



Cedar Bog Lake
Photo by Alton A. Lindsey

REPRINT "Naturalist" Volume 12-Number 4, 1961

A Tribute to-

Cedar Bog Bird Woman

GRACE LEE NUTE

It would be an interesting exercise to determine how many present and past members of the Natural History Society of Minnesota joined the organization at the personal solicitation of one of its charter members and ardent supporters, the late Mrs. Albert Corniea. At least two dozen of my own friends and acquaintances have told me that Mrs. Corniea was responsible for their memberships. Some of us laughingly compared notes on the process of signing us up, and in every instance a statement has been made to this effect: "I had to be worked upon, but she persisted, with almost num-

berless telephone calls, until at last I weakened. Almost in desperation I accepted her invitation to go to a film showing with her. That was enough. I saw she was right and that I did want to join. It took unusual persistence to get me to that first film, but I am surely glad she kept up her barrage."

Such confessions speak well, not only for Mrs. Corniea's persistence, but also for her judgment in evaluating the work of the Society. From the start of the feeble organization until her death in July, 1958, she was one of its firmest pillars and responsible to no inconsider-

able extent for its remarkable growth. In addition, she looked ahead to goals as well as membership, for she was a staunch believer in doing as well as being. One of her first goals for the Society was aid in purchasing the Cedar Swamp area, or, as she liked to call it, the Cedar Bog. That she succeeded was only part of her work in behalf of that unique wilderness area.

If only one person could be held responsible for beginning the crusade to save the Cedar Bog, that individual would be Cora Corniea. One has only to look at the dates on documents in a large portfolio of her papers temporarily in my possession to agree with that statement. From the 1930's straight on through the 1940's and most of the 1950's she was either buying the land herself, paying taxes on it, and holding it until a permanent organization for conserving it in the public interest could be formed; or she was (1) visiting farmers and their wives who owned the boglands, telling them of her plans and sometimes inducing them to *give* the land; or (2) she was trying to interest scientists, scientific organizations, professors and deans of the University of Minnesota, and others to move in the direction of public or semi-public ownership. Letters, memoranda, sales slips, tax statements, and other documents combine to create the picture of a crusader fired with zeal to keep for future generations an unusual Minnesota region replete with both rare and ordinary trees, plants, animals, birds, and waters.

In May, 1957, I took a weekend trip to the North Shore with Mrs. Corniea on which I, the historian even on pleasure jaunts, questioned her closely about the origin of public interest in the acquisition and preservation of the Cedar Bog. She could not tell me precisely the first date of her own knowledge of and interest in the area, but she promised to find the facts for me. So she got Professor Donald Lawrence of the University of Minnesota (who had already donated land in the bog) to write to retired Professor William S. Cooper of the University of Minnesota, then living in Colorado, the person who first told her about the swamp. His reply, dated June 19, 1958, follows:

"Dear Mrs. Corniea: Don Lawrence has written me of your illness, and I am extremely sorry to hear of it. Mrs. Cooper joins me in sympathy and good wishes. Don tells me that you wish very much to know certain dates pertaining to the early history of the Cedar Creek project. I have gone through my field notes, and have found the following data.

"The airplane trip on which I first saw the bog lake took place on April 6, 1930. My pilot was Mark Hurd, and the plane was a very small one intended for one person; two of us crowded ourselves into it. There was a terrific north wind blowing, and I remember noticing that the north-bound cars below us were moving faster than we. It was quite different when we turned around and headed for home. Our route that day was straight north over New Brighton, Ham Lake, Fish Lake, then circling around to cover the northeast corner of Anoka County. Incidentally, the door on my side of the plane was removed, to give me a little extra room and to make vertical shots possible. I don't mind looking down.

"As to the date of Dr. Rosendahl's visit with me, I cannot give an exact date. I made a very complete set of field notes on July 11, 1931, but I cannot believe that I waited more than a year to investigate the place that had so interested me seen from the air. Probably I

took no notes on my first visit, realizing that a complete survey would be necessary. I can say with assurance that this visit was some time during the summer of 1930, and probably early in the season. I took along the pictures that I had made from the air, and we struck in from about the point where the trail across the Crone property now is. On our first attempt we missed the lake entirely, coming out on the upland east of it. Our second try brought us to the south end of the lake.

"... I want you to know how much I, along with all others concerned, appreciate what you have done to help bring about the remarkable situation that has been attained. It is perhaps not too much to say that without your presence on the ground and knowledge of conditions and ownership, your personal generosity with regard to your own land, and your constant cooperation in so many ways, it might never have happened."

A sheet from a mimeographed publication of 1941, part of a local society's bulletin, states: "Mrs. Cora Corniea, who lives in North Minneapolis, and has been sponsoring the Game and Plant Refuge about twenty-three miles northeast of Anoka, phoned us recently that 270 acres more of the wooded land has been donated to the Refuge. She is actively working to complete this Refuge, conceived and started with her gift of 80 acres as a nucleus. Ye Editor recently tramped through this Refuge area [with Mrs. Corniea] . . . Probably nothing like it exists south of Itasca Park . . . Mrs. Corniea was caught last year in the Armistice blizzard at her cabin there, but holed in and was dug out two days later as chirp as ever."

Another piece of historical evidence in Mrs. Corniea's archives refers to the Natural History Society's gift of land in the swamp and is apparently an extract from the minutes of a meeting of the society: "Concerning the acquisition and gift of Forty Acres of Land . . . to the Board of Regents, University of Minnesota, by the Natural History Society. This land to be added to the Cedar Creek Forest area started several years before. This land was given to Mrs. Corniea by Alfred Michelson, from whom she had purchased the first piece of land in this project, with the provision that she pay taxes current at that time — 1949. On an expedition for tree planting with other members of the Natural History Society, the members of the Conservation Group decided to pay something toward the purchase of this land. The following contributions were made [names and amounts listed, \$60.35 in all] . . ." to reimburse Mrs. Corniea for taxes she had paid and for other expenses incurred by her in securing the forty-acre tract.

It would appear from this entry that Mrs. Corniea induced several members of the Society to accompany her on a tree-planting trip to the bog, which resulted in a gift of land as well as in a fine stand of timber. In later years she often pointed out the trees to me with considerable pride.

One interesting series of letters in 1939 and 1940 reveals how Mrs. Corniea's propaganda visits among the residents and property owners bore fruit. In late 1939 one owner, Mr. Frank E. Swanson, wrote to her telling her that he was going to sell his land and adding: "It is really a shame to slash down the nice trees on the land as of course would be done if sold for commercial purposes," and hoping that "Some of your friends

would be interested . . . and not molest the fine grove of trees." A year later his wife wrote on November 22, 1940: "I . . . am glad to hear favorably. I know how happy you are to see progress in your interest out here. I have the abstract and deed here in [my] house, and will be looking for you next week." Thus Mrs. Corniea obtained the Southeast quarter of the Northwest quarter of Section 27, Township 34 of Range 23, forty acres of beautiful cedar trees, which the owner would otherwise have sold for "cedar stumpage," according to his letter of November 20, 1939.

Another forty (SW $\frac{1}{4}$ SE $\frac{1}{4}$ Sec. 21, Twp. 34, R. 23) was secured in November, 1942 for the Minnesota Academy of Science, which made the down payment of fifty dollars through Mrs. Corniea, a life member, after she had persuaded the owner, Ludwig Olson, to sell to her. Thereafter and until April, 1947, Mrs. Corniea paid three annual instalments required by the contract of sale, as well as annual interest at five per cent, taxes, and registration of deed, or \$260.29 in all. Then the Academy reimbursed Mrs. Corniea and turned over the tract to the University of Minnesota.

A letter from the treasurer's office of Isanti County of August 2, 1952, states that taxes have been paid by Mrs. Corniea on three tracts of land in Section 22, Township 34, Range 23, where the preserve now lies, amounting from 1942 to 1951 to \$231.82. The adjoining county in which the area is also found is Anoka. The first record I have found in Mrs. Corniea's papers is the purchase in 1936 or early 1937 of one quarter section in Isanti County and one in Anoka County from the estate of Louis Peterson for one thousand dollars, both in Township 34 of Range 23. The covering letter, February 10, 1937, from the county attorney of Isanti County who sent abstracts of title, mentions the completed sale. Both tracts are acknowledged by W. T. Middlebrook, vice president of the University of Minnesota, in a list of legal papers "Received of Mrs. A. D. Corniea on this 30th day of April, 1948 . . . pertaining to various parcels of land in the Cedar Creek Forest area, which have already [been] transferred by the Minnesota Academy of Science to the University." The list covers 4800 acres, 80 of which were donated outright by Dr. and Mrs. Corniea. The acquisition of the remainder must also have been negotiated by Mrs. Corniea, since she held the legal documents confirming ownership.

Part of the Cornieas' gift was held by the University of Minnesota with a provision for life residence there by the donors. On this small part of the area stood a fine pine grove, beneath which the original owner had built a very modest little building. Making over that shack into an interesting woodland cabin was one of Mrs. Corniea's prime hobbies and one that I watched with fascination. To me it became a weekend haven from a crowded schedule, where she and I left behind the noises and turmoil of city life and listened to bird songs, the sighing of white pines and white cedars, and the crackling of logs in the *genuine* Franklin stove. Many a winter night we listened together to hoots of great horned owls, deep dialogues between rival long eared owls, and bell-like tinkles of tiny sawwhet owls. On spring mornings I would waken to such a dawn chorus pouring in through the double casement window by my bed as prevented further sleep for either of us. A soft "Are you awake?" from the loft in the garret

above me, where she, too, had wideopen windows looking out into pine boughs, would assure me that she was as eager as I to be out bird-watching.

One May day she apparently never forgot, for she mentioned it to me again and again. We drove here and there through the preserves, stopping wherever fancy chose, to stalk ducks in the rushes, watch migrating warblers from the car, sink kneedeep in bog mosses while studying rare flowers, peer into a fox's den under her cedars, and sit long above an otter's bankside hole, hoping he would return. But the height of her pleasure came when we stopped the car in a sandy stretch of road to follow the dusting antics and gay twitterings of a large flock of Harris Sparrows. She was not acquainted with these migrants and to see so many under such ideal circumstances made her jubilant.

On only one other occasion did I see her so excited by birds, though she might well have been called the "Bird Woman" of the Bog because of the numerous feeding stations about her cabin. It was a grey winter day and she had preceded me to the cabin. As I drove up, she motioned me to be cautious, for something unusual was happening at the suet feeder near the front door. A rather big bird flew from it as I vainly tried to enter the house without scaring it away, but I did succeed in getting some of the bird's robin-like markings as it flew. Mrs. Corniea informed me that she had been watching the bird "for some time," and could find nothing to match it in any of her bird books. As we talked, the bird returned to feed on the suet and I was able to identify it as an extremely rare, western visitor, a varied thrush. I believe there is one other record of it in Minnesota. We watched it off and on during the remainder of the weekend, whenever rivalry at the feeder from downy, hairy, redbellied, and pileated woodpeckers — not to mention clouds of chickadees and nuthatches — permitted the newcomer some feeding space. Unfortunately, it did not return the next weekend or thereafter, and we heard rumors that it had been bagged by a licensed ornithologist; much to Mrs. Corniea's distress.

Other feathered guests returned day after day and devoured literally barrels of seeds and other bird foods. It was Mrs. Corniea's delight to handfeed many of them, especially the chickadees and nuthatches. As we tramped through the woods on snowshoes or afoot, she was not infrequently recognized by some extrovert chickadee or nuthatch, who usually succeeded in getting a handout from her capacious and wellfilled pockets. One Downy Woodpecker amused her — and me — by regularly feeding on sunflower seeds from her outstretched hand. I tried to get movies of this performance, but the bird was always wary of me and my camera.

At Christmas time every year a bird count was taken at the Bog, and then several bird watchers spent a day in and about the cabin. Down in the basement, which Dr. and Mrs. Corniea had dug out beneath the former shack and built into an attractive old fashioned kitchen, we used to gather periodically that day for coffee breaks and a lunch. The old wood-burning range glowed upon us and supplied us with heat and fine food. In fact, fine food was one of Mrs. Corniea's hobbies, and many were the succulent roasts and tasty hot dishes I sampled in that underground kitchen.

After doughnuts and coffee on birdcount days — and



many a joke and witticism — we would take another jaunt to add to our already long list of birds. Once I was fortunate enough to see a golden eagle rise majestically from a knoll in front of our car. Another time we finally lost count of the vast flocks of Redpoll Linnets in the fields, but estimated them among the thousands, with a few rare Hoaries among them for good measure.

In her garden at the edge of the pine grove Mrs. Corniea tucked away plants from her travels. I sometimes went on weekend excursions with her to obtain some of them: to Lake Superior to the site of the old British trading post at Fond du Lac, where real European fleurs de lys spread a golden carpet in early July; to a certain dank grove on the Sawbill Trail for arbutus; and to Kenyon for prairie violets, Pasque flowers, snow trilliums, and trout lilies.*

One rare variety of trout lily growing at Kenyon and nowhere else, as well as an infinitude of other May-flowering blossoms, convinced her that a certain small valley should be preserved for the future in some such way as the Cedar Bog had already been secured. The crusading fire in her burst into flames once more, although she was already suffering from the malady that soon caused her death. I had just joined Nature Conservancy and naturally told her of its program of securing and preserving areas of special wildlife interest throughout the country. She grasped its significance for her in a flash and began at once to negotiate for the purchase of the little valley. Nature Conservancy *was* interested and tried, even after her death, to obtain the area, but to date we have been unsuccessful in getting the many owners of the property to sell. However, something in that direction may still eventuate, especially as Dr. Corniea has pushed the scheme as much as he could. If the valley is ever made into a wildlife preserve, it ought surely to bear the name of Cora Corniea.

I could write of her many other interests and hobbies, such as old glass, historic pieces of furniture (be-

sides the Franklin stove she had a Daniel Boone corner cupboard), travel books, bird and flower prints, and so forth, but space does not permit. I think I have never encountered anyone so enamored of life and all its possibilities as she was. Up to the very day of her death she read with consuming avidity of those parts of the world that she had not seen and to which she still hoped to go. But it was not to be. As I showed her my pictures of a just-completed trip to Glacier National Park, I realized for the first time that she was not able to see what she had asked me to show her. Her physician husband beckoned me to my car, saying softly, "It is only a matter of hours." So ended a full and inspiring and truly useful life.

Cora Alta Corniea (nee Ray) was born on October 10, 1889 in Albany, Missouri. In her veins coursed the adventurous blood of men and women of that hardy stock which had moved from frontier to frontier — south from Gettysburg up the Great Valley of Virginia to Cumberland Gap before the American Revolution; through that pass in the mountains into Tennessee and Kentucky at the time of Lexington and Concord; and, after Louisiana had been purchased, across the Mississippi to an area in Missouri that sheltered Mountain Men, Santa Fe traders, and other frontiersmen for many decades.

Her family moved on to Kansas during her childhood, and there she grew up on a farm. Apparently it was her grandmother who fostered a love of wild life in the child, who was taken on long walks and shown the beauties of our national heritage.

As a young woman Cora Ray came to the Twin Cities to do clerical work, and there she met and married Dr. Albert Corniea of an old frontier family in the St. Croix Valley. Like her, he was a lover of wild life and travel, and the couple took delight in preserving the Cedar Bog, building a weekend home there, and forwarding the work of the Natural History Society.

* (Editors Note) The trout lily area near Kenyon was eventually acquired by Nature Conservancy and is known as the Grace Nature Preserve.