

A. W. SCHORGER*

Increase A. Lapham

1811-1875

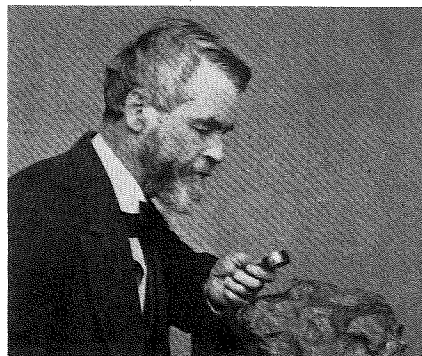
It is only where a due proportion between the cultivated land and the forests is maintained that man can attain and enjoy his highest civilization.

Time was when Wisconsin had great natural endowments. There were a varied flora, rich mines, and dense forests dotted with hundreds of lakes. The fertile prairies in summer were a riot of color and the charm of the oak openings moved the cultured traveler to ecstasy. One man was to see all this in its entirety and say that it was good. The year 1836 will remain notable in the annals of our commonwealth for the arrival in Milwaukee of Increase A. Lapham. Possessed of boundless energy, insatiable scientific curiosity, and an uncanny insight into the future, he laid the foundation of the conservation on which we continue to build. He was indefatigable in publicizing the advantages of the state. No one could have done it better since the range of his knowledge was remarkable.

He walked often a score of miles with a huge receptacle gathering plants by the way. He fished unios from the streams and chiselled rare crinoids from the quarries. The plow will eventually level the earth works of the aborigines, so they were surveyed. The size and position of the skeletons were noted and the artifacts preserved. Retained to examine the ore deposits of the Penokee Range, he listed in his notebook all the species of trees growing upon the ridge and the mammals of the region. He kept a record of the weather for thirty years, so that the clouds had meaning.

A decade after his arrival he published his "Wisconsin". The purpose was not only to furnish information useful to settlers, "but also to preserve for the future historian many interesting facts which might otherwise soon be forgotten and lost." He had begun to preserve.

Socially he was also alert. A communication was sent to the Governor suggesting the use of prisoners in quarrying and dressing granite to be



Increase Lapham studies a meteor.

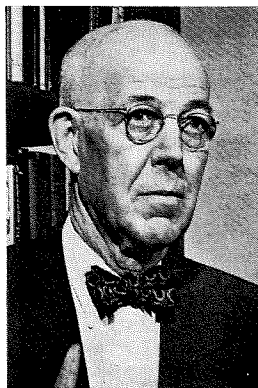
used in the construction of a penitentiary. That finished, the men could be employed in the production of materials for the University which was to be built at Madison. The unfortunates would be usefully employed and learn an art.

Lapham was the father of the present system of sending storm warnings. Appalled by the loss of shipping on the Great Lakes, he memorialized the State Legislature, asking for an appropriation for meteorological observations and for a system of warning

vessels. Years were to pass, then the Federal Government itself took heed. Here was preservation of life, preservation of property.

In 1855 he attempted to get the Legislature to authorize a natural history survey "for the present is the proper time for making his investigation, before any more of the native species become extinct." He felt intensely that then was the time to determine the abundance and distribution of our plants and animals. Already the lethal tread of progress was producing changes which would be all too permanent. It is deplorable that his advice went unheeded for future generations could not be expected to regret the passing of those things of which they had neither knowledge nor experience.

The forests of Wisconsin were not inexhaustible to the observant. Lapham was the senior author of a report on the disastrous effects arising from the rapid felling of the forests. To him a treeless region was symbolic of barbarism. Certainly no form of vegetation exceeds the tree in beauty and utility. The southern portion of the state had been so denuded of wood as to fail to meet the needs of the inhabitants. He foresaw accurately that within fifty years the whole of the state's merchantable timber would bow to the ax. No longer would there be sufficient forests to ameliorate the winds of winter, conserve the water in the soil, prevent the shifting of sands, or avoid excessive erosion. Once a break is made in the sod or forest cover on a hillside, the descending water carries with it the top soil to be deposited on the plains below or swept into the rivers. He had the measure of the people and understood that no material progress in the planting of trees would be made without encouragement from the state. This procedure we are now following.



A. W. Schorger

* The late A. W. Schorger, a distinguished conservation leader himself, and a former member of the old Conservation Commission wrote a series of tributes to leaders in the field for a centennial conference held in Madison in 1949. The Bulletin will reprint several of these in the next few issues.