

## THE BIRD LADY OF TEXAS (1886-1973)

By Kay McCracken

*It is with a great deal of pleasure that we dedicate this issue of BIRDING to the memory of Connie Hagar. This honor is especially fitting as we approach the 1976 ABA Convention to be held on the Texas Coast. It was largely because of Connie's activities that this coastline became one of North America's most visited birding areas. This year's pilgrimage by birders across the continent is itself a tribute to her indefatigable efforts to promote and preserve the avian richness of the Texas Coast—Ed.*

To the door of her white frame cottage in a then obscure village on the Texas coast the ornithological world made a beaten path that still is trod by birders who never met her. She was known on two continents as the Bird Lady of Texas, to thousands of birdwatchers simply as "Connie" Hagar. She did not write a better book, or preach a better sermon, or make a better mousetrap; she simply looked at the birds around her more closely and more often than anyone had before, seeing things not seen before, and gladly sharing her discoveries with all who wished to come and look with her.

Many hundreds of birders from near and far did come, even from foreign lands. Among them were distinguished figures in professional ornithology, others were the greenest tyros, and she welcomed all with equal warmth and grace. Connie never pretended to be more than a birdwatcher, always insisting that she learned more from her visitors than she taught, but high-ranking ornithologists regarded her with unqualified respect and admiration, and often consulted her.

For more than 30 years Connie Hagar made daily observations of the bird life of the Coastal Bend, including, for many years, weekly excursions to neighboring counties, plus occasional short trips to other parts of the state. Her observations startled the bird world a number of times, changed the literature, added new species to the state's avifauna, and shed new light on the habits and movements of others. She discovered the fantastic spring migration at Rockport and the even more amazing fall migration of hummingbirds there. Once she estimated as many as 3,000 hummingbirds buzzing over Live Oak Point. Some were species not listed anywhere in Texas.

She also upset the common notion of a birdwatching female in action. A kinglet person, five feet tall and never weighing over 100 pounds, she dressed for the field in full-skirted cotton frocks that never seemed to come unstarched. She rarely wore a hat but her silver hair never looked mussed.



Conger "Connie" Neblett Hagar, The Bird Lady of Texas

Conger Neblett Hagar was middle-aged when birds became more of a vocation than avocation to her. Born June 14, 1886 in Corsicana, Texas, she was first of the three children of Robert S. and Mattie Yeater Neblett. The parents were intellectuals with an uncommon appreciation of nature. Neblett, lawyer and native Texan, took special pride in all things Texan and taught his children to know native plants and the birds around them. Mrs. Neblett, versed in classic literature taught them about butterflies, the stars and planets, and to appreciate poetry. Throughout her life Connie continued to memorize and quote lengthy passages of poetry she loved.

Long before her small hands could span an octave she learned to pick out tunes on the piano, from watching her mother play. Music became paramount in her life and her high school graduation gift was a grand piano. By then she was also singing and from Forest Park College in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1906 she was graduated in voice and literature. Several subsequent summers were spent in further study in Chicago. She had offers to sing professionally, which she never considered. In that era "no lady sings for money," Mrs. Neblett declared. Her talents had been cultivated for her own pleasure and that of family and friends.

The Neblett home was a center of social life, the two daughters mainsprings of a gay young set that danced far into many nights. "I could do it now," Connie would avow 50 years later, "If the doctors would let me." She sang or played or recited for countless gatherings, clubs, weddings, funerals, and in churches. Throughout her active life every Sunday morning found her in some church as soloist, pianist, or organist. During World War I, then married to a Navy officer, Connie lived for a time in New Orleans but went home at the end of the war to attend her widowed invalid mother. During this period a long-latent interest in birds was reborn; she and her sister decided to learn the birds of their county and organized a nature club. Connie became a bird-bander for the U.S. Biological Survey and contributed occasional notes to ornithological journals.

Connie and Jack Hagar were married April 2, 1926. A native Bostonian, Jack had gravitated to Texas through interests in real estate and oil leasing. Eleven years her senior, he was an indulgent husband who gave her her first binoculars and a Ford coupe that she might pursue her hobby afield.

A summer visit to Rockport led to Connie's overwhelming desire to learn coastal birds. She wanted to move to Rockport. Jack was agreeable but had a problem: "What will I do while you are looking at birds"? The problem was solved when Rockport Cottages, a row of eight small resort units not far from the beach, came up for sale. They bought the cottages and moved to Rockport at the end of 1935. Jack embraced the role of Boniface with enthusiasm equal to his wife's zeal for birds.

Early every morning, again most afternoons, and often all day Connie studied birds. Peterson's first field guide was out but she did

not know it; she worked with meager literature, most of which pictured male birds in breeding plumage only. Other plumages long remained mysteries, as did migrations until she realized that major flyways converged at Rockport. South Texas had been studied by trained ornithologists off and on during the previous century but none had stayed on the ground long enough to grasp what happened during a full cycle of seasons. Connie Hagar did that at Rockport. Until she came, nobody dreamed of the richness of the avifauna on the Coastal Bend. Birdwatching at that time was relatively new in Texas—and was considerably suspect.

Connie was unaware that others along the coast were similarly engaged until Prof. George Williams of Rice Institute solicited her notes for his new publication, *The Gulf Coast Migrant*. Joyously, she began reporting, and reading with avid interest the findings of L. Irby Davis, Arlie McKay, Joe M. Heiser Jr., and others.

Her reports caught the eye of Dr. Harry C. Oberholser, then working on his comprehensive book about Texas birdlife. He questioned a Sooty Shearwater at Rockport, and breeding Warbling Vireos. Correspondence led to a visit by the distinguished authority, who came again and again. His skepticism soon evaporated; he wanted records of every bird she saw and she obliged, allowing him to copy her daily lists from her nature calendar.

Then began the long and ever-enlarging procession of visiting birders ambitious to "go into the field with Connie Hagar." The "super field-birder," many called her. Old guest books of Rockport Cottages read like *Who's Who in Birding*, far too many names to list here but included Arthur A. Allen, Robert P. Allen, Dillon Ripley, Roger Tory Peterson, the Cruickshanks, the Pettingills, the Edwin Way Teales, Chandler Robbins, George Lowery, Alexander and Sandy Sprunt, Stuart Keith, and all presidents and most officers of National Audubon Society during her time. Guy Emerson visited at least once a year. Ludlow Griscom doubted Buff-breasted Sandpipers and Bay-breasted Warblers—but came and saw both. Fred M. Packard, stationed in wartime at Corpus Christi Naval Air Station, collaborated on Connie's first checklist.

On their legendary birding tour of America, Roger Tory Peterson and James Fisher set aside one-half day to accompany Connie. Fisher later referred to her as "the best bird of the trip."

Edgar Kincaid Jr. was but a lad when he first sought her and became a source of great pride. Like her father, she was ardently Texan and nothing gave her more happiness than the growing number of Texans caring about birds. Organization of the Texas Ornithological Society, of which she and Dr. Oberholser were honorary members, was a milestone in her life.

Rockport Cottages during spring migration was like one long house party with beloved groups who came year after year, and there were days when none of them left the cottage grounds such was the



Mrs. Connie Hagar received a special citation from the National Audubon Society in 1962. Carl W. Buchheister, President, presented her with the certification of appreciation—Photo courtesy of the *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*

flood of migrant birds pouring through the Hagars' oaks. Through all this Connie still had time for her community or wherever she was needed. She gave hundreds of nature talks to clubs over the area and never turned down an opportunity to tell youth groups about the wonders of nature. She wrote for numerous publications without pay, "just to tell the world what Texas has."

Countless honors were bestowed upon her. National Audubon's 1962 convention was in Corpus Christi mainly that Connie might attend



Two well known Rockport birders in 1941

Connie, at 70, still very active

and receive a special citation to . . . "friend and mentor to three generations of field students of birds . . ." from President Carl Buchheister. A proud moment, but she was just as proud to be "honored in her own country," when Rockport Chamber of Commerce held Connie Hagar Day and when Corpus Christi Outdoor Club staged a similar event. Roger Peterson made that occasion more memorable by unexpectedly flying down to reminisce with her and the audience about the good times they had shared.

Few individuals in private life have been so much written about and photographed as was Connie. She loved it because it was "for Texas." Alfred Eisenstaedt of *Life* magazine had a frustrating day with her because she didn't "look like a birdwatcher," but the result appeared full page Sept. 10, 1956 among others under the title, "An Eminent Company of Amateur Naturalists."

Her birds and her friendships sustained Connie after Jack's death in 1962, as they did again in her final sad years. She had a vast capacity for friendships. When she died November 24, 1973 at the age of 87 she had been hospitalized for two years and was virtually blind. News of the birds outside, such as the first scissortail or a warbler wave, cheered her, as did news of friends. She had been unable to respond to communications from distant friends but the friends kept communicating, literally from around the world. Their messages recalling the glorious past were the bright spots. And they kept coming to the very last, such was the impact of one friendly small woman upon the birding fraternity.

Fittingly, she is buried beside Jack under the oaks in Rockport Cemetery overlooking a long stretch of the bayfront, always full of birds, that long ago was designated the Connie Hagar Wildlife Sanctuary.

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