

THE TAXIDERMIC SCULPTURE OF DAVE PARSONS

One of my vivid remembrances of Dave Parsons came on a cold February day back in the fifties. I had stopped at Yale University with an assortment of oil-soaked



bird carcasses I thought might be of value to the bird collection being assembled by Yale's Peabody Museum. Down in the preparation lab I found Ralph Morrill, chief preparator for the museum, Dave Parsons his newly appointed assistant, and Bob Clem who was already showing immense talent as a watercolorist. The three were engaged in a boisterous discussion interspersed with shouts of laughter, hoots of derision and finally a shared satisfaction. They were gathered about a bluejay in that discouraging stage of presentation just after the skin has been pulled over the body form and they were debating the posture of the bird.

I watched them for some time as the bird was twisted, turned, lifted at the head, depressed at the rump, raised at the hip and the legs pulled, pushed, bent and stretched this way and that. I wondered why they were taking so long. The bird looked fine to me. It was clean and neat, the feathers were well ordered and the aspect was decidedly bird-like. Dave suddenly burst into a shout of laughter roaring, "I certainly never saw a bluejay look like THAT before". Then I began to listen and watch more closely. And, as I watched, I began to appreciate the combined knowledge and skill that came into play as those three artists coaxed the feathered form from just one more mounted specimen into an arrogant, saucy jaybird that not only displayed the color and shape of a bluejay, but also portrayed the attitude, posture and personality that emanates from all bluejays.

Dave was only beginning in taxidermy at the time, but he would go on to an outstanding career in museum preparation, culminating in a masterful sculpture of Neanderthal man scheduled to go on display at Yale's Peabody Museum. Dave's early training in art was taken at the Paier Art School of Hamden, Connecticut, where he showed a strong, masculine line in drawing and dynamic motion in sculpture. After leaving Paier he worked in window display for a major department store, but his heart was not there. He haunted the Peabody Museum hoping for a position that would challenge his artistic skill and utilize his passion for natural history. Finally an opening occurred, and he began an apprenticeship under Ralph Morrill, one of the last of the old school museum preparators. Here he understudied many facets of museum preparation, but it was always bird taxidermy he preferred. He spent as much time as he could in mastering the mechanical aspects of this craft, while applying his artistic talent and the knowledge gleaned from hours and hours of concentrated observation of birds in the field to give his specimens a "breath of life". Under his hand bird taxidermy became a form of sculpture in which he built exquisitely mounted birds, each realistically posed, each anatomically correct and in perfect balance, and each exuding the essence of the species he was representing.

We lost Dave in 1985 at the far too young age of fifty-seven. There is an emptiness as we miss his exuberance in life, his joyful challenge to argumentative discussion, his unparalleled gift for story telling and for the sensitive gentlemanly quality that bespoke a man confident and sure who needed no raucus bravura to declare himself master of his talents and abilities. We mourn also the passing of his tremendous talent—a talent that should have been one to carry on the traditions of the vanishing museum men whose ranks thin with the passage of time and whose skills, taught through carefully nurtured apprenticeships are all too seldom being replaced. ■

