

# A Man For All Seasons



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photos courtesy of the Kansas University Museum of Natural History

*Many have helped shape the department we know today, but few have had the impact of L. L. Dyche when he led the agency from 1910 through 1915.*

**I**magine that you are 16 years old and have never been to school. You've known nothing but country life — raising a few cows, hunting, trapping, working in a feed mill — anything you could do to make a living. You are completely illiterate, but you have a desire to become educated and do great things, perhaps even become one of the most prominent scientists in the nation.

Impossible, you say? Well such is the larger-than-life story of the Kansas Fish and Game Department's (now KDWP) first truly qualified director. It is a remarkable story of tenacity, adventure, often cruel politics, and accomplishment.

The oldest of 12 children, Lewis Lindsay Dyche was born in 1857 in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, but when he was only a few months old, his father packed up his family and headed west, where he homesteaded near the Wakarusa River south of Topeka. Dyche's mother fell ill during the trip, so the child was cared for by Sauk and Fox Indian women for a time. As the boy grew, he maintained a relationship with local Indians in this still relatively wild country, often eating and playing with them.

When he became of school age, Dyche didn't attend. He spent his time working on his father's farm, and as he grew older, an entrepreneurial spirit infected him. He trapped, worked in a local feed mill, and saved his money. Eventually, he bought a cow. Each year, he added another cow until at age 16, he had his own small herd. It was at this time that something

urged Dyche to become educated. He sold his herd for \$600 — quite a sum in 1874 — and enrolled in the Kansas State Normal School in Emporia.

Dyche must have taken to education like he did to working outdoors because he graduated from Emporia in 1877 and promptly enrolled at Kansas University's "Preparatory College," intent on an education in classic literature. In those days, that meant mastering not only literature but the languages it was written in: Greek, Latin, French, German. Dyche's plans would be changed, however, while taking the basic sciences.

His biology instructor, Prof. Francis Huntington Snow, soon recognized Dyche's innate understanding of nature. Snow's teaching philosophy was hands-on, and he paid his students \$1 for every new species of insect they brought him. Dyche pounced on this "easy" money to such an extent that Snow was impressed enough to take the young man under his wing. Dyche had not only found his first true mentor, he was on his way to a career that would take him to the wildest parts of North America, and eventually, to Pratt.

For Snow, the study of biology meant collection first and foremost. He reasoned that to properly study biology, one had to have specimens in

hand. To this end, he organized a number of collecting expeditions in the West. Not only had Dyche become the professor's favorite pupil, the student's hunting prowess was soon legend at the university. This would be a valuable skill on collecting expeditions, and Dyche found himself braving storms, heat, and Apaches while collecting everything from butterflies to grizzly bears. He was now "hunting for science."

After preparatory school, Dyche was readily admitted to "the Kansas State University" (now known as Kansas University). By his junior year, he had been appointed an instructor in the Natural History Department, where he began his mastery of taxidermy, now considered an essential tool for studying animals. In 1884, he received both bachelor of arts and bachelor of science degrees.

Over the ensuing years, Dyche continued his expeditions



DYCHE WAS A SKILLED HUNTER AND OUTDOORSMAN AND HIS LOVE FOR THE OUTDOORS LED HIM ON SOME AMAZING EXPEDITIONS IN THE NAME OF SCIENCE.

and helped amass an enormous collection of mammals and birds for the university. He traveled to the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History where he studied taxidermy under the tutelage of the renowned William T. Hornaday. Hornaday's instruction helped Dyche with the lifelike mounts of two buffalo he had killed.

In 1888, Dyche earned a master of science degree and full professorship at the university. In 1889, he was given the titles of Professor of Anatomy and Physiology, Taxidermist, and Curator of Mammals and Birds. Among his many notable accomplishments in these positions was to acquire and mount the only U.S. Cavalry survivor of the Battle of the Little Bighorn, the horse Comanche.

In 1893, Dyche achieved national attention with his diorama of animal mounts, which was a favorite at the Chicago

World's Fair. Two years later, on a collecting expedition in Greenland, Dyche's group rescued Lt. Robert Peary, who had become stranded on a failed attempt to reach the North Pole.

This trip gained Dyche more national notoriety, which led to an 1895-96 highly-popular lecture tour in which Dyche described his exploits in the West, Northwest, Greenland, and Alaska, illustrated by a "stereopticon" projecting photos taken during his trips.

By 1901, Dyche's reputation in Kansas was well-established. Over the next few years, he used this considerable influence to obtain funds from the Kansas Legislature for the Kansas University Museum of Natural History. With this accomplishment under his belt, he was set to become a national hero of near mythic proportions when Arctic explorer Dr. Frederick Cook invited Dyche on an expe-

dition to climb Mt. McKinley and retrieve a time capsule Cook claimed to have left on the summit earlier.

It was not to be. The year was 1910, and the Kansas Fish and Game Department, just five years old, needed a new "fish and game warden." Newly-elected Gov. Walter R. Stubbs wanted Dyche. Dyche didn't want the job.

In their biography of Dyche, *The Dashing Kansan*, Bill Sharp and Peggy Sullivan quote Dyche's reluctance: "In former years, when the state of Kansas was new, it might have been considered a game state," Dyche observed. "The prairie lands were covered with herds of buffalos and antelope, and the wooded valleys and hills furnished shelter for many deer and elk. Wild turkeys were quite common . . . and prairie chickens were found in great numbers. At present, conditions are changed. Large game animals have completely disappeared. Wild turkeys have likewise become extinct, and prairie chickens are confined to a few counties in the western part of the state and are threatened with extinction. About the only game animal that has held its own is the rabbit, and about the only game bird is the quail. Ducks and geese in former years were very common during migration. Of late years, but a very few pass through. Kansas can not any longer be counted as a game state."

However, the position would be under the employee of KU, and at the urging of Chancellor Frank Strong, Dyche agreed. Stubbs wanted a qualified scientist who would stand above any accusation that his appointment



DYCHE STUDIED TAXIDERMY AT THE SMITHSONIAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY. HE PRESERVED COMANCHE, THE ONLY U.S. CAVALRY SURVIVOR OF THE BATTLE OF THE LITTLE BIGHORN.

was a political plum. Dyche was, in fact, apolitical, having no party affiliation. He was the perfect appointee.

Despite the lack of facilities and funding for the Pratt Fish Hatchery, and the fact that he knew virtually nothing about fish or fish culture, Dyche would work wonders. It would not be easy, however, or without controversy. Enforcement of the few existing fish and wildlife laws was dismal, largely because they were enforced by deputy wardens whose only qualification was that they present a petition signed by 10 taxpayers in their county. In his first three weeks on the job, there were no arrests, but Dyche received 75 complaints against deputy wardens. He immediately clamped down. Relying on recommendations from the Anti-Horse Thief Association for deputy warden recommendations, he fired and replaced corrupt wardens wholesale.

He quickly developed plans for running the agency in other ways. He promoted the concept of "a fish pond on every farm" and poured himself into his job with vigor. He learned everything he could about fish and fish culture, dissecting thousands of fish to determine feeding habits. He took trips to the east to view and study hatcheries.

One unfortunate and much misunderstood position, however, would dog him throughout his tenure: defense of carp as a sport fish. Dyche knew that carp were commonly cultivated in Europe and Asia and saw no reason why they shouldn't be in Kansas. Although Dyche never translated this opinion into



DYCHE ATTRACTED NATIONAL ATTENTION WITH THIS DIORAMA HE CRAFTED FOR THE 1893 CHICAGO WORLD'S FAIR.

policy, his detractors would distort this fact and use it as ammunition against him. One would be Del Travis, the first warden, a bitter former political appointee who owned land adjacent to the hatchery. Travis would publicly, and falsely, accuse Dyche of stocking carp throughout the state.

Before the political storms hit full force, however, Dyche developed detailed plans to stock ponds, build dams and lakes, and conserve soil. His vision extended to the Kansas Legislature in 1911, when a bill he authored was introduced. Among other things, the bill proposed to expand closed hunting seasons; continue to require a hunting license; limit open seasons on game birds; prohibit shooting birds on the ground or water; prohibit shooting birds after sundown; prohibit the use of live decoys; prohibit killing "song or insect-eating" birds; prohibit killing eagles; protect partridges and pheasants for six years; protect quail for five

years; protect beavers, otters, deer, and antelope for 10 years; and require a minimum \$25 fine for the first violation of any of these laws.

Although ridiculed by hunting organizations and political opponents of the governor, a bill passed, but protection of upland birds was cut, and the open seasons on most game were lengthened. Still, with these new laws, Kansas was on the way toward protecting and restoring many important natural resources.

The law was difficult to enforce, but Dyche was undeterred. When one local judge refused to fine two men for hunting without a license and jailed the deputy warden who arrested them, Dyche went to the attorney general and had the judge removed. He continued to push for protection of game that had been decimated in the state and eventually pushed through a law that protected quail and prairie chickens.

All the time, Dyche was plan-



THIS PHOTO WAS TAKEN ABOUT THE TIME DYCHE WOULD HAVE BEEN THE HEAD OF THE KANSAS FISH AND GAME DEPARTMENT, A POSITION HE HELD FROM 1910-1915.

ning, designing, and lobbying for more projects and money for the agency. He planned classes on pond management and fish culture for secondary and college students. He designed the museum (and then, laboratory) that still stands on the Pratt Operations Office grounds. This, he explained, would “be primarily for the students of the University of Kansas, but students from other universities and colleges will be welcomed to carry on certain investigations which should be carried on to clear up a considerable number of problems with fish culture.”

He conducted an open house, or “Fish Day,” on Oct. 29, 1912, to showcase progress at the hatchery and promote further expansion.

When the dust settled, Dyche had expanded the hatchery from

70 acres to 160 and added 83 ponds to the paltry nine that previously existed. He built housing for the warden and hatchery staff, a power house, and a barn. The new hatchery was like none other in the country and gained Dyche nationwide praise for his ingenuity and vision.

Then politics hit the fan. A reporter from a Topeka newspaper ran an article headlined, “It Has Cost \$2 For Each Fish.” The calculations were for a single year. What the reporter failed to note was that the money spent during that year was for fish that came from the only seven usable ponds at the hatchery at that time, and he didn’t take

into account the money that was spent expanding that network to 90 ponds, much less the ambitious building and renovation at the hatchery.

A lie told loud enough, however, tends to stick, and Dyche’s enemies came out of the woodwork. Those who resented the conservation laws he had pushed through saw blood, and they attacked in newspapers throughout the state. Politics had pounded on the apolitical man’s door.

Dyche was a fighter, however, and he defended himself vigorously and logically in the public forum. He also received an outpouring of support from the national scientific community. But accusations continued to pour in, and C.T. Rankin of Hutchinson filed formal charges with the governor’s office,

demanding that Dyche be removed. Plans were made for an open forum against Dyche at the hatchery on Oct. 9, 1913.

Despite the fact that Del Travis built a fence across the road between the hatchery and the railway line used to transport fish, Dyche had the hatchery in top condition, and the executive committee assigned to look into the matter found no complaint. Dyche’s accuser, C.T. Rankin, failed to show up, and Dyche was cleared. The only reaction to this fiasco was that the new governor, George Hodges, hoping to placate hunters mad about the possibility that hunting license dollars had been spent on a hatchery, proposed a fishing license. This did not pass the legislature, however.

Having survived numerous attempts to oust him, Dyche managed to distribute record numbers of fish from the new ponds in the spring of 1914. He also wrote one of the first comprehensive fish management books, *Ponds, Pond Fish, and Pond Fish Culture*. The book was sought nationally and used as a textbook in many university biology programs.

His proclivity for survival and success seemed unshakable, as noted in *The Dashing Kansan*: “In five years since he had stepped down from the lecture stage and accepted the wardenship, Dyche had, with his characteristic intensity, molded himself into a leading expert on freshwater fishes and had built the largest freshwater fish hatchery in the world — in the unlikely location of Pratt, Kansas.”

Here, the catfish industry as we know it to today was born,

but its creator was about to meet his final challenge. In late 1914, Dyche was diagnosed with severe heart disease, which he kept secret from his family and the public. In January of 1915, another new governor, Arthur Capper, took office, and Dyche prepared anew to defend his position.

In an odd twist of fate, on Jan. 6, 1915, Dyche was bitten by a Gila monster in the museum. On Jan. 14, he became too ill to work and was confined to bed. Finally, he was able to tell his family about his heart condition. With them gathered around his bed on Jan. 20, Dyche tenderly whispered to his wife, "And this was your birthday," and died. The great man had climbed his last mountain. It was his heart that killed Dyche, not the Gila monster bite, but the press would later perpetuate a myth that the renowned Prof. Dyche had died of a Gila monster bite.

The Kansas Board of

Administration passed a resolution honoring Dyche: "In the death of Professor L. L. Dyche, the University of Kansas has lost one of the oldest and most devoted members of its faculty, and the state has lost one its most distinguished citizens. Born in poverty, he reached international fame through the exercise of indomitable will power . . . This masterful man, the story of whose life would read like a romance, was the personification of simplicity in his private life. His life should be an inspiration to every young man in the land."

A year earlier, Dyche had written a friend, "I seem to have been born with a love for wild things and new and untrodden places. But such things are passing away, and I will soon pass with them. I was born to think that most things were as they should be and my fellow beings were honest — at least as honest as the wild men I first

knew. How I have been disappointed . . . The day for men . . . as myself seems to have passed."

Actually, the day for men such as Dyche was just dawning. Most of the large mammals that Dyche mounted for the 1893 World's Fair still stand at the KU Museum of Natural History. A conservation movement that would sweep the nation in the 1930s eventually restored the game Dyche lamented passing, and his legacy of game and fish management serves today's Kansas outdoorsmen and women in ways he could not have imagined.

Ironically, this visionary man longed for the past while laying a foundation for the future of Kansas fish and game management. ♡

*Note: For more information on the remarkable life of L. L. Dyche, read *The Dashing Kansan*, by Bill Sharp and Peggy Sullivan, published by Harrow Books.*



IN JUST TWO YEARS AFTER ACCEPTING THE POSITION OF "KANSAS FISH AND GAME WARDEN," DYCHE HELD A PUBLIC OPEN HOUSE AT THE PRATT FISH HATCHERY. ALTHOUGH DYCHE'S NAME IS SPELLED WRONG, THE CUTLINE BILLS THE HATCHERY AS THE LARGEST OF ITS KIND IN THE WORLD.