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Schlemmer Family Papers, 1904-1924

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Collection Overview

Repository:	Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C., osiaref@si.edu
Title:	Schlemmer Family Papers
Identifier:	Accession 05-288
Date:	1904-1924
Extent:	0.5 cu. ft. (1 document box)
Creator::	
Language:	English

Administrative Information

Preferred Citation

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Historical Note

Maximillian Joseph August Schlemmer was born in 1856 in the French province of Alsace Lorraine to German parents. In 1871, as the Prussian army crossed the French border, Max set sail for New York. After traveling on whaling ships for several years, Max Schlemmer settled in Kauai, Hawaii, in 1885. His interest in Laysan Island began after procuring a job with the North Pacific Phosphate and Fertilizer Company, which mined the guano-rich island. The island also had a unique bird population because of its abundance of fresh water, and it soon became popular with the scientific community. Max himself collected a small number of bird specimens.

Captain Max Schlemmer lived and worked on the island intermittently from 1893-1915. He became known as the "King of Laysan Island." As the company he worked for began to turn elsewhere for fertilizer, he took full charge of the mining of guano on Laysan. Japanese pirates began visiting this island and neighboring Lisianski Island to kill the birds for their skins, which brought a hefty profit. Max also tried to use the birds for profit, but all his attempts failed. In February of 1909, President Theodore Roosevelt declared Laysan and the other islands in the Hawaiian archipelago to be the Hawaiian Islands Bird Reservation, thus hoping to stop the destruction of the feathered inhabitants. However, bird pirating continued.

In 1914, Max bought the sloop yacht, *Helene*, to make a journey to the Laysan he had not visited since 1908. On June 25, 1915, Max set out for the island with several of his children on board, including his son Eric. After troubles with the ship, they arrived at Laysan only to find the little island completely decimated of wildlife. They set about restoring the island to its former glory as a natural habitat and breeding ground. The journal by Max covers this trip from June 25 to December 2. The *Helene* was completely lost soon thereafter in a hurricane when loaned out to a shipwrecked captain for a short trip to Midway Island. Eventually, another ship arrived to remove the Schlemmer family from the island, thus leaving it open again for bird pirating. The Schlemmers returned to Honolulu, where Max stayed until his death in 1935.

In 1923, the Tanager Expedition (named after the boat, *Tanager*), run by the U.S. Biological Survey and the Bishop Museum in Honolulu, set out to survey the Bird Reservation on Laysan Island. Max Schlemmer had previously introduced rabbits to the island that had since destroyed Laysan's ecological balance. The expedition hoped to remove the rabbit threat as well as bring back bird specimens from Laysan and other islands in the Bird Reservation. Alexander Wetmore, the noted ornithologist, was appointed to lead this expedition. Eric Schlemmer, Max's son, was recruited by Wetmore to join the trip. After three trips that year, the expedition succeeded in exterminating the rabbits on Laysan.

Descriptive Entry

This accession includes two journals by Eric Schlemmer (and possibly others) while on Laysan Island, 1904-1908; a letter from Alexander Wetmore to Eric Schlemmer, 1924; and the log of the yacht, *Helene* by Max Schlemmer, 1915. For more information, see *Max Schlemmer, Hawaii's King of Laysan Island* by Tom E. Unger (iUniverse, Inc.: New York, 2003).

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

- Fertilizers
- Guano
- Sea birds

Types of Materials:

- Diaries
- Manuscripts

Names:

- Helene (Yacht)
- Laysan Island (Hawaii)
- Schlemmer, Eric
- Schlemmer, Max, 1856-1935
- Tanager Expedition (1923)
- Wetmore, Alexander, 1886-1978

Container Listing

Box 1

- | | |
|------------|---|
| Box 1 of 1 | Journal, 1904-1908 |
| Box 1 of 1 | Journal, 1905-1906 |
| Box 1 of 1 | Correspondence: Alexander Wetmore to Eric Schlemmer, March 16, 1924 |
| Box 1 of 1 | Log of the Yacht <i>Helene</i> (Owned by Max Schlemmer), 1915 |