

## Young Humboldt

Stephen Vermette



Image Source: D.J. Crumrine



Young Alexander holding a barometer together with his widowed mother.

Alexander von Humboldt was born in Berlin on September 14, 1769. As a young boy Humboldt was tutored at home. The late 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries were a time known as the “Age of Enlightenment”, a period where reason was the primary source of knowledge, and where scientific activity challenged the norms. Humboldt was educated in the classics but, given the times, was challenged by his enlightened tutors to “dare to know”.

Humboldt’s childhood was described by some as unhappy, given the constraints of his strict Calvinist upbringing and the upper-class position of his family. In correspondence he characterized his home as “Castle of Boredom”. However, there is another side to his childhood, one that he had more control over. It turns out that Humboldt’s “classroom”, by his own doing, extended beyond the walls of his home, to his backyard (a country estate with plenty of acres to explore). Novelist Theodor Fontane described the young Humboldt as *“restless and a bit wild, preferring to roam outdoors or read about explorers”*. Humboldt found solace outside at “play”, when free to wander and curious to wonder. He collected and cataloged his backyard – labeling plants, shells, insects – whatever attracted his curiosity. Adults, witnessing his wanderings and his growing collections, referred to him as “the little apothecary” in reference to his penchant to collect. Later in life Humboldt, famous for his ability to come up with big ideas, wrote *“Our imagination is struck only by what is great, but the lover of science should attend equally to little things.”* It was his youthful backyard roaming that allowed

Humboldt to acquire an early appreciation of nature’s “little things”.

As the curator of his backyard collection, Humboldt took pride in what he had learned. Charles Darwin, at his first meeting with Humboldt (then 70 years old), commented on Humboldt’s tendency to talk a lot. It is left to speculation whether this was an early trait, but the writer Goethe, upon visiting the family home, did note that he walked away impressed by Humboldt’s youthful grasp of science. Goethe encouraged him to continue his learning. Unfortunately, Humboldt’s interests were not taken seriously at home.

As a young man, Humboldt did not outgrow his fascination with nature and science. Though he was being steered toward a career in public service., his interests in nature and science were rekindled during his formal schooling and by the individuals with whom he kept company. One such person was Georg Forster, a German who had sailed with the famous explorer Captain Cook, who, in turn, introduced Humboldt to others of like mind. As a child Humboldt had read about explorers and then, as young man, he was meeting them! Humboldt was determined to be a scientific explorer in his own right – to study the “little things” beyond his backyard and to propose, in time, those great ideas that struck the imagination of the world.