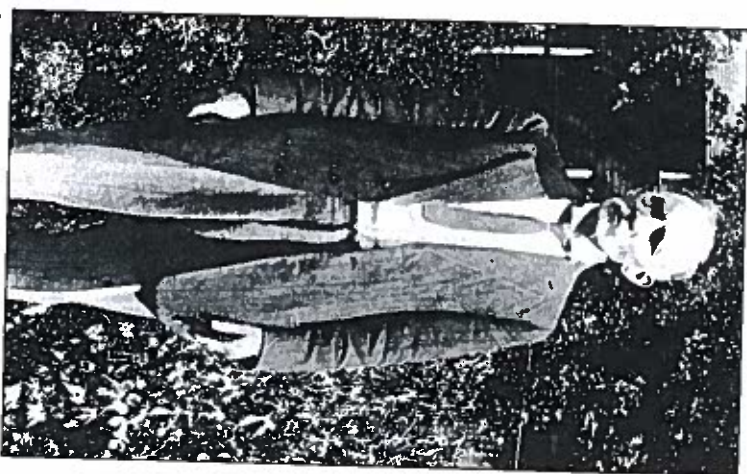
Vermont-born Aiken collected birds as a youth in Chicago, where he in time started selling specimens that he had learned to mount. He began studying the rat and the birds, thus embarking upon his vocation—taxidermy—and his avocation—ornithology.

Twenty-one-year-old Aiken arrived in Colorado Springs in late October 1871, after the famous Chicago fire destroyed his father's mercantile business, to homestead on a sheep ranch at Turkey Creek.\* He was joined by his parents and four sisters the next spring. In time the family moved into one of the first large houses in Colorado Springs, at the corner of Huertano\*\* and Weber streets.

In that first Colorado season, Aiken collected 15 species of birds in the vicinity of what is now called Aiken Canyon, and published the first Colorado bird listings ever compiled by a resident. The area today is an ecological preserve of The Nature Conservancy and it fortunately remains much as it was in 1871.

By 1874 Aiken had opened a taxidermy shop where he mounted big-time heads and made fur garments from pelts. Truly a student of nature, Aiken's taxidermy skills were renowned. He considered himself "the best taxidermist in the state." Aiken not only knew how a specimen should

*mouth of present-day westside Colorado Springs named Colorado Avenue after Colorado Springs' 1917 annexation of Colorado City*



Courtesy of Colorado Springs Pioneers Museum

A mature Charles Aiken

look, but also how to make it look that way. "It is my ambition to preserve the specimens so true to life," he noted, "that those who view them one hundred years hence will say that Aiken was an artist as well as an ornithologist."

Aiken is credited with originating the method of dressing animal skins with the heads on, now a common practice. Especially successful in the preparation of small birds for specimens, for some years he maintained a downtown taxidermy shop and small museum. He did so even while engaged in other activities, including correspondence with some of the nation's foremost scientists as well as his many field expeditions in search of bird and mammal specimens.

In 1874 Aiken explored the Colorado-New Mexico border with the Wheeler Survey party, as an assisting ornithologist, and collected some 400 bird skins for the Smithsonian Institution. Aiken garnered 80 species around Pagosa Springs, Colorado, alone, forced by the expedition's schedule to perform his taxidermy work by "candle's dim light."

His longest expedition, in 1876, was a foray by himself into the wilds of New Mexico and eastern Arizona, where he stayed at Army camps and collected about 500 birds. At the request of the Smithsonian he provided bird and mammal specimens from the new state of Colorado for display at the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia in 1876.

Most of Aiken's lifetime field work, indeed, would be within Colorado. In 1907, city founder General William Jackson Palmer purchased Aiken's collection of 4,700 birds for The Colorado College Museum. It was these specimens that inspired the state's first comprehensive bird book, *The History of the Birds of Colorado*, published in 1912

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Courtesy of Colorado Springs Pioneers Museum

A young Charles Alken after his return from the Wheeler Survey of October 1874

by British ornithologist William Sclater. Sclater had been director of the college museum and, incidentally, General Palmer's brother-in-law.

Upon selling his collection, being the avid ornithologist he was, Alken began a new one, which was eventually added to The Colorado College Museum. The bulk of the collection was later transferred to the University of Colorado Museum at Boulder, where it is housed for research.

Alken's habit of jotting down daily experiences yielded detailed diaries of his explorations, all of which are on file at The Colorado College's Tut Library. His first article on Colorado birds appeared in 1872, his last 56 years later. Among his publications were *Birds of the Southwest*, about Alken's 1876 excursion to Arizona, and with Edward R. Warren, the definitive *Birds of El Paso County*.

His observations and collections provide a valuable, sometimes over-

looked, historical baseline for ornithological studies in the Southern Rockies and Southwest. "His hearing was keen," said one naturalist, "and he could not only recognize the notes of birds when heard, but could imitate them closely by whistling."

Alken's interest in nature extended to all living things. A great lover of flowers, he developed and named several new varieties. He once was asked by the Smithsonian to name a species of bird he had discovered, and he also named several species of other animals. Two subspecies of birds he discovered were named for him: Alken's junco, a sparrow that winters in the El Paso County area, and Alken's Screech Owl.

Remarkably, many of Alken's old haunts in the Pikes Peak Region, and their bird populations, remain relatively unchanged. Were he here today, however, Alken would observe that crows have increased tremendously, house sparrows and starlings have invaded and unfortunately thrive, and turkeys—which disappeared after 1873—have been reintroduced. Moreover, he would report a decline in the diversity and abundance of several kinds of birds—including warblers, sparrows, sharp-tailed grouse, white-necked ravens, blue grouse, whooping cranes, and turkey vultures—while eastern animals such as the bluejays, fox squirrel, and raccoon are more frequently encountered.

Details of Alken's personal life are sketchy. He has been described as a small man, about five-and-a-half feet tall, wiry and sporting a mustache. Genial and courteous, modest and unassuming, Alken seldom aired his opinions but was "entertainingly conversant" with those who shared his interests. Family members wrote that his great scientific knowledge was better known to his correspondents than to those with whom he had daily associations.

A noted citizen, Alken was a charter member of the exclusive all-men's El Paso Club, served in the volunteer fire department and, in later life, became famous for his breeding of hunting dogs. In 1926 he was selected as a Life Associate of the American Ornithologists' Union, which was the highest honor that could be bestowed on an ornithologist at the time.

Throughout the years, Alken made his home with his sister Jessie who is buried beside him at Evergreen.