

EDITOR'S COMMENTARY

This book is the autobiography written by naturalist educator Anna Botsford Comstock and is also about her husband, the entomologist John Henry Comstock, during their tenure at Cornell University in its foundation years. The manuscript, which Mrs. Comstock had typed in preparation for publication, is based on her diaries during the zenith of their professional careers in their respective fields of study and on her personal reminiscences during the last years of their lives. The abstract statement for my doctoral thesis sums up the impetus for my years of research on the Comstock manuscript:

Anna Botsford Comstock contributed significantly to fostering imagination in nature study education at the turn of the 20th century. Through the process of restoring the 'Comstocks of Cornell'-manuscript for historical accuracy and completeness, Comstock's genuine voice is revealed thereby emphasizing her written legacy in both scientific and Cornell University history.¹

That research uncovered discrepancies between this document and the 1953 edition of *The Comstocks of Cornell*. The 1953 edition of *The Comstocks of Cornell* has been regarded with veneration as the definitive biography of John Henry and Anna Botsford Comstock by researchers since its publication. The first document in the original order of the book's publication was the little-known Comstock manuscript, typed by Mrs. Comstock, which served as the 1953 book's template. *The Comstocks of Cornell* (1953) was altered from its source, becoming a biographical book with third- and fourth-generation information, which was only a shadow of the autobiographical document that Mrs. Comstock wrote. The importance of my dissertation and its parallel archival research was to bring the egregious actions to light and to restore the voice of Mrs. Comstock to her own autobiography as definitively as

1. St. Clair, Karen Penders, *Finding Anna: The Archival Search for Anna Botsford Comstock* (2017). <https://doi.org/10.7298/X44X55ZB>.

possible. The significance of this book is that it resonates with the genuine voice of Mrs. Comstock. By using first- and second-generation material, touched only marginally by this editor, this book is as near to Comstock's original written piece as could be obtained.

For more than thirty years, Professor and Mrs. Comstock directly influenced the personal expression and professional imagination of their students. The collegiate lives of dozens of young men and women were enriched by their alliance with the Comstocks, and the Comstocks' influence also spread to their department colleagues during their tenure at Cornell.

Long after Mrs. Comstock had been awarded accolades for her wood-carving artistry in the illustrations of her husband's entomological work, and while she continued the development of her own nature study curriculum, Comstock sat down to write her and John Henry's biography. As Mrs. Comstock's widely acclaimed *Handbook of Nature Study* (1911) gained acceptance and popularity, however, other obligations pulled her from the autobiographical manuscript, and the document was put away until such time that Mrs. Comstock could devote herself fully to its completion.

The work on her autobiographical manuscript was picked up again around 1928, in the last years of Mrs. Comstock's life. During this time, Professor Comstock, an invalid from several strokes, could not speak or walk. Mrs. Comstock had been debilitated by cardiac problems for many years, and her strong frame weakened as cancer began its insidious unraveling of whatever good health remained. A determination to finish her work on the book, and the sense of urgency she must have felt as she labored over it, are palpable through the pages of the manuscript.

When Mrs. Comstock completed the manuscript, she did not have a title for her book. The task of editing, printing, and subsequently naming her book fell to the hands of others in the decades to follow. As probate and protocol dictated, after the death of Professor Comstock (six months following his wife) their collective effects and papers were ultimately bequeathed to Glenn Washington Herrick (1870–1965), their closest living relative, and to their attorney, George H. "Jim" Russell. The original 760-page autobiographical document was among the possessions bequeathed to these executors of the Comstock estate in February 1931.

Glenn Washington Herrick was a second cousin to Mrs. Comstock on her father's side. He said of his cousin that to everyone she always spoke beautifully and quietly. Those who knew her valued her friendship, her loveliness, and her sense of wonder of the world, which resonated through the grateful hearts she touched. It was at her urging that Herrick petitioned to attend Cornell University. Herrick was a student at Cornell University

from 1892–1896 and followed in the footsteps of John Henry Comstock by studying in the department of entomology. He would say of his undergraduate years that the men who most impressed him were John Henry Comstock and Liberty Hyde Bailey for he was gratified to work with them and admired them completely. Herrick's passion for his own work stemmed from his devotion to his mentor, John Henry Comstock, a man he described as a natural teacher, quiet, kindly, and one who loved cigars.²

After graduation, Herrick was a biology professor at the State College of Mississippi, Starkville, for several years, and then briefly taught entomology at the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas, College Station. He returned to Cornell in 1909 as professor of economical entomology for the Department of Entomology and Limnology.³ Those who knew Herrick characterized him as friendly, sincere, and a bit naïve. Herrick's teaching was described as animated and clear, his religious convictions strong, and his hospitality an enjoyment. He wrote many bulletins and papers on insect control that were considered good and inspiring, but not groundbreaking to the degree of his peers' accomplishments. Herrick, who was a lifelong accumulator of information, was bored after his retirement from Cornell University in 1935. He would occupy himself with projects that he hoped would give him a small boost of satisfaction, if not attention. Herrick carefully studied the newspaper in his retirement, saving every news clipping or document of interest to him, as it served as a valuable gateway to the world for him. Herrick preserved the corrected pages of his own articles and of those written about him. He kept original illustrations he rendered, the travel brochures from every place he visited across the United States (and into Canada), and ledger booklets of household expenses from 1917 to 1963. In the early 1950s, the fastidious Professor Herrick, rooted in a pattern of monotony, returned to a passion project he had tabled twelve years earlier. He still held the autobiographical manuscript of Mrs. Comstock, and he still desired to publish it, but this time under his own name. That the manuscript should fall to one who was painfully inclined to detail was fortuitous; however, Herrick's enthusiasm may have worked against him as he endeavored to share this last offering from the Comstocks. Herrick's devotion was admirable to one Comstock, but at the sacrifice of the voice of the other.

2. St. Clair, *Finding Anna*, p. 89.

3. From the Memorial Statement for Professor Glenn Washington Herrick who died in 1965. The memorial statements cited in this book were prepared by the Office of the Dean of the University Faculty of Cornell University to honor its faculty for their service to the university. <https://ecommons.cornell.edu/handle/1813/19056>.

As we follow the history of the Comstock manuscript and its publication, the enormity of the value of the document was not lost on Herrick. In 1937, he originally sought the manuscript's publication with guidance from a core of close intimates of the Comstocks. He did so through an exchange of twenty-one letters from the fall of 1937 until the following summer of 1938. Herrick took counsel from two Cornell emeritus professors, Simon Henry Gage (1851–1944) and George Lincoln Burr (1857–1938); or rather, he pushed for their opinion of and support for publication of the manuscript. In August 1937, Herrick wrote to Gage, then President of the Comstock Publishing Company, that he believed Mrs. Comstock's manuscript would make a "very interesting book" and was "a fine narrative" of both Comstocks. Herrick also believed that such a biographical book as this would have "wide remunerative value" and suggested two titles to Gage:

Our Years Together as Teachers, Scientists and Writers: an Autobiography of John Henry Comstock and Anna Botsford Comstock, or

A Life Program Together as Teachers, Scientists and Writers: an Autobiography etc.⁴

Herrick's plans were met with succinct objections by Professor Burr, a notable Cornell historian in his own right. In a letter to Herrick, dated April 1938, Burr questioned the historical significance of corrupting someone else's manuscript, especially after their death, and of the changes Herrick proposed to make, and had already made, to the document. Professor Gage, a close personal friend of both Professor and Mrs. Comstock, was significantly concerned about the Comstocks being personally presented in a diminished point of view. The manuscript was then passed from Simon Gage and George Burr to the critical eye of Woodford Patterson (1870–1948), editor of the *Cornell Alumni News* and secretary of the university. Patterson culled large sections from the document with a purple wax pencil. Patterson believed that the Comstock manuscript was too personal and trite for scholars of the Comstocks' character. He believed a book produced from such a manuscript would devalue the contributions both Comstocks made to their individual fields of study.

Patterson's terse review of Mrs. Comstock's autobiography halted any further discussion of publication with Herrick by the board of the Comstock Publishing Company. Shortly after receiving Patterson's letter of July 19, 1938, and the assessment contained within, Simon Gage met personally

4. St. Clair, *Finding Anna*, pp. 96–97.

with Glenn Herrick to persuade Herrick to curb his enthusiasm for publishing Mrs. Comstock's manuscript. Gage proposed that creating a marginal biography that emphasized the accomplishments of John Henry Comstock would be more appropriate to the Comstock legacy. Gage added that Mrs. Comstock's professional legacy was secondary to that of her husband's. Herrick wholeheartedly agreed with Gage; however, privately he was also more inclined toward establishing his name in the time line of the Comstocks' biography. Twelve years after this fateful meeting, Herrick's decision to send the document to print regardless of Gage's opinion was equal to Patterson's culling within the Comstock manuscript.

As mentioned above, when Herrick re-opened his files in the early 1950s to work on the manuscript, he did so with all previous detractors to his project being deceased. With such key participants (Gage, Burr, and Patterson) silenced, Herrick had the literary freedom for the final dissection of the Comstock manuscript. The worthiness of Herrick's publication efforts collapse when one realizes that he was the one who corrupted the *Comstocks of Cornell* in every plausible way the others had hoped to preserve of the Comstocks' legacy—the historical, the personal, and the academic. At any time during these early phases of the second publication attempt of the Comstock book, Herrick could have reset the marginalized document back to its near 1937 format, which he had enthusiastically tried to sell to Gage, Burr, and others. Yet, years later, he remained swayed by Woodford Patterson's critique against Mrs. Comstock's memoirs, particularly as Herrick believed Professor Comstock may have been diminished, and as such, he kept Patterson's expunctions.

Whatever essential core of Mrs. Comstock's persona remained after Patterson's culling was further altered by Herrick's over-enthusiastic admiration for Professor Comstock. Herrick removed the emotional grit of the attachments Mrs. Comstock held to objects, people, or situations significant to her throughout their lives. The personal anecdotes, emotional adjectives, historical Cornell University persona, and truly, any statement of detraction—or declination of Mr. Comstock that Herrick perceived as damaging to the deceased entomologist's career by Mrs. Comstock—was omitted by his critical hand. Herrick's severe edits and omissions created for posterity a third- and fourth-generation document that diminishes the stature of Mrs. Comstock's university status as a professor's wife, the legacy of her work and professorship, and her intentions to preserve their lives equally. The ramifications of such a personal sense of hubris on the part of Herrick created a book that is not a piece of fiction but is also not entirely genuine when compared to its manuscript. Herrick changed the first-person narrative of Mrs. Comstock to a third-person narrative with him as the voice of the Comstocks.

The only printed edition of *The Comstocks of Cornell* has served as a reference for many books and publications since its debut. As a historical reference piece of the beginnings of Cornell University, and of the lives of the Comstocks, the book represented a window into a particularly poignant time of Cornell's history as told with a singular voice from that time: Mrs. Comstock's. The recension of large portions of Comstock's memoirs of her and her husband's personal and professional life together is not unique or unusual, nor singular in its occurrence. Written documentation that has been altered in such a way is a continual critical talking point among rhetoric and archival researchers. The altering of facts, recollections, and point of view in the recording of history is so prevalent through time that to discover an example where these instances are *not* adulterated would be the true find.

The document that is Anna Botsford Comstock's autobiographical manuscript is preserved in the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections at the Carl A. Kroch Library within Cornell University. What remains of the document today is 712 pages in length, forty-six pages less than what Woodford Patterson reported receiving in 1938. The Comstock manuscript is composed of twenty chapters, denoted by Roman numerals, by both Mrs. Comstock and myself, for continuity. The shortest chapters are I and XIX at twenty-six pages each; the longest manuscript chapter is IV, at sixty-six pages, and concerns Anna Botsford's family history, childhood, and youth up to her admission to Cornell University. For comparison, in the 1953 edition of the book, Anna Comstock's early life is recorded in thirty-five pages, with the longest chapter in the book, regarding John Henry Comstock, his childhood, youth, and his work, at fifty-two pages.

Manuscript Chapters XV (35 pages), XVI (33 pages), XVII (55 pages), XVIII (47 pages), XIX (26 pages), and XX (34 pages) total to 230 pages of the manuscript and were all omitted from the 1953 edition of the book. This figure does not include the many paragraphs, several pages, and other chapters also removed from the manuscript.

Chapter XIV is missing and per Herrick in a note he left at the front of Chapter XV: "Chapter XIV: I cannot account for it."⁵ The parallel chapter in the 1953 edition, Chapter 15, is titled "Cornell's New Quarters for Entomology and Nature Study." This chapter is duplicated in this book as it was printed in the 1953 edition. Important in this chapter is the chronological range of 1908–1912 during which time Mrs. Comstock relays how

5. John Henry and Anna Botsford Comstock papers, #21-23-25. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

she conceived of the idea of, and prints, her magnum opus, *The Handbook of Nature Study*. It is within the time frame of this chapter that the Comstocks bought, and sold, the land called The Pinnacle, which would later be the site of the rhododendron and azalea collection on Comstock Knoll at the Cornell Botanic Garden. In this chapter is when they purchased the property that would become their last permanent home and the future site of Comstock Publishing Company. In this chapter, Mr. Comstock finished the manuscript for *The Spider Book*, and John Walton Spencer, nature study educator in partnership with Mrs. Comstock, who was known fondly as "Uncle John" by thousands of nature-enthusiastic children, succumbed of unknown causes in Ithaca, New York. The death of Spencer is significant because his loss brought the end of an era in nature education, not only in his home state of New York but also nationwide given that his work reached thousands of children. We can only surmise what might have been omitted from this chapter.

Another significant artifact of the 1953 edition is the choppy chronological order of the book's format. For example, Chapter 16 splits the year 1912 (a leftover remnant from Chapter 15 described above) and continues through to 1914. Several prominent events in the Comstocks' personal and professional lives occurred during these years that Mrs. Comstock would have unabashedly described, or at the very least commented upon, although she may have been silenced for her candor. Such events include the surprising retirement of Liberty Hyde Bailey as dean of the College of Agriculture at Cornell in June 1913. Not six months later, in December 1913, Professor Comstock resigned his Cornell professorship to take effect almost immediately, at the end of the year. Alice McCloskey, also at Cornell as a prominent nature study educator in her own right, became an associate in rural education and edited the Rural School Leaflets. The following year, 1914, McCloskey was promoted to assistant professor, as was Mrs. Comstock. McCloskey, however, is demoted to "Mrs. Comstock's assistant" in the 1953 edition and is mentioned only the one time. My point here is that Mrs. Comstock gave credit to her peers where credit was due, which is evident in her manuscript, but not in the 1953 edition of the book. Further research on my part yielded that the two women were dissimilar on many levels. Comstock was considered a scholar, artist, and scientist. McCloskey was considered frank and sincere, yet maybe less educated. Perhaps Herrick knew of this contention and opted for the latter's removal? Other nature educators mentioned in Mrs. Comstock's manuscript were omitted from the book, including Julia Rogers and Ada Georgia. Mary Rogers Miller is mentioned once in the book in a footnote referencing her husband. All of these women made significant

contributions to nature literature and nature education in the disciplines of their interests. Today they are among the specters lost by judicious omission.

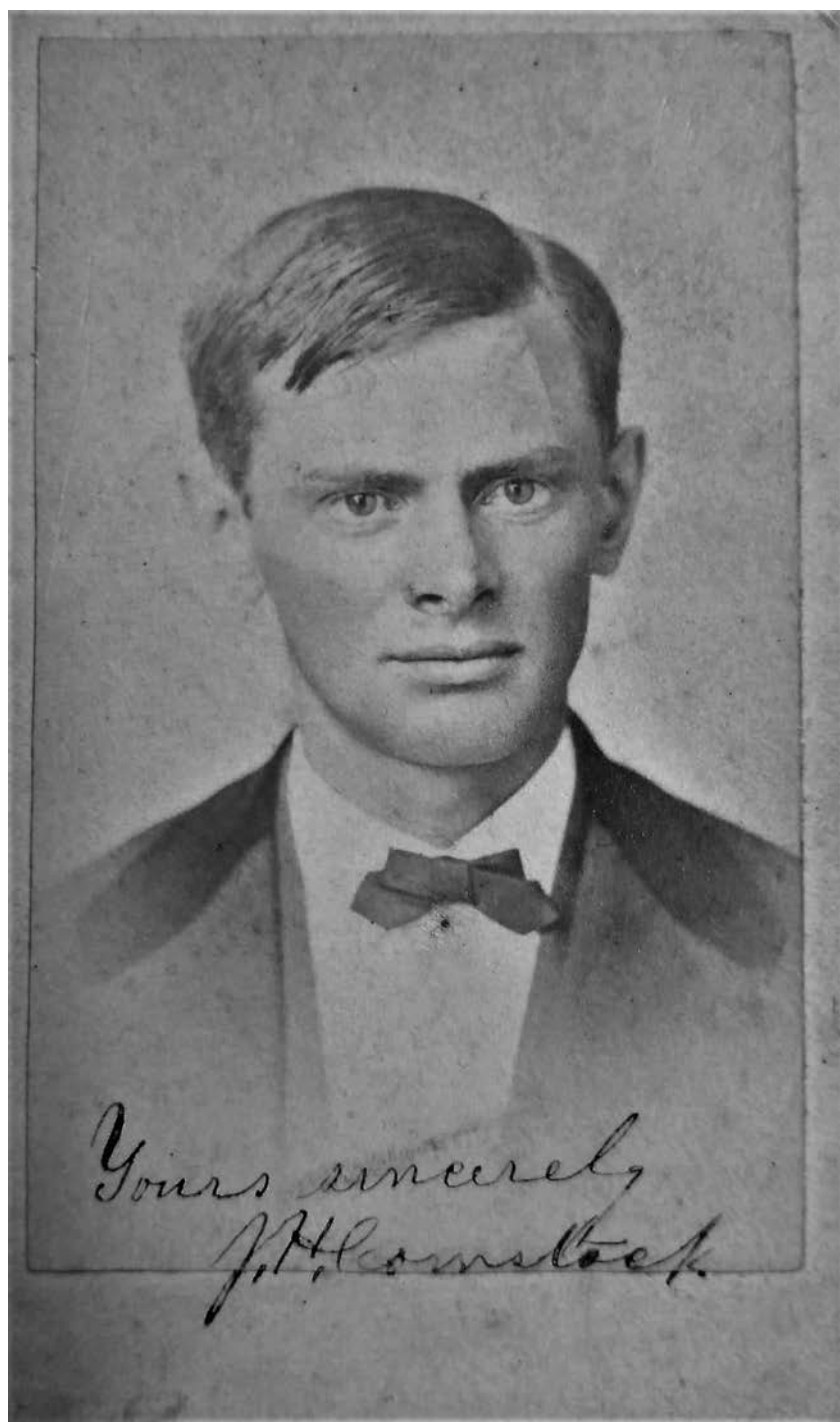
Not everything was crossed off in the manuscript, however; some of the initially untouched text in the manuscript was also *not* included in the book. This led to careful reading and comparison on my part between the manuscript and the 1953 edition to recapture what (or who) was lost, to re-introduce emotional descriptors and colloquial language, and to ensure accuracy and completeness. All 712 pages (except for Chapter XIV as mentioned above) of Mrs. Comstock's manuscript have been restored completely in this book.

The 1953 edition of *The Comstocks of Cornell* is 267 pages in length, also divided into twenty chapters; however, the last chapter is only four paragraphs in length. Some changes were made by Herrick for diplomacy, or what we today call "political correctness," particularly regarding slavery, religion, or university politics. Details lost in the 1953 edition include those of early Ithaca, New York; early Cornell University milestones; and pioneering personalities, visitors, and alumni of Cornell University across several departments. As mentioned previously, the choppiness in the chronology of the book comes from the omission of great portions of (or entire) chapters spliced together with the remnants. A sobering example of such a schism occurs at page 229 of the 1953 edition: Mrs. Comstock's infamous *Handbook of Nature Study* is first mentioned here, and shockingly, there remains only forty-two pages in the biography for the discussion of the final twenty-five years of the Comstocks' lives!

This 1953 edition has served as a single important source to describe the collective history and background information of both Professor and Mrs. Comstock, their colleagues, and Cornell University. The ramifications of Herrick's actions have affected more than sixty years of researchers and educators. Anna Comstock's voice is one worth recovering from her original manuscript because she tells the history of her husband's entomological work and her nature-study work at the turn of the 20th century. The anecdotes she provides give a strength of precedence to the work we do today in agricultural, entomological, and horticultural extension work, as well as nature education and public garden initiatives. The extent to which Comstock is still referenced today in these disciplines legitimizes the strength of historical relevance of her memoirs. Knowing both John Henry and Anna Comstock through their complete biography, and autobiography, helps us to rediscover their efforts, the efforts of their colleagues, and opens us to listen to their collective legacy.

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THE COMSTOCKS OF CORNELL



John Henry Comstock, n.d.