

John Henry Comstock

Professor of Entomology

— *March 20, 1931*

In the death of Professor John Henry Comstock on March 20, 1931, Cornell University has lost the scholar who perhaps more than any other embodied the aims of her founder and the spirit of her earliest years. Fatherless from his infancy and reared mainly by strangers, he spent his youth largely as a sailor on the Great Lakes with but winters for schooling, and his higher education had to be won without financial aid from others. Thus he built up the self-reliance, the tireless energy, the concentration, and efficiency so characteristic of his whole career; and thus there came to him, as to few men, power of observation, skill of touch, boundless persistence, and a rare union of quickness, even impatience, with sympathetic insight and considerate helpfulness.

Already while a sailor he had found spare time for the study of plants and of insects, and he came to the young University a ripe student in these fields. Here, under the encouragement of Dr. Wilder, then in charge of biology at Cornell, he developed so swiftly that he was but half through his undergraduate years when at the request of his fellow students he was set at giving a course on insects. This was but the beginning of a professional career which later assumed world-wide significance. His work as an investigator began to express itself in published papers as early as 1871, and his ability and enthusiasm in research grew with the years. This is indicated by his papers on the *Coccidae* (1880, 1883), his essays on *The Descent of the Lepidoptera* (1892), and on *Evolution and Taxonomy* (1893), and by his papers in collaboration with J. G. Needham on the wings of insects (1899). Subsequent papers embodying the results of researches on spiders appeared regularly during his later years. These culminated in the publication of "The Spider Book" (1912.) Following his retirement in 1914 he devoted the remaining years to the rounding out of his life's work. The results of his long years of research on the wings of insects were finally brought together in the form of a book, "The Wings of Insects" (1918), probably his chief contribution of pure research. His last years were devoted to the writing of his final work, "An Introduction to Entomology." Happily this was completed before his last illness.

Professor Comstock never engaged in controversy nor did he criticize the work of others. He did his own work as well as he knew how, and with faith in it he let all adverse criticism pass in silence. On the other hand, no one was franker to acknowledge a mistake than he, for accuracy was almost a fetish with him. Moreover he never appropriated the work of others.

Professor Comstock was one of the earliest teachers of entomology in the United States; and his ideals and standards have exerted a profound influence on the teaching of entomology in this country. His early struggles in self-education undoubtedly begot in him the habit of clear, precise, logical arrangement in his own mind of the problem in which he was interested. As a result, his lectures were models of simplicity, clearness, and conciseness. This logical quality of mind, together with his infectious enthusiasm and his personal interest in his students, made him a great teacher, and this characteristic, together with his experience as a teacher, lay at the root of his success as a writer of text-books. His greatest service to the University and to the world may but be expressed in this brief sentence: He was a trainer and inspirer of men.

Source: Faculty Records, pps. 636, 1690 Resolutions of the Trustees and Faculty of Cornell University, September, Nineteen Hundred And Thirty-One