Retrospective
A Look Back at Medicine

Finding the Time
The general practice of Thomas Sadler Roberts (1858-1946)

By Sue Leaf

The cry rolled off his pen sometime after midnight. “I am now so desperately busy into professional work that I haven’t had time to eat or sleep,” Dr. Thomas Sadler Roberts wrote to a friend in 1898. “I do all my bird work at night—normally between 11:30 and one o’clock. It is now the ‘small hours’ and I shall have to [leave off] to prepare for a busy day tomorrow.” Frustration was building in a man blessed with a buoyant personality and seemingly unlimited energy.

Roberts, who practiced medicine in Minneapolis from 1886 to 1915, was in a bind. Possessed by a driving passion for birds that had propelled him since youth, he was now monopolized by a general practice. He maintained an exam room in his home at 1603 Fourth Avenue South in Minneapolis. Office hours were from 2 to 5 p.m. every day. Mornings were spent making house calls by horse and buggy. He also stopped by St. Barnabas Hospital most days—he had taken over the chief of staff duties from his preceptor, Amos Abbott, in 1892.

Evenings were also likely to be spent doing house calls, sometimes until midnight. He often didn’t dine until 9 p.m., long after his family had eaten. His wife was concerned about the stress this demanding schedule placed on her husband. Even though both of them were involved in community efforts to treat lung disease, particularly tuberculosis, she urged him to take up smoking. She thought it might encourage him to linger after supper. Roberts developed a taste for fine Cuban cigars.

Roberts loved the personal relationships he had with his patients. He was never too busy to talk about birds during house calls, and he later observed that he often served as legal, spiritual and financial advisor to some of them. Roberts’ zest for life was not fully satisfied by medicine, however. An extremely social person, he was a member of the Minneapolis Club, the Long Meadow Gun Club, the Cotillion Club (he learned to waltz in his 50s) and the Minikahda Club—although he seldom had time for the links.

His membership in the Minneapolis Club in some ways facilitated his medical practice. He was first approached to join the exclusive club in 1900. His childhood friend Charles Bovey of the Washburn-Crosby Company (the forerunner to General Mills) wrote to inform him that Roberts was “badly wanted” in the new organization. Roberts declined, saying he was too busy. But later in life, after he ceased to have a conventional practice, he did join and used the club’s rooms as de facto exam rooms, meeting patients for lunch and to talk about their medical concerns.

Dr. Thomas Sadler Roberts (right) with his field assistant and quasi medical partner, Dr. Leslie O. Dart, at the Long Meadow Gun Club on the Minnesota River near Fort Snelling in 1900.
A love of birds

Roberts’ overwhelming passion, though, was birds. He had kept a bird journal since 1874, the year he turned 16. Back then, Minneapolis was a small village, so quiet that the roar of St. Anthony Falls could be heard throughout town in the quiet of the evening.7 He tracked Passenger Pigeons as they moved through town, migrating waterfowl that rested at night on the lakes south of the city, horned larks nesting on the prairie surrounding Fort Snelling and the shore birds that congregated near the shallow marshes. He shot birds in those days, identified them and preserved his specimens. By the 1890s, he had become the leading ornithologist in Minnesota.6

Roberts had long dreamed of writing a comprehensive book on Minnesota’s birds. In 1892, when his practice was burgeoning, the Minnesota Natural History Survey published what was purported to be the official list of state birds.8 Roberts found a number of mistakes in the report, done by a Minneapolis homeopath, and was determined to correct them.

In 1898, he purchased a Premo long-frame camera with a Bausch and Lomb lens for the express purpose of photographing birds. That spring, he practiced with it, photographing his children, the clinic secretary in front of the door to his office, and the horse and buggy that carried him on rounds. He fiddled with exposure times, developing technique and chemicals, and papers of different weights. His lab became a dark room and his clinic secretary an expert in producing magic lantern slides for bird talks. But his practice still monopolized his time.

“[I] am hoping to do some bird photography this spring and summer,” he wrote to the same friend, “but as most of my plans miscarry for lack of time I am afraid this may all be anticipation and very little reality.”9 He added, “If you have ever had any close acquaintance with a physician you must know how entirely he is at the mercy of circumstances and to what a very limited extent he can control his time. I have been closely occupied night as well as day … birds and all else … has had to be given the go-by …”10

A defining event

During the following years, Roberts managed to carve out time for wildlife photography despite his pressing schedule. He traveled to Heron Lake in southwestern Minnesota to photograph an immense colony of Franklin’s Gulls. In 1900 and 1901, he went to what is now the Lake Agassiz National Wildlife Area in northwestern Minnesota to record on film the desolate expanse of tamarack bog and wet prairie. He chased Prothonotary Warblers along the Mississippi floodplain and breeding warblers on Lake Vermilion. His one- to two-week furloughs were made possible with the help of a young doctor who had interned under him at St. Barnabas Hospital and covered his practice.

But his absence was not without consequence. Usually, repercussions were relatively minor: “I got home a few days ago,” he noted, “and have been literally snowed under ever since …. But in 1900, while he was up north photographing young Broad-winged Hawks, a serious incident occurred at St. Barnabas, where Roberts was still chief of staff. A man was admitted to the hospital with smallpox. The case was initially diagnosed as typhoid fever. The admission was a breach of protocol, as hospitals did not care for patients with contagious diseases in 1900. The mistake was realized within 24 hours, and the patient was whisked away to the city’s quarantine hospital, but not before two nurses were infected. Roberts received an irate letter from the city’s quarantine officer, dressing him down for the lapse.”9

Would Roberts’ presence have changed the outcome? It is hard to say. Soon afterward, Roberts resigned the unpaid chief of staff position, citing lack of time for the job.10 “I get so buried in … my business that it seems as though I [do] not have a single moment for anything else and the days, weeks and months go by before I realize that so much time has passed. Never before have I been so busy and had so many serious, anxious things in hand,” he noted.11

Breaking point

As Roberts’ practice expanded, obstetrics came to play a larger role. Many of his patients were among Minneapolis’ wealthy elite. But as joyful as his obstetrics experience was, he also saw it as his ball and chain. “I am hoping to be able to devote all of next June to bird photography, but if it is like most years, a few ‘baby cases’ that cannot be deserted will loom up before long and my hopes will be dashed.”12 He had known many of his wealthy patients since childhood, and they were still friends. He was reluctant to turn such cases over to someone else.

The tension grew. The frenetic pace of Roberts’ practice was unsustainable. He
took time off in 1905 to retreat in exhaustion to Gulfport, Mississippi. He returned to his practice, but nothing had changed. In 1913, he suffered another breakdown and spent a month recovering in Bermuda. His wife, who stayed behind with the children, was deeply concerned. Jennie Roberts hoped that a month would restore him but “did not expect [him] to recover in so short a time from years of overwork.” Perhaps the depth of the crisis is revealed in what was missing from his communications home: he didn’t mention the bird life of the subtropical paradise.

**A second career**

Roberts was in his 50s, and the Minnesota bird book he had dreamed for so long of writing remained unwritten. Finally, he had had enough. In 1915, he quit his practice. He agreed to continue seeing about 25 families who kept him on retainer. Then he took an unpaid position as associate curator at the University of Minnesota’s natural history museum and agreed to teach the school’s first ornithology course. He sold the duplex that had served as his office and home and bought another one in south Minneapolis. Rent from the lower apartment supplemented his savings for living expenses. His wealthy patients raised the money to fund his summer research.

At age 57, Thomas Sadler Roberts began his second career. He rolled up his sleeves and went to work on the museum. He tossed out moth-eaten, bedraggled specimens and oversaw construction of dramatic, artistic dioramas of white-tailed deer, woodland caribou and beavers. He launched the ornithology class. Its members initially were women studying to be teachers. They caught his passion for birds and went out to schools in rural Minnesota, passing on a love of birds to their students.

It took a decade, but Roberts wrote his book, *The Birds of Minnesota*, a two-volume tome with records reaching back to the state’s early history. His medical secretary from the 1890s organized the voluminous data that Roberts and his various correspondents had been amassing for 60 years. *Birds* received wide acclaim, and Roberts received the coveted Brewster Medal of the American Ornithologists’ Union in 1938.

Roberts was in his 80s when he oversaw construction of a new natural history museum, one that would eventually bear the name of its benefactor and one of Roberts’ patients, James Ford Bell.

Roberts never officially retired from medicine or from the university. He remained an active member of the Minnesota Academy of Medicine and served as a reporter of Minnesota bird life for *Audubon* magazine until just before his death in April of 1946.

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A Love Affair with Birds (University of Minnesota Press, 2013) by Susan Leaf is the first full biography of Minnesota physician, bird enthusiast, author, curator, educator and conservationist Thomas Sadler Roberts. Roberts practiced in Minneapolis at a time when birds were abundant and house calls were made by horse and buggy. His two-volume book on birds, *The Birds of Minnesota*, was widely acclaimed.

Leaf is the author of two other books, *Potato City: Nature, History and Community in the Age of Sprawl* (Borealis Books, an imprint of the Minnesota Historical Society) and *The Bullhead Queen: A Year on Pioneer Lake* (University of Minnesota Press), which was a finalist for a Minnesota Book Award.