



RefugeUpdate

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A Look Back ... William L. Finley

Dramatic photography, captivating lectures, memorable movie scripts and magazine articles – William L. Finley used them all to convince the American public that it was time to give birds a home of their own. Finley, who was born to a pioneer family in California in 1876, and his boyhood friend Herman Bohlman hauled cumbersome camera equipment up cliffs and into marshes and trees along the Oregon coast. They used block and tackle to raise their equipment onto ledges. They followed the development of hawks, eagles, herons, murrens and cormorants from egg to fledgling.

In a history of the Audubon Society of Portland, Tom McAllister wrote that Bohlman and Finley spent four months photographing a California condor nest. “Bohlman was the reserved and skilled photographer ... Finley was the clean-shaven extrovert who spread a message across the land of the need to save habitat as well as pass protective bird legislation. Their derring-do and the results captivated audiences and readers nationwide. Finley packed the lecture halls.”



Finley/Bohlman hand-painted photographic slides of Three Arch Rocks in Oregon inspired President Theodore Roosevelt to establish the first bird refuge west of the Mississippi.

Their photos are striking. Hand-painted glass plates were the most effective way to produce full-color photos in the early 20th century. Many Finley/Bohlman photographs were considered the best of their time and are still in use today. In 1907, after President Theodore Roosevelt saw the team’s photos of Three Arch Rocks, he established the first bird refuge west of the Mississippi.

With his wife, Nellie Irene Barnhart, Finley wrote three wildlife books,

created popular wildlife movies and wrote articles for *Nature* magazine. He was a leader of the Oregon Audubon Society and was named Oregon state game warden in 1911. The Oregon Historical Society reports that, in 1913, Finley ordered a deputy to confiscate a headdress of 46 egret plumes from singer Lillian Herlein at Portland’s Orpheum Theatre.

Long before easy transportation or instant communication, Finley regularly made the case for protecting habitat on the West Coast with the leaders on the East Coast. Finley worked closely with J.N. “Ding” Darling, chief of the Bureau of Biological Survey, and then with Ira Gabrielson, the first director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, to add the 65,000-acre Blitzen Valley to Oregon’s Malheur National Wildlife Refuge.

Finley died in 1953. A decade later, wintering and resting habitat for the dusky Canada goose in Oregon’s Willamette Valley was set aside as a national refuge and named for him. 

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