The Good Earth's Bounty

Text by Stewart T. Coffin

Photographs by R. L. Coffin

Cynthia Moth (1929)

Preface

The photographs in this annotated album are the legacy of my father, Robert Leighton Coffin. A dedicated and self-trained naturalist, he took a keen interest in "just about everything that lives and grows," to use his own words. With his ancient view camera, he spent the better part of his lifetime quietly roaming about the countryside, compiling what amounted to a personal album of his world of nature.

Some of his prints were exhibited locally under the auspices of the Amherst Camera Club, and a few of them later made their way into photographic exhibitions. Then his interests seem to have turned in other directions, and they were stashed away on closet shelves, rarely to be seen again. Many were later given away or discarded.

By sifting through dusty piles of long forgotten prints and negatives, many of his old favorites have turned up in some form or other, in varying degrees of deterioration. This modest album represents a somewhat belated effort to preserve for posterity at least a portion of what remains of this photographic collection. Many of the faded old pictures bring back memories of bygone days, some of which I have endeavored to set down in writing before they too fade away.

Nine copies of the original version of this album were printed and bound in 1977. One was donated to the Jones Library in Amherst, where it can be found among archival collections in the Boltwood Room. That has been the only copy available to the public. The other eight have remained in the Coffin family, but have been seen by many friends and relatives.

The main reason for that very limited edition was the cumbersome method I concocted for producing them. I typed the manuscript on my old IBM typewriter and had photocopies printed on good quality heavy paper. I then laboriously reproduced all of the photographs by enlargement in a makeshift darkroom, learning as I went. Some were on high quality Agfa Portriga, but as an expedient most were on cheap Kodak coated paper. They were glued in place and the resulting sheaves sent to a nearby custom bindery. Because of the bulk caused by the photos, special techniques were required for binding, adding even more to the already high cost.

In 2002 I produced a revised and expanded version using my own home office equipment. That version was less of an annotated photo album and more of an illustrated documentary of my father's illustrious life and times. I had a notion to print and publish it myself, but when I discovered how difficult it was to make satisfactory reproductions of the photos on my scanner and printer, I gave up the idea after printing only five copies. This further revised 2020 version, made using Microsoft Word, Photoshop, and better equipment, can now be transmitted digitally.

My father always loved to give lantern slide talks on his favorite natural history subjects, but when it came to putting his knowledge into the printed word he was hopeless. With help from my sister Esther, I have attempted to write a narrative as best I can, even though I never acquired anywhere near his knowledge of natural history. Frankly, I was not that interested back then either. But no matter, I will let some of the photos speak for themselves. In this much revised edition, the emphasis will be less on photography and more on personal stories that the photos bring to mind, so fondly remembered even after all these years.

"Mullein," taken in North Amherst in 1947

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Commercial Photographer

R. L. Coffin (the professional signature he always used) was born in Harrington, Maine, in 1889, the youngest of seven children of George H. and Mary (Leighton) Coffin. After attending the local public schools he went to Coburn Classical Institute in Waterville for his preparatory schooling. After a year or two at Coburn he became convinced he could learn more by teaching himself, and so he did just that. This ended his formal schooling.

Harrington had been a shipbuilding town but the business was in serious decline and jobs were few. For a while, RLC did odd jobs and collected butterflies. His early bent for nature study was encouraged by his older sister Grace, who kept him supplied with books. His copy of The Moth Book by W. J. Holland contains many check marks of his early observations. Then in the spring of 1912 he secured a job at the Massachusetts Agricultural Experiment Station in Amherst, working as an assistant in soils and fertilizers. By then he had already progressed through several cameras, starting with a Kodak Number 2 Brownie when he was thirteen, and each one thereafter of increasing size.

R.L.Coffin with the old Premo 5 x 7 view camera

In 1916 he purchased a 3A Kodak Special with anastigmat lens and tripod and improvised a darkroom at the Station with no running water. Two years later he acquired an old 5x7 Premo with Victor lens and shutter, a camera that was to serve him for many years, such as it was. With this cumbersome apparatus, he began to take photographs of experimental work at the Station, and by 1922 he found himself doing work for all departments at "Mass Aggie," as the state college was then known.

In 1923 he married Mildred Comins, daughter of a North Hadley farmer. The following year they moved to New Jersey where my father worked at the USDA Japanese Beetle Laboratory. In 1931, now a family of four, we returned to Amherst and RLC established himself as a commercial photographer of sorts, doing most of his business at the State College.

His darkroom and studio were in the attic of one of the old college buildings. There was no ventilation except for one window in the darkroom that was usually kept shut. The studio had a large overhead glass skylight. Consequently it was balmy in the winter and insufferably hot in the summer. The sink had only one faucet, running cool or warm with the seasons, besides being rusty. He once took a photo of his darkroom for a Camera Club talk and labeled it jokingly, "Where perfection is sought for, but seldom achieved."

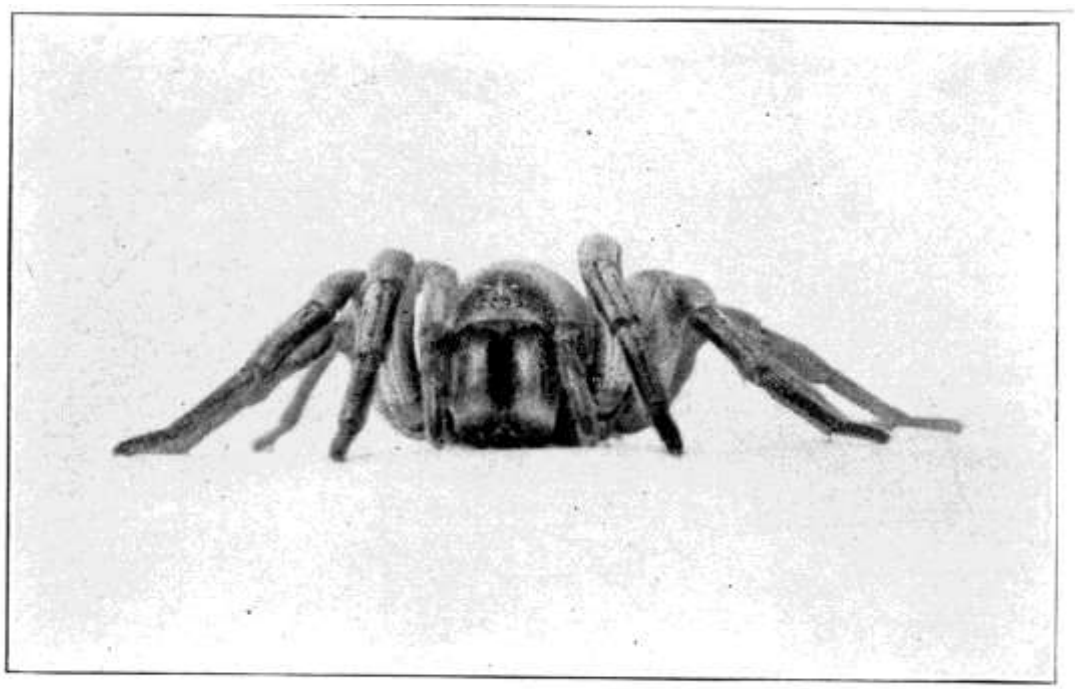
Fernald Hall, with attic skylight mostly hidden behind tree

He mixed his own chemicals, and the shelves along one wall looked (and smelled) like a veritable chemistry laboratory. To this day, the unmistakable smell of hyposulfite takes me back in an instant to that stuffy darkroom of long ago. There was a box for me to stand on so that I could peek over the rim of the sink. The light would go out and I would listen in the pitch darkness to his complaints and other incidental noises, trying to imagine what was taking place. Gradually the luminescent green face of the alarm clock would peer out of the darkness (the only timer he ever used). Next the ruby safe light would snap on, and there he would be, silhouetted against the rusting sink and crumbling plaster walls. Then there was the fascination of watching for the image to appear on the blank film or paper as it went rhythmically "clink-clank" back and forth in the big enamel tray. No magician ever had a more spellbound audience.

He developed roll film the old fashioned way - two hands back and forth through a tray. Once you start this, you can't let go until it is done. Before starting, sometimes he would gingerly open the darkroom window a short while for ventilation, but he had to be careful because wasps nested just outside. One time he had just started processing a roll when he became aware of something crawling up his leg inside his pants, and he had a pretty good idea what it was! As he counted off the development time it crawled higher and higher. He tried to shake it loose by stomping his foot, but to no avail as it continued its upward path. At last, he curled the fully developed film into the hypo and took care of his little intruder.

Studio in the attic of Fernald Hall

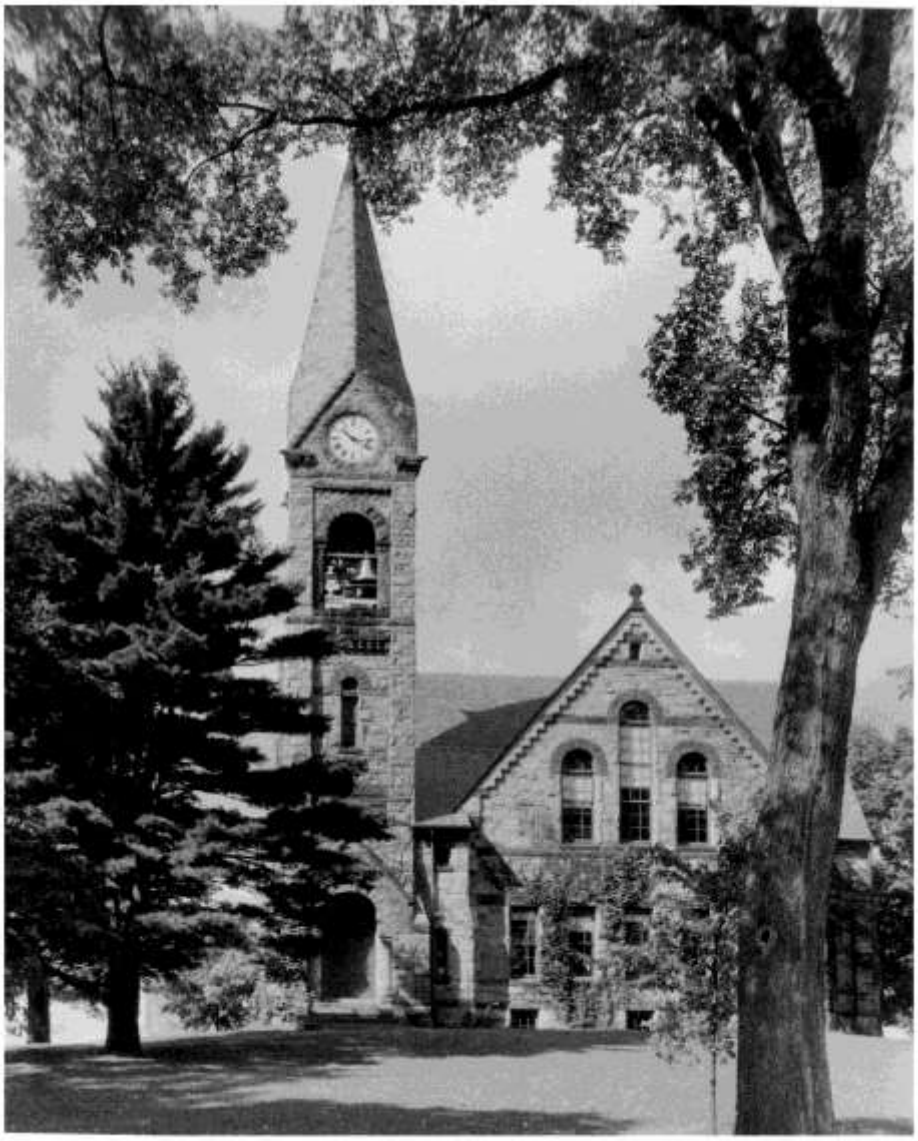
Of his studio, the one thing I will never forget was his favorite pin-up mounted over the desk. As you entered the room, there staring you in the face at twenty times magnification with its eight beady eyes was a gigantic wolf spider. The enlargement and negative of this fantastic photograph are both lost, but I recently discovered a barely usable reproduction in the 1931 Turtox catalog, from which this print has been copied.



LZ9.519 Wolf Spider

Other colleges in the area (Amherst, Smith, Mount Holyoke) sometimes called upon him for their scientific photography, but most of his work was in connection with agricultural research at Mass. State College, as it was then known. It was a bizarre arrangement. The college had no photo lab. RLC was given free work space and utilities, but he remained self employed and billed all customers for his work. Back then the college did not have a photocopy machine, so when copies of graphs and charts were needed, such as for a thesis, he was called upon to laboriously reproduce them photographically.

RLC photographed this building more than any other on campus, and once used a winter view of it for a Christmas card (next page). Today it is overshadowed and nearly hidden by unsightly concrete structures. Those who are photographically inclined may note that he raised the lens board of the view camera to prevent vertical lines from converging, a technique often used in architectural photography. Close inspection of the blurred upper corners of the photo also reveals the serious optical limitations of the lens he used and depended upon for so much of his work.



The Old Chapel

Here is the winter view of the Old Chapel that RLC once used for a Christmas card. I am guessing that it is no longer possible to stand where the picture was taken because of surrounding buildings.

On photographic assignments, sometimes I would tag along to help. My only recollection is that nearly every job was a test of nerves, as he fussed with his equipment, fumed over the lighting, and struggled to line up restless animals or droopy plants. When things were not quite to his liking, as was nearly always the case, he would start muttering an astonishing repertory of quotations on the general theme of perversity and its many variations, borrowed freely from the Greek classics, the Bible, or other unlikely sources.

The most quotable person at the college was surely Dr. Ray Torrey of the Botany Department, as many a student of his can attest. RLC picked up many of his epigrams, especially those in a cynical vein, and every so often one would pop out. He would be doing some copy work for a ponderous thesis on some mundane subject. His only comment, which quite likely he picked up from Dr. Torrey: "Learning more and more about less and less."

As he hiked across what was, back then at least, the beautifully landscaped campus from one job to another, he would often pause to record his favorite scenes - across the pond and mown hayfields that once graced the entire center of the campus, traditional old ivy-covered buildings, or perhaps the rhododendron gardens in bloom. (Many of these photos are now presumably in the UMass archives.) He was dismayed in later years by what he regarded as the systematic demise of the college, both architecturally and institutionally, as it mushroomed from a humble agricultural college to a sprawling liberal arts university, with what he regarded as an emphasis on liberal. To give some idea of how things have changed, I will mention that he kept most of his photographic equipment in his studio, and it was never locked. The campus had only one policeman, compared to 43 by 1977 (and who knows how many today), whose only visible function was taking admissions at football games.

RLC considered the automobile to be a curse upon mankind, and he refused to own or drive one. Work was often brought to him instead, but if the job was within a few miles he would hike there with all his apparatus. Operating strictly on a cash basis (he distrusted all financial institutions) the only bank he ever used or needed was the wallet in his back pocket. This precluded major capital expenditures and may have had something to do with his never owning any first rate photographic equipment (or a car). Most of his equipment was rather old and worn out, often by the time he acquired it. Sometimes he would salvage parts from one camera to use on another.

The camera that he used for his highest magnification work was a homemade contraption with plywood body that we called "the cannon." It took two of us to focus it - one to look in the ground glass and one at the other end to rack the lens in or out as instructed (see page 46). Then we had to remain still for the long time exposure. Among the things we photographed with it were soil particles, spore cases of ferns, and cavities in rats' teeth. As I reflect on this now, there must have been far better optical systems for doing this, even in the early 1940s. I was mechanically inclined, and I now wonder why we didn't at least devise a linkage so that one person alone could focus it.

His relationship with his cameras and other equipment was one of mutual antagonism. It seems they never functioned quite right, which he took to be just one more sign of the decline of Western civilization. His tripods suffered the worst. He used the large wooden kind, and he would slam the legs into the ground for a firm footing, which still they did not always provide to his satisfaction.

Sometimes a suggestion might be discreetly made to him about the advantages to be gained from a few modest investments or improvements, such as an exhaust vent or simply a screen in the window, but to no avail. Instead of using a light meter he guessed at exposure times - likewise development times instead of using a darkroom timer, resulting in much waste. Seldom satisfied with the results, for every print he finished, many more were often pitched forcefully into the wastebasket with a resounding "splat," followed by a few choice words. Sometimes I would fish them out and try to figure out what was wrong with them.

He had a decidedly stubborn streak. If some new piece of equipment did not come up to his expectations, he would simply discard it forthwith and never mention it again, but he was apt to bear a lifetime grudge against the salesman or store, the firm that made it, and even the state or country where they were located.

He maintained an uncompromising idealism with respect to certain principles and notions he held. For example, he did not deal with stores that were not locally owned and did not approve of us doing so either. At the outbreak of World War II he disposed of all his equipment that happened to be of German manufacture, and forever after he would not use German or Japanese products. Mildred, saint that she was, patiently put up with all of this and rarely attempted to interfere.

"Web of Pearls"

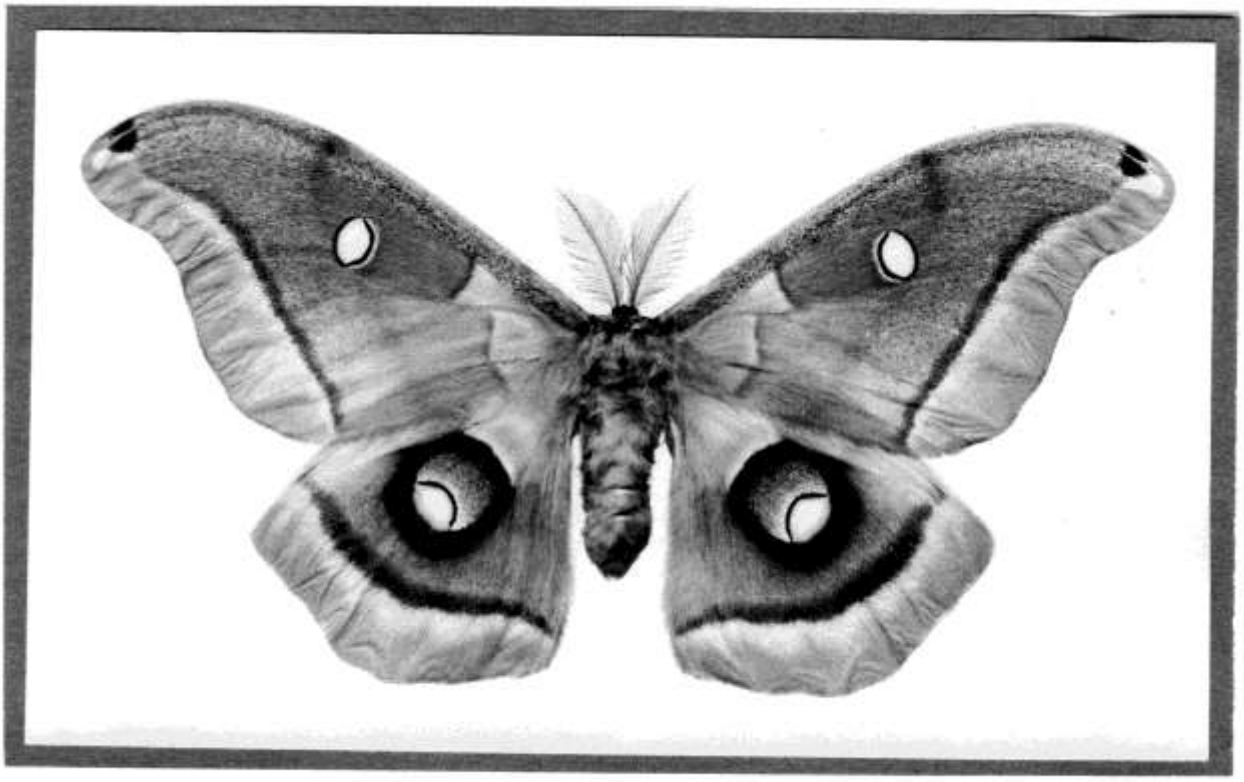
Moths and Butterflies

One of RLC's boyhood hobbies was collecting and identifying moths and butterflies. An early photo of his room shows the walls covered with framed specimens. Later he became especially interested in the giant silkworm moths, and he raised several species of them in a large screened enclosure in the backyard in order to study and photograph their life histories, such as the Cynthia Moth on page 2.

RLC in Harrington around 1910

Most of his insect photography was done while he was at the USDA Japanese Beetle Laboratory in Moorestown, New Jersey. Working indoors with a 5x7 Century camera on a lab stand and using a Micro Tessar 72 mm lens, he could get up to eight diameters magnification. His work was noted for its sharpness and clarity, and it may have been among the earlier applications of macro-photography in the biological sciences. Many of his plates made fifty years ago can be found in use even today in various agricultural publications. (Perhaps in 1977, but probably no longer true in 2020.)

While RLC was in New Jersey from 1924 to 1932, more significant than his work for the USDA, at least as far as we are concerned here, was the emergence of his newfound and lifelong passion for nature photography. Many of his prints and negatives from that period have survived. Of his insect photographs, which are perhaps the most noteworthy, it is not always easy to tell now which were associated with his job assignments and which were



"Polyphemus Moth"

strictly for his own rapidly growing natural history collections. In addition to insects there were wildflowers, fungi, ferns, amphibians, reptiles, birds, mammals, and an especially large collection having to do with trees - bark, twigs, buds, flowers, etc. He sold many of these to Turtox, a supplier of biological lantern slides. The 1931 Turtox catalog lists over 600 photos by RLC, about half of their entire catalog. Father lost his job at the USDA in 1932, and the income from the Turtox sales helped pay for our move back to Amherst.

Yet another related avocation of his that emerged during this period is what we now call pictorial nature photography, although there was no such name for it back then. From what little I have been able to learn on the subject, RLC was one of the earliest pioneers in this field, which was not to come into its own for another decade. The earliest organized event for which I have located any definite record was the first annual "Boston International Salon of Nature Photography" held under the auspices of the New England Museum of Natural History in 1940. However, I believe that the Buffalo Museum of Science may

have initiated a similar "International Salon of Nature Photography" around 1938. The comprehensive History of Photography, published by the Museum of Modern Art in 1949, does not contain a single word on the subject.

"Imperialis" (larva of Imperial moth) was taken in 1931. The subject may be entomological, but the ultimate object was surely artistic. This was what he did best. It was also a labor of love. Of all his endeavors that I would classify as pictorial nature photography, for which he gained modest national recognition in the 1940's, I am aware of only two or three photos that he sold, and for amounts that probably did not even cover the cost of materials. But that would have been no matter to him.

Evidently this photograph and others in the same vein served no purpose other than the satisfaction of having created them, and perhaps to display in his study - that is until 1935. In that year the Amherst Camera Club was founded under the able leadership of John Vondell, and RLC was one of the founding members.

"Imperialis"

The ACC had monthly print competitions, and the winning photos were published in the rotogravure section of the Springfield Sunday paper. The Club also had a monthly newsletter edited for many years (and later preserved) by Donald Lacroix that listed the winners each month. In 1937 the ACC organized the Connecticut Valley Salon of Photography for the five camera clubs then in the Valley, which exhibited annually the top prints from each club. A few years later the New England Camera Club Council was organized, likewise with its annual juried exhibit at what might be considered the next higher level of selection. By the early 1940's similar juried exhibits were being widely held, and there was an ongoing exchange of winning prints between the various sponsors, which included camera clubs, regional organizations, museums, and magazines.

From what few historical records I have uncovered for this period, a picture emerges of the rapidly developing state of pictorial photography. In the 1930s, photography as an art form was still struggling to disengage itself from the influence of American oil painting, which we are told was likewise trying to break away from European influences - Impressionism, Neo-Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, and so on. In pictorial photo albums of the 1920's, one finds nudes draped over velvet couches or posing demurely while holding a Grecian urn, a nearly naked Caucasian all made up as an American Indian with toy arrow aimed skyward, or bucolic misty landscapes reminiscent of the English countryside, often highly retouched with air brush. This was also the era of the "soft focus" lens, presumably an attempt at semi-abstraction. The whole subject is fascinating to study, but we should perhaps leave it to the experts and return to things I know firsthand that might otherwise be lost and forgotten.

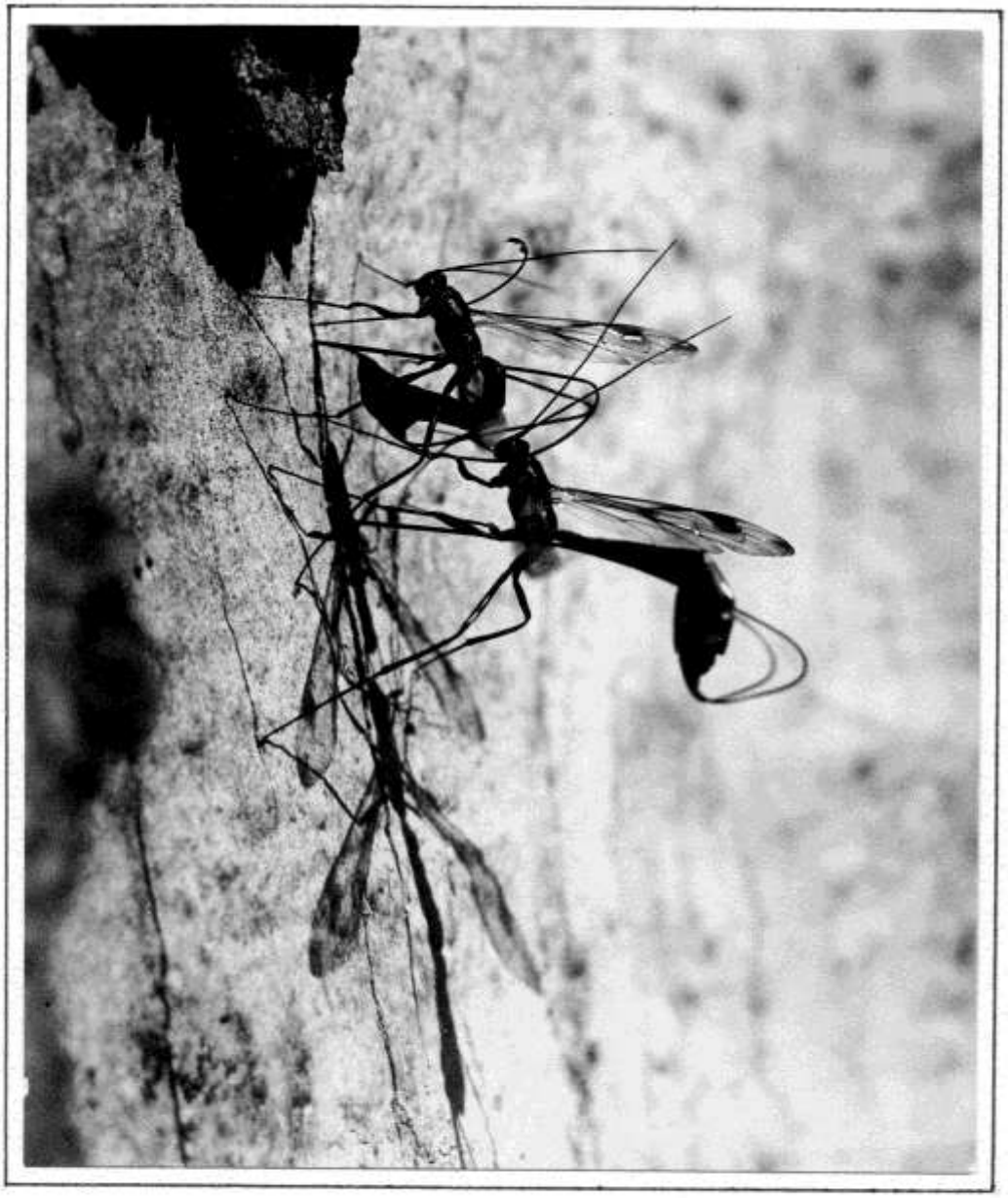
Getting back now to the early days of the ACC and the monthly print competitions, RLC already had well established credentials as a print maker and was possibly the only professional photographer in the Club. He also already had a backlog of pictorial nature photos, of which Imperialis was clearly one of his favorites, so he entered it in one of the early monthly competitions. Evidently it raised a few eyebrows, brought some laughs, and was flatly rejected. It possibly marked the first time that a worm (!) had ever been entered into a print competition. The records show that for the next year or two he reverted to traditional subjects.

The big break came in 1939. To observe the centennial of the beginnings of photography, an international juried salon was held in conjunction with the 1939 World's Fair in New York City, with the chosen prints placed on display in the Kodak Building. Pictorial nature photography had yet to emerge as an art form, but there was a category called "Scientific Photography," really a misnomer as far as RLC's work was concerned, but at least better than nothing.

(Of course it can be argued that there is no clear distinction between "scientific" and "pictorial" nature photography, and the two tend to overlap. Almost any "scientific" photographic task can be rendered artistically, to some extent at least, by anyone sufficiently inspired to do so.)

Four of his submissions were accepted, including three in the Scientific category. The fourth received "Honorable Mention" in the Pictorial category. No other nature photographer in the show achieved this distinction. More to the point, one of those prints was his "Imperialis," and another was his perhaps even more startling "Green Grass Snake," about which we will have more to say later. If a history of pictorial nature photography is ever compiled, I think "Imperialis" warrants at least some mention. It later became probably his most widely exhibited print, being shown throughout the United States and in Europe. What other caterpillar has ever been so lucky?

"The Drillers" was the third RLC print accepted for the "Science" category of the World's Fair Centennial Exhibit, in addition to the two already mentioned ("Imperialis" and "Green Grass Snake"). It was probably taken around 1930 in New Jersey.



"The Drillers" (Ichneumon wasps)

"The Drillers" (copied directly from exhibition enlargement)

One other print in this category deserves special mention. For as long as I can remember, a framed moth photo toned dark green stood alone on my father's desk. It obviously occupied a very special place in his heart. It was labeled "Evening Tryst," and it was not until recently I discovered that it reveals a pair of Cecropia moths mating on a lilac bush, taken in New Jersey in 1932. It was exhibited at the ACC in 1937 and appeared in the Springfield paper, which as far as I can tell marked the beginning and end of its public appearance. Considering the somewhat discreet title, I'll bet few if any ever realized what it actually portrayed. At one juried exhibit, a judge was said to have criticized it as being "much too dark," evidently not understanding the title or realizing what it was showing.

"Evening Tryst"

A Word about the Prints

As I said, all of the prints in the original version of this album were laboriously made by photographic enlargement and glued in place. In this version, thanks to the technique of digital scanning and printing, fair copies of at least some of RLC's original prints can now more readily be reproduced and published.

The standard for print exhibition and competition was an 11 x 14 print on a 16 x 20 cardboard mount, which will not fit into any scanner that I know of. Fortunately, for nearly all of his favorite photos, RLC usually made a few extra enlargements of various sizes, including unmounted ones. Furthermore, some of these are on glossy paper, which reproduces better. As I have sorted through these to pick out the best of each, I have become more critical in my selection. Alas, I have discovered that some of them are not as sharp as they should be, and many of them do not have the wide tonal range expected in a top notch enlargement, especially for reproduction. When judging pictorial prints, some aspects can be subjective, but not tonal range and sharpness, especially for photos by one who was known for the sharpness and clarity of his work. I searched for an explanation.

When RLC retired and had to give up his darkroom at Fernald Hall, he set things up again in a spare room at home, by then mostly as a hobby. I used this opportunity to begin developing and printing my own photos too. I might have learned more from him than I did, but being a very independent sort I preferred to experiment and learn for myself as I went.

In the late 1970's, RLC gave up the darkroom and sold or discarded all of the equipment. In 1977, when I began work on this album a year after he died, I had to go out and purchase all of the equipment that earlier I could have had for the asking. A 5x7 enlarger is not the easiest thing to find these days, but I finally found one exactly like his, an old Elwood diffusion enlarger. Among its numerous shortcomings, I soon discovered that it was incapable of making a crisp enlargement until I replaced the old lens with modern coated optics.

Another interesting discovery was a letter from my mother to one of her sisters dated 1938 in which she laments a recent batch of lantern slides that all had to be discarded because they were out of focus, which she attributed to his failing eyesight. All of this waste, which I have mentioned before, was especially troubling to her because she was raised in a large family on a farm struggling just to survive, where nothing was ever wasted. Father had a general distrust of the entire medical profession, but eventually he gave in and started using reading glasses.

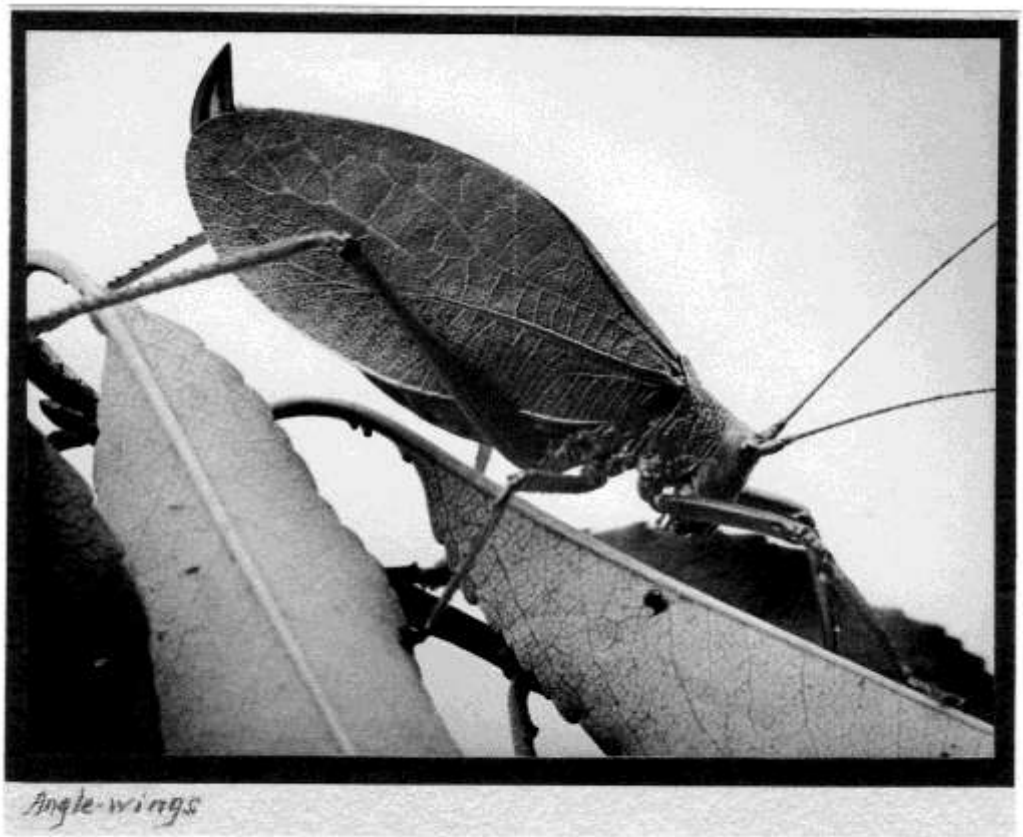
How, then do we account for his reputation early in his career for work "noted for its sharpness and clarity?" The answer, I think, is that most of those early insect photos were 5x7 contact prints that did not even require enlarging. At least that is my theory.

Then there was the question of paper. RLC always preferred what could best be described as soft tone or low contrast prints. I guess to his eye they looked more "natural," but they would not be viewed as very professional by today's standards. At the start of World War II, he stopped using Agfa paper (German of course) and used only Kodak paper - not even the higher grade Medalist but ordinary Kodabromide matte finish, which was likewise incapable of the wide tonal range needed to bring out the best in photos, not even when toned with selenium, which he seldom if ever did. However, to judge these prints simply by darkroom technique would be to miss the whole point. (See the article by Andy Marx on page 68.)

"Imperialis Moth" (copied from a 5 x 7 contact print)

Thus, some of the photos in this book have been reproduced from RLC original prints, but others are from enlargements remade by myself. To give proper credit, practically all of his enlargements involved some "art work." This was mainly "dodging" (darkening some areas and lightening others), but also cropping, toning, sometimes reversing, and occasionally retouching with opaque on the negatives or soft pencil on the prints. He was expert at all of these. In some cases I probably have failed to meet his high standards, but I have tried to do the best I could.

As for the negatives, most of them have survived surprisingly well considering that they were stored in ordinary acid manila envelopes in a hot upstairs room for decades. Especially those on glass plates appear to be nearly as good as the day they were made. But alas, so many of them are under or over exposed, and under or over developed, printing them is anything but routine. Even after many years of practice, he never did manage to get it down to a science, nor did he upgrade much of his ancient equipment he used for nearly half a century.



"Angle Wings" (Broad-winged Katydid), another print copied directly from an exhibition enlargement

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"Indian Pipes," 1947

Bird Man

According to an article that appeared in the Christian Science Monitor in 1922, R. L. Coffin was known as the "bird man of the Connecticut Valley." Of all his natural history interests, certainly his most constant was in songbirds and birds of prey.

His bird records begin with his boyhood days on the coast of Maine and continue uninterrupted throughout his lifetime. During this considerable span of years, he noted virtually every bird that came within range of his binoculars, their spring and fall migrations, plumage, nesting, and other particulars. He came to recognize many individual birds, or pairs of birds, and would watch for their arrival and nesting each spring. Yet this was one category he rarely photographed, for all his field photography was done with a cumbersome view camera, and it often took him half an hour to get set up and make one exposure. He did, however, photograph nests of birds. This was one of his early studies, done mostly in the New Jersey Pine Barrens. He had an uncanny knack for locating nests, and I never knew of one he could not identify.

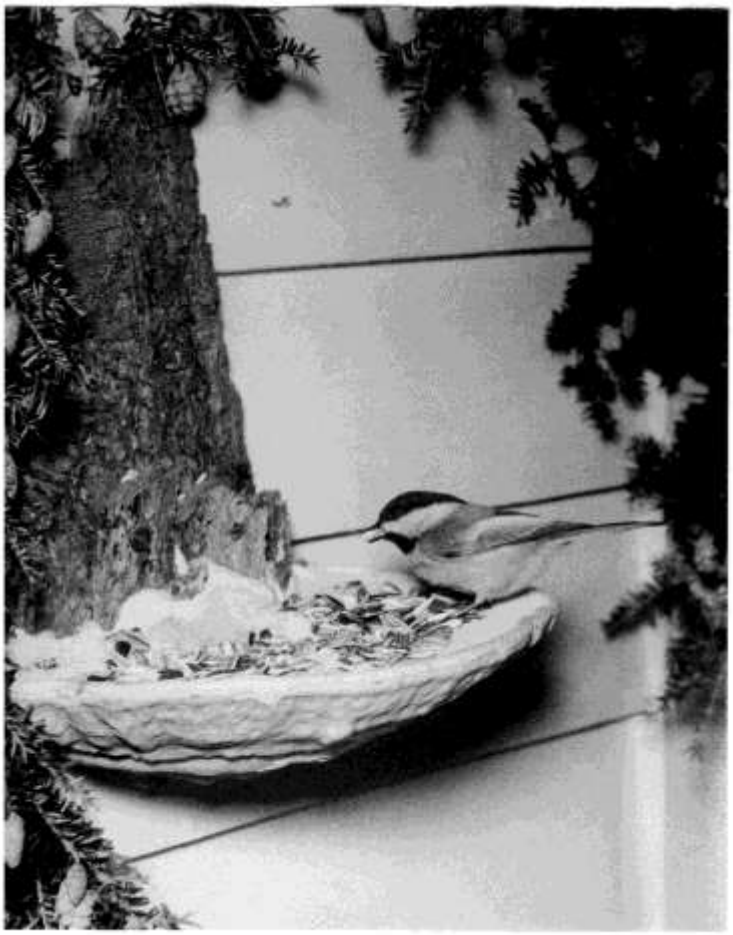
"A Home in the Laurel"

This Red-eyed Vireo's nest with Cowbird's egg was taken in 1928. Many of his photos contained a little natural history lesson of some sort like this one. He often told about these in his frequent lantern slide shows. I might have picked up more than I did, but my interests in those days lay elsewhere. He lived by brevity of the written word, and an explanatory title was just about the extent of his writing on this or any other subject. Later, in a more poetic mood, he renamed it "A Home in the Laurel." Here is an example of a photo that was all but forgotten for twenty years, was pulled out of the closet for one exhibition, and was never shown again. The original enlargement has long since disappeared, and I believe it was sold to Kodak. The negative was ruined in storage, so this copy was made from an old duplicate print. Likewise Virginia Rail Nest below.

"Virginia Rail Nest" (taken in the New Jersey Pine Barrens around 1930)

How he did love to go on bird walks. Winter was his favorite season for this, and the more snow the better. He had a notion that a good snow cover was important to the survival of many living things (automobile drivers not included in that category), and he could become rather impatient with anyone who expressed a dislike for snow. Just about the only persons who got to know him well were those willing to tramp all day in any weather to have a look at some uncommon bird or plant, and I don't believe I could include myself among that small number.

"Chickadee" was taken by RLC with flash looking out our kitchen window. It appears that he made the feeder from a fungus turned upside down and attached to a piece of pine slab, the whole thing then attached to the side of our house.



"Chickadee," taken with flash right out our kitchen window

How well I recall one blustery early spring day of many years past. He decided that we should bicycle to Sunderland to check out a bird in a lady's backyard there, which she reported to be a Dickcissel (but which turned out not to be). When we got there, he commenced to prowl around nervously with his binoculars, expecting me to follow close behind with my Peterson's Guide. I rebelled that day and refused to get off my bike, much to his displeasure. Resigned to this development, though, he never again insisted in my scouting after birds with him, and I don't believe I ever did.

He made quite a study of bird and animal tracks in the snow, which of course he recorded on film. Not content to merely identify every track he came across, he would want to know what the creature was up to, and why. This was one of his lantern slide lecture themes, but his notes were kept entirely in his head, and all that remains now is a set of slides showing puzzling tracks in the snow. But this one is easy: *rabbit*.

Pictorialist

The print competitions of the Amherst Camera Club were in specific categories at each monthly meeting. This may have encouraged RLC to experiment in subject matter that he might not have otherwise. From Lacroix's column in the Club newsletter of February, 1937, comes the following: "Bob Coffin's losing his grip - made a fuzzed up pictorial photograph - never expected to see him back-slide like that." The print referred to was his "Deserted," of an old abandoned house up on Bull Hill Road, taken late afternoon of a dreary winter's day with a soft focus technique.

"Deserted"

The following summer he produced a pictorial photo decidedly more optimistic in both subject matter and title. He spent many an hour roaming the woods and fields around Amherst, with an eye out for pictorial possibilities. Often he would return to the same spot many times looking for the elusive perfect conditions. And so it was that "Hope" was taken one misty early morning in 1937, on that part of the college land known as the Clark Estate. It shows rays of sunlight beaming through the morning mists onto a secluded opening in the woods.

I used to be able to locate those woods. At the northern end of the college campus, on the east side of North Pleasant Street, was a large apple orchard, and as I recall the Clark Estate lay just beyond to the east. A year after the photo was taken, the 1938 hurricane caused much damage there, which of course he also photographed, but you have to use your imagination to recognize the same spot, so lets skip that second photo. I have not gone back there recently, and not sure I want to. I wonder if the whole area is developed now, but let us *hope* not. I think my father had a special knack with titles to his pictorial photos.

"Hope"

Later this same year he produced what proved to be his most successful pictorial photograph - "The Good Earth's Bounty,". He would spend hours on these setups. As I recall, he took several shots with slightly different arrangements, and this was the last one. Each time, everything had to be moistened with water "to tone it up a bit." If you look closely you can see where some of the barn boards got stained with moisture. When he discovered this in the enlargement, he lamented that it was "ruined." Evidently it wasn't though, because it was accepted for the previously mentioned Centennial Exhibit at the New York World's Fair, where it received the Award of Merit. By the way, that barn door on Summer Street was still there, last I knew, and looked about the same. So why, you may wonder, didn't I use this for the cover of the album with that name? Because I never considered it a very outstanding photo, and I do not believe my father did either. In juried exhibits, you never know what will catch the attention of some judge. Ah, but I did like the title.

Little is known about this photo with the whimsical title of “The Three Monks,” of skunk cabbage plants emerging in early spring, but I am guessing that it was taken in the 1930s, in or around North Amherst.

“The Three Monks”

Reptiles and Amphibians

My father always had a natural tendency to side with what he considered the underdog in the perpetual battle of Man against Nature. All the more so if the battle was waged in a cloud of fear, ignorance, and superstition. So it was hardly surprising that he would have a special fondness for snakes. A neighbor was interested in vipers, so they had a good time together looking for rattlesnakes and copperheads. The best place to find them was on the sunny talus slopes of the Holyoke Range, among the piles of flaky traprock. Of course he would have to see how close he could get with his camera.

Once when I was small we were hiking down the trail from Bare Mountain to The Notch, with me far behind as usual. There was a large flat rock beside the trail, and I heard a loud rustling coming from underneath. Surely, I thought, a little birdie is caught under the rock and I must let it out. I was struggling with the rock when Father came back up the trail to see what was the matter. He was very hard of hearing, but one glance told him the whole story, and he moved me away from there in a hurry with a few words of advice.

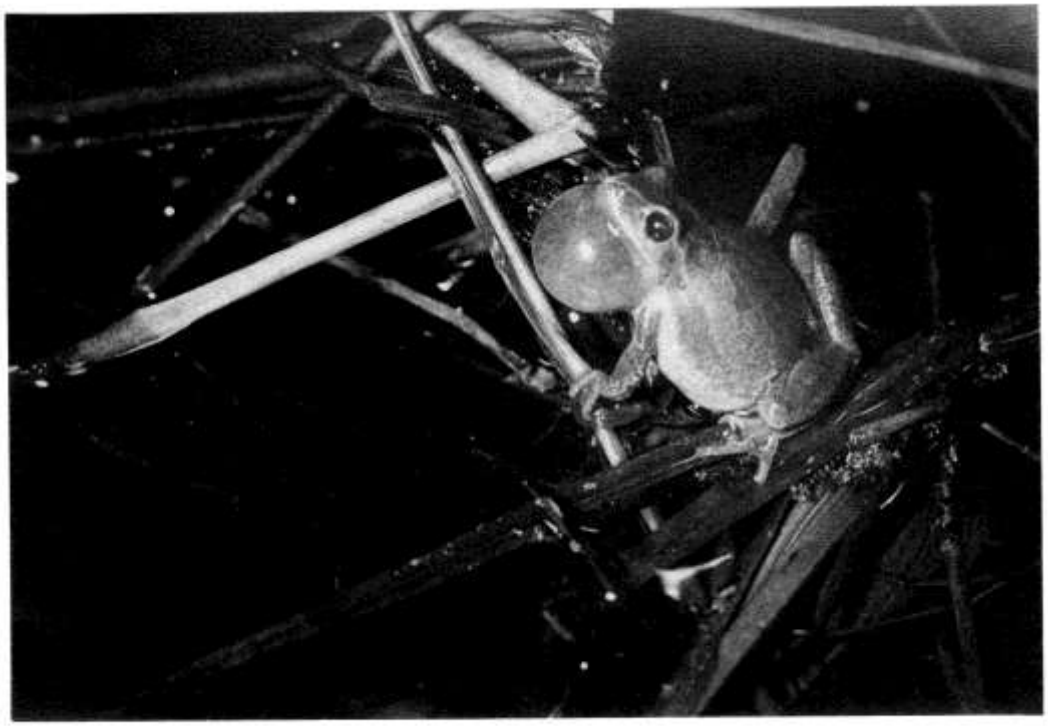
There were many snake episodes, but I will mention just one other. When he took my mother on camping trips, it was all new to her and she tried to make the best of it, but with limited success it seems. One time there was a big hollow tree by the campsite, which he proposed they use as a "natural refrigerator" for their food. When she reached into it for something, it was a bit more "natural" than she anticipated, for what should come slithering out but a large black snake! Naturally, her attitude toward snakes was not exactly the same as his, especially at that moment, and she let him know it.

RLC photographed all of the native reptiles and amphibians in their natural habitat, with the emphasis on natural, and was quick to detect and criticize works of others that did not meet his strict standards of accuracy and authenticity. Later, I am told, the standards for judging nature photographs were made more stringent, and no photograph could be accepted if the "hand of man" was anywhere in evidence. Ironically, if these standards had been in effect in 1939, it would have prevented his "Green Grass Snake" from being accepted in the Nature category. The "hand of man" is very much in evidence - his own in fact. He was left-handed, and I would guess he took this photo unaided. As already mentioned, this was one of the three RLC nature photographs accepted for the Centennial Exhibit at the New York World's Fair in 1939. In my personal judgment, and many others agree, this was his most outstanding photographic achievement. One can only guess how many times he tried before managing to get everything perfect - the pose, lighting, composition, focus, and even the exposure. It made the usual circuit of international

exhibits, the last being in Chicago in 1946. If an anthology of historic nature photography is ever published, I hope this print will be given consideration.

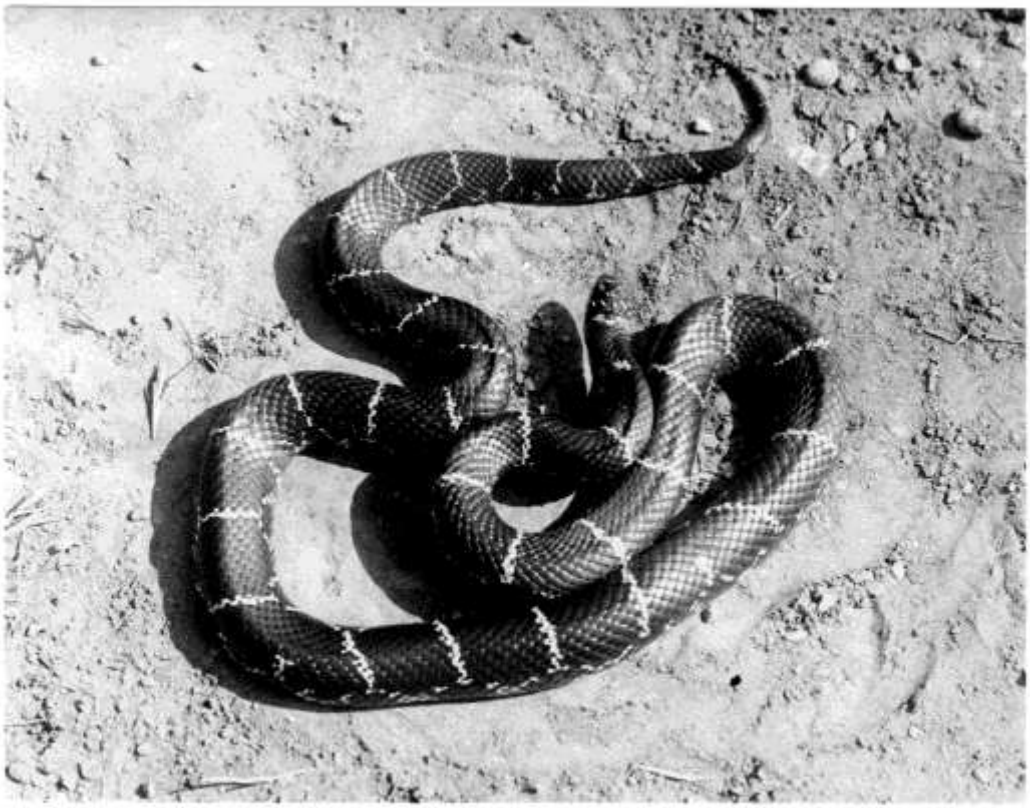
"Green Grass Snake"

My sister Esther adds the following: "Father had a standing offer for us and the other neighborhood kids of 50 cents (a huge sum to me at the time) for a live green grass snake. The reward went unclaimed for some time until we were on a family outing to Mt. Toby. We were walking strung out single file when the prize slithered across the path in front of me and I grabbed it." And that was in 1936.



"Hyla Crucifer"

"Hyla Crucifer" (spring peeper) was taken in Whipple's Ice Pond, near where we lived at the time on Thayer Street in Amherst, in the spring of 1932. I was only two at the time, but I recall his later describing how it was taken, perhaps augmented by my own experience with these critters at our backyard pond in Lincoln. They can be making a tremendous chorus, but as soon as you approach they all suddenly go dead silent. You hunt around with flashlight until you locate one, set up your camera with flash on a tripod, focus and wait. Any movement you make will keep them quiet, but the flashlight does not seem to bother them. You may be surprised how tiny they are. Finally, with much patience and luck, you take the flash photo while one is all puffed up peeping.



"King Snake"

"King Snake" was photographed in 1931 in New Jersey on a 5x7 glass plate negative. Here is another example of a subject that had to wait patiently until the times were right. It was hung in international nature photography exhibits in 1947 (Photographic Society of America), 1948 (Chicago Natural History Museum), and 1949 (Cranbrook Institute of Science, Michigan), never to be seen again - until now.

Botanist

One of RLC's pastimes was to "botanize" a plot of land, such as someone's backyard, pasture, or woodlot. By this he meant identify every plant growing on it, and for good measure he might throw in birds' nests, animals, and perhaps a few minerals. These field notes, like so many others of his, were kept in pocket-sized notebooks using a stubby dull pencil and very small compact script, making them difficult for anyone else to read. Over the years, they just kept accumulating in one of his desk drawers.

Sometimes a plant would crop up that would have him stumped. If he could not key it out with Gray's Manual, as a last resort he would turn to his good friend, the illustrious and previously mentioned Dr. Torrey, who is said to have been able to visually identify every native plant. Serious students of one of the natural sciences are (or at least once were) expected to be reasonably well versed in the nomenclature of their chosen field. Dr. Torrey has been quoted, in speaking of his graduate students, that he simply could not understand why they didn't just go ahead and "learn the plants." (Note: Gray's Manual, 8th Edition, listed 5523 species.)

For many years, RLC took a special interest in mushrooms, identifying and photographing those found locally, going all the way back to New Jersey around 1930. For quite a while he looked for a really good specimen of *Pleurotus ulmarius* for his collection. Around 1950 he was working for the Shade Tree Laboratory on Dutch elm disease, and he should have found plenty, as this species is said to grow like anything on dead elm. However, there was an Italian chap in the crew who was very alert to quickly gather these up and take them home for table use. One day, when they were working at Forest Park in Springfield, he found just what he had been looking for - a perfect specimen at last. Before his rival could spot it, he covered it all over with brush and leaves. Then he returned by bus the next day with his big 5 x 7 camera and tripod, cleaned it off, and got his prize photo. Many consider it one of his best, hence I am using it for the cover of this album.

His largest scientific collection was of trees of the Northeast. This included bark, twigs, buds, flowers, and so on for all the native trees. As I mentioned, many of these were sold to Turtox. Then there were his favorite "specimen" trees, such as the Sunderland sycamore, the Cushman elm, and many others that he visited regularly on his outings, photographing at different seasons and perhaps measuring too. His knowledge of such things was phenomenal, but I once had the satisfaction of discovering a tree that had somehow escaped his attention.

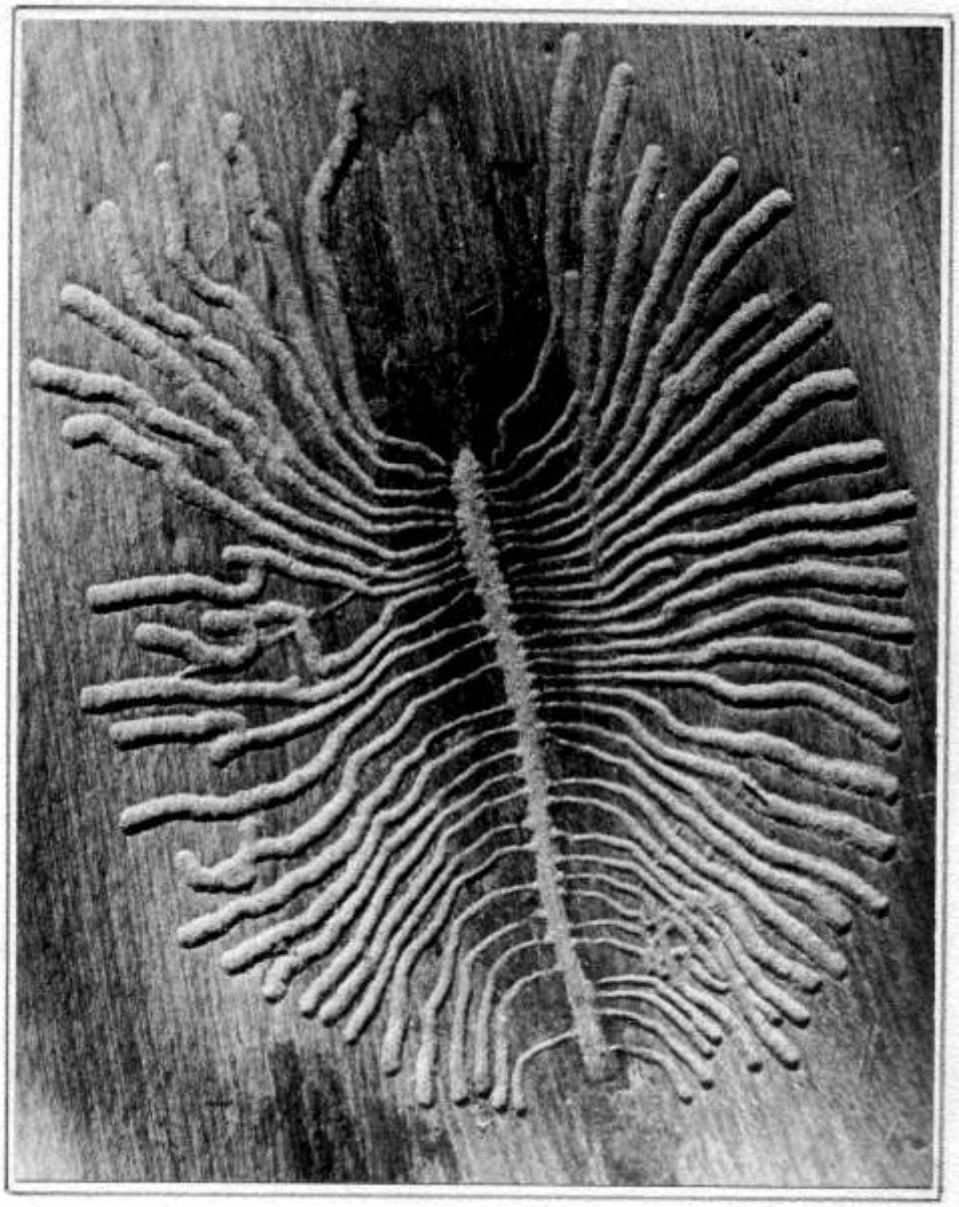
Back in the days when North Amherst was not so built up, one could look from our yard on Summer Street clear across the Connecticut Valley to the foothills of the Berkshires on the far side, forming what appeared as a continuous ridge running north and south for many miles. I had a telescope of sorts, put together with a pair of cardboard mailing tubes and a pair of 25¢ mail order lenses that must have been plastic. My sister said it was like looking through a coke bottle (and upside down). It did have 33-power magnification though. With it I used to watch the last red rays of the setting sun peeping through the trees on the skyline - always a fascinating sight. There was a tiny bump on the ridge that had always puzzled me. Turning the "glass" on it one day, I perceived it to be a very large tree some 10 or 12 miles distant. Of course we had to go find it, so early one summer's day, armed with topographic sheets and a carefully plotted compass bearing, we set off by bike across the Valley. Our route took us up through Sunderland and across the river, past tobacco fields and pasture land, and finally to wooded hilly country beyond. After pushing up a steep gravel road and hiking a bit, we located the tree with no difficulty - a gnarled old sugar maple standing atop a cleared ridge in old pasture land. This photo shows my father sizing it up. And by the way, what a great picnic site.

Here I am perched on one of the lower limbs of this monarch.
We took these photos with my little Argoflex twin lens reflex.

In 1976, my wife and I took an exploratory trip and were able to locate the tree with no difficulty. I originally reported it being in Conway, but now I believe it was just over the line in Whatley. Other trees had grown up around it so that it no longer stood out as it once did. In 1998 my companion Mary and I took another trip to look for it but could not find it, and I doubt if it still stands, except in these photos and in my memory.

RLC's work involved photographing many specimens in connection with agricultural research, and in particular plant pathology. He would sometimes spend hours fussing with the lighting and composition on what would otherwise be a routine job, trying to achieve the most artistic rendition. This practice must have puzzled some of his more pragmatic clients and was probably not always appreciated. But every once in a while a favorite photo would be the result. It would be carefully enlarged, mounted, and added to his collection.

One such example is his untitled print showing the brood galleries of the elm bark beetle, probably taken around 1950. The negative is lost.



Brood Galleries of Elm Bark Beetle (Scolytus multistriatus)

To digress slightly, while roaming the New Jersey Pine Barrens, in addition to his nature studies, RLC took an interest in historic places such as old buildings around Rancocas dating back to the late 1600s, the "Dunwoody House," and a water powered mill. Most of these negatives are on 5x7 glass plate and well preserved. There are about a dozen, dated 1930-1931. We have donated all of them to the New Jersey State Library. Here is one of them, with story unknown.

Historic old house in the Pine Barrens, still standing?

Ferns and Orchids

Soon after we moved back to Amherst in 1932, RLC undertook one of his major projects, collecting and photographing all the New England ferns, which numbered about fifty-four. This kept him pretty busy, tramping through the wetlands and over the hills of western Massachusetts. The biggest problem was getting to those in remote mountain locations, but the solution was found when he and his friends at the college started their annual backpacking outings to the mountains in the mid 1930's. One summer they would be off to the Adirondacks, the next year to Maine or the White Mountains, but their favorite haunt was the Long Trail of Vermont. Several of the less common ferns were found on Mt. Mansfield and other summits.

"The Awakening," Osmunda claytoniana, interrupted fern

This was probably the only collection of his where he actually set out with some intention of seeing it published. His main complaint with the fern books of that time was that they lacked good illustrations, and he proposed to fill that need.

Beginning a few miles north of Amherst and running northward, a small range of mountains known as Mt. Toby rises out of the Valley. An astonishing variety of plant life grows thereabouts, including most of the New England ferns (46 according to his notes). I was once told that the reason for this was that the mountain was made of "puddin'stone" (i.e. conglomerate), but now that I reflect on it many years later I wonder if it was rather more of a joke. Father knew every glen and cliff of that range, and he kept detailed notes of all the uncommon plants he discovered there. He was pretty careful with whom he shared this information.

We hiked up there together many times. I remember once when we went to photograph the Ram's Head Lady's Slipper, which grew in a secret spot known only to him and a few others. We would start early in the morning. Across the farm fields, over Pulpit Hill, and up through pasture land, there would be frequent detours, mostly to check on birds' nests. He would remark that the same pair of wrens had nested in a dead tree for so many years in a row, and peek in with a flashlight to count and record the number of eggs, or note that some young bitterns were just leaving their nest well hidden in a marsh. He had his favorite routes around swamps, across brooks and through fences, and we made good time.

Finally we would reach Bull Hill at the southern end of the range and start gaining altitude. By this time I would be tuckered out, but he would be just warming up. He was quite short, and was known and recognized far and wide by his quick nervous hiking gait, usually with camera and tripod over his shoulder. He had a 9 x 12 cm Zeiss Ikon Maxima view camera that fit, together with tripod and film packs, into a special compartment in his knapsack for backpacking all over the countryside. But for more critical work he preferred the cumbersome 5 x 7 Premo. At the start of World War II, of course he got rid of the Maxima because of its German manufacture, which left him with nothing but the big Premo.

Sometimes we would strike old logging roads that branched off in every direction, but he knew them all and continued along, pausing here and there to drop something into his collecting box. If I asked about lunch, he might pluck some semi-edible plant for me to chew on. Various minerals would be found to add to my collection, and by day's end my pockets would be bursting with them. Oh yes, of course he had a large mineral collection of his own. One of his interests was locating old mines and mineral locations, many of

which we visited on our excursions. How he discovered them I do not know, for most of them were merely a depression in the ground like an old overgrown cellar hole. I doubt if I could find any of them now. I used to have ore samples from all of them, but they must have been used for fill in our driveway during some mud season long ago.

Finally, after much bushwhacking we would arrive at his "station." The ram's head lady's slippers were just a small bed in a shaded glade, barely noticeable until you were standing right over them. At last the tripod would be set up, and we would get down to serious business. One of the advantages of this type of camera, as I later learned, is that there is less tendency to snap at everything under the sun. I would eat lunch while he exposed one or two plates and be done long before he was.

We would hike to the summit and visit our friend George Boulden in the fire tower, and then proceed hurriedly down the east side, past the Metawampe cabin and along Roaring Brook. Again we would leave the good path and strike off through the brush, perhaps to photograph some rare spleenwort in a remote rocky gully.

I will try to describe his method of plant photography. First he would clear away brush and other objectionable matter using tools that he brought along, and perhaps rearrange a few rocks. Then he would work on and around the specimen with tweezers or clippers, accompanied by much muttering. A camel's hair brush might be used to flick away a few bits of dirt. Finally the tripod would be set up, with much slamming and scraping of the legs, trying to get a firm footing for the heavy camera on the sloping hillside. This would be accompanied by a few terse comments on the sad state of tripod design. The final touch would be to moisten the fern and rock with an atomizer. By this time he would discover that the lighting was not at all to his liking and not likely to improve either, which would evoke comments on the natural perversity of New England weather. Various makeshift reflectors and shades might be employed, for which I could sometimes make myself useful.

We would head home along the Central Vermont tracks, which was for my benefit, since I was far more interested in trains than ferns. Once he told me to dig at a particular spot on the embankment and see what I might find there. Snapping turtle's eggs - dozens of 'em. We took some home and hatched them in sand, and one of them I raised for a year or so on house flies and hamburg. Sometimes we would collect samples of swamp water to be taken home and studied under a microscope. On every outing there would be interesting things to be brought home and added to our home museum or backyard zoo.

Father would bring back specimens to be photographed in the studio. His fern collection even had high magnification photos of sporecases made with the apparatus shown on the next page. One of these, enlarged to 50 diameters, was exhibited under the

Fern Photography

Mr. Coffin's set up for the photo below.

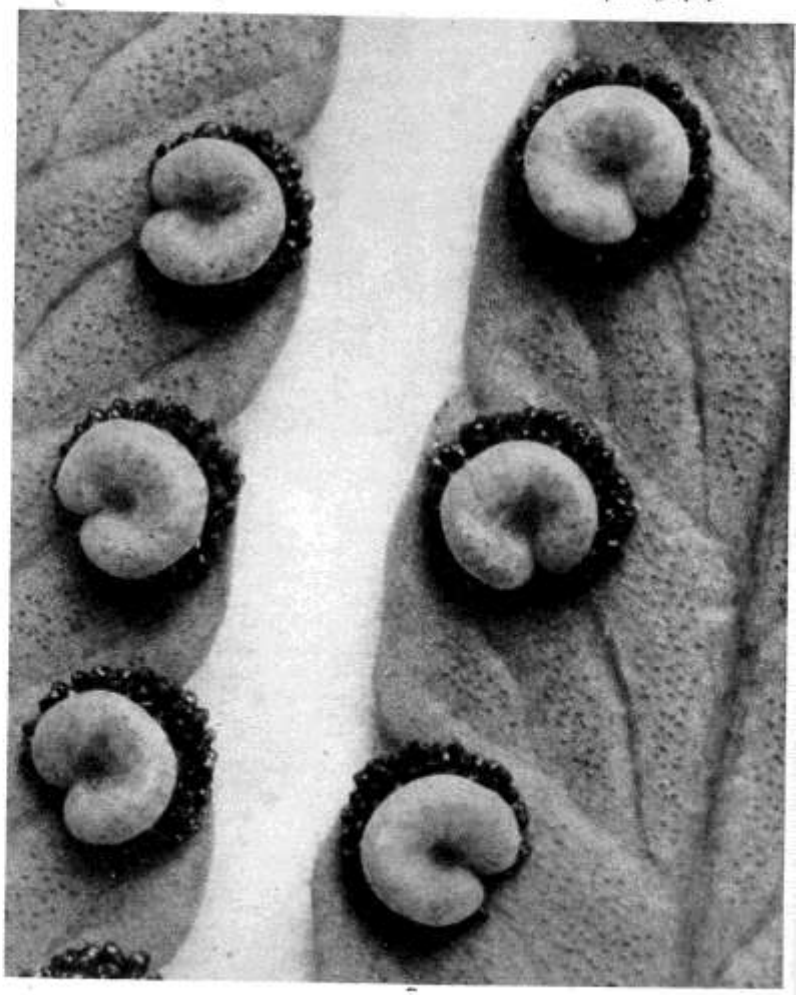
For some 10 years, R. L. Coffin, of North Amherst, Mass., has been working on a group of photos to illustrate a book on New England ferns being written by one of his friends.

The photo of "Marginale-sori 50," from the 1946 PSA Exhibition, illustrated below, was made by the camera shown at left — a four-foot box attached to a 4 x 5 Korona View, using a four-inch Tessar lens. This picture shows Mr. Coffin's son helping him to get the camera focused at the right magnification to photograph some soil samples in connection with mud erosion work being done at Massachusetts State College.

"The set-up is rather crude," says Mr. Coffin, "but we do not have the funds here for more elaborate equipment. The fern soil photos were made with the camera in a horizontal position on a heavy oak table — making it stable and easier to manipulate. The vertical set-up is a little more spectacular and I took it to use in a camera club talk.

"We have a large north light in our old studio and I use daylight alone, when I can, in all of my natural science photography."

The original contact print, reduced from 4 by 5.

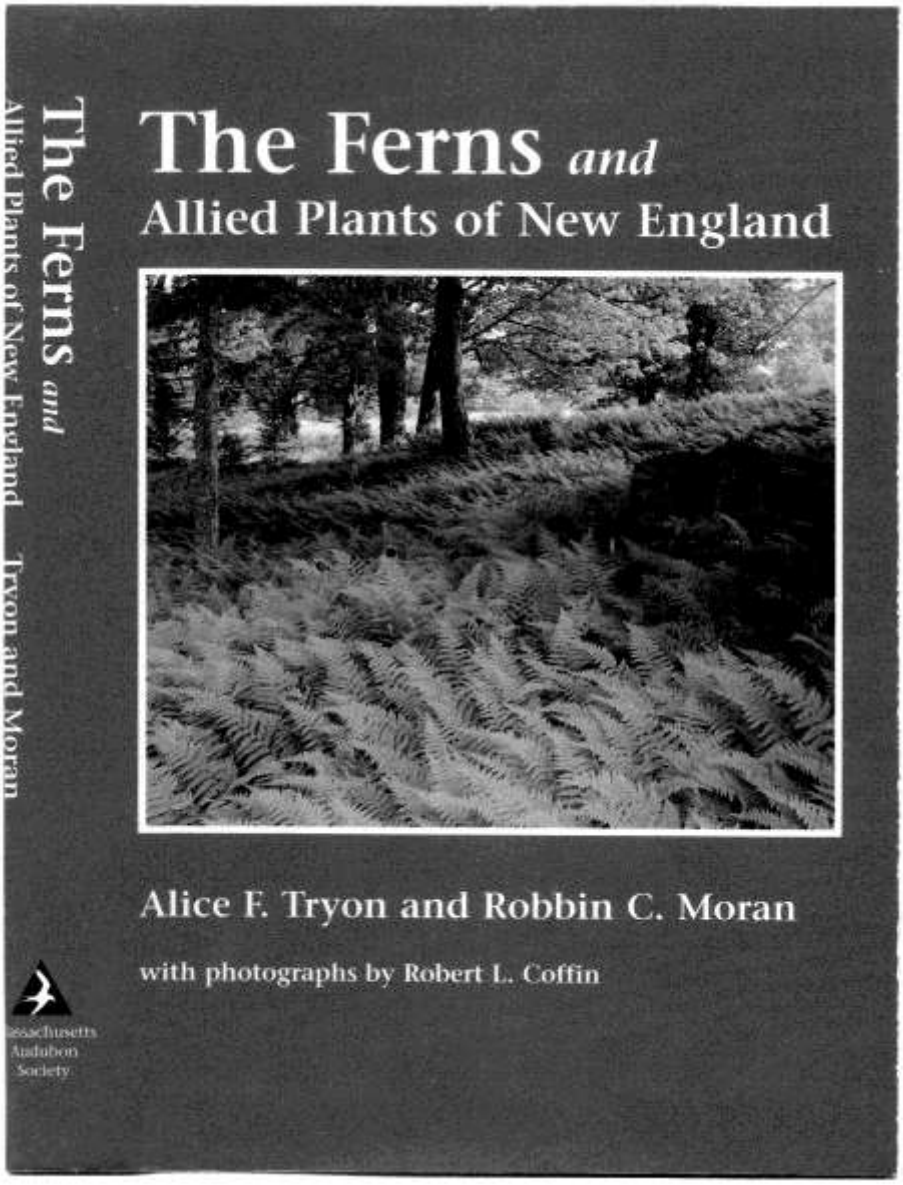


"Marginale-sori 50"

title "Marginale sori 50" and was written up in the PSA Journal of August 1948. He ended up photographing all the ferns but one, which was in Connecticut and he could not get to. As for the proposed book, the negatives and prints were all neatly labeled and filed away in a box, where they remained long after his death, nearly forgotten. But then around 1990, Alice Tryon of Harvard University, an authority on ferns, was nearing completion of her book on New England ferns and wondering what to use for illustrations. She happened to be acquainted with another expert on ferns in upper New York State named Walter Hodge. It seems that many years earlier Walter, then botany professor at Mass. State College, had belonged to the Amherst Camera Club and knew about the RLC fern photos. Somehow they managed to track me down, and on behalf of my father's estate I donated the negatives for use in the book. Then there was a long delay as Alice searched far and wide for a publisher. When she finally found one, it turned out to be none other than my next door neighbor, The Massachusetts Audubon Society.

I should also mention that RLC carried that view camera and tripod nearly the entire length of the Long Trail in the 1930s, not long after it had been established, and of course he recorded everything on film including all of the cabins and shelters, and the many fine views. Those photos have all been donated to the Green Mountain Club.

"After Sunrise from Camel's Hump," August 7, 1935



Incidentally, after all that business about hiking to Mt. Toby to locate and photograph the rare Ram's Head Lady's Slipper, why haven't I included the photo? The reason is simple enough – it is lost. Much worse than that, I have been told that all those rare plants have been dug out and the colony destroyed.

Weather Man

RLC would probably not have been called a meteorologist, which according to the dictionary has to do with the science of weather forecasting. But what then do you call someone who has recorded daily weather observations for nearly his entire life, augmented with photos?

Around 1930 he did a photo series on cloud types. Thirty years later he repeated it on Ektachrome. The one photo chosen for this album is his unusual "Storm Signal." An enlargement of it hung in his studio for as long as I can remember. Note how the branches of the tree are mimicked in the clouds, reversed and enlarged - a fleeting opportunity of the sort that, according to him, he usually just missed. It was taken in New Jersey in 1930. The underexposed 5 x 7 negative has become degraded in storage and is now difficult to print.

"Storm Signal"

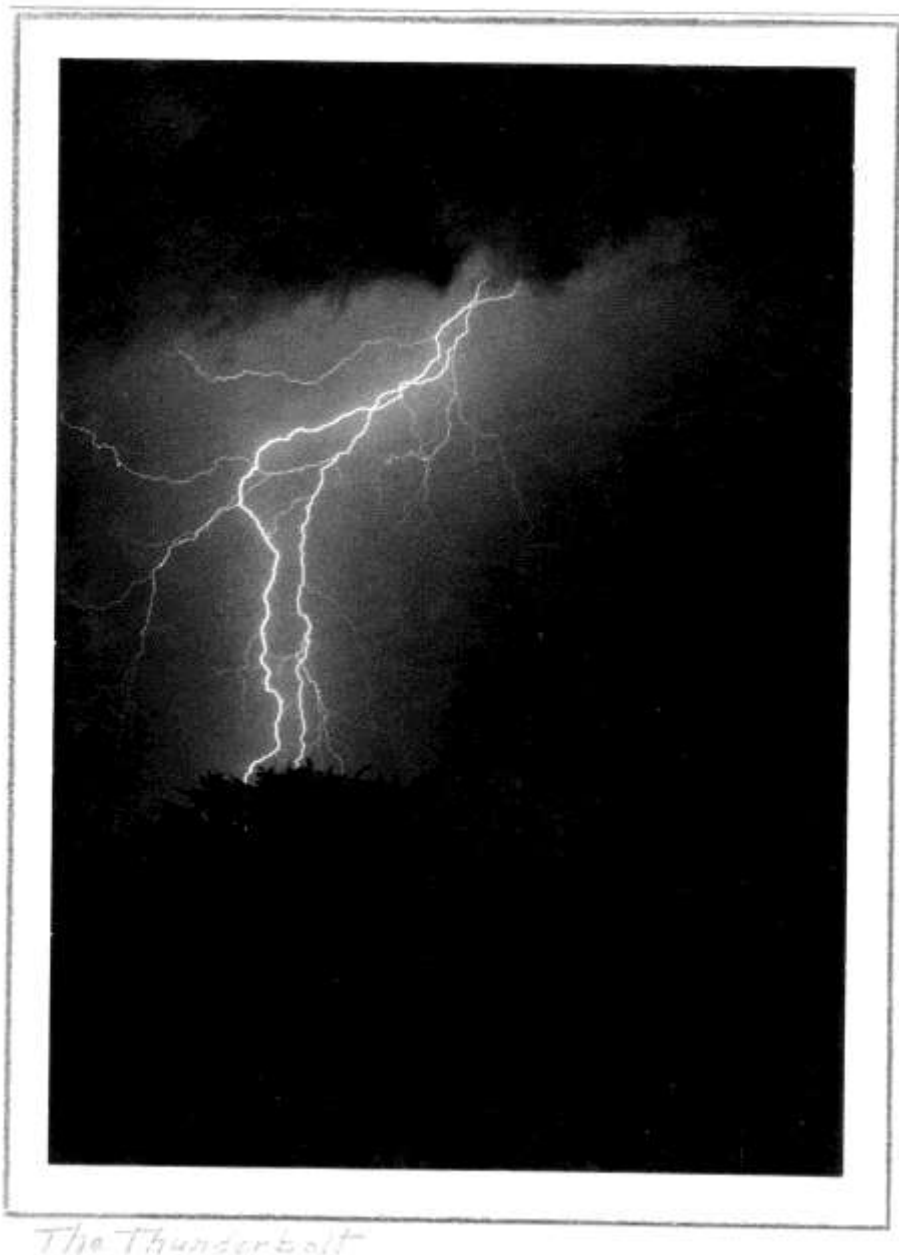
He was fascinated by extremities of any sort in the weather, and he loved to photograph floods, blizzards, or damage from wind, hail, lightning, or whatever. One fall, just after we moved from one house to another next door on Summer Street, there were torrential rains and he blithely hurried off with a friend to photograph Tannery Falls in the Berkshires. For once he got more than he bargained for, as their return was blocked by floods and uprooted trees. My sister was only a few doors down the street, and she too was unable to get home until evening because of downed trees and wires. Meanwhile, my pal Dick Swift and I were running around the neighborhood in our bathing suits, thinking it was the greatest spectacle we had ever seen. It was of course the beginning of the great 1938 hurricane, the storm of the century.

Mother was alone in the house, mopping the upstairs floor furiously and wondering how all the rainwater was coming in. Father and his companion managed to drive back only as far as Sunderland before dusk. He arrived home on foot the following morning, only to find the entire metal roof of our house in a crumpled heap, together with the remains of both chimneys. To save the cost of new bricks, he paid me one cent each to chip the mortar off the old ones, and I spent weeks doing it. The mason who repaired the chimneys would not use them though, so it was all wasted effort.

This photo shows the hurricane damage. By the way, the Norway spruce and black walnut were planted by my great grandfather Chauncey Phelps in 1886, and both were still standing last I knew. That storm left a deep impression on me. I remember the three of us being in the house that night, the wind shrieking, the house shaking, and no lights of course, as the electricity was off for weeks. The large Norway spruce whipping back and forth looked as if it would surely come down on the house, especially after the large elm next door toppled into it, but it held. But my most vivid memory is of venturing out the next morning on a beautiful calm, sunny fall day into a new world. Giant elm trees lay in heaps all up and down every street. We could climb over them for some distance without ever touching the ground. For decades afterward you could see remnants of that storm damage if you knew where to look, such as the east side of our spruce tree. You might have to use your imagination now, but not so the sugar maple in the front yard. Even to this day, you can still see where it was broken off about ten feet up and then branched and grew up again. I know because Dick and I were standing nearby when it broke, those many years ago.

During the hot, sultry weather of mid summer, violent thunderstorms were common in the Valley, more so than anywhere else I have lived. My father said that the Connecticut River attracted and strengthened them. We could see them approaching from way across the Valley. The sky would darken. Then a violent wind would come, always from the west, just before all the rain and lightning. Sometimes my father and I would go out after a strong storm to stand the blown down cornstalks upright again.

As you might expect, lightning held a special appeal to my father. He would set up the view camera aimed in a likely direction, keep the rain off with an umbrella, open the shutter, and wait for a flash. With luck and patience, you might occasionally get an exposure worth printing. His favorite was "The Thunderbolt," taken on Summer Street probably in the mid 1930s.



"The Thunderbolt"

One evening we had an even better than average storm, and as usual the electricity went off. (Note the use of the word “better.” In one way at least, I guess I took after my father. I always loved the drama of strong storms, and still do.) As we went to bed by candlelight there was a dreadful odor, the source of which was a mystery. It was downstairs, so we bedded down upstairs and shut all the doors. When we came down the next morning, every one of Father’s coveted potted ferns was as white as a ghost, and just as dead. It seems that the sulfur dioxide refrigerant had leaked out of our old Norge "icebox.” Why it chose this particular time to spring a leak we never knew.

One special night every August, if the sky was clear, the two of us would lie on a blanket on the nearly flat roof of our house to gaze at the heavens and count meteors. Father would watch one half of the sky and I the other, both of us counting out loud, probably to the puzzlement of our neighbors. Sometimes one would split in two and I would argue that it should be counted as two. In between counts, he would point out the names of the stars and constellations, but I would soon forget. My mind was of an entirely different bent from his, and I would ponder the practical use of all this information or drift off into some other distant realm of thought. He was always content to just observe and record. At the end of one hour the meteor count was totaled and dutifully recorded in his little book - "Aug 12, Perseid, 72 in 1 hr.” Then one year I lost interest and we didn’t count meteors any more.

The Witches' Bird and Other Pets

Our menagerie of childhood "pets" included all manner of bird and beast, some of which I would rather forget. One time one of my pals discovered a large nest in the top of an old pine tree in the Sunderland swamp, with the chicks just hatching, and he let me have one of them. I guess we thought they were crows. When my father came home that evening he was furious, for he immediately recognized it as a young red-shouldered hawk and wondered how I could have been so ignorant. Furthermore they were protected by law and it was too late to return it to the nest. To make it legal, I was able to obtain a permit from the state Conservation Department to raise it to maturity.

"Hawkshaw"

This was during World War II when meat was rationed, and you can probably guess what the diet of a hawk is supposed to consist of exclusively. Nearly every day after school I would go out hunting. As a last resort, I could always shoot rats at the dump or frogs in the swamp, and that is largely what "Hawkshaw" was raised on, successfully I am proud to say. I had a large screened cage for him, but as he (or she?) got older I would let him out on training flights to see what he could forage for himself. Unfortunately, the neighbor next door raised chickens, and every time Hawkshaw made a low pass over his yard his hens got the jitters and stopped laying, or at least so he claimed. Finally in mid summer the time came to release him. Our neighbor with the chickens had a camp in New Hampshire, and he offered to release Hawkshaw on one of his trips up there. Whether he actually did or not we will never know, but I was relieved to see him go.

The most illustrious critter we ever raised was a pet crow. Like my hawk, it was taken from the nest soon after hatching. From an innocent nestling, "Crow" soon became the scourge of the neighborhood. Crows evidently possess an inborn bent for mischief, and I have often wondered what miscarriage of evolution could account for this development. My pals were all fascinated by his antics and wanted one too. Raising pet crows was not that uncommon back then, and I knew of a few others. Everyone seems to agree that crows are smart birds and have a passion for making trouble.

Crows love to steal things for no other purpose than just the pleasure of stealing. His favorite sport was making the rounds of the neighborhood collecting clothespins, especially those that were in use. These were the old fashioned kind of solid wood. Perched on our garage roof, he neatly split each one with a few jabs of his powerful bill and then let the splinters fall into the gutter. When it rained, all the pieces would wash down into a heap on the ground. There would also be quite a few splinters of pencils. Crow could land on someone's shoulder and slip things out of shirt pockets as deftly as any professional pickpocket.

We had a cocker spaniel puppy at the same time, and we trained her not to bother the young crow. That was a mistake. Soon realizing his advantage, Crow devised endless schemes of torture for that poor dog, like stealing her favorite toys and placing them just out of reach, or stalking up while she was dozing peacefully, giving her a good jab on the rump, and then flying off to the spruce tree with a scream.

Crow would fly around the neighborhood and rap on windows to be let in. Some of our neighbors were amused by this at first, but soon learned the price to be paid. Crow loved to collect anything shiny, such as silverware or coins. Back then, folks used to leave money on their doorstep to be taken by the delivery man for milk, eggs, and such. Pretty soon it was disappearing, and we had a pretty good idea why. Our suspicions were

confirmed when some of it started turning up in our yard, especially hidden under plantain leaves in the driveway. Also included in this booty were the little red cardboard tokens about the size of a dime that were used for meat rationing during the War. They turned up in our driveway for years afterward.

A rogue's gallery. Upper left photo of RLC is by Lacroix. Then clockwise: Crow with the enemy, Crow with someone's pipe, and Esther feeding Crow.

Crow used to follow me to school and perch just outside the window, to the delight of everyone except Miss Boron, our teacher. Probably the most celebrated incident was the time he perched on the window sill of the church and rapped on the window during the service, causing quite a commotion. I was not there when it happened, but I heard about it, told and retold many times. I think the story got embellished over the years as to what just what the minister was preaching when the disturbance happened. I would have been more interested to know what the minister might have said to himself at that moment.

I think the funniest thing Crow ever did was the time he stole Baxter Eastman's cigar. This man came to see Father on business one evening. In his vest pocket he always carried a good cigar, and you can probably already guess what happened next. There was a faint swoosh and a dark shadow, a light touch on the shoulder, and Crow was off to the birdbath with the cigar. After giving it a good dunking there, he flew to the garage roof, just out of reach, where he dropped soggy shreds of tobacco into Mr. Eastman's outstretched hands. These antics would typically be accompanied by a garbled sound that we supposed was intended to mimic human laughter. They say some crows actually learn to talk. He seemed to try, but luckily his speech was never quite intelligible. Mr. Eastman was a good sport and thought it was quite a joke on himself.

RLC took a picture of Crow in January of 1941 perched on a neighbor's clothesline (naturally) and named it "The Witches' Bird." When he first submitted it to a juried exhibition of nature photography shortly thereafter, one judge refused to consider it, so the story goes, because he insisted that the bird was stuffed. Well I can assure you, many of our neighbors wished that it was! Later this same print was accepted for the Sixth International Salon of Nature Photography in Buffalo where, much to everyone's surprise, it was awarded "Best in the Show." It also appeared on the cover of Hobbies magazine, June 1944.

We had Crow for about two years. Then one day he just disappeared. We suspect that he tried someone's patience just once too often. "The Witches' Bird" - certainly a fitting title.

"The Witches Bird"

Duck Hawk

Of the many faces of nature that RLC studied and recorded over the years, it would be hard to say which was his most passionate interest, but near the top of the list would be the peregrine falcon, which back in those days was called duck hawk. There were at least six known eyries in western Massachusetts in the 1920's, most of them within hiking distance of Amherst. These he visited and observed regularly, often by rope, keeping detailed notes on such things as nest locations, egg measurements and markings, when they were laid, and all too often when they were stolen.

RLC began his duck hawk photography in the spring of 1920, which predates practically all of his other nature photography. He and many others were becoming concerned over the fate of the duck hawk, with increasing numbers of collectors ready to grab every clutch of eggs as soon as they were laid. Presumably, the appeal to collectors lay in the inaccessibility of the nests. It was his conviction that the eggs could just as well be collected photographically, and this he set out to do. He worked that season with the inapt Kodak 3A, and the results did not suit him. The following spring he learned of an eyrie on Mt. Sugarloaf. Determined to get a good photograph, he packed up the 5 x 7 Premo and all the accessories, traveled by bus to South Deerfield, and lugged the whole works up the mountain.

From the observation railing at the top, the nesting site was directly underneath but hidden from view. Mr. Fisher, the warden of Mt. Sugarloaf State Park, showed him where the nest was and let him down over the edge of the cliff using a stout rope he had there. Quoting now from a description of the eyrie by State Ornithologist Joseph Hagar:

"... The female would hover several hundred feet over you, then come down like a bullet, brush past your head, and without moving a wing, bounce right back up to where she'd been before. You were seldom caught completely off guard, though, because she kept up this incessant "cack, cack, cack' and you could tell pretty well by the sound where she was and whether she was going to hit you or not."

Here we must resort to conjecture and try to imagine RLC at the end of his rope, setting up his tripod and big view camera on the sloping shelf - a shelf that the parents intended to be just large enough for their nest and nothing more. Then focusing under the draped black cloth and making the one exposure, all the while avoiding the double hazards of falling off the mountain or being scalped by the birds, and last but certainly not least - getting back up again. This, by the way, was before he was married. Mildred once told me that after Esther was born in 1925, he cut back on some of these antics.

The resulting prized egg photo on 5 x 7 glass plate negative

RLC said he preferred glass plate negatives over film for critical work because it stayed flat and thus gave a little sharper focus, especially when the camera was aimed downward. He took a great deal of pride in that particular photo and considered it one of his best. There is no record of it ever having been exhibited in a juried show, but that would have mattered little to him. In the years that followed, he visited many eyries and accumulated quite a photographic record of this ill-fated bird, but this and the next photo were probably the only times he roped down a cliff with the big 5 x 7 camera.

Ten days old, May 18, 1921, hatched from eggs in previous photo

Mr. Fisher, with the rope used to lower RLC down over the cliff

Later this same season, 1921, he suffered a misfortune. Quoting Donald Lacroix: "Back in the early twenties, Bob Coffin took us on a trip to Prescott cliffs in search of duck hawk nesting sites. We left the old trolley car at West Pelham, hiked over Pelham Hill and down into the valley to the east. Bob had borrowed a 5 x 7 Graflex and a dozen plate holders loaded with glass plates. When we reached the top of the cliff, he laid his pack down on a ledge; a pack containing camera, plate holders, grub, rope, and sundry accessories, and started to scout around for nesting sites. We heard a noise and turned around in time to see the pack go sliding over the cliff and down some 80 or 90 feet to bare rock below. Bob gazed fixedly for a moment and then uttered some words that could only be printed on asbestos! When we got down to the remains we found a thoroughly crushed camera, glass slivers all over the place, and the lens in its barrel sitting on a jagged rock unscathed." That hike over hill and vale and across the west branch of the Swift River was twenty miles round trip, and the Graflex was a very heavy piece of equipment, not to mention the glass plates, but at least he did not have to carry them back.

(Update: When I showed the original version of this to Lacroix he revealed to me the words that RLC had uttered: "blood, guts, and feathers!")

Over the years, RLC accumulated a good collection of photographs of the eyries, eggs, and young, but none of the adult birds. Then in 1940 Joe Hagar built a blind close to the eyrie at Prescott, blocked off other possible nesting sites with brush, and even planted a small hemlock tree at the far end of the ledge to serve as a nice background. A few photos were obtained the following spring. Then in 1942 the nest was on the same ledge and even closer to the blind. Sometimes I went there with them. We three would approach the blind and then two of us would depart, leaving RLC inside. It was explained to me that this fooled the hawks into thinking that the blind was vacated, that is assuming that they could not count to three. I always wondered. Usually they were nowhere to be seen, but I was assured that we were being watched from afar nevertheless.

Joe Hagar and I would leave that bleak ledge for the welcome shelter of the pine woods, where I spent many an hour daydreaming on a sunny bed of pine needles while the wind sighed in the treetops. RLC spent days in that blind with shutter cocked and cable release in hand, waiting. One day he saw the male strike down a pigeon and the female pick it up. Three more hours passed while she plucked it on a stump before she warily approached the ledge to feed her young. Finally, using a 14-inch lens in a makeshift camera, he got the one photograph he had waited so long for. It was also to be his last, for the project was interrupted by the war effort and gasoline rationing.

After the war, the project was resumed, but the conditions were never as favorable as before. RLC had a full-time job then, and Hagar did most of the photography. Some photos were obtained in 1946. I believe it was in 1947 Hagar noted that the eggs failed to hatch and some were broken. A raccoon was suspected but then ruled out. Shortly thereafter the cliffs were silent and the duck hawk was seen no more in this part of the country.

All of this work was recorded by Hagar and summarized in an article in "Massachusetts Wildlife," July 1972. I still have some of the photos, but most were donated to the Massachusetts conservation headquarters in Westborough.

The end of this story contains some bitter irony. For all I know, this may have been one of the first places where the effects of DDT on wildlife were actually documented, but nobody guessed the reason for decades. Even when Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring" was published in 1962 the cause was still unknown and remained so until the historic international conference at the University of Wisconsin in 1965. As I mentioned, RLC measured the duck hawk eggs with calipers and kept careful records. But he never measured the <u>thickness</u> of the shell, which would have been the critical measurement, since

DDT caused the shells to be too thin. Finally, and perhaps saddest of all, after the war RLC was working for the Shade Tree Laboratory at the University of Massachusetts, on a misguided project to save elm trees from the Dutch elm disease. As part of their experimental effort, they bought DDT by the 55 gallon drum and drenched elm trees with it in an attempt to control the beetle that spread the disease, a method which ultimately turned out to be a failure.

So this photo has very special significance in the saga of RLC's romance with this magnificent bird. It may well be the best photo that exists of the adult Eastern peregrine falcon in the wild. In recent years they have been reintroduced and have made a significant comeback, but these are the Western or Arctic peregrine. As I understand it, the Eastern subspecies is believed to be extinct.

Sadly, as so often happens, I became really interested in many of these things only after my father died. In July, 1976, I visited Joseph Hagar at his home in Marshfield and made a tape recording of his recollections and stories. Then I learned that ornithologist and author John Kaufman had driven all the way from New York City to interview RLC in 1974 specifically about the duck hawk, and I obtained a taped copy of that interview also. I also talked with Donald Lacroix and got his recollections. All of this, together with photos and field notes, constitutes quite a record of this bird, for anyone who might be interested.

Joe Hagar told me that he had revisited the historic site at the Prescott cliffs (now within Quabbin Reservoir and difficult to access). He reported that the blind had suffered the same fate as the Graflex and lay demolished at the foot of the cliff. The hemlock tree was still there and the nesting site looked about the same. I could almost imagine the bird hurtling into the sky from her perch on that lonely crag and the familiar "cack, cack, cack." But the cliffs are silent now, and the only sound likely to be heard would be the lonely sighing of the wind in the pines.

"Duck Hawk"

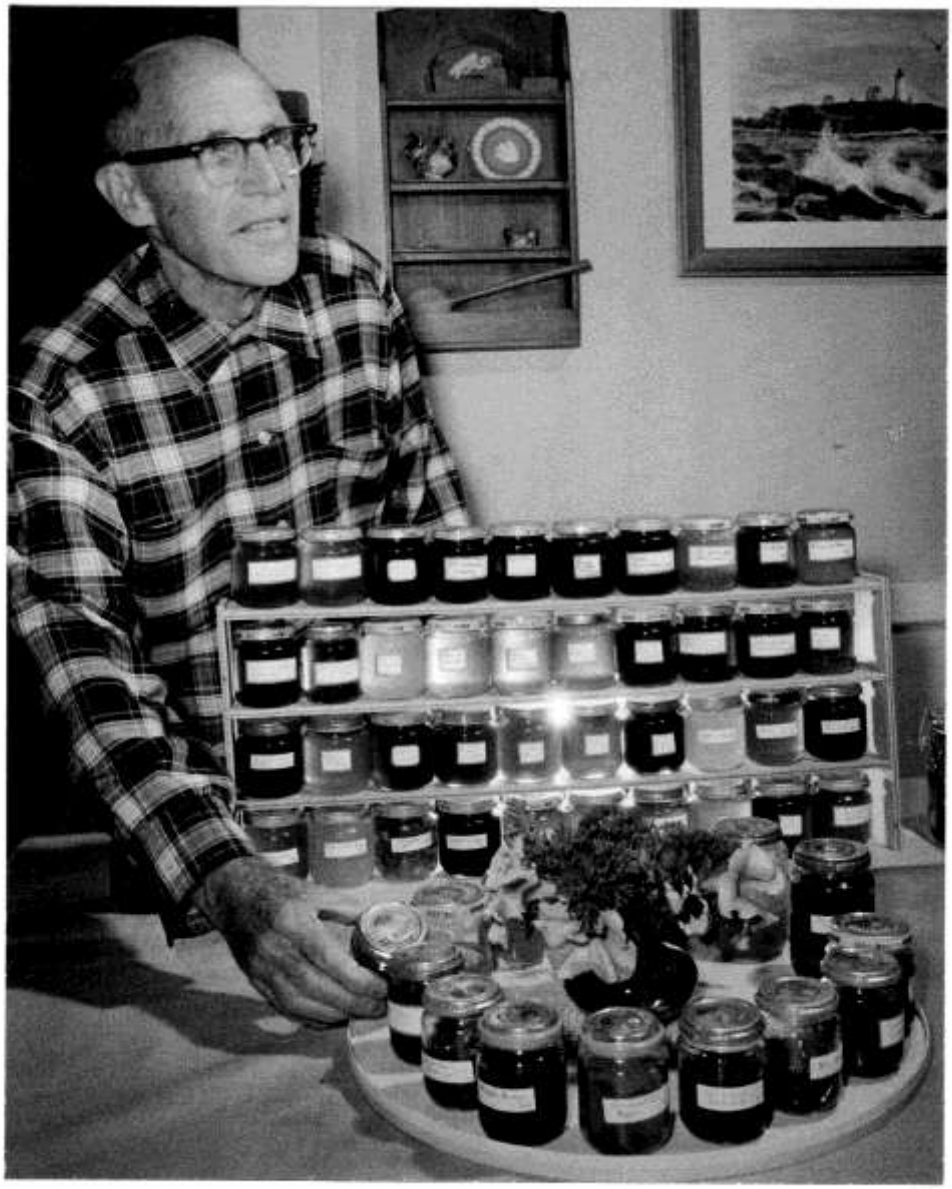
Color and Wild Fruit

RLC started taking color photographs in 1930. These were on the old Agfa Farbenplatten lantern slides, mostly of flowers and moths. If the extreme graininess and absence of white were not enough to discourage most nature photography, perhaps the instructions on the box would: "Give 60 times the exposure required for Plenachrome film." In other words, several seconds even in bright sunlight. He soon discontinued using these in favor of hand-colored slides. The best of these were done by Stephen Hamilton, a talented Amherst artist. One of my early recollections is of begging to see the columbine slide. It was my favorite of all his slides, and still is. But the great majority of his large collection of lantern slides on every subject were plain old monochrome.

By 1950, his beloved Amherst Camera Club was becoming less of a print club and more of a 35 mm Kodachrome slide show. The monthly meetings of another favorite, the Amherst Nature Club, revolved around color slides. The old monochrome lantern slides that he used for nature lectures were losing much of their appeal and value, likewise many of his prints of subjects such as wildflowers and scenery. And so he switched to Ektachrome. Presumably the transition from 5 x 7 to 35 mm would have been just too drastic for an old view camera die-hard, so he acquired a 2 1/4 x 3 1/4 Crown Graphic with roll film back and started accumulating all over again. During the next twenty years, this amounted to some 8000 slides, all bound in glass. We never did quite have the nerve to ask what he intended to do with all of them. They just kept accumulating until they nearly filled the shelves along one wall, and the floor sagged under their half-ton of weight.

One new hobby he took up in retirement was the making of jellies from wild fruits. He always maintained that wild fruits were the only kind "fit to eat." This went on for many years, and searching for the raw materials provided him with yet another reason to roam the countryside. A newspaper interview reported that he had put up 279 jars that season using 47 kinds of fruit. His records, as you might have guessed, were in the form of colored slides – first of the fruit, leaves, blossoms, or whatever, and then the finished product.

I am reminded of a tradition we carried on for many years during my boyhood. Every fall, when the wild grapes were ripe, we would go out to gather them for making juice. They grew along the hedgerows between farm fields, and of course Father had them all scouted out. I would climb the trees, often old apple trees, where the vines formed a canopy high overhead, and drop the bunches down onto a tarp, while he would gather them up and fill our knapsacks. They would be boiled down and pressed through cheesecloth, some sugar added, and bottled. They made an excellent tangy juice, much better than the commercial varieties.



"Jelly Maker" (photo by D'Addario)

The Snowshoe Cutworm

In February of 1975, the local paper sought an RLC winter scene for the cover of the weekly shoppers' guide. He certainly had many fine ones from which to choose. Which one would he dig out of the closet? From a subsequent article by editor Andy Marx the following is quoted:

> Photographs that appear on the cover of the Amherst Dollar Saver most often come from aspiring young photographers or family snapshooters. But the picture that caused the most comment in a long time was the work of one of the town's oldest and most distinguished photographers. Coffin celebrated his eighty-sixth birthday about the time his picture of a "snowshoe cutworm" appeared in the Dollar Saver. What didn't appear in the paper, although close observers may have guessed it, was an explanation of how Coffin created not only the picture, but the "cutworm" itself. "This was up the Metawampe Cabin on Mt. Toby, that's where I found this animal," Coffin recalls with a laugh. The animal, he confides, was put together with a piece of hose and other odds and ends.
>
> "He was hiking with some friends," Coffin's wife Mildred added in, "and he told the boys to hide their snowshoes so the cutworms wouldn't chew 'em up - and the boys believed it."
>
> Coffin's friends might not have fallen for this prank had he not been a well known nature photographer, frequently called upon by scientists at local colleges to take pictures of exotic species.
>
> Coffin's nature photographs convey something special, the touch of a man who says "I've been a naturalist all my life" and means it. A note of regret creeps into his reminiscences when he talks of aspects of nature that have come under assault from pollution and urban expansion. And he sorely misses the hikes by foot and snowshoe, the gathering of wild fruits for making jelly, the wildflowers and the birds. But while he can't get out and around like he used to, he has hardly lost interest when the conversation turns to nature. At those times, his manner belies the self-deprecating description of himself as "physically poor and mentally worse." And it isn't hard to picture him as the puckish inventor of the snowshoe cutworm, swinging through the woods on a favorite pair of snowshoes.
>
> The energy is rekindled when he brightens with the satisfaction that allows him to look back and say, "I've had quite a time, photographing nature."

"Snowshoe Cutworm"

North Amherst Village

This chapter was not included in my original 1977 version of *The Good Earth's Bounty*. Parts of it were borrowed from my other Collective Copies book, *Tall Trees and Wild Bees*, that came out in 2006.

One of the reasons we moved from New Jersey back to Amherst in 1932, in addition to being near my mother's family, was that my father said he was attracted to the natural beauty of the area. Growing up in such a place, as Esther and I did, one tends not to appreciate all the amenities until leaving and looking back years later. The whole experience of childhood memories is so tinged with nostalgia that objective descriptions are difficult, but I will try to set the stage and let the RLC prints do most of the talking.

In recalling life and times in North Amherst Village, I stress the term "village." We were pretty well self-contained and still largely agricultural. We had our own Post Office, grocery store, fire station, library, church, and elementary school. The fire department was all volunteer. We all gathered at Hobart's pasture to watch our village Fourth of July fireworks, put on by volunteers and paid for by contributions, and likewise the annual village clambake, also in Hobart's pasture. On Christmas Eve, our Christian Youth Fellowship went around the village to sing carols to the elderly and infirm. Our North Amherst Grade School held village events, such as the annual Christmas pageant. Our Summer Street neighborhood also held its own annual picnic. We even had our own volunteer aircraft spotting station during The War, and dare I mention it, our own dump off of Pine Street. Small businesses scattered about the community included a woodworking shop, water powered sawmill, water powered grist mill, blacksmith shop, sand and gravel pit, and ice house. We kids were free to wander about all of these and watch the men at work, even at the sawmill. Seems hard to believe today. Alas, all of them are gone now.

On the outskirts of the village were farms. We were on the edge of the alluvial flood plain of the Connecticut River. Most lands to the west were cultivated farm fields. In other directions the land rose in wooded hills and pasture land. Views to the north were of Mt. Toby and Mt. Sugarloaf, while to the south the Holyoke Range dominated the skyline. I use the past tense only because the land was ever so much more open back then. The difference is striking when old and new photos are compared.

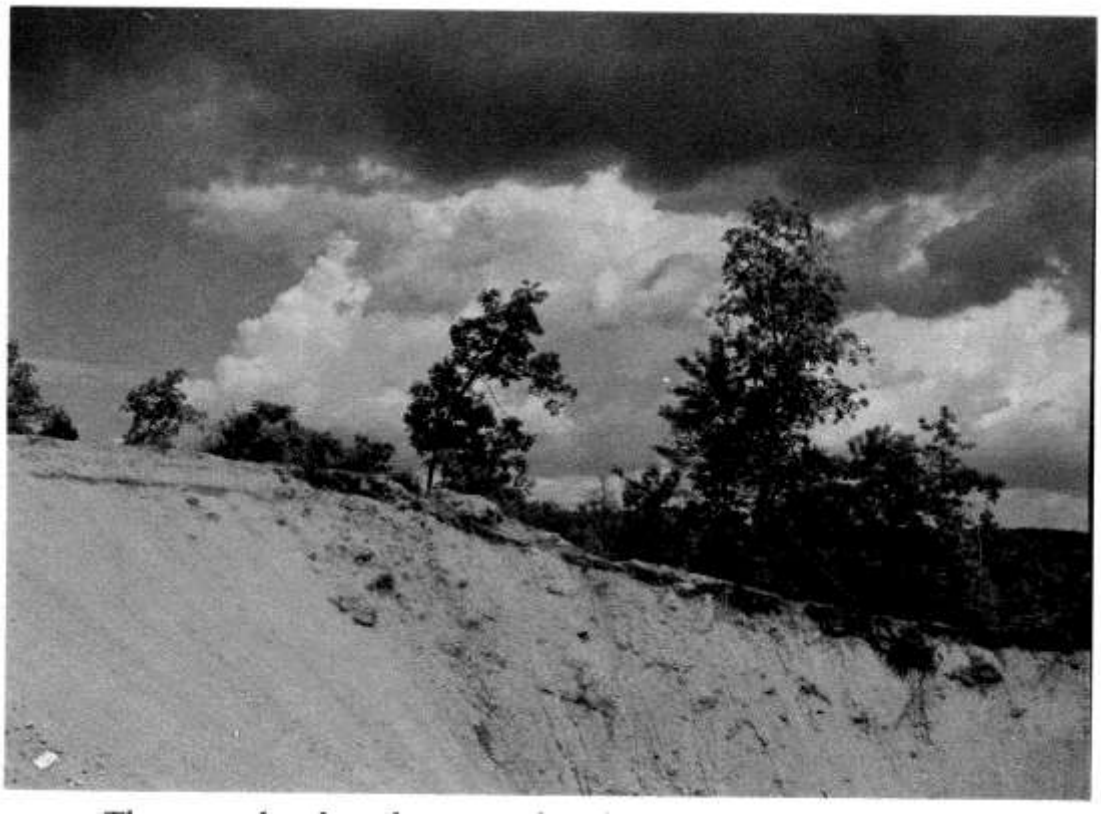
The first photo on the next page is a view I took from the air in 1945. In the foreground is the old canal. Above it is Summer Street and then Montague Road. Note all the open land, most of which was either pasture or under cultivation. The second photo was taken from our front yard looking west to the foothills of the Berkshires. Note all of the large light areas, which must be fields or pasture. What a difference now.

An ice house once stood at Puffer's Pond on the southeast side near the inlet. I can remember watching the men cut ice there until around 1940. The large cakes would be floated to a power conveyer that lifted them high up, and then they slid by gravity into the sawdust pits, where they lasted all summer. They were delivered to customers with iceboxes, including us and most of our neighbors. You put a sign in your window indicating if you needed 25, 50, 75, or 100 pounds. The delivery man had chopping tools to cut off the correct sized block and tongs to carry it in and put it in your icebox. We kids would grab up the chips of ice off the pavement to suck on. The ice house burned around the early 1940's but had probably already gone out of business. This first photo was taken by me in the early 1940s using my sister's little Brownie box camera. It shows the remains of the conveyer, with power house at top. The second photo was taken by RLC around the same time and given an evocative title. Until recently, the old foundations could still be seen, but no more. There is a swimming beach there now.

"Testimony to the Past"

Here now are just a representative sample of RLC photos. Many are not dated, but most were taken in the late 1930's or early 1940's. Some were used to illustrate the North Amherst Cookbook put out by the Ladies' Social Circle of the North Congregational Church in 1945.

You might think it strange to include RLC's photo of a sandbank in this album, but this was no ordinary sandbank. It was huge, and a wonderful place for us to play, especially by taking a running leap off the top and landing far down. Of course that probably meant nothing to my father, and he no doubt took this photo showing only the rim more for the cloud formations. Not a trace of that sandbank remains today.



. Beyond the sandbank was Pulpit Hill, a great place to play in the woods and among the rock cliffs. Beyond that was farmland, mostly pasture, that one could hike through all the way to Bull Hill at the southern end of the Mt. Toby range. Or better still, follow the CVRR rails and hope for the thrilling sight of a steam-powered freight train.

To the right of the sandbank would be what back then we called Puffer's Ice Pond and its high dam. There was a high rocky overlook near the dam that we used to dive off of into the pond. We all supposed we were performing a daring thirty-foot dive until someone measured it and found it to be only seventeen feet, but still not bad. All that was when the spot was still open to the public. The present swimming beach is now on the opposite shore.

A penstock several feet in diameter fed waterpower to the sawmill below. We would walk along it, dodging the many leaks. This RLC photo showing some neighborhood children playing on it was taken probably in the 1960s. The sawmill burned around 1940. Old maps called that area Factory Hollow, but the nickname we used for it was "Slab City" because of the sawmill. Note the hole at the bottom of the stone face of the dam, barely showing on the right. I recall being puzzled by the purpose of that hole as I passed by on my bike each day, delivering newspapers for Bates' Store. The mystery was solved many years later when Steve Puffer told me that it was for access to the interior of the dam, and that he had actually crawled through it to make repairs.

In this RLC photo of the Factory Hollow Dam, obviously taken later than the previous photo, the penstock is no longer there, but only the round opening for it.

This photo shows the concrete dam that supplied power to the grist mill. A few traces of it can still be found today.

A short ways downstream from the Factory Hollow dam, the Mill River was impounded by a concrete dam that delivered water by a long canal running in back of Summer Street and Montague Road to the old grist mill.

The old canal. RLC used this winter scene for a Christmas card in 1935. Most of it is filled in and graded over now.

In this photo, Montague Road is to the left. From his dairy farm on Montague Road, which is just up the road, each day in summer Clarence Hobart used to herd his cows down the road and across a crude plank bridge over the canal, to his pasture that included nearly all of the land enclosed by the four roads – Summer Street, Montague Road, State Street, and Pine Street. Note the fencing in the photo, evidently no longer in use. Of all places to play on our way home from school, that pasture was a clear favorite. It is all in the past now.

On the next page, the top photo of the old Puffer's grist mill (also showing some of Hobart's cows grazing) was taken by me around 1950. We kids loved to play underneath the mill on our way home from school. You could enter by the tailrace beneath the mill where the turbine was located and then crawl out near the inlet sluiceway. Owner Steve Puffer once told me that it was the last water-powered grist mill operating in Hampshire County. It shut down in the early 1940s and for a while thereafter housed a gift shop.

The second photo, taken by RLC probably around 1940, shows the mill clearly still in operation, with bags of something stacked next to the Fairbanks-Morse scales.

This view is from the bridge on Montague Road over the Mill River looking upstream at Hobart's pasture, probably in the early 1940s. The river was an important source of waterpower in olden times. Lawyer and local historian R. R. Brown was said to have identified nearly one hundred old mill sites along the length of the river. They would be mostly upstream, because below here the river flattens out and meanders through fields to North Hadley Pond and the Connecticut River.

I can't say enough about Hobart's pasture. It was a place to swim, make rafts, build bridges and dams, pick wildflowers, hunt, fish, picnic, and enjoy countless other wonderful adventures and games too numerous to mention. It was no ordinary pasture, as most of it was wooded. Ostrich ferns grew profusely, and we used them to construct thatched roofs for our huts and hideouts. You would hardly recognize this scene today, for the land on the right has been turned into a shopping mall and parking lot. It is pretty much the same story elsewhere. Our other favorite place, Pulpit Hill, is now housing and a golf course.

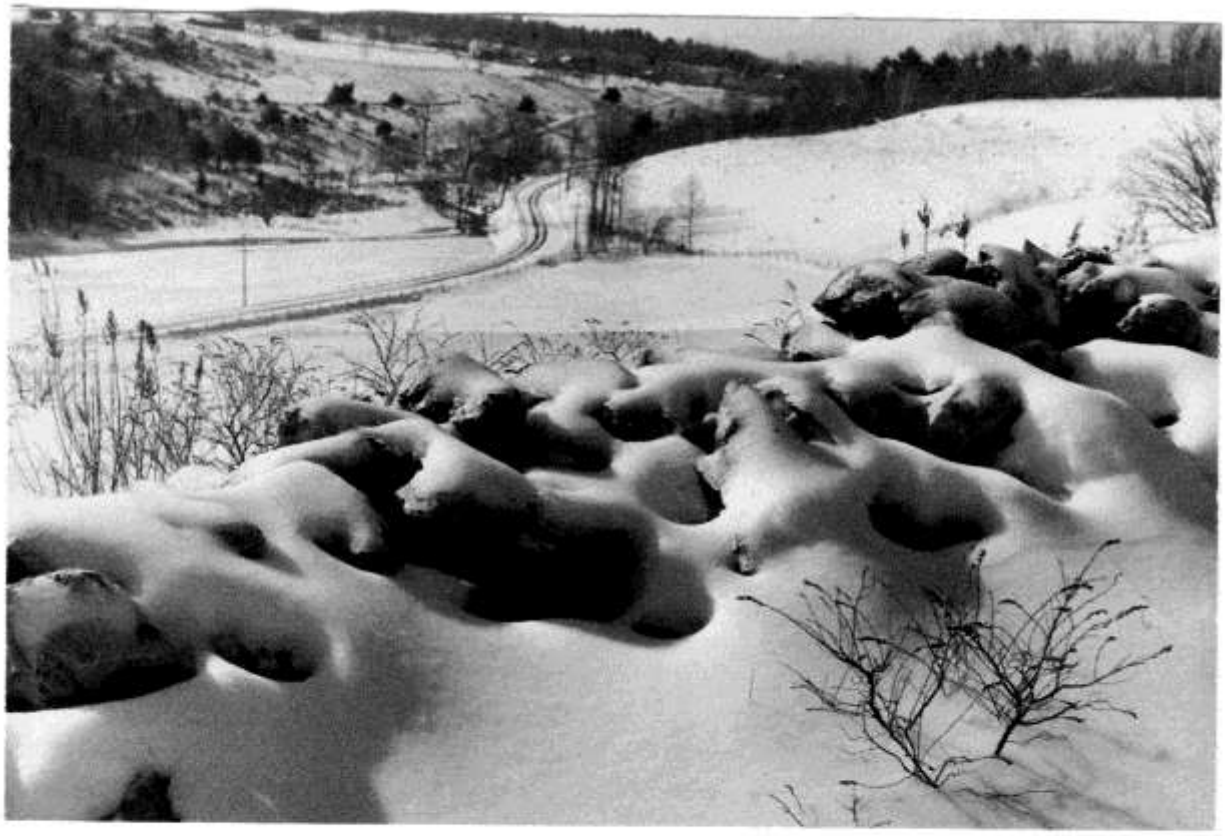
In the view on the previous page, in May the land in the foreground would be one vast mass of bluets. We would pick clumps of them on our way to and from school. It always amazed me that wildflowers would grow so profusely in spite of a herd of cows constantly chomping and stomping. Also thriving there was trillium, orchids, lilies, and violets (several kinds of each), and countless others that I can't remember. My father would tell the following little lesson in wildflower preservation: Someone found a patch of their favorite rare wildflower growing in a dairy pasture, and wishing to save it, they erected a fence around it to protect it from the cows. The precious flowers that had been happily growing there for years promptly died out, possibly because of invasive weeds. Another lesson of his I remember is to not dig rare wildflowers (especially orchids) and transplant them to your backyard, because they nearly always die from lack of exactly the right soil conditions. As he put it, "Some fools love them to death."

I used to tell my children wonderful tales about my boyhood adventures in Hobart's pasture, and I promised to bring them back there someday. When we finally did, the cows were long gone and it had grown into utterly impenetrable thickets of barberry and multiflora rose. The good news is that when I again went there in 2002, it had reverted back to woodland, and the upper part is now protected conservation land with trails. Funny, though, how everything there is so much smaller now than I thought I remembered it to be.

I am not exactly sure where this bucolic RLC photo was taken, but the meandering Mill River with Mount Warner probably seen in the distance would place it somewhere downstream of Sunderland Road. The cows grazing might also be a clue as to time and place.

"Winter Glaze"

This RLC winter scene is of a rocky outcrop in pasture land where we used to hike, between Pulpit Hill and Juggler Meadow Road. As I recall, it was pinpointed on the topographical map as a tiny circle. I once had a notion to go back there and see what it looks like now, but alas, the area is now completely changed and residential. Note how the icy crust on the snow appears to sparkle. This enlargement was printed on a special rough Kodak paper that actually enhanced the sparkling effect. I am told it is no longer available.

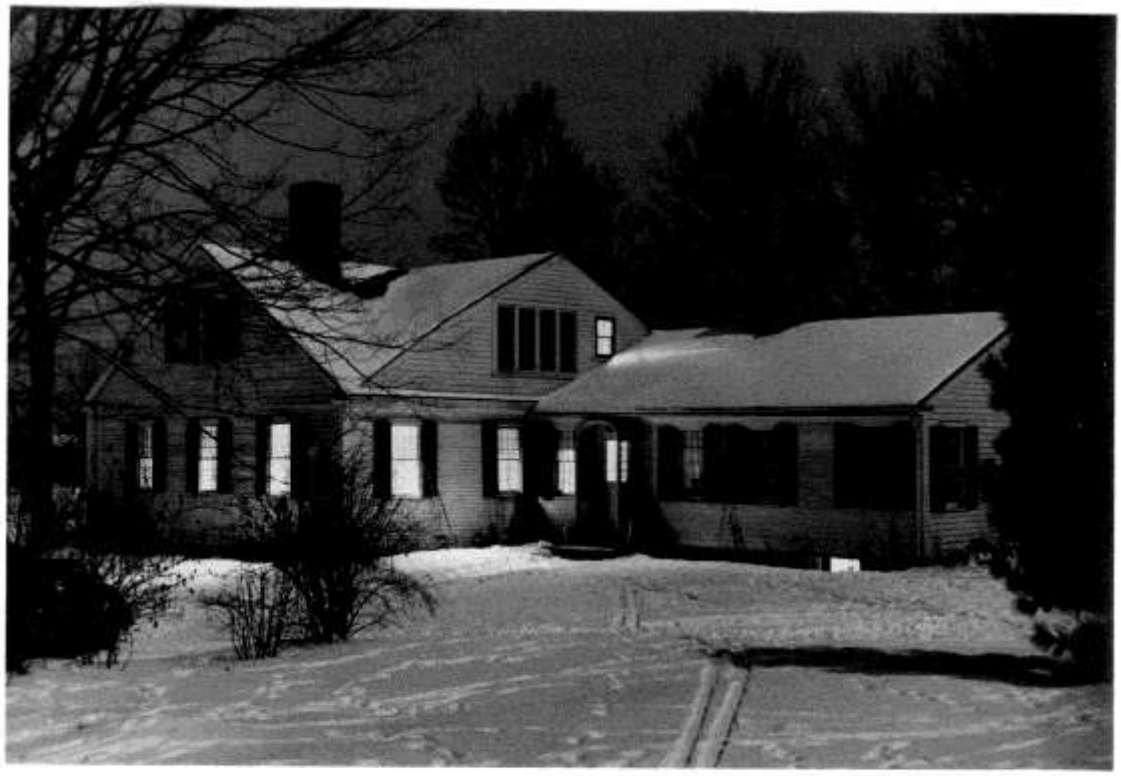


Road from Cushman to East Leverett, probably around 1940

This copy of another RLC winter scene shows the Mill River meandering in the background, a short ways upstream from Cushman. It was, taken from a hillside that was once pasture land belonging to my grandfather Charles Comins, and later my uncle James Comins. You would not recognize the scene today because of all the trees, and probably also a house or two.

"The Corner Lot"

I don't know when this winter scene with old rail fence was taken, but the negative and enlargement both suggest late 1930s. I don't know where either, but most likely somewhere in the vicinity of Amherst. I expect that, like so many of these scenes, it is unrecognizable today.



"A Winter's Eve"

RLC was intrigued by the pictorial possibilities of this house in our neighborhood. He photographed it at all seasons, in the daytime, evening, and here by moonlight. It must have been the perfect combination of architecture, composition, landscaping, and lighting that caught his eye. And who wouldn't find it inviting? The neighborhood is so changed today that I am not even sure if the same view is even possible. That also applies to many other places that I thought I remembered so well. What a strange feeling it is to go back and find so many things changed.

"Old Wright House"

To give some idea of the difficulties I faced in labeling and describing all these photos, here is one labeled Old Wright House. When I first compiled this in 1977, I wondered where it was, if it was still standing, and if it had any special historic significance. From the looks of it, as I write this in 2020, I think it even less likely to be still standing now. If only Fred Warner, an authority on local history, were still around, I might have found out more. My guess is that it was on or near Plumtrees Road in North Amherst or perhaps Sunderland.

The Old Naturalist

New Year's Day of 1976 found RLC sitting at his favorite window, binoculars in hand as always, methodically making notes of the goings-on within his pitifully shrunken world - birds feeding in the yard, weather observations, and the passage of time. As the daylight faded, he recorded the state of the weather and bird count for the day, and closed his notebook for the last time.

A self trained botanist-ornithologist-entomologist, artist and philosopher of sorts, view camera specialist, highly individualistic if not eccentric, he was once characterized by a friend as "the last of the old-time naturalists." I hope that this album will convey some idea of the fitness of that description.

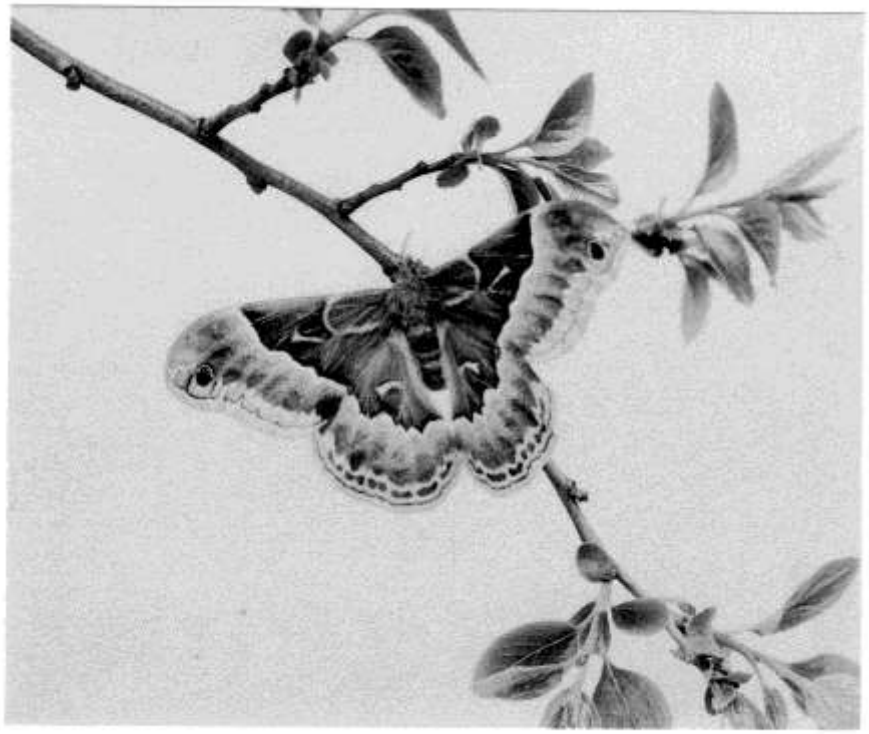
In looking back now, I think the family actually took rather a disinterest in most of his natural history studies. I never had any great desire to acquire his photographic skills either. The years slip by so quickly, and many opportunities are lost. These were my thoughts as Esther and I began the discouraging task of sorting through his lifetime collection of negatives, prints, and notes, wondering which to discard and what to do with the rest.

The 8000-odd colored lantern slides were the easiest. Most of them were already deteriorating from being bound in glass. Those went straight to the Amherst landfill, requiring several trips. I will never forget the sickening sight of the front end loader scooping them up and crushing them into oblivion.

At one point I had decided to donate a set of his top exhibition prints to a well known museum that maintains archives of historic photographs. When I contacted the museum, the first question they asked was if RLC had any photographs of famous persons. It struck me that his wary Duck Hawk, shy Green Grass Snake, or fat Imperialis larva would scarcely fit that category, nor would all of his little beds of ferns and orchids growing in secret places in the woods. So I decided to keep them.

Many of the original enlargements were badly faded and others were lost. I was told that many years ago he had donated a stack of them to a community rummage sale, where they were sold for 50¢ each. Many of the negatives were ruined in storage or missing. When I attempted to have copy negatives and new enlargements made commercially, I soon learned that the making of photographic prints to the standards of perfection that RLC set for himself seems to have become a lost art.

I wonder what my father would have thought about this album of his photographs and my commentary. I think he would have approved of the selection of prints because there are plenty of records indicating that they were his favorites. I am sure he would have found fault with the reproductions, and I wouldn't blame him for that. As for the stories, probably he would have corrected my mistakes and omissions, and added many recollections of his own. His memory remained keen right up to his final days. If only I had started assimilating this material while he was still alive. I actually did suggest it at one point but he was not at all interested. He said there was so much that he wouldn't know where to begin. To me, he always was somewhat of a mystery.



"Promethia Moth," 1927

R. L. Coffin (photo by Lacroix)

Epilogue

My plan in compiling this album in 1977 was to start with a pile of my father's photos sorted into chapters by subject matter, more or less, and then write about things they brought to mind, relying mostly on my memory. It has been revised twice, first in 2003 and again now in 2020. With each revision, in addition to correcting mistakes, I have made some additions and done some rearranging. The emphasis has shifted somewhat away from photography and more into local history.

I often reflect on how lucky we all were to have lived at that place and time. I have already described how aptly the term "village" applied to North Amherst back in those days. There is a tendency to look back and think things were better back in the olden days than they are now (especially as I pen this in 2020). But I wonder. I recall my father making the same comments about his boyhood Down East on the coast of Maine. Likewise, my mother sometimes reflected nostalgically about her early life on the old farm in North Hadley, hard as it was. But whatever the case, I hope that this album brings as much pleasure to others as I have had putting it together, a photographic record of things and places so dear to my memory, most of which are now long gone.

I would like to thank friends and family members who contributed to the making of this album, as mentioned in the text. Thanks also to my partner Valerie Thaddeus for help in editing.