

A. Willis Robertson:

 Pioneer Conservationist

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Honors Thesis

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A.R.H.

Epigram

"And I brought you into a plentiful country, to eat the fruit thereof and the goodness thereof; but when ye entered, ye defiled my land, and made mine heritage an abomination."

Jeremiah 1:6¹

Chapter I.

The Life of A. Willis Robertson

Senator Absalom Willis Robertson, one of Virginia's most respected and influential statesmen, was born in Martinsburg, West Virginia on May 27, 1887.² Although born in West Virginia, Senator Robertson traced his lineage to a very old and aristocratic Virginia family. The proud history of the Robertson family left a tremendous impression upon the young Willis. Among his ancestors were some of Virginia's most historic figures. The Senator once remarked about the expectations he was to fulfill because he was a Robertson:

I am a direct descendant of Colonel James Gordon of Orange and of Colonel Nathaniel Harrison II of Brandon, who became Governor of Virginia and was a direct descendant of Benjamin who came from England in 1635. I am also a direct descendant of William Gordon of Orange, who rendered great service to his friend James Madison in the State Convention which ratified the Philadelphia Constitution; of Cole Diggs, grandson of Sir Dudley Diggs of the London Company; and of Colonel Henry Willis, the founder of Fredericksburg.³

Robertson's mother, Josephine Ragland Willis Robertson, was a direct descendant of Benjamin Harrison, a signer of the Declaration of Independence.⁴ Mrs. Robertson also seemed to direct her son to a life of public service. She had served as president of the Baptist Women's Missionary

Union and was admired across the state for her public speaking.⁵ The Senator's father, the Reverend Franklin Pierce Robertson, was a noted Baptist missionary in Virginia who imparted to his son the virtues of "Spartan discipline, pioneer individualism, and Puritan and Calvinist morality".⁶ The rigid and austere lifestyle of the Reverend Robertson had a tremendous impact upon his son. Throughout his life, Willis Robertson would guide his personal and political actions along certain basic principles or what he called the "eternal truths".⁷ The personal magnetism of his father was depicted in Robertson's speeches. Often the Senator appeared to his constituents as a preacher lecturing on a meaningful lesson to his parishioners:

He salted his rhetoric with quotations from Jonathan Edwards, Shakespeare and the Bible, he warned of Ahab and his vineyard, spoke of the milleniums and Gabriel's horn. On the stump, he could be fearsome, peering down on his audience with a ruddy, weatherbeaten face and thick, brushy eyebrows.⁸

In 1891, young Willis moved with his parents back to their native state of Virginia.⁹ The family settled in Lynchburg, where he attended the public schools. Since Robertson's father was a Baptist missionary, Willis had grown accustomed to moving to different regions of West Virginia, North Carolina, and Virginia.¹⁰ Yet the family decided to remain in Lynchburg permanently, in order that

their son could continue his education.

While attending elementary school, young Robertson was befriended by a classmate, Carter Glass Jr.¹¹ His new friend was the son of Virginia's most powerful politician, United States Senator Carter Glass. Since Willis often was in the company of the younger Glass, Senator Glass thought of him as one of the family. Soon a close personal and political relationship developed which was to remain with Willis Robertson throughout his first years of public office.¹² In fact, Senator Glass once remarked to the ambitious Robertson that he would do his utmost in order that he could succeed to the Senate.¹³

At the age of sixteen, Willis Robertson decided to enroll at Richmond College.¹⁴ The fascinating story of the Robertson family inspired him to study history in college. While attending school, he came under the influence of another great Virginian, Dr. S. C. Mitchell, professor of history.¹⁵ Dr. Mitchell took a personal interest in the young man and instilled in him a desire for learning and a strong interest in the American political process. Through his studies, Robertson became a great admirer of Woodrow Wilson, the scholar in American political science and Governor of New Jersey. Robertson was particularly impressed by Governor Wilson since he was, in his opinion, the first scholar to offer a practical solution to the problem of international conflict.¹⁶ Willis' hard work earned

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his many academic achievements, particularly Phi Beta Kappa and Omicron Delta Kappa.¹⁷

Willis Robertson excelled on the athletic field as well as the classroom. He was Richmond College's tennis champion, the state champion in the 16-pound hammer throw, and the right tackle for the football team.¹⁸ He did not only enjoy intercollegiate sports but during college, Willis became an avid hunter and fisherman. Whether on the playing field or alongside a mountain stream, he developed a strong feeling for the outdoors.¹⁹

After receiving his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1907, Robertson remained at Richmond College for another year in order to complete the requirements for a law degree.²⁰ Following graduation, he was admitted to the Virginia bar and established his practice in Buena Vista, Virginia, with his cousin, R. Holman Willis.²¹ As a lawyer, Willis Robertson displayed the oratorical skill he inherited from his mother. His analytical mind and keen insight into the law impressed the people of Rockbridge County. The young attorney soon acquired a strong reputation for his ability. In 1922, the Lexington Gazette reported that A. Willis Robertson was "marked a young man of more than average success."²² Upon establishing a law practice in Rockbridge County, the young lawyer moved to Lexington, Virginia in 1910. Lexington was to remain his home for the rest of his life.

In 1912, Willis Robertson's political idol, Woodrow Wilson,

announced his candidacy for the Democratic presidential nomination. With Wilson's declaration, Robertson's political ambitions reappeared. The State Democratic Convention in 1912 served as an entry into Virginia politics.²³ After the convention's nomination of Wilson, Robertson devoted his time and energies to the Democratic Party in Virginia and its standard-bearer, Senator Carter Glass: "The experience confirmed Robertson's resolution to emulate his colonial ancestors by making public service and the study of political science his major undertaking; and during the next four years he was an unflagging worker in the Glass organization, then dominant in the Virginia political scene."²⁴

In return for Robertson's devotion to the Democratic party, party leaders selected the Lexington attorney as their nominee for the State Senate in 1915. Willis Robertson's renown as an industrious worker for the party and a successful lawyer made him a clear choice to the voters of Rockbridge County. Consequently, he was elected overwhelmingly to a six-year term. Unfortunately, Robertson did not serve his term as State Senator uninterrupted. The outbreak of World War I led the Virginian to volunteer for military service in August 1917.²⁵

After the war, Major Robertson returned to Lexington to complete his term in the State Senate. By 1922, he became tired of the position and chose not to run for re-election. He decided to return to his law practice in Lexington. But

Willis Robertson could not escape the lure of politics. A few months following his "retirement" from political office, the former State Senator declared himself a candidate for the position of Commonwealths Attorney of Rockbridge County. Once again the aspiring, young attorney was elected to office. He was to hold this position until 1928.²⁶

Willis Robertson always loved a challenge. In 1928 Governor Harry Flood Byrd presented Willis Robertson with one of the greatest challenges of Virginia's recent history - the preservation of her wildlife. Virginia's fish and game were dwindling to small numbers. Governor Byrd, a political associate of Robertson, knew that Robertson had a deep love for the outdoors and nature. But the Lexington attorney was also a very favorable choice since he was a loyal Democrat and a diligent worker for the party. Thus Governor Byrd named his friend and associate to the chairmanship of the Commission on Game and Inland Fisheries.²⁷

Willis Robertson performed the role of commissioner admirably. As Virginia's first game commissioner, Robertson instituted many significant conservation programs. The commissioner was the creator of Virginia's fish hatchery system, which was responsible for restocking Virginia's lakes and streams with game fish. He also established the first game breeding refuges in an effort to replenish Virginia's wildlife. The Commissioner was also responsible for Virginia's

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first game warden system. Prior to Robertson's role as game commissioner, illegal hunters and poachers had ravaged the wildlife of the state with little fear of reprisal.²⁸

With little money and limited personnel, Willis Robertson was able to provide Virginia with a creditable wildlife management system. In recognition for his achievements, Democrats of Rockbridge County chose him as their nominee for the United States Congress in 1932. For seventeen years, he had furnished his services to the state. Robertson realized that his work as commissioner of Virginia's game was far from completed, but his concern for the preservation of wildlife was not confined to the borders of Virginia. Across the United States, hunters, sportsmen, and conservationists protested the decimation of wildlife and the inadequacy of federal game laws. Once more, Willis Robertson envisioned an enormous challenge being presented before him. With pleasure, he accepted his party's nomination and prepared to campaign throughout the Seventh Congressional District. The former game commissioner was elected to the House of Representatives by a very favorable margin.²⁹

In the Congress, Robertson extended his time and abilities to many different interests. His wide knowledge in the fields of taxation, foreign trade, banking, and wildlife conservation made him a valuable asset to any committee. In less than two years, he captured the attention of Congressional

leaders. Secretary of State Cordell Hull personally requested the freshman congressman to spearhead the drive for ratification of the reciprocal trade treaties in the House of Representatives. Robertson's eloquence was also able to persuade congressional leaders to approve a resolution creating a special committee, the Select House Committee on the Conservation of Wildlife Resources. Willis Robertson's distinction as a pioneer conservationist in Virginia made him the logical choice to be chairman of that committee. He was to serve as chairman for fourteen years, until his election to the United States Senate.³⁰ Under his chairmanship, the committee was destined to begin the greatest wildlife conservation movement in the history of the United States. As the magazine Pathfinder stated: "The Select House Committee on the Conservation of Wildlife Resources had a tremendous influence in shaping and guiding federal policy in the field."³¹

While in the House of Representatives, the Virginian distinguished himself in the area of finance. The disastrous results of the Great Depression forced many of the country's legislators to modify their ideas concerning inflation, buying on credit, government spending, and the stability of the United States dollar. Robertson's stance for fiscal conservatism became a popular rallying point for many congressmen. After his appointment to the House Ways and Means Committee, the dangers of overinflated currency became publicly

known to all Americans. Throughout his fourteen years as congressman, Willis Robertson concerned himself with the financial solvency of the United States. While President Franklin D. Roosevelt urged a greater role for the government in restoring the United States economy, Congressman Robertson fought to restrict the power of "big government" and lower the ceiling on government spending.³²

The precarious financial situation of the United States during the 1930s and early 1940s demanded the attention of a knowledgeable legislator such as Robertson. However, the problems of national finance did not inhibit his efforts to enact important conservation laws. During his years in the House of Representatives, the Virginian's interest in the preservation of wildlife, especially waterfowl, led him to begin the national movement to protect America's vanishing wilderness.³³ In 1934, the Congressman sponsored the Migratory Bird Hunting Stamp Act or The Duck Stamp Act, which provided funds for the creation of waterfowl refuges. Prior to The Duck Stamp Act, hunters had slaughtered flocks of duck, geese, and swan as they migrated south for the winter. Since there were no refuges, waterfowl were vulnerable to hunters' rifles along every part of their journey. Robertson's Duck Stamp Act provided sanctuaries from the hunter's guns for the migrating waterfowl.³⁴

In 1937, Robertson and Senator Key Pittman of Nevada proposed the most comprehensive game law ever written to

the Congress of the United States. Within this bill lay the authority of the Federal Government to supply millions of dollars for wild game protection. The Federal Aid to Wildlife Restoration Act or the Pittman-Robertson Act was passed by both houses of the Congress on September 2, 1937. The passage of this bill officially transferred the responsibility of wildlife protection from the states to the United States government. With the support of the Federal Government, the Virginian was able to initiate a national conservation program that included all the states.³⁵

The Virginian's achievements in the House of Representatives did not go unnoticed by his constituents. In 1946 Senator Carter Glass died suddenly and Virginia Democrats quickly convened to name a successor to fulfill Glass' unexpired term. Unanimously, the Democrats selected Congressman Robertson to succeed to Senator Glass' seat.³⁶ As Carter Glass had predicted forty years earlier, Robertson was to become his successor in the United States Senate. For the next twenty years he was to serve in the Senate with Harry Flood Byrd.

Since Robertson was a man of influence in the House of Representatives, Democrats welcomed his presence in the Senate. Following his election to his own Senate term in 1948, the Virginian voiced his ideas on taxation, finance, banking, and conservation to his fellow senators. The Senator's financial expertise was quickly recognized by the

Senate Majority Leader and he was named to the chairmanship of the Senate Banking and Currency Committee.³⁷ The Senator was also selected to be a member of the Appropriations Committee.³⁸ During his twenty years in the Senate, Robertson was credited with many banking laws and reforms. His fiscal conservatism was praised by the nation's bankers who regarded him as "the watchdog of the treasury."³⁹

The Senator's involvement with the country's financial problems distracted him from his conservation work. But Robertson never removed himself from his role as the leader of the congressional movement to preserve wildlife in the United States. The Senator took a personal interest in the protests of hunters and fishermen regarding the ineffectiveness of game laws.⁴⁰ He was also greatly disturbed by the exorbitant corruption in the conservation activities of the federal government.⁴¹ In an attempt to curtail the excessive spending and bureaucratic waste of the government, the Senator personally supervised the application of the federal funds under the Pittman-Robertson Act.⁴²

In 1966, after twenty years of public service in the Senate and thirty four years in the Congress, Robertson decided to run for one last term as Senator from Virginia. At age 79, he was in amazingly good health and his sharp wit was still present. However, the challenger for the Democratic nomination, Congressman William B. Spong, questioned the ability of a seventy-nine year old man to conduct the

important business of representing Virginia in the United States Senate. Spong argued that a younger man with fresh ideas was needed. In a hard fought campaign, William B. Spong narrowly defeated the incumbent Senator Robertson for the Democratic nomination. A difference of 611 votes separated Willis Robertson from Spong. For the first time in his political life, Robertson had suffered defeat.⁴³

The Senator accepted the mandate of the voters like a true gentleman. Robertson did not order a recount of the votes fearing a split among Virginia Democrats. He even retired early from the Senate in order to give Senator-elect Spong a jump in seniority over other freshman senators.⁴⁴ After his retirement from public life, Robertson returned to Lexington. Although he was forced to retire from the United States Senate, the former Senator remained active in Rockbridge County. He established his law practice again and reacquainted himself with his constituents.⁴⁵ After thirty-four long years in Washington, Robertson had missed some of his good friends in the Seventh Congressional District. But Robertson was not to remain in Lexington for very long. In the fall of 1966, he accepted a position as consultant to the World Bank.⁴⁶ Describing his work, the former Senator remarked: "Maybe I am a little bit of missionary. I think I'm reverting to my boyhood training. I was trained to help people."⁴⁷ Robertson's financial acumen was a valuable contribution to the activities of the World Bank. After

two years, the former Senator officially retired from public life and returned to Lexington.⁴⁸

Tragedy struck the Senator in 1968 when his wife of 48 years, Gladys Churchill Robertson, passed away. Her death affected Robertson tremendously.⁴⁹ His health began to fail quickly. His once robust physical health was tarnished by a recurring heart ailment. On November 1, 1971 Senator Robertson died in Stonewall Jackson Memorial Hospital in Lexington, Virginia at the age of eighty-four.⁵⁰

The death of this Virginia statesman brought to a close a life of devoted public service to state and nation. For more than half a century, Robertson had served the interests of the people of Virginia. Throughout the Old Dominion the Senator had accumulated a large group of loyal supporters. The popularity of Robertson among his constituents is best exemplified by the fact that from 1915, the year Robertson won election to the State Senate, until 1966, when Robertson lost the Democratic nomination for Senator, the Senator had never experienced political defeat. To this day, Willis Robertson still holds the Virginia record for winning an election by the largest majority 506,169 out of 622,280 votes cast in 1960 and for the narrowest margin of defeat, 611 votes, in the Democratic primary of 1966.⁵¹

Senator Robertson expressed deep concern for his constituents: "He felt in his blood the concerns of the farmer, small town folk, and the mountaineer."⁵² The Senator often

worked in his office sixteen hours a day, dedicating his time and attention to the matters which concerned the citizens of Virginia. As Mrs. Blandy Clarkson, neighbor and friend of A. Willis Robertson, recalled: "The Senator's mind was always taken up with some problem."⁵³

Though he was subjected to the rigors of public life for over fifty years, by nature the Senator was a very reserved and private individual. The Senator was also a very devoted husband and father. On October 19, 1920, Willis Robertson had married Gladys Churchill Willis. The Robertsons had two children, both boys, Willis Jr. and Marion Gordon. Often Mrs. Robertson was called upon to represent her husband in Rockbridge County while the Senator was busy in Washington. She also supported her husband's election campaigns by writing over half his speeches. Senator Robertson's sons followed their father's footsteps into public life. A. Willis Robertson Jr. became a prominent attorney in Atlanta, Georgia and the Reverend Marion Gordon "Pat" Robertson became president of the Christian Broadcasting Network.⁵⁴

Since the Senator was often in the public limelight, he cherished the moments he could spend alone with his family or the outdoors. The wilderness of Virginia invigorated him to meet the challenges of his day:

A man does not have to kill game or fish to enjoy the out-of-doors and to get inspired from it. I love nothing better

than to tramp through a boundary of virgin timber. . . It is an inspiration for me to stand beneath an Oak or a Hemlock that is three or four hundred years old and to realize that it has withstood the vicissitudes of the centuries. From such an uncrowned monarch of the forest, man can learn how to clasp with tougher roots the inspiring earth.⁵⁵

The Senator felt great pride in being a Virginian. Robertson was always eager to show his fellow Congressmen and Senators the expanse of Virginia's forests and wildlife. He was particularly proud of his efforts to save the scenic beauty of the state. Former Senator Allan Bible of Nevada remembered Robertson's love of nature: "There was a private side though, that only his friends were privileged to experience. That was his deep love for the great outdoors, particularly the woods and fields and the lakes and streams of Virginia."⁵⁶

As a result of his adoration of the outdoors, Robertson was in superb health for most of his life. Following his college days, the Senator enjoyed hunting and fishing as his regular exercise. While serving in Congress, Robertson began each day with exercises. Later he continued his daily regimen in the Senate gymnasium.⁵⁷ In his last term as senator, he invited a reporter to test the muscular definition of his abdomen. The reporter obliged Senator Robertson and wrote: "He tensed it and let me bang it with my Sunday punch. Only my fist showed ill effects."⁵⁸

In the history books Willis Robertson has been remembered for his role in United States financial policy. The Senator's chairmanship of the Committee on Banking and Currency, his ranking membership on the Appropriations Committee, and his success in curbing excessive government spending were all notable accomplishments. However, Senator Robertson was also a leader in the field of conservation, a cause which did not merit consideration from government officials or historians until recently. During the 1930s, Robertson's fight to protect the nation's natural resources through legislation was the first constructive attempt at preserving our vanishing wilderness.⁵⁹ The Virginian's struggle to save forests from destruction and free rivers of pollution forewarned Americans of the dangers of the exploitation of our resources. Due to Robertson's efforts, politicians, civic leaders, and government officials became aware of the magnitude of the problem. In the 1960s, Senator Robert F. Kennedy of New York heeded the warning Senator Robertson had given thirty years earlier: "We in Government have begun to recognize the critical work which must be done at all levels - local, state, and federal - in ending the pollution of our waters."⁶⁰

Of all his contributions, the Senator regarded his achievements in wildlife conservation as the ones most personally rewarding. Robertson once declared: "I would be happy if history records my efforts in behalf of

conservation as a worthwhile contribution to my day and generation."⁶¹ To Willis Robertson, the honors he received for a half a century of public service could not overshadow his personal satisfaction in protecting wildlife. Today, many hunting and fishing areas enjoyed by sportsmen are the result of the cooperative State-Federal programs which he sponsored.⁶²

The role of Willis Robertson in the field of wildlife conservation has been neglected by historians because of his achievements in finance, banking laws, and anti-inflationary policy. But Robertson's championship of the first federal game laws to protect wildlife was not any less important than these other accomplishments. The pioneering days of conservation produced a rare breed of men. Protectors of wildlife, such as Willis Robertson, embodied a deep love for both the ideals and the scenic heritage of our country. These men sacrificed themselves to a cause that did not receive the popular support of the government or the people. For this particular reason, the sportsmen of today owe an enormous debt to the Virginian for his endeavors in conservation several decades before the preservation of natural resources became a topic of concern. Upon notification of Senator Robertson's death, Senator Strom Thurmond of South Carolina asked the Senate for the opportunity to speak on the passing of this legislator. Senator Thurmond asked his fellow senators to remember the example

Senator Robertson had set for them:

Before ecology and environment became household words, Willis Robertson knew of the importance of both and devoted much of his energy and constructive effort to preserve the beauty and quality of our natural resources. He was an avid outdoorsman; he loved the mountains and the streams of his native Virginia. He worked hard for fish and game policies and many people throughout the United States are today enjoying hunting and fishing areas, because of cooperative State-Federal programs which Willis Robertson promoted.⁶³

Since Senator Robertson considered his efforts in wildlife conservation to be his greatest contribution to United States history, it is only proper and fitting that we assess the role of the Senator in this light. In the following pages I will hope to prove that the Senator was clearly a man ahead of his time, a true pioneer in the field of conservation.

Chapter I - Footnotes

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- ³⁴Ross O. Stevens, Talk About Wildlife (Raleigh, North Carolina: Bynum Printing, 1944), 151-154.
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Chapter II.

A. Willis Robertson and Virginia Politics

The State Democratic Convention of 1912 kindled within Willis Robertson the desire to emulate his ancestors by making public service his ambition in life.¹ The aspiring Robertson entered Virginia politics in order to advocate the ideals and programs of his political idol, Woodrow Wilson. Consequently, the Virginian proudly served as a Wilson delegate to the State Convention.² In the eyes of the young lawyer, the nomination and subsequent election of Wilson represented a new beginning for Virginia and the United States. For the next three years, he dedicated his time and efforts to furthering the programs of President Wilson in Virginia.³ Robertson's labors were not unappreciated. In 1915, Democratic leaders urged him to announce his candidacy for the State Senate. His popularity in Rockbridge and Bedford Counties was well-known.⁴ Robertson accepted the party's nomination, and in 1915 he was elected to the State Senate "by a handsome plurality over two opponents who were much older and better known."⁵

Democrats were anxious to place the knowledgeable and talented State Senator on the most important committees. As a result, Robertson was assigned to the Justice, Public Institutions, and Education Committees.⁶ In respect for Robertson's ability, Democratic leaders named him to the

powerful Steering Committee, which held the responsibility of naming State Senators to other committees.⁷ His appointment to the Steering Committee made him the youngest Senator who ever sat on this committee.⁸

Unfortunately, Robertson's bright career as a State Senator was interrupted by the outbreak of World War I. Once again the Senator's actions were guided by the example his ancestors had set. While a child, he used to listen to his grandfather, Absalom Willis, tell stories of his family. The Senator's grandfather came from a large family, 20 brothers and a sister. With the eruption of the Civil War, the Willis family supported the cause of the Confederacy. Of the twenty brothers ten were killed during the war.⁹ Thus, Senator Robertson experienced little hesitancy in volunteering his services to the Officer's Reserve Corps at Fort Meyers, Virginia.¹⁰ In fact, he was the first State Senator from Virginia to step forward.¹¹ The Senator entered the Second Officers Training Camp in August 1917 and was commissioned a first lieutenant in the infantry. Because of his analytical mind and excellent leadership abilities, the Virginian was a valuable man to the United States Army. During the war, he was stationed at 80th Division Headquarters at Camp Lee, Virginia and with the Adjutant Generals Office in Washington, D. C.¹² With the European powers signing of the Versailles Treaty, he was honorably discharged from the army with the rank of major.

After the war, the Major returned to the State Senate to fulfill his term of office. Once more he concentrated on the important matters concerning his constituents. Of the utmost concern to Virginians was the terrible condition of the state's roads. Throughout Virginia unpaved roads had been a source of many problems for farmers and businessmen. D. B. Ryland, business manager of the Lynchburg Chamber of Commerce, who was an authority on the subject of state roads remarked on the sad situation of Virginia's roads:

Virginia's penalty for her lack of a highway system is no less than \$50,000,000 a year. At least \$27,000,000 is being lost annually because surplus food products raised on the farms of the state are allowed to go to waste on account of the difficulty of getting them to market over the existing roads. Bad roads are also resulting in families leaving the farms and going to the city, with a consequent decrease in food production.¹³

The poor condition of Virginia's roads also harmed the state's tourist industry. The total loss of revenue was estimated at \$23,000,000, because tourists who would spend money in Virginia were kept from traveling within the state due to the poor transportation system.¹⁴

The State Senate recognized the problem. As early as 1916, the State Senate had appointed a joint commission to investigate possible ideas to improve Virginia's thoroughfares. Robertson was named to this special committee. However, any possible progress by the committee was soon checked

by the events of World War I. With the end of the war, the Senator redirected his attention to the problems of Virginia's roads. With his initiative, the committee was revived. After much consultation, the committee concluded that the trouble behind Virginia's transportation system could be traced to the financing of the construction of highways. In Virginia, roads were constructed with the contributions of the State and the counties. The State and the particular county, where the road was being built, each agreed to pay half of the total construction costs. Although sufficient funds were collected, the application of these monies to highway construction was a financial disaster. The Lexington Gazette reported that bureaucratic waste was resulting in poor roads for Rockbridge County:¹⁵

Is it not time we were getting a system of road building, maintenance, and control suited to modern motor traffic? Some years ago the State of Virginia adopted the system of State aid by which the State would contribute as much as one-half to permanent construction and re-construction of roads if the counties would contribute the other half. However it results in patches of good road distributed here and there. As a typical illustration take the road from here to Buena Vista. A little hard surface road at Lexington, 3 miles of mud and rock, 3½ miles of good macadam, 1 mile of mud and some 3 miles of macadam now getting to need repairs badly.¹⁶

Since the state roads were in such poor shape, funds for construction had to be spent on repairs. Under the

present plan, state officials determined that it would require not less than sixteen years to complete the state highway system.¹⁷ But Robertson realized that Virginia's economy could not withstand sixteen years of highway construction. If the state could secure additional funds for road construction, the State Highway Commissioner determined that the highway could be completed in less than six years.¹⁸ Upon hearing this optimistic report, Robertson campaigned throughout the state in an effort to drum up support for Virginia's highway system. He appealed to the "peacetime patriotism" of Rockbridge County residents.¹⁹ At a town meeting in Lexington, the Senator stated "If every man lives for himself alone and does only what he receives a direct benefit for doing and thinks that citizenship entails no obligation of patriotism in times of peace, there will never be any good roads in Virginia".²⁰

Robertson was well aware of the fact that Virginians were not going to part with their money easily. Taxes in Rockbridge County were considered to be too high and made people skeptical of Robertson's proposals to raise money. After much deliberation, the State Senate Committee discovered a viable solution through the implementation of a constitutional amendment permitting the State to issue bonds.²¹ However, an amendment to the Virginia constitution had to be voted upon by the people in the next

general election. Robertson approved the use of state bonds, because "Virginia's highway system could be constructed without increasing taxes one penny."²² Virginians acknowledged the serious state of their roads and voted overwhelmingly for the public referendum on November 3, 1920. Following the approval of the amendment, the first appropriations were made for Virginia's new highway system. In recognition of the Senator's contributions, the plan under which the first fourteen million dollars were allocated to the construction of roads was called the Robertson Road Act.²³ Robertson assured his constituents of the success of the project by later sponsoring a bill creating the Virginia State Highway Department. This bill, which was passed unanimously, was responsible for providing an agency to supervise the construction of the state thoroughfares.²⁴

Although Robertson played a major role in providing Virginia with her first modern roads, he considered his sponsoring of the bill creating the State Game and Fish Department to be his greatest accomplishment as a State Senator. Being an avid hunter and fisherman, the Senator understood that the safety of Virginia's wildlife would be placed in jeopardy with the construction of a highway system. Therefore, his bill established an agency to protect the natural habitat of Virginia's fish and game.²⁵

In 1922, Robertson's term as State Senator from Rockbridge and Bedford Counties ended. Rather than seek

re-election, the Senator decided to return to his law practice in Lexington. Although Robertson was removed from the center of Virginia politics, he still kept an active interest in the affairs of the state. With the support of his many friends in Rockbridge County, he was elected to the office of Commonwealth Attorney for Rockbridge County, a position he retained until 1928.²⁶

To Virginia's Democrats, Robertson was an essential man to their organization. He was young, popular, and hardworking. His reputation as a powerful orator was known throughout the state. Many Democrats were disappointed that Robertson did not seek re-election to the State Senate in 1922, but they were determined to keep him involved in the party.²⁷ One Democrat who was particularly interested in Robertson's career was Harry Flood Byrd. Both men had been born in the same town, Martinsburg, West Virginia, within two weeks of each other and a few blocks apart.²⁸ They both entered the Virginia legislature as State Senators in 1916 and were assigned to the finance committee together. Not unexpectedly, they developed a close personal and political relationship. A relationship which later tarnished Robertson's career. While Robertson "retired" from politics in 1922, Senator Byrd continued his search for political fame. In 1926, Byrd was elected Governor of Virginia. In one of his first acts as governor, he appointed his old

associate Robertson to the chairmanship of the new Commission on Game and Inland Fishers.²⁹ Byrd knew that Robertson enjoyed hunting and fishing and that he was especially concerned about the preservation of wildlife. But to Governor Byrd, the chairmanship of the Commission on Game and Inland Fisheries was more important as a political favor to Willis Robertson in appreciation for his hard work for the party.³⁰ Byrd was also aware that Robertson would accept such a position in the gubernatorial cabinet with little hesitation. Thus, Byrd would have the talented Robertson working for his administration.³¹

Robertson was quite content as the Commonwealth Attorney for Rockbridge County, but the opportunity to serve as Virginia's first chairman of the Commission on Game and Inland Fisheries was an offer he could not refuse. Since his college days, Robertson had felt a deep love for the outdoors. With his retirement from the State Senate, he returned to his hunting and fishing. However, he noticed a drastic reduction in the wildlife population of Rockbridge County. By the early twentieth century, many birds and animals had vanished from Virginia's forests.³² Beavers had disappeared from the state by 1910, and the famous Southern fox squirrel had been eliminated by 1895. Predators, such as the timber wolf and the cougar, were exterminated by bounty hunters. Birds such as the fisher, the heath-hen,

and the marten no longer nested in Virginia. Prior to the mid-nineteenth century, Virginia had supported bison and elk, but, with man's cutting of the forests, they were soon killed.³²

The disappearance of Virginia's once abundant wildlife saddened Robertson. Very few people realized the serious predicament of Virginia's wildlife. To many people, the preservation of birds and animals was of little importance, compared to the economic problems of the day. The public disavowed any obligation to protect wildlife. Hunters rejected the notion of possible restrictions upon their bag limit of game. Fishermen rarely obeyed the few regulations concerning the number of fish to be caught. In general, people demonstrated no consideration for the country's natural resources. Conservationists in the 1920s and 1930s, such as Robertson, sought to educate the public as to their responsibility of protecting the nation's fish and game. Only by the public's awareness of the problem could wildlife be saved:

With the world's constantly increasing human population, and the resulting economic pressures to turn the remaining wild lands into croplands, one cannot look to the future with optimism. Only through continued efforts to educate the public regarding their moral responsibilities of sharing this world with other animals, to teach people that it is possible to derive as much or more pleasure from watching and studying animals as from shooting

them, and to preserve natural areas for the preservation and propagation of endangered species, will it be possible to show our descendants the extraordinary beauty and incalculable value of waterfowl.³³

Willis Robertson was also aware that wildlife was a tremendous asset to the state and national economy. Several large industries depended upon the existence of wildlife. National companies which manufactured fishing tackle and other equipment estimated their receipts at \$35,000,000.³⁴ Manufacturers of guns and ammunition sold \$70,000,000 worth of firearms a year.³⁵ In addition, \$46,500,000 of tents, sporting goods, camping gear, and other outdoor paraphernalia were marketed.³⁶ In total, America's fish and game was responsible for a multi-million dollar business. To the states, wildlife held a very high monetary value. In 1935, the Federal Government estimated the value of game taken in the state of New York to be \$3,239,277.³⁷ Idaho approximated the value of their game at \$1,000,000.³⁸ Robertson's home state, Virginia, assessed the value of fish and game at over \$1,000,000.³⁹

Until the turn of the century, man's activities in regard to wildlife were of a destructive nature. But with the rapid disappearance of animal life from the land, a noticeable change occurred in the attitudes of a few men. These men felt that the elimination of wildlife was a

serious mistake which would have tremendous repercussions upon the American people. As a State Senator, Robertson foresaw a bleak future for Virginia's fish and game unless regulatory measures were taken. In 1916, he sponsored a bill creating the State Department of Fish and Game, this department later became the Commission of Game and Inland Fisheries. He saw the need for the state to become active in apprehending illegal hunters and poachers, restocking the fish and game of the state, and restoring the natural habitat of Virginia's birds and animals. With his appointment to the chairmanship of the Commission on Game and Inland Fisheries, he was determined to carry his plans into action.⁴⁰

As commissioner, Robertson's first priority was to gain the support of Virginians in his attempt to restore the state's wildlife. For years, Virginians had been inclined to view wildlife as an inexhaustible resource. The public, at first, ignored Robertson's warnings about the possible extinction of the state's fish and game. The Lexington Gazette supported Robertson's difficult task of educating the people about the value of wildlife.⁴¹

Major Willis Robertson, head of the Game and Inland Fisheries Commission, is getting greater results in the work of game conservation and getting them at lower cost than ever before. But he is having an uphill fight against ignorance and prejudice. It really seems that quite a large part of the

rural population is opposed to the presence of game, especially elk, bear, and birds; while the urban population, including so called "sportsmen" is indifferent. The utter lack of appreciation of the value in dollars, of game, is beyond belief.⁴²

Another major obstacle confronting Robertson was the insolvency of the Commission on Game and Inland Fisheries. In order for the state to produce more fish and game, the Commissioner knew that it was necessary that the Commission "rearrange the financial affairs of the department, along sound business lines."⁴³ Prior to Robertson's chairmanship, the State Department of Fish and Game had a notorious reputation for being inefficient and ineffective, especially in the area of enforcement. Illegal hunters and poachers were a particularly troublesome problem. Hunters and fishermen saw little reason to purchase a license before enjoying their sport. If a sportsman was caught for violating the law, a fine was sometimes imposed but rarely collected. Thus, Robertson dedicated his time to making the game warden system and other branches of the Commission more efficient. Although he dismissed twenty-five game wardens, he still secured more convictions in 1927 than in any other year. In less than one year, he established a creditable state fish and game department: "For an eleven month period the wardens travelled 886,224 miles, inspected 142,820 licenses, killed 10,075 dogs, and secured 4,507

convictions in which the fines and costs amounted to \$45,146,210."⁴⁴ The former Senator's leadership and fiscal conservatism had eliminated almost all the corruption and bureaucratic waste in the department. With the reorganization of the Commission complete, Robertson began his program to restore the wildlife of Virginia.⁴⁵

One of the first constructive projects he initiated in Virginia was the restocking of game. In 1927, he attempted to reintroduce elk to the mountains of Virginia. The last native elk had been killed in 1885. Robertson was able to acquire several herds of elk from Yellowstone National Park.⁴⁶ Previous legislation did not provide adequate protection for these powerful, migratory animals. Robertson was disturbed by the flexibility of game laws which allowed the elks to be killed:

The law provides an open season from December 15 to December 31, but it provides that anyone may kill elk found damaging crops or trees on his own land. This makes practically a 12 month's open season, and Major Robertson says that it appears that the people really do not want elk or deer or bear.⁴⁷

The Commission also commenced a program to reintroduce quail, ruffed grouse, and white-tailed deer in Virginia. Under Robertson's supervision, the Commission released 5,000 Texas quail and hundreds of Hungarian partridges throughout the Blue Ridge mountains.⁴⁸ To increase the birds' chances

of survival, the Commission offered to supply free seed to any land owner who would plant it near a suitable nesting area.⁴⁹ White-tailed deer were virtually extinct in Virginia by 1920. With the cooperation of game officials in Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin, and New York, Robertson was able to transport thousands of deer to Virginia.⁵⁰ One of his proudest achievements was the successful increase in the population of ruffed grouse. A few years earlier, the ruffed grouse had been considered extinct in the eastern United States. Through restocking, this bird returned to its natural environment: "While this wonderful game bird may never be restored to the Tidewater counties, there is reason to believe that it can and will be restored to all the mountain counties and in the adjacent counties of the Piedmont section."⁵¹ The restocking of Virginia's game continued throughout Robertson's term of office.

The former Senator also devoted his attention to the improvement of Virginia's lakes and streams. The Commissioner was especially concerned about the depletion of fish from the state's waters. In the past, actions to protect Virginia's fishing areas were hindered by a lack of funds and open violation of fishing laws and regulations.⁵² However, the Commissioner now had the services of a vigorous and diligent game warden system to apprehend law-breakers. He also was able to establish the first trout

hatcheries in the state to restock lakes and streams.⁵³

Once the fish and game returned to Virginia, it was important that they were provided with adequate protection. Robertson secured wildlife from possible harm in a number of ways. First, the Commissioner used his game wardens to assist the farmers in posting and patrolling private game sanctuaries. Second, the Commission purchased lands not owned by the federal government for the express purpose of establishing sanctuaries and game refuges. Finally, Robertson was able to prevent the destruction of domestic animals, such as livestock and sheep, by stray wild dogs. He presented to the Virginia legislature a bill prohibiting dog owners from allowing their animals to run wild. The Commissioner also proposed that dog owners be taxed in an effort to control the stray dog population. Robertson's bills were passed overwhelmingly, and the results were highly beneficial to Virginia's citizens and wildlife. Revenues from the Dog Tax were spent on the construction of state roads and public schools. The Dog Tax removed thousands of dogs from the streets and reduced the chances of the public contracting rabies. Most importantly, Robertson's bill to eliminate wild dogs and to compensate ranchers for their losses saved the sheep industry from bankruptcy.⁵⁴

"It is generally conceded by those conversant with the matter that but for the activity of the game wardens in eliminating

the cur dog, coupled with the compensation fund for stock losses realized from the dog tax, the sheep industry in Virginia would ere this have been put out of business."⁵⁵

The restocking of Virginia's wildlife resulted in much more than a return of the birds and animals. During Robertson's tenure as chairman of the Commission on Game and Inland Fisheries, many laws and regulations were established for the permanent protection of wildlife. Such protective measures as restricted hunting and fishing seasons and bag limits gave the state's fish and game a fighting chance at survival.⁵⁶

The accomplishments of Robertson were many during his term as chairman of the Commission on Game and Inland Fisheries. As commissioner, Robertson set a precedent to be emulated by his successors and other conservationists. To the people of Virginia, he will always be remembered for his creation of the first fish hatchery system in the state, the establishment of the first sanctuaries and game breeding farms, the successful restocking of Virginia's fish and game, and the introduction of an effective game warden system.⁵⁷

Conservationists respect Robertson's role as a game commissioner for another reason. He was one of the country's first legislators to represent the cause of wildlife because of his own convictions and not for political reasons. In the 1920's and 1930's, fish and game departments served

as employment agencies for the political party in power.⁵⁸ In fact, Robertson owed his position to the state Democratic party. Usually the commissioner was controlled by the governor and instructed to do as he was told. Rarely was the commissioner ever qualified to hold his position:

Often state game and fish administrators have been forced to hire old-line politically minded and dominated employees, not only because the officeholder's back home made such requests but also because a person who is adept at politics can help build political organizations for such administrators. While such personnel may help retain game and fish administrators in office, the total result for wildlife can be and frequently has been entirely negative.⁵⁹

Unlike other state game commissioners, Robertson followed his own beliefs and principles. Byrd respected the judgement of his game commissioner and allowed him to formulate his own policies. Robertson was truly a rare breed. He did not view the job of commissioner as a steppingstone to political fame. He had already served with distinction in the State Senate and had refused to seek renomination. But Robertson's achievements as state game commissioner did not go unnoticed by Virginians or the state Democrats. After much urging by his friends and associates, he announced his candidacy for the United States Congressional seat in the Seventh District. For the next thirty-five years, the Virginian was to argue for the preservation of wildlife,

not only on a local basis, but as a national concern. Throughout his public life, Robertson would envision the task of preserving the nation's fish and game as a personal, not a political, responsibility. For this reason, he was truly a man ahead of his time.

Chapter II - Footnotes

- ¹Current Biography, 1949, 526-528.
- ²Ibid.
- ³Ibid.
- ⁴Lexington Gazette, August 22, 1917, 2.
- ⁵Ibid.
- ⁶Current Biography, 1949, 526-528.
- ⁷Lexington Gazette, August 22, 1917, 2.
- ⁸Ibid.
- ⁹Lexington Gazette, November 3, 1971, 1.
- ¹⁰Lexington Gazette, August 22, 1917, 2.
- ¹¹Ibid.
- ¹²National Cyclopedia of American Biography, 1960, 78.
- ¹³Lexington Gazette, September 1, 1920, 3.
- ¹⁴Ibid.
- ¹⁵Lexington Gazette, February 4, 1920, 3.
- ¹⁶Ibid.
- ¹⁷Lexington Gazette, September 29, 1920, 1.
- ¹⁸Lexington Gazette, October 20, 1920, 2.
- ¹⁹Lexington Gazette, June 16, 1920, 2.
- ²⁰Ibid.
- ²¹Lexington Gazette, September 29, 1920, 1.
- ²²Ibid.
- ²³Current Biography, 1949, 526-528; Lexington Gazette, November 3, 1971, 1; National Cyclopedia of American Biography, 78.

²⁴Current Biography, 1948, 526-528; National Cyclopedia of American Biography, 78.

²⁵U. S. Congress. Senate. Memorial Addresses and Other Tributes in the Congress of the United States on the Life and Contributions of A. Willis Robertson, 92nd Cong., 2nd sess., 1972, 36.

²⁶Current Biography, 1949, 526-528.

²⁷U. S. News and World Report, September 20, 1946, 80-81.

²⁸New York Times, November 2, 1971, 38.

²⁹Lexington Gazette, November 3, 1971, 38.

³⁰U. S. News and World Report, September 20, 1946, 80-81.

³¹Ibid.

³²Jean Gottman, Virginia In Our Century (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1955), 287.

³³P. A. Johnsgard, Waterfowl: Their Biology and Natural History (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1968), 89.

³⁴Stevens, 211-212.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Harry Bartow Hawes, Fish and Game Now or Never (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1935), 193.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Gottman, 290.

⁴¹Gottman, 298; Lexington Gazette, April 5, 1927, 8.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid.

- ⁴⁶Gottman, 290.
- ⁴⁷Lexington Gazette, April 5, 1927, 8.
- ⁴⁸Ibid.
- ⁴⁹Ibid.
- ⁵⁰Gottman, 292-293.
- ⁵¹Lexington Gazette, March 8, 1933, 3.
- ⁵²Ibid.
- ⁵³Gottman, 292.
- ⁵⁴Lexington Gazette, August 9, 1927, 3.
- ⁵⁵Ibid.
- ⁵⁶Gottman, 293-294.
- ⁵⁷Lexington Gazette, November 3, 1971, 1.
- ⁵⁸Robert H. Giles Jr., Wildlife Management, (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1978), 378-379.
- ⁵⁹Stevens, 29-30.

CHAPTER III.

Congressman Robertson: A Representative for
Virginia and for Wildlife

Because of the efforts of public officials, conservationists, and sportsmen, the issue of wildlife protection became a topic of national concern during the 1930s. The economic depression and the disastrous results of dust storms, droughts, and floods awakened Americans to the need for the conservation of natural resources. Years of neglect had devastated the country's forests and wildlife. Upon Robertson's entry into Congress in 1932, America "showed thousands of miles of polluted streams, millions of acres of burned-over forest lands, millions of acres of farm land so badly eroded as to produce neither food nor cover for wildlife, the total disappearance of some valuable species and great reductions in the supply of others."¹

While serving as game commissioner, Robertson succeeded in demonstrating to Virginians the need for a constructive program to restore the fish and game of the state. However, as a United States congressman, he recognized the extreme difficulty of convincing the American people of the importance of wildlife. The public had become spoiled by the country's overwhelming supply of natural resources. But the belief that resources were inexhaustible was an erroneous one. As a Congressman, Robertson acknowledged the role of education in selling the protection of wildlife to the people:

I have contended for the past thirty years, and still contend, that you can't sell anything to anybody by force, not even the old watering trough to the horse. And you can't sell anything to most of us in the absence of a personal profit motive. There is no difficulty about selling this program to the fifteen million or more who fish and hunt. Selling it to an equal number of land owners is a horse of another color. The only effective sales campaign is education.²

Public officials, like Robertson, realized that meaningful reform in conservation could only occur with the trust, respect, and support of the public. The attention of the federal government was also essential. For years, sportsmen had pleaded with the government to consider a serious conservation program. The fisherman had seen his favorite lake become an open sewer or polluted with soil from erosion. Hunters noticed the drastic reduction in the supply of game. But the government was reluctant to allocate any funds to conservation projects while an economic depression existed in the United States.³

The federal government was not the sole reason for the lack of conservation policies in the 1920s and 1930s. The movement for the restoration of our natural resources lacked knowledgeable and effective leaders and a broad base of followers. Until a responsible spokesman was found, the federal government would reject any type of conservation project. Therefore, sportsmen and conservationists sounded a call for help in their struggle to protect wildlife:

Never before has there been such an awakening of American sportsmen, landowners, and other wildlife enthusiasts. Never before has their help been so greatly needed. Their activities will either produce or destroy future hunting and fishing in our great land. If the wildlife resources are to be handled properly, it is high time that the true leaders of these groups come to the front and make their wants known.⁴

Of particular concern to these dedicated individuals was the decimation of America's waterfowl, namely ducks, geese, and swan. By 1934, the country's supply of ducks had been reduced from hundreds of millions to a bare fifteen million.⁵ For instance, the numbers of the American white swan were greatly reduced, and the threat of extinction seemed a real possibility. In the 1920s, an estimated 450 swan remained of a population of millions. By 1935, only 73 existed in the United States.⁶

The plight of the nation's waterfowl was traced to several causes. Perhaps the greatest threat to their preservation during the 1920s and 1930s was the United States government. The process of land reclamation or drainage removed millions of acres of wetlands. These lands once served ducks, geese, and swan as their feeding and resting areas.⁷ By 1941, 100,000,000 acres of such land had been drained.⁸ With dust storms, droughts, and floods ruining crops, the federal government urged farmers to drain any marshes, swamps, ponds, or lakes on their lands to provide more acreage for food

production. Since they received free seed and fertilizer for their crops, the farmers gladly listened to the government's recommendations. However, the effects of drainage were disastrous to waterfowl: "Loss of waterfowl production is estimated at 1,840,000 (chiefly ducks) per year. Annual duck losses as a result of all habitat destruction since the late 1800's are thought to be of the order of six million."⁹ As a result of the constant draining of marsh area, the remaining waterfowl population was crowded onto what few lakes and ponds remained. The great concentration of waterfowl on the few existing wetland areas caused a further decline of the population. Often these wetland areas were shallow, alkaline lakes and marshes and feeding birds became the victims of botulism.¹⁰

Man's disregard for the survival of America's waterfowl resulted in an even greater reduction of the bird population. Hunters enjoyed long hunting seasons with very few, if any, restrictions on the number of birds they could shoot. In numerous instances, hunters devised ingenious techniques to kill waterfowl. One popular method was to soak grain in cheap whiskey and scatter the feed on nesting grounds. The birds would eat the food and become so drunk that the hunters could walk into the area and literally pick up the intoxicated waterfowl. Along the coast of New England, hunters disguised their boats as small icebergs. Dressed in white clothing, the hunters were able to row within very

close range of unsuspecting flocks. A few observant hunters noticed that feeding birds did not take to flight from cows or horses when they were in the area. Thus, some hunters camouflaged themselves behind a cow or a horse to get within gun range of the feeding birds. Man's implementation of these unfair hunting methods accelerated the decline of the waterfowl population.¹¹ By the early 1930s, it was painfully clear to concerned sportsmen and conservationists that the total loss of waterfowl due to nature, the federal government, and the hunters was far greater than the crop of young being born every year. Biologists confirmed the fears of the sportsmen and conservationists by testifying to the underpopulation of breeding grounds in Alaska and Canada.¹²

The rapid decimation of America's migratory birds finally earned the attention of the federal government with the election of Willis Robertson to the United States Congress. He was that unique type of legislator who could understand the problems of the country's conservation policy. As game commissioner and state senator in Virginia, he recognized the plight of the nation's waterfowl. As a sportsman and a dedicated conservationist, the Virginian comprehended the difficulties in formulating a uniform code of game laws.¹³

Congressman Robertson was an important member of the House of Representatives in many other ways. His forceful speaking voice made him the logical choice as spokesman for several significant causes. In 1934, he surfaced as

one of the leaders in Congress to repeal the prohibition amendment. In the same year, Secretary of State Cordell Hull, acknowledging the pervasive influence of the freshman Congressman, called upon the Virginian to spearhead the drive in the House of Representatives for the ratification of the reciprocal trade treaties.¹⁴

The Congressman's appointment to the powerful House Ways and Means Committee in 1937 marked an important moment in Robertson's political career. He was the first Virginian to be assigned to this committee in thirty-four years.¹⁵ His reputation as a fiscal conservative in Virginia preceded his entry into Congress. With economic depression gripping the country, Robertson's ideas concerning taxation, international trade, currency, inflation, and banking, were very popular with his fellow congressmen. He harshly attacked the spending measures of government and the increasing size of the federal budget. Throughout his congressional career, the Virginian was to consider his work in the area of financial reform to be a source of great satisfaction.¹⁶

As a congressman, Robertson was responsible for the drafting of the Robertson-Forand Bill, which placed the collection of income taxes on a pay-as-you-go basis.¹⁷ His absorption with taxation problems led him to argue for a lighter general tax burden on the people.¹⁸ The Congressman's hard work earned him the respect of his fellow legislators,

both Democrats and Republicans. Even the officials of the United States Treasury respected the Virginian's approach to financial reform:

The Virginian was always one of the Ways and Means Committee's hardest workers. When tax bills reached the floor, he usually was prominent in the debate, and, during the war, led the fight for some of the revenue measures. . . . Although often in disagreement with Treasury tax policies, Mr. Robertson is highly regarded by Treasury officials. They speak warmly of him as one who reached conclusions after thought and study, and as a man with whom they could reason.¹⁹

The Congressman's major role in the Committee was recognized and appreciated by the nation's bankers and businessmen. So valuable was Robertson to the House Ways and Means Committee, that President Harry Truman offered the Virginian a federal judgeship, if he would remain in the House of Representatives for another term, rather than seek election to the United States Senate in 1946.²⁰

However, the Congressman's convictions about the stability of United States currency and the financial security of American businesses created quite a few enemies, especially the leaders and members of labor unions. The Congressman sponsored anti-trust legislation in an attempt to regulate labor unions.²¹ He also opposed any increase in worker's wages, because a raise in pay might result "in an uncontrolled inflation that is bound to be disastrous."²² His vigorous

stance against the labor unions and his total support for the banking industry resulted in much criticism of his financial policies. Robertson's critics were to call the Virginian "a pawn of big business, both inside and outside Virginia."²³

Although Robertson was greatly satisfied with his accomplishments in the field of financial reform, he still enjoyed his work in the area of conservation the most. The Congressman was able to observe the grave situation of the country's wildlife from a viewpoint which few individuals could attain. Throughout his life, he had felt a deep love for the outdoors. As both a hunter and a conservationist, he could understand and appreciate the arguments of the various interest groups concerning the protection of waterfowl. For years, hunters had opposed the wildlife restoration programs of conservationists, because they could not accept the notion of possible limitations upon their sport, such as restricted bag limits or shortened hunting seasons. At the same time, conservationists were infuriated with the disregard some hunters demonstrated towards waterfowl. The state and federal governments also argued over the fate of America's migratory birds. In the past, the protection of migratory birds was the responsibility of the state. But state governments failed to devise a uniform code of laws which would ensure the protection of waterfowl. Hunting clubs often blocked any attempts

by the state governments to formulate effective game laws.²⁴

The states could not devise laws which would permit the restoration of waterfowl, because the selfish hunters in some few localities would not permit their states to join other states for more adequate protection. Those states which were willing to provide better protection, therefore, had no incentive, because to have done so would only permit larger kills in the uncooperative states, which practically speaking, were permitting year-round shooting.²⁵

Officially, the federal government had assumed the responsibility of protecting migratory birds with the ratification of the Migratory Bird Treaty, signed with Canada and Mexico, in 1916. Yet the government did little to enforce its authority and, consequently, hunters ignored most of the federal regulations regarding the killing of migratory birds. To Congressman Robertson, it was quite evident that no one was willing to assume responsibility for the safety of wildlife.²⁶

The Virginian believed that, if migratory birds were to be saved, the federal government would have to play a more active role in initiating and enforcing game laws. Robertson's tenure as Virginia's first game commissioner provided him with the necessary experience to begin the fight for the creation of a new committee in the House of Representatives to advocate the interests of wildlife:

For some years the Senate has had a special committee on conservation of wildlife resources, and all who are familiar with the conservation work being done in the United States know of the splendid services rendered to the cause of conservation by this Senate committee. I have been agreeably surprised to find so many of my colleagues in the House interested in hunting and fishing and the cause of wildlife conservation, and there are many of us who feel that there should be organized in the House either a regular committee or a special committee pertaining to wildlife conservation.²⁷

The Congressman's bill to create a special House committee was passed overwhelmingly in both houses of Congress. In recognition of his efforts to found the new committee and his exceptional record as Virginia's game commissioner, the Congressman was chosen as the chairman of the Select House Committee on Wildlife Conservation.²⁸ Robertson's selection as chairman in 1934 was quite an honor, since he had served as a congressman for less than one term. But, his peers in Congress admired his initiative and dedication sufficiently to unanimously choose him as chairman.²⁹

Under the Virginian's chairmanship, the Select House Committee sponsored some of the "most productive wildlife laws ever enacted".³⁰ Unlike previous congressional committees on conservation, the Select House Committee wielded considerable power and influence. The Committee was given complete jurisdiction in a supervisory capacity over all of the conservation work of the federal agencies.³¹ Such bureaus as the Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Park

Service, and the United States Forest Service were now accountable to Robertson's committee.³² Previously, these bureaus conducted their business independently and with little consideration for the work of other agencies involved in conservation. With the government's agencies working against each other, rather than in a joint effort, little progress was made in the protection of our natural resources. Robertson's hope was that the Select House Committee would provide the direction and leadership the federal agencies demanded:

The fact that these conservation agencies of the government must report each year in detail to us on their operations, and those reports will be printed and distributed to the four corners of the country, keeps them on their toes and encourages them to tackle new jobs to which they can in such reports point with pride. Our reports go not only to all State game departments and organized conservation associations but to many public libraries and the technical schools of many colleges. It is the only full and complete report of the conservation work of the government, and in some schools our hearings are used as textbooks.³³

The Committee's endeavors to revive conservation activities were supported by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. At a meeting with the Committee on December 20, 1933, Roosevelt promised to allocate over a million dollars in funds for the purchase of waterfowl feeding and nesting grounds.³⁴ Roosevelt was also very receptive to the idea of using the Civilian Conservation Corps (C.C.C.) to develop waterfowl habitats.³⁵

Originally, the C. C. C. operated with little regard for wildlife conservation. However, Robertson was able to use the power of the Select House Committee to turn the C.C.C. into one of the most effective conservation agencies the government had.³⁶ Under the Committee's direction, the C.C.C. built 4,087 fish rearing ponds; engaged in food and cover planting for waterfowl on 54,251 acres; planted 462,770,542 fish in streams and lakes; reforested 1,300,000 acres, planted over two million trees and shrubs, and developed over 12 million acres for breeding and feeding refuges for migratory birds.³⁷ Congressman Robertson was proud of his connection with the conservation projects of the C.C.C. He was particularly pleased with the accomplishments of the C.C.C. in Virginia:

There is not a section of the United States that has not felt the influence of that conservation activity, and, naturally, I take pride in it because the first C.C.C. camp in the United States was built in the Seventh Congressional District, the first lake with C.C.C. labor was built in that district, and the general movement to stop the C.C.C. boys from cutting trees and shrubs valuable to wildlife and directing their energies into a national conservation program, in addition to improving the timber stand in State and National Forests, was initiated by the House Conservation Committee, of which I have the honor to be chairman.³⁸

The overall success of the Select House Committee was

demonstrated by the fact that in 1943 there were four times as many ducks and geese as there were before the Committee was founded.³⁹

Conservationists were understandably pleased with the work of Congressman Robertson and the Select House Committee. The deliberations of the Committee had resulted in the first substantial game laws to protect waterfowl. But the Virginian had been careful to consider the opinions of the country's fifteen million hunters. Over the years, sportsmen had become disillusioned with the wildlife restoration activities of the federal government. The primary reason for their anger was the government's failure to consult hunters about the formulation of game regulations.⁴⁰ The Virginian recognized that the nation's sportsmen formed a very influential and politically powerful interest group. Within the United States, there existed duck clubs, hunting and fishing clubs, trapshooters associations, riflemen's clubs, field trial clubs, and skeet clubs.⁴¹ National organizations, such as the American Game Association, Ducks Unlimited, the Izaak Walton League of America, and the More Game Birds Foundation, maintained ties of mutual concern for the rights of the sportsman and the protection of wildlife.⁴² Sportsmen, such as H. R. Basford, were becoming impatient with the government's ambivalence toward the protection of migratory birds:

There is a very definite feeling in California and, from what I have been told, in the other Western States that we have to a large extent, been given the "brush-off" and "run-around" by the Federal Fish and Wildlife Service. For more than two years we here in California have sought by every effort possible to discuss openly and frankly with the various and sundry officials of the Federal Service, including the Secretary of the Interior, who we entertained here, the migratory waterfowl situation in the western states and the Pacific flyway, where those of us who live in the West all know that biological and other conditions have not justified the drastic restrictions which have been imposed on the Pacific slope. This condition has been admitted by the Federal Service but they have not seen fit to do anything about it.⁴³

In an attempt to satisfy disgruntled sportsmen, the Select House Committee strongly urged the Fish and Wildlife Service to "liberalize shooting regulations in recognition of an increased supply of game."⁴⁴ Overall, sportsmen were pleased with the programs of Congressman Robertson. Although hunters still resented the notion of restrictions upon their sport, they respected the Congressman's determination to protect wildlife. Many sportsmen admired the Virginian for simply listening to their grievances. The establishment of the Committee furnished a forum for federal agencies, state game departments, conservationists, and sportsmen to present their views. To these various groups, Congressman Robertson was the knowledgeable and respected leader they had long sought. The Virginian was popular with his

colleagues in the House of Representatives, and he was able to straddle political lines to win sponsors for his legislation.⁴⁵ To his fellow congressman, Robertson was the House spokesman for conservation:

I want to congratulate him (Robertson) on what he has been doing for the sportsmen of the United States. I do not know of a man in the entire Congress who is doing more for them than the gentleman from Virginia. The hunters and the sportsmen of this country will be willing to pay taxes, to pay their share if somebody will take the lead, like the gentleman from Virginia.⁴⁶

One of the most significant pieces of legislation to result from the activities of the Select House Committee was the Migratory Hunting Stamp Act. This Act required all waterfowl hunters to purchase a stamp before shooting any birds. The stamp could be bought at any convenient post office and was to be affixed to the hunter's license.⁴⁷ The Select House Committee felt such a game law was essential in order to raise funds for the better protection of waterfowl. Although Roosevelt had agreed to support Robertson's plans, the President parted with federal funds very reluctantly. Roosevelt's New Deal programs demanded a large portion of the government budget and, consequently, the Committee's game restoration proposals received very little financial consideration. In the first year of the Duck Stamp Act, the Committee succeeded in collecting \$700,000.⁴⁸ In the following year, collections

ranged from \$500,000 to \$1,000,000.⁴⁹ According to the Act, revenues were to be appropriated for the purchase of migratory bird refuges.⁵⁰

The need for waterfowl refuges was enormous, and the Duck Stamp Act was viewed as the only feasible method to finance the construction of these nesting and breeding grounds. The hazards of migration reduced the waterfowl population tremendously. Once each year, ducks and geese had to fly from their summer quarters in Canada to their feeding grounds in the southern United States. At every phase of their journey, migratory birds faced gunfire from hunters. By the early 1930s, the future supply of ducks and geese was in doubt. Unless protected resting stations, or sanctuaries, were organized along the flyways of the migrating waterfowl, the chances of survival for the birds were very slim. The ratification and enactment of the Duck Stamp Act furnished America's birds a safer passage southward by building the necessary refuges:

They were harassed with fire shot, buck shot, and rifle balls, until it was difficult to see how they could any longer consider themselves a part of the American continent. To give them a semblance of what they were once used to, resting refuges have been, or are being, established along the main travel routes or flyways as they are commonly called. The refuges lying along these routes give the birds a chance to rest and feed without interference. They not only permit the birds to travel

from north to south under better conditions, but they also help conserve a larger breeding stock, an important consideration in wildlife restoration.⁵²

The Duck Stamp Act established an important precedent in the field of wildlife restoration legislation. With the passage of the bill, the federal government resumed its rightful position as guardian of America's migratory birds. The Act bestowed upon the federal government the power and ability to collect revenue from sportsmen in order to promote a constructive conservation program. The success of the Act inspired Robertson and the Select House Committee to consider further wildlife restoration measures. The Act had succeeded in obtaining sufficient funds for the establishment of migratory birds refuges, but other phases of the government's conservation program demanded financial consideration.⁵³

Since the states were financially incapable of supporting a national wildlife restoration program, the Select House Committee once again considered imposing a tax upon sportsmen to defray the costs of purchasing lands for wildlife production, feeding, nesting, and public hunting. After consultation with the chairman of the Senate Committee on Wildlife Conservation, Key Pittman of Nevada, Robertson and the Select House Committee decided to propose a law which would impose an 11% excise tax on guns, ammunition, and fishing

tackle.⁵⁴ The Committee realized that a vast sum was spent annually by hunters and fishermen for sporting equipment.⁵⁵ The receipts from the excise tax were expected to yield \$2,750,000 for wildlife restoration programs.⁵⁶ The Virginian reasoned that since sportsmen were the ones who directly profited from hunting and fishing, they should be the ones to pay for the government's supervision and maintenance of their sport.

The Congressman was also concerned that the states take a more active part in the formulation of the government's game policies. Both Senator Pittman and Robertson concurred that the revenues collected from the proposed excise tax should be allocated to the state's game and fish departments for their own wildlife projects. On September 2, 1937, the Federal Aid to Wildlife Restoration Act was approved by President Roosevelt.⁵⁷ With financial backing and legal authority, the federal government began "the most aggressive and constructive wildlife-restoration program ever known."⁵⁸

Under the terms of the Act, the federal government agreed to pay 75% of the total cost of approved wildlife restoration projects in the states.⁵⁹ Federal funds were to be matched by the state governments. The states were required to pay the remaining 25% of the funds necessary for the purchase and development of lands, wildlife research, restoration of animal habitats, or the expenses of game management.⁶⁰ The size of the government's grant was based on a formula

which incorporated the number of licensed hunters and the area of the state.⁶¹ In this way, large states with low populations and small states with high populations would be treated equally when considering them for federal funds.

The availability of money for wildlife restoration projects opened a new era in the history of conservation. Within ten years of the passage of the Pittman-Robertson Act, over 900,000 acres of refuges and wildlife management areas were constructed.⁶² The Virginian was particularly pleased with the expansion of the wildlife restoration movement under his legislation. Robertson's legislation initiated the federal funding of conservation in the United States:

The Biological Survey has also shown great zeal and commendable understanding of local problems in the administration of the Pittman-Robertson Act, under which 167 restoration projects have been started in 42 states at a cost of \$1,350,000. And that program will be stimulated by the Federal appropriation this year of \$1,000,000 more than was appropriated last year for the same purpose.⁶³

Across the country, previously abandoned wildlife restoration projects were revived with federal funds. In the Southwest, irrigation projects were begun to provide watering holes for deer, antelope, and desert bighorn sheep.⁶⁴ In the Great Lakes region, federal funds were used in an effort to restock the beaver. By the late 1930s, the beaver was considered nearly extinct south of Canada.⁶⁵ The Pittman-Robertson Act

furnished 27 states the opportunity to initiate beaver research and restocking programs. In the first ten years of the Act, 8,470 beavers were restocked in the region.⁶⁶

North Carolina, with the cooperation of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, utilized their grant to secure information about dove populations, in an attempt to formulate more protective hunting seasons.⁶⁷ Game farms were created within the state, and the first scientific data on doves and their behavior were obtained. One of the game managers expressed his delight with the Pittman-Robertson Act:

As stated previously, our fieldmen soon realized the need for more definite information concerning field management problems in this state. The Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration program has given us the chance to secure this information sooner than would have been the case had our game funds been depended on for financial assistance in this respect. Therefore, we cannot speak too highly of the Pittman-Robertson program, and our efforts will be directed toward the closest cooperation with the Fish and Wildlife Service with the idea of making the very best use of the Pittman-Robertson funds.⁶⁸

The Pittman-Robertson Act, in conjunction with the Duck Stamp Act, was responsible for the preservation and repopulation of America's waterfowl. The revenue collected from these Acts supplied the Bureau of Biological Survey with enough funds to acquire approximately 12,000,000 acres of lands for

migratory birds, specifically ducks and geese.⁶⁹ As a result of the government funds, restricted bag limits, shortened hunting seasons, and effective enforcement, the supply of ducks increased over 100%.⁷⁰ In 1934, the number of ducks and geese were estimated to be as low as 27,000,000. However, in less than ten years, the waterfowl population had risen by over 100,000,000 birds.⁷¹

The Virginian's championing of federal game laws during his career in the House of Representatives earned him the admiration and respect of his fellow congressmen. Senators, such as William B. Spong of Virginia, expressed their gratitude to Robertson for his pioneering spirit in the field of conservation:

Robertson was especially proud to be a co-sponsor of the Pittman-Robertson Act, which has produced millions of dollars for wildlife preservation activities. I think with the emphasis we know now must be placed on the environment and its preservation, Senator Robertson's pioneering work in the field will truly be recognized as a worthwhile contribution not only his day and generation but to future generations as well.⁷²

The Virginian was also responsible for drafting and sponsoring the first effective legislation to restock, repopulate, and preserve America's fish and game. Acts, such as the Duck Stamp Act and the Pittman-Robertson Act, set an important precedent in the area of wildlife management, as well as conservation.

Due to the activities of Robertson and his Select House Committee, 166 bills affecting wildlife were introduced in the first session of the 67th Congress alone.⁷³

With the death of Robertson's close friend and political associate, Senator Carter Glass, in 1945, the Virginian was appointed by the Governor to become the Old Dominion's representative in the United States Senate. He accepted the offer gladly and prepared to offer his talents in finances and conservation to his new colleagues. Thus, in 1945, Robertson's years as a congressman came to a close. For more than ten years, he had provided undivided attention to his constituents and Virginia's problems. But he also had the vision to see the problems beyond Virginia's borders, especially in the field of conservation. As a senator, the Virginian continued to serve as a leader in the wildlife restoration movement and, consequently, America's fish and game were spared the fate of eventual extinction.

Chapter III - Footnotes

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¹⁸U. S. News and World Report, September 20, 1946, 80-81.

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- ²⁰Lexington Gazette, November 3, 1971, 16.
- ²¹Ibid.
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- ²³Wilkinson, 323-324.
- ²⁴Stevens, 47.
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- ²⁶Committee on Agricultural Land Use and Wildlife Resources, 228.
- ²⁷U. S. Congress, House of Representatives, 73rd. Cong., 1st sess., 9 June 1933, Congressional Record 77:5504-5506.
- ²⁸National Cyclopedia of America Biography, 1960, 78.
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- ³¹U. S. Congress, House of Representatives, 78th Cong., 1st sess., 21 January 1943, Congressional Record 89:281-282.
- ³²Ibid.
- ³³Ibid.
- ³⁴Trefether, 219-220.
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- ³⁷A. Willis Robertson to the Old Belt Game Association, 2 September 1938, A. Willis Robertson Papers, The College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia; Michael Frome, Whose Woods These Are: The Story of the National Forests (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1962), 16-17.
- ³⁸A. Willis Robertson to the Old Belt Game Association, 2 September 1938, A. Willis Robertson Papers, The College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia.

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⁴¹Ibid., 275-276.

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⁴³H. R. Basford to Glenn L. Martin, 4 March 1948, A. Willis Robertson Papers, The College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia.

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⁴⁵U. S. Congress. Senate. Memorial Addresses and Other Tributes in the Congress of the United States on the Life and Contributions of A. Willis Robertson, 92nd Cong., 2nd sess., 1972, 43.

⁴⁶U. S. Congress, House of Representatives, 77th Cong., 2nd sess., 16 October 1942, Congressional Record 88:8255-8257

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⁴⁹Stevens, 187.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Hawes, 83.

⁵²Stevens, 151-154.

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⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵U. S. Department of the Interior, Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration, Wildlife Circular No. 3 (1940), 2-3.

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⁵⁸Trefether, 228-229.

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰U. S. Department of the Interior, Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration, Wildlife Circular No. 3 (1940), 2-3.

⁶¹Trefether, 228.

⁶²Ibid., 214.

⁶³A. Willis Robertson to the Fifth North American Wildlife Conference, 20 March 1940, A. Willis Robertson Papers, The College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia.

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Chapter IV

The Senate Years: 1946-1966

Robertson's appointment and subsequent election to the United States Senate was well received by his colleagues. The Virginian's diligent work while serving on the Select House Committee for Wildlife Conservation and the House Ways and Means Committee earned him the praise of both Democrats and Republicans. Since he was a man of influence in the House of Representatives, many political observers expected him to attain a similar status in the United States Senate.¹ Robertson's interests in the Senate were wide, and he made his presence quickly known. His expertise with tax laws, financial reforms, foreign trade, and wildlife conservation made him a respected authority on these matters.²

United States deficit spending, against the backdrop of world economic instability, attracted the attention of a financial expert like Robertson. Soon after his election, the Senator was appointed to the Banking and Currency Committee.³ The precarious financial situation of the United States and Western Europe, following World War II, temporarily diverted the Virginian's attention away from his work in conservation. The Senator was particularly concerned with the increased spending of the federal government:

The Government plans to spend not less
of what we are making but vastly more.
Spending measures are now before Congress

which - looking innocently at first glance - are due to amass, for us and our children, the most gigantic bills in the peacetime history of any nation.⁴

Robertson's dissatisfaction with excessive government spending stemmed from his earlier opposition to President Roosevelt's New Deal programs, which he called "extravagant and reckless".⁵ The Virginian claimed that the government's tendency to spend its way out of debt had established a dangerous precedent in United States financial policy. One of the serious problems resulting from increased government spending was rising inflation. The Senator was particularly concerned about the effects of rising prices in the United States. In fact, he contended that inflation was "the cruelest policy a government could inflict on its people and if inflation continued at only 3% a year, the savings and life insurance of the young would be wiped out in thirty years."⁶

In an effort to control deficit spending, the Virginian recommended that Congress trim the federal budget of any unnecessary expenditures. In Robertson's opinion, this could only be done by insisting "that every dollar spent by the government is not only a dollar well spent, but a dollar necessarily spent."⁷ The Senator deemed such proposed expenditures as the national health insurance and public health program, federal school lunch program, public housing and a veteran's pension bill as financially extravagant.⁸ However,

the Senator's fiscal conservatism did not extend to all government outlays. Fearing the spread of Communism in Western Europe, the Virginian was a staunch advocate for increased foreign aid. He supported President Harry Truman's proposals to provide foreign aid to Greece and Turkey in 1947.⁹ He also backed the administration's European Recovery Bill in 1948.¹⁰ However, Robertson strongly felt that the responsibility of foreign aid should be eventually turned over to more international agencies, such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.¹¹

Robertson's experience with America's financial problems led to his chairmanship of the Banking and Currency Committee in 1959 and his position as sixth-ranking member of the Appropriations Committee.¹² As chairman, the Senator was able to directly oversee the government's expenditures on housing, unemployment, and other areas.¹³ During his tenure as a United States Senator, he was recognized for his sponsorship of many banking laws and reforms. Robertson's skill in handling the problems of foreign trade, tariffs, banking, and currency and taxation deserves much credit, since these were subjects that many Senators were reluctant to pursue.¹⁴

Although the Virginian received widespread approval for his financial programs, Robertson encountered disapproval for his stand on civil rights. In 1948, the Virginian publicly announced his support for President Truman for a second term, but, at the same time, he denounced the President's

stand on civil rights. Robertson cautioned his fellow Democrats that "he had no idea of accepting the interpretation of our Democratic platform with respect to a civil rights program which Mr. Truman has placed upon it."¹⁵ In the Senate, the Virginian later stood with his fellow Southerners in opposition to the United States Supreme Court decision, Brown vs. the Board of Education, which declared segregation unconstitutional.¹⁶ On one occasion, Robertson was so vigorously opposed to a civil rights bill that "he threw his arm out of joint with a too-vigorous gesture."¹⁷ Robertson's personal animosity to civil rights legislation during his Senate career overshadowed many of his achievements in finance and conservation. From today's perspective, Robertson's opposition to civil rights legislation appears to be the act of a strongly opinionated human being, but the Senator only reflected the mood and moral temperament of the South during the 1940s and 1950s. Many of Robertson's close friends were blacks. In his opinion, civil rights legislation was an imposition on the South's way of life by the federal government.

Despite the problems of finance and civil rights, the Senator devoted a majority of his time to his personal crusade for the protection of wildlife. Robertson's fight for conservation legislation in the 1930s gained the attention of the country's legislators, hunters, and conservationists,

but many Americans were still unconcerned. By the 1950s, wildlife conservation was a topic of national interest. The United States Department of the Interior noted that one out of every three households in the United States contained at least one person who hunted or fished.¹⁸ In fact, the government estimated that twenty-five million people pursued these outdoor sports.¹⁹ Robertson believed the magnitude of participation by Americans in hunting and fishing demanded greater attention to fish and wildlife conservation:

There can be no doubt about the fact that the Fish and Wildlife Agency needs new and better leadership and its work is of far greater consequence than those who do not fish and hunt realize because there are now some thirty million people who hunt and fish, either or both, and their operations involve the expenditure of two billion dollars per year.²⁰

Once again, the Virginian was requested by the nation's hunters and conservationists to represent their interests in Congress. Distinguished sportsmen, such as Nash Buckingham, pleaded with Robertson to use his influence in strengthening fish and game regulations: "I don't know angles or answers to Congressional conservation horizons, but I do know that unless conservation has your aid as in the past, it is in one hell of a fix."²¹

Since the Virginian was instrumental in sponsoring this country's first wildlife conservation legislation, he was

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very disturbed by events during his term as senator in the field of conservation which undermined the original intentions of fish and game laws. The Senator was especially concerned about the collapse of the game warden system in the United States. As Commissioner of Game and Inland Fisheries in Virginia, Robertson dedicated his energies to furnishing the state's sportsmen with an efficient and effective wildlife protection agency. However, nationwide, game wardens were being criticized for their laxness in not apprehending well-to-do game violators. Too often, game wardens brought the violator to court only to see the accused released by a sympathetic judge. Instead, game wardens sought those violators who could not get around the law.²² Robertson realized that game wardens were becoming obligated to politicians and not to the protection of wildlife. He became quickly frustrated with the government's apathetic approach to the problem. In Robertson's opinion, law enforcement was essential to all successful game management:

Practically all the states and all national conservation agencies have reached the conclusion that we can't continue to tolerate indefinitely illegal destruction of migratory birds estimated to be running at approximately twenty-five percent of the kill. We are convinced that the legitimate sportsmen will never get any satisfactory shooting, satisfactory bag and seasonal limits unless the vicious violators can

be brought under control. Since it is a federal law involved state enforcement agencies have not in the past been too much concerned with its enforcement.²³

In an effort to curb the spread of corruption in the government's conservation programs, Robertson got the Chairman of the Senate Committee on Expenditures to appoint a subcommittee on wildlife to investigate the conservation activities of the government. The subcommittee would also serve as an open forum for legislators, sportsmen, conservationists, and citizens, where they could offer ideas concerning better enforcement of existing laws and new legislation for wildlife protection.²⁴ Robertson was selected as chairman of the new subcommittee and began to seek remedies to ineffective enforcement of fish and game laws. The Senator's fiscal conservatism aided his efforts to reorganize the government's conservation work. In the past, money was spent to perpetuate the government's bureaucracy. However, as chairman of the new Senate subcommittee on wildlife, the Senator was determined to spend every dollar wisely and necessarily, while eliminating bureaucratic waste:

Of course, we do not wish to see the Fish and Wildlife Service use an increased administration fund for the employment of additional lawyers, stenographers, and general office chair-warmers, but we have an effective means of controlling that through the annual investigation I make under the powers conferred by the Reorganization Act on the Senate Expenditures Committee. Each year I shall require the

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Fish and Wildlife Service to give a detailed report of receipts and disbursements. Some years ago I had occasion to severely criticize the Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service for the manner in which he increased office personnel out of his administrative percentage of the Pittman-Robertson Act fund. That did the job in that instance.²⁵

The Senator believed that one solution to strengthening the enforcement of wildlife legislation was to increase the price of the duck stamp from one dollar to two dollars. Money for law enforcement was desperately needed. In 1951, only three million dollars, of the approximately twenty-nine million collected under the Duck Stamp Act, was allocated to the construction of new refuges and the protection of migratory birds. The other twenty-four million dollars was diverted to operational, administrative, and maintenance expenses. Revenue could not be raised elsewhere.²⁶

Besides the problems of inadequate enforcement, the Senator's Duck Stamp Act suffered from other troubles. The Act provided funds for the construction of refuges for migratory birds. But the building of these refuges was done in a haphazard manner with no overall direction or supervision.²⁷ In 1934, Robertson had demonstrated to his colleagues in Congress the need for a wildlife refuge system. However, twenty years later, no one was willing to share the tremendous responsibility involved in successfully completing the task. The wildlife refuge system became a prime example of how

failure to organize a system and to provide competent leadership can prevent a governmental agency from reaching its potential.²⁸ Organizations, such as the Fish and Wildlife Service, tended to treat waterfowl refuges as "unwanted responsibilities."²⁹

The mismanagement of refuges was complemented by the failure of the government to purchase suitable land for waterfowl refuges. In several instances, the Virginian discovered that the Fish and Wildlife Service was purchasing land at highly inflated prices just to prove that the wildlife refuge system was expanding.³⁰ Once again, Robertson's fiscal conservatism led him to criticize the government's conservation policy:

We have found that in many instances the price being asked for the marsh land is so excessive that it is not in the best interest of the sportsmen to expand the acquisition program, as would otherwise be the case. So far the average price paid for these refuge areas has been less than \$10, but now the price asked ranges from \$50 to \$100 per acre. Consequently, at our last meeting, I voted to turn down some of the recommendations of the Fish and Wildlife Service for areas which I felt were overpriced.³¹

Robertson urged the Fish and Wildlife Service and the Migratory Bird Conservation Commission to halt their land purchases, except for those which appeared absolutely necessary. The Virginian appreciated the fact that duck stamp funds were limited. Therefore, he felt the money should be

used for land acquisition when the prices were more reasonable.³²

The Senator believed that additional funds would strengthen the game warden system and allow the government to purchase more suitable refuge areas for waterfowl and migratory birds. But, the Virginian realized that the success of the increased duck stamp was contingent upon the removal of bureaucratic waste from governmental agencies involved in conservation.³³ Robertson encountered a division of opinion concerning the proposed increase in the duck stamp. A few Senators argued that hunting should be free and law enforcement by federal game wardens was an unacceptable infringement upon the rights of sportsmen.³⁴ After the expenditure of much time and effort, the Senator was able to convince his fellow legislators that only if increased funds were available to game wardens would our wildlife be preserved. The passage of the Virginian's bill appropriated twenty-five percent of the two-dollar duck stamp (or fifty cents) to the operation and upkeep of the game warden system.³⁵

Today, the Duck Stamp Act is still the primary source of income for the government's land purchases and maintenance of wildlife refuges. Robertson's persistent struggle to raise the price of the duck stamp demonstrated to Americans that wildlife conservation was a concern which demanded greater public awareness and financial support, as the years

went by. Presently, the duck stamp costs \$7.50, and between two and three million stamps are bought each year.³⁶

Another major setback for Robertson in the field of conservation was the failure of the fish hatchery system to successfully replenish the lakes and streams of the United States. The Senator's interest in fish production extended back to 1927 when, as chairman of the Virginia Commission of Game and Inland Fisheries, he established several trout hatcheries, which later became Federal fish rearing stations.³⁷ In fact, the Virginian was the originator of the first fish hatchery system in the state.³⁸ As game commissioner, Robertson recognized that more sport and recreation could be derived from the improvement of fishing waters than in any other conservation project. However, the proper development of Virginia's fishing areas was hampered by two things, a noticeable lack of funds for the construction and operation of hatcheries and flagrant violation of fishing regulations by sportsmen.³⁹ Virginia's waters, as well as those in other states, suffered from the drainage of lakes and ponds, the construction of dams which prevented the migration of fish, and the pollution of streams.⁴⁰

In Robertson's opinion, the only way to restore America's depleted fishing areas was to produce game fish artificially in hatcheries. By the 1950s, game fish, such as trout and bass, were produced in great abundance. In most states, the annual hatchery production was over a half-million pounds of

fish.⁴¹ But fish hatcheries were also encountering many serious difficulties in keeping the artificially-produced fish alive. The addition of fingerlings to trout streams often jeopardized the survival of the wild stock. Feeding areas were limited and the presence of artificially-produced trout and bass disturbed the delicate balance of the ecological environment.⁴² Many fingerlings served as food for larger fish. Other fingerlings simply could not adapt to the natural conditions of lakes, ponds, and streams, after becoming used to daily feeding and stabilized temperatures.⁴³ By 1956, Robertson's admiration for the fish hatchery system turned to bitter disappointment:

But the results accomplished by the restocking of streams with hatchery trout have not been very satisfactory. Hatchery trout are poor swimmers and are washed downstream by flash floods. They are not alert and fall an easy prey to fishermen. Being poor swimmers, they do not put up much of a fight when they are hooked. But the most serious objection of all is that they do not even, when they survive the fisherman and predators, appear to spawn. Consequently, in the average flowing stream the restocking of hatchery trout is a put and take business - you put them in one month and take them out for the most part in the first two months of the open season. And that is an expense that far exceeds the contribution by those who buy fishing licenses to do trout fishing.⁴⁴

Although the Senator was disillusioned by the results of the fish hatchery system, he was very satisfied with the accomplishments of the Pittman-Robertson Act. During his

tenure as Senator, Robertson persistently advocated the financial strengthening of the program. By Robertson's retirement from the Senate in 1966, sportsmen were paying \$28 million annually in federal excise taxes on guns and ammunition for the initiation of wildlife restoration projects.⁴⁵ The amount of revenue collected by the Pittman-Robertson Act has been substantial, considering the government accumulated only \$2,750,000 in the Act's first year of existence.⁴⁶

The Virginian was particularly proud of the wide range of conservation projects conducted with funds provided by the Act. As a cosponsor of the bill and a public servant of Virginia, Robertson was concerned that his state receive the benefits of the federal funds. With the Senator's leadership, money was allocated for the protection of Virginia's wild turkeys. As recently as the 1930s, the wild turkey was considered nearly extinct in the state.⁴⁷ Beginning in 1936, wild turkeys were raised on state game farms under the supervision of Virginia's Commission on Game and Inland Fisheries.⁴⁸ The disappearance of wild turkeys was not restricted to Virginia. No state had a surplus of the game bird. All of the Atlantic Coastal states and many of the Mid-Western states required the restocking of the bird. In 1948, the Senator requested the members of Congress to consider an appropriation of \$25,000 for the United States

Fish and Wildlife Service to begin the mass production of turkeys in the national forests.⁴⁹ Robertson's proposal was passed, and the federal government officially assumed responsibility for the future of these game birds. Due to the Virginian's efforts, the government launched a national program to restock, transplant, and selectively breed the wild turkey. Today, the bird has been restored to the woodlands of 43 states, and the population has increased from a few thousand to 1.5 million.⁵⁰

Until his retirement from politics, Robertson defended the interests of wildlife against man and his technology. In the early 1960s, the Senator strongly opposed the construction of the Gathright Dam on Virginia's Jackson River, fearing it would destroy fishing in 17 miles of the river and would endanger the natural habitat surrounding the site. Robertson called the project "the most glaring example of porkbarrel legislation in recent years."⁵¹ The Senator later relented when a group of public officials from Richmond convinced him that the Gathright Dam was the first step in the development of the James River, and it was necessary to assure the people of Richmond a sufficient water supply.⁵² In the eyes of the Virginian, man often failed to appreciate the wondrous gifts of nature, because he was too concerned with his material progress:

We have many who do not realize that contentment is a frame of mind, an attitude of heart, and does not come from the possession of material things. We must teach the people how to find peace and contentment in the simple pleasures of the out-of-doors; we must teach them how the principle of equality of opportunity is being exemplified in the administration of our national parks and national forests. We must develop sound minds in sound bodies through outdoor recreation.⁵³

By 1966, Robertson had reached the end of his political career. For thirty-four years, the Virginian had devoted his time and talents to his state and country. However, the Senator was seventy-nine years old, and many political observers questioned his ability to continue as a United States Senator for another six-year term. Although the Senator appeared physically fit and mentally alert, many of his beliefs seemed old-fashioned in comparison to the problems of the day. Robertson viewed his past years in Congress in a different light. He judged his Senate seniority (chairman of the Banking and Currency Committee and sixth-ranking member of the Appropriations Committee) and his distinguished record as valuable assets in wooing Virginians to vote for his return to the Senate. But many voters hesitated to endorse Robertson. For many Virginians, the Senator was an outdated political tool of the corrupt "Byrd Machine," which had controlled the politics of the state for over forty years. Although Robertson

was never personally close to Harry Byrd or an influential member of the state Democratic party, voters tended to associate the Senator with the controversial tactics of the "Byrd Machine."⁵⁴

Virginia Democrats recognized that a split had been created within the party. Some Democrats resented the dictatorial practices of the party machinery and sought to cut into the party's membership for support of a candidate to challenge Robertson for the Democratic nomination for Senator. Those Democrats who identified themselves with an "anti-machine" label selected William B. Spong, State Senator from Portsmouth, to be their nominee. Spong offered his fellow Democrats and all Virginians a "realistic and modernist" approach to solving the problems of Virginia and the country. Spong's billboards across the state proclaimed him as "The Man of Today." The State Senator strongly attacked Robertson's antiquated and prejudiced stands on civil rights, labor unions, urban renewal, and education. Spong charged: "The problems of our time cannot be comprehended and will not be solved by status quo thinking. We must not be led by those who would march backward into a comfortable past that no longer exists and cannot be disinterred."⁵⁵ The State Senator supported his charges that Robertson's perspective was unable to cope with recent problems by noting that the Senator had vetoed every major

education bill in the last twenty years, the Urban Mass Transit Act (1963-1964), the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (1963), and pay-reform for federal workers (1962).⁵⁶

The Senator's age soon became a volatile campaign issue. Spong and his supporters contended that for years the Byrd organization had neglected several opportunities to incorporate young talent into the party leadership. While campaigning for the Democratic nomination, Spong recounted how Patrick Henry was governor of Virginia at the age of forty, Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence at thirty-three, James Monroe became a United States Senator at thirty-two, and John Marshall ascended to the position of Chief Justice of the Supreme Court at age forty-five.⁵⁷

Robertson was puzzled by the upsurge in criticism of his candidacy. During an election year, he could expect his economic and social programs to be attacked by Republicans, but the denouncement of his hard work by Democrats left him tremendously disheartened. Only six years before Robertson won reelection to the Senate with 81% of the total vote, the largest measure of victory ever recorded in the state.⁵⁸ Now the Senator was involved in the toughest fight of his fifty-year political career.⁵⁹

In spite of bitter opposition, Robertson was determined to retain his seat. What mattered most to the Virginian was his self-respect. He was, said one reporter,

"an old oak in deep woods - tall, gnarled, and plenty tough."⁶⁰ On the campaign trail, the Senator kept a very rigorous schedule. He was up every morning at 5:00 A.M. to meet the voters and usually went to bed late at night. Recent assaults on Robertson's record failed to sway his large personal following of friends, relatives, and political associates. But the Senator was campaigning in a modern Virginia where a circle of friends no longer made the difference in an election. In his fifty years of politics, the Virginian had never felt the need for a campaign organization. In the past, the Robertson name had been sufficient.⁶¹

The Senator incurred great expense in his attempt for renomination. In fact, Robertson's campaign was one of the costliest ever waged in Virginia.⁶² He reported spending \$253,661 while Spong expended only half as much, \$132,150.⁶³ With a large amount of campaign funds to draw from, the Senator began publishing brochures and posting billboards proclaiming "Robertson Gets Results."⁶⁴ The Virginian argued that his years of service in Washington could get Virginia far more than a freshman senator such as Spong: "For Roanoke, Robertson hoped to get several million dollars for a proposed civic center; in Richmond, he would do the same for the projected coliseum and Gathright Dam; Portsmouth might be assured that its naval yard would be protected;

federal largesse would rain upon Virginia."⁶⁵

Of all the barbs which were exchanged between candidates, none was more damaging than Spong's accusation that Robertson was a pawn of big bankers, both inside and outside Virginia. As a Congressman and Senator, Robertson had always supported the banking industry. He had served as chairman of the Banking and Currency Committee for seven years in the Senate, and in that time, the Virginian had sponsored several significant banking reform laws. But the extent of Robertson's association with the banking industry caught the attention of reporters and the media. Spong accused the Senator of receiving generous campaign contributions from bankers, which were used for an extensive program of television and radio advertisements. What concerned Spong was that he believed that employees of Virginia's banks were being subjected to blatant arm-twisting⁶⁶ to cast their votes for Robertson. The seriousness of Spong's charge, which was later to be proved unfounded, tarnished the image of Robertson as a trustworthy and respected legislator. To the Senator, the Democratic primary was more than a means to retain his seat; it was a way to vindicate his integrity to his fellow Virginians.⁶⁷

A tight election was expected in the Democratic primary, and the experts were not proven wrong. By a difference of 611 votes, out of a total of 433,059 votes cast, William B.

Spong was declared the Democratic nominee for United States Senator.⁶⁸ Robertson did not question the outcome and refused to order a recount of the votes. He remarked after his defeat: "They don't believe any 70-year-old man can do the job. They, the voters, can't believe I have the stamina to carry on."⁶⁹ Defeat was especially hard for Robertson to accept. Before 1966, he had never lost an election. In a characteristic gesture, the Senator resigned before the expiration of his term in order that William B. Spong could take office earlier and gain added seniority over other freshmen senators.⁷⁰ Upon Robertson's announcement of his retirement, members of the Congress, from both political parties, rose to praise the Virginian's accomplishments and leadership. Robertson's most intimate friend in Congress, Senator John C. Stennis of Mississippi, remarked to his fellow legislators that Robertson symbolized the ideal United States Senator:

Thus, we have the finished product - an active effective Senator. This is the test of a Senator's value - his effectiveness. Senator Robertson is an effective Senator for his state; an effective Senator for his committees; and is effective at the council table and on the floor of the Senate. I emphasize that, after all, this is the real and final test of a man's worth and service to his State, to his people, and to the Nation. After all, the outstanding trait that makes Senator Robertson a great Senator is his love for the State of Virginia, as well as an intense personal interest in their welfare. This, and his

love for the Constitution of the United States, is the guide of his life as an individual and as a Senator.⁷¹

After retiring from the Senate in 1966, Robertson returned home to Lexington. However, the former Senator's retirement years were far from leisurely. For two years, the Virginian served as a consultant to the World Bank, furnishing his knowledge of international finance. Once again, the former Senator returned to practice law. But by his eighty-fourth birthday, Robertson's health began to fail. On November 1, 1971 he passed away in Lexington. Robertson's death closed a life of remarkable public service to state and nation. But the death of Willis Robertson also brought an abrupt end to one of the nation's first and greatest conservationists.⁷²

Chapter IV - Footnotes

- ¹U. S. News and World Report, September 20, 1946, 80-81.
- ²Lexington Gazette, November 3, 1971, 16.
- ³Current Biography, 1949, 526-528.
- ⁴A. Willis Robertson, "What Are We Being Spent Into?", The Reader's Digest 54 (May 1949), 116-120.
- ⁵Ibid.
- ⁶New York Times, November 2, 1971, 38.
- ⁷Robertson, 116-120.
- ⁸Ibid.
- ⁹Current Biography, 1949, 526-528.
- ¹⁰Ibid.
- ¹¹New York Times, November 2, 1971, 38.
- ¹²Houston, 31.
- ¹³New York Times, November 2, 1971, 38.
- ¹⁴Ibid.
- ¹⁵Current Biography, 1949, 526-528.
- ¹⁶Richmond Times-Dispatch, November 2, 1971, 2.
- ¹⁷Houston, 31.
- ¹⁸Ross Leffler to A. Willis Robertson, 7 February 1957, A. Willis Robertson Papers, The College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia.
- ¹⁹Ibid.
- ²⁰A. Willis Robertson to Dr. Milton Eisenhower, 15 December 1952, A. Willis Robertson Papers, The College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia.

²¹Nash Buckingham to A. Willis Robertson, 28 January 1953, A. Willis Robertson Papers, The College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia.

²²Stevens, 56-58.

²³A. Willis Robertson to U. S. Senator Edwin C. Johnson, 15 June 1951, A. Willis Robertson Papers, The College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia.

²⁴A. Willis Robertson to J. Hammond Brown, 11 October 1948, A. Willis Robertson Papers, The College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia.

²⁵A. Willis Robertson to U. S. Senator Edwin C. Johnson, 15 June 1951, A. Willis Robertson Papers, The College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia.

²⁶A. Willis Robertson to Nash Buckingham, 16 July 1951, A. Willis Robertson Papers, The College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia; Trefether, 258.

²⁷Giles, 271.

²⁸Ibid., 120-121.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰A. Willis Robertson to Carl D. Shoemaker, 4 April 1952, A. Willis Robertson Papers, The College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia.

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid.

³³A. Willis Robertson to J. Hammond Brown, 11 October 1948, A. Willis Robertson Papers, The College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia.

³⁴A. Willis Robertson to M. D. Hart, 6 January 1948, A. Willis Robertson Papers, The College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia.

³⁵A. Willis Robertson to U. S. Senator Edwin C. Johnson, 15 June 1951, A. Willis Robertson Papers, The College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia.

³⁶M. A. Ogilvie, Wild Geese (Vermillion, South Dakota: Buteo Books, 1978), 311.

³⁷A. Willis Robertson to Zane Jones, 24 July 1958, A. Willis Robertson Papers, The College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia.

³⁸Lexington Gazette, November 3, 1971, 4.

³⁹Lexington Gazette, March 8, 1933, 3.

⁴⁰Gabrielson, 46-47.

⁴¹Giles, 301-302.

⁴²Stevens, 187.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴A. Willis Robertson to Ernest Swift, 28 July 1956, A. Willis Robertson Papers, The College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia.

⁴⁵Committee on Agricultural Land Use and Wildlife Resources, 44.

⁴⁶U. S., Department of the Interior, Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration, Wildlife Circular No. 3 (1940), 2-3.

⁴⁷Trefether, 252-255.

⁴⁸Gottman, 293.

⁴⁹A. Willis Robertson to J. Hammond Brown, 11 October 1948, A. Willis Robertson Papers, The College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia.

⁵⁰Trefether, 254.

⁵¹Houston, 31.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³A. Willis Robertson to the Fifth North American Wildlife Conference, 20 March 1940, A. Willis Robertson Papers, The College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia.

⁵⁴Wilkinson, 310-311.

⁵⁵Ibid., 318-319.

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷Ibid., 320.

⁵⁸Houston, 31.

⁵⁹Wilkinson, 320-321.

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Houston, 31.

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴Wilkinson, 322.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Ibid., 323-324.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Ibid., 332-333.

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰Lexington Gazette, November 3, 1971, 16.

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²Ibid.

Chapter V

Willis Robertson: A Neglected Hero

As a conservationist, sportsman, and lawmaker, Willis Robertson was concerned about the future of America's wildlife. Throughout all his years of public service, he fought hard for a cause which received little attention from the federal government and the American people. Although the Senator was instrumental in sponsoring significant legislation to protect wildlife, he received very little credit for his endeavors. The protection of fish and game has never received the consideration it deserves. Our supply of wildlife has long been assessed as an inexhaustible resource which does not demand the strict supervision of the government.

Another reason why man has failed to adequately safeguard wildlife from extinction is that the worth of fish and game is not easily transferrable into terms of dollars and cents. In our society, it seems that nothing is really important unless it has a monetary value attached to it. Consequently, Robertson's lifetime of work in the field of conservation has been unfortunately neglected. Historians do little more than note that the Senator played an important role in formulating the conservation policies of the United States. Rarely have historians examined the extent or impact of the Virginian's contributions.

In this paper, I have attempted to show that the work of Senator Robertson was extensive, and the impact of his bills and programs is still being felt today. Every time a hunter enters a forest or a fisherman sits alongside a stream, his actions are regulated by laws which Robertson helped to create. The Virginian was a unique type of individual who recognized that the aesthetic, as well as the economic, value of our natural resources was as meaningful to our lives as the exchange of currency, the balance of power, or the control of inflation.

To fully appreciate the importance of Robertson in the field of wildlife restoration, one only has to look at fish and game management prior to the Senator's work. Before Robertson's arrival in Congress, America's record in conservation had been an inglorious one. Corruption in the government's conservation agencies was unrestrained. Political favors became the basis upon which hunting seasons and bag limits were determined. The few laws on the books pertaining to hunting and fishing were rarely obeyed, and violators were seldom prosecuted. Fish hatcheries, sanctuaries, refuges, and game farms were used as pawns or a playing board, moved by the whims of politicians without regard for the condition of the fish and game. State game commissioners were often replaced by new governors with political allies and not competent personnel. Robertson never solved these problems in his lifetime. Many of these

troubles still exist in the present administration. But the Senator was the first hunter, conservationist, or lawmaker to acknowledge and combat these harms. For this reason alone, the Virginian deserves recognition from historians.

However, Robertson was not satisfied with simply trying to halt the degradation of the government's conservation programs. Rather, he offered conservationists and sportsmen the first constructive statutes and policies to correct these serious problems. Almost single-handedly, the Senator made wildlife restoration a topic of concern for the government. A forceful speaker, the Virginian regularly argued on the floor of Congress for support of his legislation, despite indifferent and uninterested lawmakers. During the 1930s and 1940s, Americans were worried about world peace and the economic future of our country. The preservation of wildlife was a task to be left to the future. Not until the late 1940s, when the United States had fully recovered from the blows of the Great Depression and World War II, did legislators begin to listen attentively to Robertson's ideas. Today's sportsmen and conservationists owe him a great debt for his perseverance in sponsoring conservation work decades before this became a popular cause. Acts, such as the Duck Stamp and the Pittman-Robertson, established a foundation for

future wildlife restoration projects. Robertson's legislation officially sanctioned the federal government as protector of the country's fish and game.

Robertson's pioneering work in this field was recognized by his peers in Congress. As a freshman Congressman, he was selected unanimously to chair the Select House Committee on Wildlife Conservation. In the Senate, he was considered the logical choice to be chairman of the Senate Subcommittee, since his inspiration and work had founded the committee in the first place. Senator John C. Stennis, speaking for his associates in the Senate, thanked the Virginian for leading the way in the field of wildlife conservation:

I remember that long before there was a national movement about ecology or publicity or consciousness about it, even before I knew him, Senator Robertson was leading the way for fish and wildlife conservation, for the purity of our streams, and for the protection of our natural resources. He was a man long ahead of his time. That interest led him to author much of Virginia's fish and game law of his time, and after he came here he was co-author of a bill (Pittman-Robertson Act) that is still the basic national law on the subject.¹

Historians have done a further disservice to the Virginian by discounting the significant role of Senator Robertson in American politics and history. The character of the Senator has been ignored for several reasons. In the early decades

of the twentieth century, politics in Virginia was linked with Senator Harry Byrd and his political machine. The controversial practices of the Byrd Machine guaranteed Democrats local and state positions. With the death of Byrd in 1967, the Democratic Party in Virginia was subjected to severe criticism by political analysts and historians. For more than thirty years, Byrd vigorously opposed the federal government's spending proposals, welfare programs, and civil rights legislation.² Columnist Kenneth Crawford compared Byrd's record to a "mark left by tenaciously sustained foot dragging."³ The Washington Post described the former Senator as "a national symbol of fiscal, racial, and social welfare conservatism".⁴ Resounding criticism of Byrd and his followers poured forth from all sides. The New Republic blasted the prejudicial policies of Byrd:

Although a champion of state's rights, Byrd never showed any interest in state responsibilities. His machine let Virginia's educational system deteriorate into one of the nation's worst. While holding up Virginia's pay-as-you-go system as a model of fiscal purity, he conveniently ignored the parsimony that made it possible, nor did he care that towns and cities went deeply into debt financing services the state wouldn't. Courteously, courteous, well liked by his congressional confreeres, Byrd foisted on his people the most iniquitous policy devised by any Southern state to combat school desegregation.⁵

Unfortunately, the censure of the Byrd Machine during

the late 1960s included a harsh appraisal of Robertson's work. Although the Senator was a loyal Democrat, he was never a devout follower of Byrd. While serving Virginia, the Senator retained his independence from the Byrd Organization. Several times he incurred the anger of Byrd by taking a "too-liberal" stand on issues, such as supporting the Truman and Stevenson campaigns for the Presidency of the United States.⁶ Robertson's autonomous stand (from the Organization) caused Byrd to terminate their once cordial relationship. Throughout his years of public service, the Senator was involved in a bitter struggle with the Organization, which Democrats tried to hide from view. The Virginian organized his campaigns around a circle of friends and admirers, rather than a clique of political aspirants. Thus, historians have committed a serious injustice by simply assuming that Robertson was a loyal supporter of the Byrd Machine and that he consequently lacked any constructive ideas of his own.

Critics have tended to minimize the Senator's role in United States history because of his staunch support for the segregation of schools and public facilities. We must remember that Robertson was not the only Senator to attack the desegregation ruling of the United States Supreme Court. Some of our present Senators, such as Strom Thurmond of South Carolina and John Stennis of Mississippi, joined the Virginian in opposing any civil rights legislation. Today these gentlemen

are respected as national leaders. Within the past twenty years, our society has undergone tremendous changes. Blacks have made great advancements in equal rights and employment. The narrow-minded beliefs of the 1950s no longer hold true for the 1980s. Robertson's feelings against segregation were a reflection of the times in Virginia. The constituents he represented were a proud people and disliked being told their way of life was morally and constitutionally wrong. Since Reconstruction, the Democratic party in Virginia had stood for white supremacy. While the nation began to accept the notion of blacks as citizens, Virginia remained stuck in Civil War assumptions. Congressman Bill Tuck, a future governor of the state, clarified Virginia's position following the Supreme Court ruling in 1954:

There is no middle ground, no compromise. We're either for integration or against it, and I'm against it. If they (other Virginians) won't stand with us then I say make them. We cannot compromise... We may have to have 5, 10, or 100 special sessions or even have the Assembly stay in constant session...If you ever let them integrate anywhere the whole state will be integrated in a short time.⁸

Clearly, the thought of large-scale Negro voting power, economic mobilization, and educational opportunities terrified many Democrats and Virginians. It was only logical that Robertson be expected to prevent these threats from becoming realities in his state.⁹

Robertson's extreme fiscal conservatism was yet another reason why many historians have neglected the Senator's character. The Virginian's steadfast stand against extravagant government spending and runaway inflation were popular ideas during Roosevelt's administration. However, by the early 1960s, Robertson's theories on monetary policy were considered outdated and impractical. Massive government spending was considered a necessary tool in the implementation of economic and social programs. But while the government increased its expenditures, inflation continued to soar. Interestingly, many of the Senator's predictions about the future state of the American economy have proven to be true. Recent years have witnessed the instability of the dollar on the world market, rising inflation, and deficit spending by the government.¹⁰

As I have attempted to show, historians have not provided us with an adequate or accurate portrayal of Willis Robertson. One of my goals in writing this paper was to provide a more in-depth analysis of the Virginian's achievements in conservation. But my efforts have been inhibited by a lack of research materials concerning the Senator. When materials were available, they often viewed Robertson's conservation work only in a favorable light. Rarely do historians expand on his personal triumphs and failures. Contrary to what many historians believe, Robertson suffered

many defeats in his conservation work, especially the ineffectiveness of the fish hatchery system and the political corruption of the government's conservation agencies. Access to Senator Robertson's personal and public papers gave me a unique opportunity to examine the conservation work of the Virginian from a different perspective. Robertson's papers allowed me to remove the man from the pedestal and subject him to careful scrutiny. The Senator's letters revealed his strengths and weaknesses. The Senator's love for the outdoors reverberated throughout his writing. At times, the Virginian believed that nature could cure "all" of man's ills:

And while some of the people of this Nation may be desperately poor, the majority of them are not poor but just unhappy. Therefore, at this stage in our recovery plans, I deem it advisable to be giving some consideration to the ways and means of finding peace, happiness, and contentment. A business executive who thinks the country is going to the dogs may be just suffering from a case of nerves and indigestion. Let him fish a trout stream all day, let him follow the elusive grouse in our mountain ranges all day, and I will guarantee he will sleep well that night, and that he will view the world the next day through clearer eyes.¹¹

During his lifetime, Robertson was accused of being overly zealous in his defense of wildlife and natural resources. Many people could not understand his deep love for nature and his willingness to risk his political career at times

for its preservation. But Robertson was no ordinary man. He had within him a vision which few men ever attain. His fight to protect our wildlife, and the legislation he sponsored to guarantee its safety, demonstrated that he was a man ahead of his time. To many conservationists, Robertson has become an inspiration, a standard to live up to. Today, his name is rarely mentioned in political discussions. But in the field of conservation his name should not be overlooked. Senator Allan Bible of Nevada expressed the feelings of hunters and conservationists best when he remarked: "For his visionary leadership and his fierce love of the unspoiled wilds, Virginia and the nation owe him a debt that could never be repaid."¹²

Chapter V - Footnotes

¹U. S. Congress. Senate. Memorial Addresses and Other Tributes in the Congress of the United States on the Life and Contributions of A. Willis Robertson, 92nd Cong., 2nd sess., 1972, 12.

²Wilkinson, 306.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., 307.

⁵Ibid.

⁶William Bryan Crawley Jr., Bill Tuck: A Political Life in Harry Byrd's Virginia (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978), 214.

⁷Wilkinson, 210.

⁸Ibid., 119.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰New York Times, November 2, 1971, 38.

¹¹A. Willis Robertson to the Old Belt Game Association, 2 September 1938, A. Willis Robertson Papers, The College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia.

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