

IN QUEST OF THE SANDHILL CRANE

Background

My first trip to Jackson Hole was in 1952 when I was all but eight years old. Mom and Dad, who had always taken summer vacations in the Northeast, wanted to experience a slice of Western life at the Triangle X dude ranch. Of note: Triangle X is still present today and still owned by third and fourth generation members of the Turner family who settled in the Teton valley nearly a century ago. Our trip began on a steamy July summer morning when we left Cincinnati from Union Terminal and headed west for Chicago on the James Whitcomb Riley. From there, we boarded the Northern Pacific heading west for Billings, Montana. We travelled for nearly 2 days *'in high cotton'* as my dad would say. We took in scenery from the panoramic Vistadome and played board games, enjoyed gourmet meals in the dining car --- what a waste for an eight year old---, and slept in a berth on a Pullman car listening to the unforgettable clackety-clack as the train chugged into the night. In Billings we boarded a Greyhound bus and headed for Jackson. As I recall, I fought with my brother the entire four hour bus drive; nearly driving mom and dad nuts.

We arrived in Jackson Hole after dark. I remember that it was a real western town, wide-open, dusty streets, cowboys on horses, and bars everywhere.

Missing completely was today's commercialism. From there, a wrangler drove us about 15 miles North to the Triangle X ranch in an old Ford F-150 pick-up truck. At this point we were 2 1/2 days into our vacation; I was exhausted and overcome by sleep.

I woke up on a crisp summer morning, looked outside, and saw, for the first time, the magnificent Teton Mountain Range. As I recall, we spent about two weeks at the ranch where my days consisted of horseback riding, hiking, as well as playing and exploring with my friends. I inhaled it.

One day, Dad took me fly fishing out of a lodge in Driggs, Idaho. The legendary Alma Kuntz, a magnificent fisherman and a true western man, guided us. Dad fished with a fly rod, which requires a high degree of technical proficiency and I used a spinning rod. We were both rookies and to boot it was a slow day. Nevertheless, we were hooked and over the years took countless trips together.

Teton Valley Lodge

Fast forward 30 years to 1982. Mom and Dad took a fishing trip every fall to Idaho in quest of Sydney Greenstreet, the mythical, monster brown trout that dad was determined to catch and land. That year, they invited Sandy and me to join them at Teton Valley Lodge; the same Lodge that was owned by Alma Kuntz our fishing guide 30 years earlier. Kuntz moved on after he sold the lodge to Randy Berry and John Pherson. They developed the lodge into an all-around first class operation. Their guests stayed in comfortable cabins, were well fed, and fished in

well know western streams and rivers such as the South Fork and Henry's Fork of the Snake and the Teton.

I'm a morning person and an early riser. I enjoy the A.M. solitude and the opportunity to read a book or a newspaper. On my first morning at The Lodge I heard the unmistakable call of the Sandhill Crane; a sound I've subsequently heard countless times and indelibly ingrained in my brain. The call is loud, trumpeting and suggestive of a rolling "r" in the throat. For me, the crane's call brings back fond memories of the west and fishing with Mom, Dad, and my family.

Sandhill cranes are magnificent birds. Of the 15 species of cranes, they are the most populous and wide-ranging. Overall they are gray in color, with a distinctive red forehead, white cheeks, and long, dark, pointed bills. Adults stand nearly four feet tall on spindly legs, can weigh up to four pounds, and their wingspan is just short of seven feet. They are primarily herbivorous and can be found in shallow wetlands where they use their beak to feed primarily on seeds as well as small mammals, insects, and reptiles.

They are fairly social birds that live with a mate, have one brood per year and raise 1-2 chicks over a 9-10 month period. In flight, they appear perfectly straight with their head, neck, and body perfectly aligned. They can soar similar to hawks and condors and use thermals to obtain lift. They can stay aloft for hours using occasional flaps of their wings to maintain elevation. The cranes I've come to know are migratory and can fly upwards of 400 miles in a day. From March to

April, approximately half a million cranes in North America gather on a 75-mile stretch of Nebraska's Platte River during spring migration to prepare for the long journey north to their breeding grounds.

During the 1982 trip to The Lodge, I saw my first life-sized sandhill crane in the form of a print hanging in the Lodge's dining room. It was a magnificent life-sized rendition of the bird. I asked John Pherson, one of the lodge's owners, where it had come from. He related that a very wealthy client and fisherman had gifted it to The Lodge and remarked that it was an original Audubon print. I found it hard to believe that someone would give away a rare and original Audubon print; but accepted the explanation and thought little more about it.

I subsequently became a member of the lodge, so Sandy and our family could have guided access to some the premiere fishing in the American West.

Collecting

Collecting something, anything, had been instilled in me by my Dad. He so enjoyed all aspects of collecting: the find, authentication, estimation of the object's worth, and finally the purchase---- frequently done at an auction bidding against others with deep pockets. If he was lucky enough to acquire an object he researched it thoroughly. As some of you know, Dad collected presidential letters, nineteenth century first edition books written by U.S. authors, and limited first edition books illustrated by 19th and 20th century artists. His passion for collecting was imparted to me when I was a young boy. I started with soap

wrappers from hotels, cigar bands mostly acquired from my grandpa, and match wrappers from all over. As I grew older, my interest turned to first edition lithographs from nineteenth or twentieth century artists. I made a new purchase every 4-5 years.

In the mid-80's, I wanted to acquire an Audubon print. I knew that the vast majority of prints were reproductions and are not worth much more than the paper they're printed on. So, I called a close friend and college classmate who had become a well-respected art dealer in New York City. I asked him to keep his eyes out for an Audubon print. About eight months later a print entitled "Reddish Egret" came up for auction at Sotheby's. Both the auction house and my friend verified its authenticity. I sent in a bid, received notification that the bid was accepted, and within a few months I had it framed and hung. To this day, I take great pleasure viewing this wonderful print. The multi-colored bird is standing on one leg in a swamp staring beak to beak at white heron. The detail in the plumage of both birds can only be described as magnificent.

Audubon the Man

Before going further, I'd like to say a few words about Audubon and his life. His accomplishments were, by any standard, truly amazing and can be attributed to an unparalleled work ethic, an unflinching passion and focus on his work, and a few friends and family who supported him through thick and thin.

He was born in 1785 in the French colony of Saint Domingue (now Haiti) to a French naval officer and chambermaid from Brittany. His biological mother died shortly after childbirth of a tropical disease. At the age of six, young Audubon was brought to France where his father's wife, Anne Moynet Audubon, raised him with devotion and tenderness until he was 18 at which time he boarded a ship bound for the United States. This move was done strategically by his father to avoid conscription into Napoleon's military. Upon arrival in New York he contracted yellow fever and spent some time in a Quaker boarding house recovering and learning to speak English. After recovering, he moved to Mill Grove, Pennsylvania, an investment property that his father had purchased some time earlier. The element lead had been discovered on that property and Audubon's father hoped to build a lead mine, which would serve as a family revenue stream. It never worked out. In Mill Grove, Audubon spent nearly all his time hunting in the woods for birds. He would then wire the bird to a wooden board scored with squares so that he could draw the bird on paper, also scored with identical squares to match the wooden board thus replicating a perfectly proportioned copy of the bird. As opposed to the stuffed bird appearance produced by contemporary artists, Audubon's birds were beautiful life-sized reproductions often in dramatic poses.

While in Mill Grove, he married Lucy Bakewell, the daughter of a reasonably wealthy neighbor. Shortly thereafter, they moved to Louisville and subsequently to Henderson, Kentucky, where he set up a general store that failed for many reasons; one of which was his continual forays into the wilderness to paint birds.

As his passion for painting grew, his goal (perhaps OBSESSION) was to paint all the birds of North America. Quite frankly, I can't understand what kept their marriage going but Lucy stuck with him, and supported him through her earning as a teacher, for the duration. As painting became a full time endeavor, most viewed him as irresponsible and impractical. Furthermore, he was gone for months at a time, and nearly always in debt or on the brink of poverty.

Audubon himself drew nearly all of the birds. Early on, as he was developing his self-taught skills, he destroyed and re-did many of his painting, always striving for perfection. He became better and faster over time. However, due to time constraints he did not draw the background setting which was nearly always sketched by a series of apprentices. Interestingly, his earliest apprentice was a 13 year-old Cincinnati named Joseph Mason, an artistic prodigy, who spent 2 years with Audubon during a trip down the Mississippi River. There were several others who did backgrounds including his sons, as well as his future engraver Robert Havell, Jr. In essence, a committee was nearly always necessary to complete his work. Interestingly, Audubon gave none of his apprentices credit for their contributions.

By 1826, he has a sizeable portfolio, and needed an engraver/publisher.

Because of intense professional resentments, his work was not accepted in the United States until his latter years. Accordingly, he set off for England where his work was immediately acclaimed. At this point he desperately needed patrons to subscribe and finance his future publication. To recruit them, he travelled from

city to city and set up expositions while dressed as an American woodsman wearing buckskin. He had a charming personality and was a super salesman.

In order to provide his clients with prints, he needed an engraver. He hired William Lizars of Liverpool who did his first 10 prints; however, Lizars employees went on strike, a near fatal blow for Audubon. By a stroke of luck, he found Robert Havell, Jr. in London. Havell was a master engraver, whose etching of copper plates was as much a tour de force as Audubon's original paintings. Havell and Audubon had a synergy; Havell recognized Audubon's genius and was fully committed to the Audubon project which took over a decade to complete. In the end 435 color plates were produced containing 497 birds. The birds were depicted life-sized on sheets of paper measuring 26 ½ by 39 ½ inches and were bound into 4 huge volumes- entitled "Birds of America" also known as the Double Elephant Folio, for the thick paper size. As an interesting aside, in order to accommodate big birds, such as a sandhill crane, the long neck was drooped to the ground. A tiny bird, such as a hummingbird, was lost on the page.

With the publication and subsequent sale of 200 copies of the "Birds of America" in 1838, Audubon hit pay dirt. His reputation skyrocketed as a naturalist, scholar and artist. Today, approximately 120 complete sets survive, mostly in institutions; one complete folio can be viewed at the Cincinnati Public library. In 2012, a complete copy of the Elephant Folio was sold at Christie's for \$7.9 million to an American collector who bid by phone.

Caveat Emptor

About 4 years ago, Teton Valley Lodge changed ownership. It happened that last May, Sandy and I returned to TVL for a day of fishing and I noticed that the Audubon's sandhill crane was no longer there. I soon learned that when the lodge was sold, the previous owner, John Pherson, took the sandhill crane print for himself. I've known John for the last 35 years-----he has a great personality, enjoys life to the fullest, always sees the cup ½ full, and is known as a wheeler-dealer extraordinaire.

My keen interest in acquiring a second Audubon was maintained by annual trips to Chicago where I participated, for the last 30 years, as a Board examiner for Orthopaedic Surgery certification. Each year, I snuck away from the examination to visit the Oppenheimer Gallery on Michigan Avenue. The Oppenheimers, father and son, are no doubt among the world's authorities on Audubon and his works. There, I enjoyed viewing magnificent Audubon's for sale; unfortunately, they were out of my price range.

At this point, I decided to track down John Pherson and see if he had any interest in selling his Audubon sandhill crane. I was fairly sure that John was unaware of the true value of his painting and I suspected I could purchase it at a rock-bottom price. After a few phone calls, I located John and talked with him. I asked him if he was interested in selling his print and he responded rather zealously that he

was. I was elated but repressed my enthusiasm so that I could negotiate a favorable price. A week later, I received an email from John with several jpegs of the painting. It was just as I had remembered it. I called and explained that before I made an offer, I needed to see the print and have it authenticated by a qualified appraiser of fine art. He agreed and told me he'd have it packed and shipped to Cincinnati so that it could be officially appraised.

Several weeks later I received a phone call from Sandy ----- a large UPS package from Driggs, Idaho had arrived. I couldn't wait to get home. As it turned out, I had an emergency surgery and didn't get home until 11 that evening. Like a kid opening a birthday gift, I tore into the package. The picture was buried in a protective casing of bubble wrap and Styrofoam peanuts. Finally, I was able to feel the frame, and I carefully extracted the picture from its container. In a nanosecond my mood changed from the pinnacle of excitement to the nadir of despair. The glass had shattered.

It was no surprise that the painting had experienced considerable damage in the form of scrapes and scratches. I was nearly apoplectic. As it turned out, the protective packing was slipshod--- completely inappropriate for an object of such value and delicacy. Where was I to go from here? Should I return the painting to John Pherson or should I have it authenticated and appraised and then--- possibly restored.

I ruminated for about 2 weeks before making a decision. I loved the painting and decided to at least have it authenticated. As it turns out, since the 1930's, 20-25 million Audubon prints have been reproduced. None have any market value. Nevertheless, each year, Audubon fakes are sold at outlandishly high prices to naïve and unsuspecting buyers on vehicles such as eBay.

The sandhill crane was one of 435 prints from the 4-volume *Birds of America*. When considering a purchase, one must carefully evaluate several aspects of the print to be sure it is not a fake. First, the paper must measure 26 1/2" by 39 1/2". The paper is thick and heavy and it contains a watermark, which is visible when held up to a light source. The watermark reads: J. Whatman or J. Whatman Turkey Mills plus a date. Individual prints have tiny perforations along the binding edge, where the print was stitched into one of the four volumes. Each print has a plate mark, a colorless rectangular depression in the paper created by the extreme pressure used in the printing process. A plate number in Roman numerals will always appear in the upper right hand corner. Numbers ending in 1 or 6 were the large birds and ALL birds were life sized. Finally, in the last 20 years, many reproductions were created using highly pixelated digital imaging. As such, individual pixels can only be detected with magnification. It is said that if all these criteria are fulfilled, there is a 90% chance that the print is an original.

I contacted an individual I considered a qualified appraiser. He had done several appraisals for my parents and he provided a list of references; most were individuals I recognized. The appraisal was done at our home in my presence. In

retrospect, it was a shoddy 10-minute evaluation. When he touched the print, it was with bare fingers (no white inspection gloves); he did not remove it from the frame to look for the watermark and the binding perforations; and he failed to use magnification to detect a pixelated digital image.

About ten days later, I received his official appraisal as well as a signed statement of authentication. He estimated that the value of the print, even after restoration, was a quarter of the value of the same print in top-flight condition. At this point, I was convinced that I possessed a genuine but severely damaged Audubon print and I was hell-bent on having it restored.

Subsequently, I made an offer to John Pherson. He was aware of the damage, the steep decline in value as well as the associated cost for restoration. After some dickering, we agreed upon a price. Despite its poor condition, I felt good about the sale. With restoration, I thought my purchase price was well below fair market value.

Two weeks later, the print was appropriately packaged and insured. I then shipped it to Joel Oppenheimer Galleries in Chicago where I had made arrangements to have it definitely re-authenticated and restored.

The Nail in the Coffin

Two weeks went by, and I had not heard from Oppenheimer. I checked with FedEx to verify that the print had been received. It had. Next, I emailed the gallery and they confirmed that the print had been received; they were backlogged and promised to get back with me within the next few weeks. Finally, I received an email from David Oppenheimer: QUOTE

"We have received your Audubon and examined it. This Audubon is a reproduction from the 1970's called The Amsterdam Edition. These have a "G. Schut and Zonen" Watermark along the margin and were produced using a process called offset lithography. The modern printing process, paper type, and watermark all clearly indicate that this is from the 1971 Amsterdam edition. Original Audubons will have a watermark that reads "J. Whatman 18xx" or "J. Whatman Turkey Mill 18xx" depending on the year the print was made and which Whatman mill produced the paper; the original engraving, aquatint, and watercolor should be very apparent. We can certainly still restore this print if you prefer, but I cannot recommend it."

Sincerely, David Oppenheimer

Post Mortem

In retrospect, I had a form of auction fever. Although my situation did not involve competitive bidding my mental state was such that I wanted to own this print at any cost. In fact, all along, I convinced myself I'd found a bargain and that John

Pherson was completely unaware of its true worth. Furthermore, I had enjoyed this print at the Lodge for more than 30 years, loved seeing and hearing the sandhill crane as it kindled memories of fishing with Mom and Dad and Sandy and my kids.

For a while, I toyed with the idea of going after the man who had done the authentication. I commented to Sandy immediately after he left that his appraisal had been cursory and substandard. He overlooked the basics. He failed to remove the print from its frame, examine for the watermark and binding perforations, and he did not use magnification to evaluate for pixilation. I rationalized these obvious warnings, by convincing myself that the combination of strong credentials and years of experience equated with his knowing what he was doing.

Do I have regrets? Of course I do, I was duped. I had foolishly rationalized the many red flags in my quest of the sandhill crane. Did I learn a lesson? Perhaps. On the flip side, I've come to enjoy; even more, Audubon the man, his talent and limitless energy, and of course his wonderful paintings.

Thank you.

