Herbert Wendell Gleason, Photographer

Herbert Wendell Gleason was forty-four years old and living in Minneapolis when poor health forced him to withdraw from the Congregational ministry in 1899. The next thirty-eight years of his long life he devoted to photographing nature. Born in Malden, Massachusetts, on June 5, 1855, he had graduated from Williams College in 1877 and then had attended Union and Andover seminaries.

Gleason began to photograph Walden Pond and the Thoreau country in the fall of 1899, and is best known for that work. About one hundred twenty of his photographs were used to illustrate the twenty-volume “Walden” edition of Thoreau’s Writings, which Houghton Mifflin and Company published in 1906. Gleason’s own photographic record of Thoreau’s travels, Through the Year with Thoreau, was published in 1917. By 1920, he had assembled well over one thousand negatives of Thoreau country alone.

But Gleason did not limit himself to photographing Thoreau’s haunts, or even sites in New England. Drawn strongly to the wilderness, he travelled extensively and arduously, always carrying along with him his bulky camera equipment. A dedicated conservationist, he was appointed an Interior Department inspector by the first director of the National Park Service, Stephen Mather. Gleason’s charge was to photograph and observe both the existing national parks and lands that had been proposed for national-park status. Over the years, he would make thirty separate trips to western North America, visiting Alaska, the Pacific Coast, the Grand Canyon, and the Rockies, from Canada to Colorado. Some of the photographs from these trips appeared in National Geographic and in John Muir’s Travels in Alaska. Yet Gleason was always a New Englander at heart.

In his introduction to Through the Year with Thoreau, Gleason felt obliged to put his affection for New England into proper perspective. “Lest any should assume that the fondness for New England scenery here avowed is due to lack of acquaintance with other regions more famous for their grandeur,” he wrote, “it may be stated that during this same period the writer made two trips to Alaska, six to California and the Pacific Coast, three to the Grand Canyon of Arizona, seven to the Canadian Rockies, two to Yellowstone Park, and three to the Rocky Mountains of Colorado.”

His very active professional life included friendship with Luther Burbank, whom he photographed performing his plant-breeding work in California. The friendship with Burbank spurred Gleason’s own botanical interests. Gleason knew John Muir well during the last seven years of Muir’s life, “camping and tramping with him in his beloved ‘Range of Light’ [the Sierra Nevada], visiting him in his California home, entertaining him on his occasional visits to Boston, traveling with him by rail, receiving his confidence with regard to some of his most cherished plans, and having many opportunities to catch something of the lofty inspiration which controlled his life.”

For several years in the 1920s and 1930s, he was the official photographer for the Arnold Arboretum; several dozen of his glass slides, some of them hand-colored, remain in the Arboretum’s Photograph Archives. The largest assemblage of Gleason photographs, however (some six thousand in all), is owned by Heather Conover and Nicholas Mills of Cohasset, Massachusetts, to whom we are indebted for the Gleason photographs appearing in this issue of Arnoldia. In the past few years, the Conover–Mills collection
has been used to illustrate the new edition of Thoreau’s works currently being issued by Princeton University Press (The Illustrated Walden, The Illustrated Maine Woods, and The Illustrated Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, to date). Gleason’s photographs also have appeared in Thoreau’s Cape Cod (1971) and The Western Wilderness of North America (1972), both published by Barre Publishers, and in Thoreau Country (1975), published by Sierra Club Books.

Photograph of Walden Pond taken by Herbert Wendell Gleason on April 28, 1906. The pond appears here essentially as it did when John Muir visited it in 1893. Used through the courtesy of Heather C. Conover and Nick Mills.