

OSCAR ELTON SETTE

I cannot imagine a more pleasant task than this—to write a prefatory statement for the Oscar Elton Sette issue of the *Fishery Bulletin*. It is also a most difficult task, for one must choose one's words with care lest he become maudlin and guilty of oversell on the one hand, or reserved to the point of disparagement on the other.

I do not propose to list Elton Sette's accomplishments and honors (these are recited elsewhere), but only to comment on and quote others on certain aspects of his career that may help us attain perspective.

It was not long ago that I left the 18th meeting of the Eastern Pacific Oceanic Conference (EPOC), before its conclusion and before Elton Sette stepped down as Chairman of that eminently successful "non-organization." He had conceived the idea and served as the sole (always temporary) Chairman through the history of this informal, nonstructured conference, at which attendees speak freely, representing only themselves in their capacity as experts and not necessarily speaking the party line of their parent organizations. The success of EPOC in developing ideas and plans, in bringing about coordinated efforts over a wide spectrum of scientific disciplines, is a measure of the way the man works: low key, low pressure, high performance.

Over a decade ago, on January 16, 1961, he received the Department of the Interior's highest honor, the Distinguished Service Award. In his citation, Secretary of the Interior Fred A. Seaton said this:

Dr. Sette is an internationally recognized leader in marine science, highly respected by his contemporaries in University, State, and Federal Service. His ability has speeded progress in the knowledge of the sea and its resources, and reflected prestige and credit upon the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries and the Department. Since joining the Bureau of Fisheries, a predecessor agency of the Fish and Wildlife Service and Bureau of Commercial Fisheries, on January 8, 1924, he has made outstanding contributions not only as a

scientist, but as an organizer of investigations, eminent administrator, and an unusually successful teacher . . .

He has always placed special importance on the training of scientists under his supervision and has devoted much time and effort to their development. These efforts have had an important influence upon fishery science in the United States and Canada, as attested by the numbers of his former employees who now hold leading positions in the profession.

That such things should be said of a man who has already made a significant impact for the good upon society is appropriate and expected. But I find two earlier statements of perhaps greater interest for they show that his attributes were recognized at the very earliest stage of his career.

Some 50 years ago (fifty!), W. F. Thompson was Director of the fledgling California State Fisheries Laboratory. He employed a young college student, O. E. Sette, apparently in 1919, and wrote this for the January 1921 issue of "California Fish and Game":

Mr. O. E. Sette, who has been with the [California] Commission for more than a year, has also returned to his college work, having left for Stanford on September 1 [1920] . . . The Commission is fortunate in being able to retain the interest and services of Mr. Sette, whose work has been of high value.

Then, in January 1924:

The fisheries investigation work of the Commission appears to be a training school for government fisheries men, for several who have been mainstays have been tempted to other positions by higher salaries . . . now comes word that O. E. Sette has accepted a prominent position with the United States Bureau of Fisheries . . . Nor is it an easy matter to find the right kind of scientifically trained men to fill these vacated positions. Although discouraging, those in charge are planning to carry on by acquiring the best material available to fill these positions.

His worth was obviously apparent at a most tender age to no less stringent a taskmaster than W. F. Thompson.

From a personal standpoint, I knew him by repute from my first delvings into fisheries

literature as a student. My first real contact with his work came when, as a very junior biologist at that same State Fisheries Laboratory, I was given the task of recompiling some length frequencies of Pacific mackerel, which were measured in units called "settes." The man I knew of, the measurement not. It turned out he established the half centimeter as appropriate for mackerel during his days at the laboratory. The unit later became known as the sette, and the term was used for over a decade until the half

centimeter finally fell from grace, being deemed insufficiently precise. I first met him some years after my encounter with the sette and found that the good reports that preceded him were excelled only by the man himself.

So with this issue we honor as best we can someone who has earned the respect and admiration of those fortunate enough to have crossed his path during his long and most honorable career. He is in the truest sense a gentle man.

Philip M. Roedel