

The Tragedy of the Public Museum's Swedish-American Naturalist

by Harry H. Anderson

One of the tragic figures among the Swedish-American pioneers who immigrated to Wisconsin in the 19th century was Thure Ludvig Theodore Kumlien (1819-1888). A native of Skaraborg, Sweden, and a one-time student of the natural sciences at Uppsala University, Kumlien was listed as a "zoologist" on the manifest of the vessel "Svea" when he landed at the port of New York in 1843. Coming to Wisconsin he filed land claims in the Koshkonong settlement near Madison, but regarded farming as a "hard life" and instead embarked on a career as an ornithologist, becoming one of the first and most prominent in the state. He specialized in collecting bird specimens—skins, nests, blown-out eggs—for museums, other scientists and educational institutions in Wisconsin, elsewhere in the United States and many European countries.

For a number of years he taught natural history as professor of botany and zoology at Albion Academy (Dane County) and in 1881 organized the Natural History Society at Wisconsin, serving as its taxidermist and conservator for two years. When the Society's collections were transferred to the Milwaukee Public Museum in 1883, Kumlien moved to that institution, becoming its conservator of natural sciences at a salary of \$800 to \$1000 annually.

Kumlien held that position at the Public Museum until a fateful day in August, 1888. While sorting a large collection of South American bird skins, he inhaled a quantity of preservation poisons and became violently ill. Although taken immediately to a hospital, he died the same day, August 5, 1888, at the age of 69.

Thure Kumlien was a remarkable natural scientist and scholar. His widely recognized professional accomplishments helped establish the foundation of the Public Museum's reputation. Kumlien's son, Ludvig, later used the results of his father's 45 years of collecting to write the outstanding ornithological work, "Birds of Wisconsin."

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