

Edna Lanier Appleberry

PAULINE E. MEBANE

Edna Lanier was born 23 September 1894 at Horse Branch, a community in central Pender County, N.C., between Watha and Burgaw on the creek that gave the settlement its name. She married Cecil Appleberry and they had two sons, Cecil Jr. and Thomas. While rearing their two sons, Edna became a respected amateur naturalist in the fields of marine biology, botany, and ornithology.

The Appleberrys lived at Wrightsville and later in Wilmington, except for several years during the 1960s when Cecil's job as an accountant with the Atlantic Coast Line railroad took them to Jacksonville, Florida. Following his retirement, they returned to Wilmington.

The family were communicants of St. James Episcopal Church, where Cecil and Edna sang in the choir for many years. According to her sister, Louise, Edna was quite musical. A member of the high-school orchestra, she played the mandolin and gave lessons on the instrument. She also took elocution lessons and gave readings at schools and social events. Her sister remembers them as being of the "tear jerker" variety, but in later life Mrs. "A" exhibited an excellent sense of timing while telling humorous stories. Beneath her matronly and dignified demeanor lived an irrepressible comedienne.

Edna was versatile in many fields and deeply interested in advances in medical science. Had she been able to attend college, she might have become a physician or medical researcher in spite of her two handicaps. Her eyesight was somewhat impaired, and she had no sense of direction. She was immediately disoriented when taken out of familiar surroundings. Consequently, she could not safely drive an automobile.

Mrs. "A" was an astute birder whose acute hearing more than compensated for her deficient vision. After the organization of the Wilmington Bird Club in 1947, Edna Appleberry, Mary Baker, and I spent at least two mornings a week birding, mostly in New Hanover County. Occasional field trips took us across the Cape Fear River to Brunswick County. Bird study was a passion with Edna, and she never was satisfied until she had actually spotted a bird and heard its song. One spring morning she and I spent 2 hours chasing a Carolina Chickadee until she actually sighted it while it was singing a song unfamiliar to her.

CHILDHOOD INTEREST IN NATURE

Edna's interest in natural history began in early childhood, during a visit to the country when she was about four years old. "I picked up a beautiful little snake, which I know now was a Scarlet King Snake, but I just thought that it was a beautiful worm. I went out to the barn where my mother was trying to learn how to milk a cow. I ran to show her the snake, and the next thing I knew I was on the ground while my mother, the hired girl, and the cow all went over me leaving the stable." For causing the commotion Edna received a sound whipping, which taught her never to show an adult anything pretty that you find—just keep it to yourself.

Nonetheless, "The Indefatigable Mrs. A"—as *Raleigh News and Observer* columnist Charlotte Hilton Green dubbed her—spent a lifetime showing beautiful things to people of

all ages. For a number of years Mrs. "A" was in much demand, sometimes five days a week, for lectures on marine life at schools and clubs. For two years she maintained two large saltwater tanks constructed at the Lumina by the Tidewater Power Company. This was done as a surprise for her, so she could keep and share with others the living animals she found along the beach. Unfortunately, the designers forgot about the need for drains and aeration equipment. In spite of Edna's best efforts, keeping the tanks properly balanced was next to impossible. Everytime she would have everything just about right, a passing fisherman would donate part of his catch.

To help the Cape Fear Garden Club entertain the state organization, Edna agreed to exhibit her fine shell collection at a Wrightsville Beach liquor store that had closed for the winter. The empty shelves were perfect for the purpose. While she and her sons were arranging and labeling the shells, she stopped working long enough to enjoy a Coca-Cola a friend had brought her. Two women walked past on the boardwalk. "Just look at the brazen hussy drinking in broad daylight," one said to the other. The liquor was gone, but the ABC Store sign was still outside. The garden club meeting was such a success that the shells remained on display awhile longer. Visitors made a voluntary offering for the benefit of St. Andrews Episcopal Church. The sign, however, was changed to "Appleberry's Marine Museum."

Mrs. "A" did not become particularly interested in birds until 1942. Theodore Empie, who was certain the Wilmington area had more birds than any other part of North Carolina, gave her a membership in the North Carolina Bird Club and challenged her to prove him right. He could not do it himself, he said, because his arthritis made it impossible for him to do the necessary field work. When Edna protested that she knew nothing about birds, he replied confidently, "You can learn."

At first the learning was slow, but once she received instruction from Gregor Rohwer, an entomologist whose hobby was bird study, she progressed rapidly. Her first published field report appeared in the September 1945 *Chat*. She indignantly described the disastrous loss of preflight birds caused by the early-summer clearing of Spanish moss, dead trees, underbrush, and reeds around Greenfield Lake, which was near her home and the site for many of her bird walks.

WILMINGTON BIRD CLUB FORMED

In 1947, when an out-of-town woman complained because the Wilmington Chamber of Commerce had informed her that there was no local bird club, Mrs. "A" surprised herself by responding, "Certainly we have a bird club, and I'm the president of it." She promised to invite the lady to the next meeting and then telephoned the Chamber to list the Wilmington Bird Club and the name of its president. That same night she called together 14 people who had shown a real interest in bird study. When she arrived at the meeting, Edna announced, "Today I have founded Wilmington Bird Club, appointed myself president, and I have a slate of officers which I would like you to adopt unanimously." They laughed and did as they were told. Afterwards Rohwer remarked, "President, hell—she means dictator." Edna was an excellent executive and relentlessly expected full cooperation from all club members. She got it, too, because there was never a dull moment when Mrs. "A" was around.

In 1950 the Wilmington Bird Club became the Wilmington Natural Science Club to encompass the varied interests of its members. One major project of the club was the

opening of the Greenfield Park Nature Museum (Chat 16:89) in 1952. The museum offered excellent exhibits of carnivorous plants and seacoast life, including a shell collection, Mrs. H.E. Lane's insect collection, and mounted birds on loan from John Funderburg. Although it was popular with tourists and local residents during several years of operation by a volunteer staff, the nature museum never received enough financial support from the city to transform it into a permanent, professionally operated institution.

For 15 years Edna Appleberry conscientiously reported local bird sightings to the editor of *The Chat*, and her husband Cecil was frequently mentioned as an observer. This quiet, unassuming man became an excellent bird student in his own right, and he never hesitated to argue with Mrs. "A" on questions of identification. Cecil and Edna were really a team. Soon the Appleberrys and their friends proved that Theodore Empie was right about the great variety of bird life in the lower Cape Fear area. They added a new species to the state bird list (the Black-whiskered Vireo found by Dot Earle), and on one Christmas Bird Count they recorded 169 species, the highest number reported anywhere in the country that year.

Naturalists came from all over the state, and all over the world, to enjoy Mrs. Appleberry's guided tours of the best birding spots. In his 1951 book *North with the Spring*, Edwin Way Teale referred to Mrs. "A" as "one of the most enthusiastic and capable amateur naturalists we met." All of her guests were not famous, but she was gracious to everyone. Once she was leading two young couples to find three local specialties—Red-cockaded Woodpecker, Painted Bunting, and Bachman's Sparrow. One of the men became bored with the tedious search for the elusive sparrow. "Tell me, Mrs. Appleberry," he inquired politely, "have you ever seen a No U Tern?" Without batting an eye or cracking a smile she replied sweetly, "No, Mr. Newman, but I have seen many an Extra-marital Lark."

Edna Appleberry was elected president of Carolina Bird Club in 1958. During her one-year term, she wrote three President's Page messages for *The Chat*, pointing out the strengths and weaknesses of the club and urging members to "get busy on these projects," especially the ones that would involve young people in CBC activities.

At the winter meeting held at Myrtle Beach in 1959, one club member was very pregnant. Mrs. "A" used her presidential authority to persuade a bird-watching doctor to accompany the expectant mother on the field trips, just in case there should be a medical emergency. There was no emergency. Patricia Eileen Potter was not born until nearly two months later. From her hospital room, Eloise Potter wrote Mrs. "A" to announce the arrival of the newest CBC member. At the spring meeting Mrs. "A" passed the good news along to the membership. "Do you remember the doctor I found to look after Mrs. Potter at Myrtle Beach?" she asked. "Well, I later found out that he is a dentist, but he's awfully good at extractions."

Mrs. Appleberry genuinely enjoyed working with young people. She was nature director at the Wilmington Girl Scout Camp for a number of years, and she also befriended boys who were particularly interested in birds. The boys' appetite for bird study was reportedly whetted by the sumptuous picnic lunches Edna packed for field trips and bird counts. Mrs. "A" taught integrity in reporting and respect for other people's property. "I insisted on it, and if they couldn't, then they weren't my boys," she declared. John B. Funderburg, now director of the North Carolina State Museum, was one of her boys. "If it had not been for Edna and Cecil Appleberry," he says, "I might have remained a taxidermist in Wilmington for the rest of my life. They insisted that I take advantage of the

GI Bill and go to college." When the museum and Carolina Bird Club published a new state bird list in 1978, it was, at Funderburg's suggestion, dedicated in memory of Edna Lanier Appleberry, who died on 30 January 1978.

The secret of Mrs. "A's" success as wife and mother, church and club leader, naturalist, teacher, and friend was that she never lost her love of beauty, her eagerness to learn, her concern for people, her integrity, or her sense of humor. Her motto was: "What's the use of what is done/ If in the doing there be no fun."

Acknowledgments. This article is based in part on "I've been a very busy Lady" by Bobbie Marcroft, which appeared in the May 1977 issue of *Scene Magazine*, a publication of the Cape Fear Media Associates of Wilmington, N.C. The list of Edna Appleberry's publications was compiled by Eloise F. Potter. She and John B. Funderburg reviewed the manuscript and shared their memories of Mrs. "A" with me.

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ORNITHOLOGICAL PUBLICATIONS OF EDNA LANIER APPLEBERRY

(Excluding Christmas and Spring Bird Counts)

- 1945. Wilmington, N.C. [Habitat destruction during nesting season.] Chat 9:59-60.
- 1946. Arkansas Kingbird at Wilmington. Chat 10:86.
- 1948a. Young robin at Wilmington, N.C. Chat 12:65.
- 1948b. Both Glossy and White Ibises observed at Wilmington. Chat 12:67-68.
- 1948c. Wilmington, N.C. [Winter bird reports.] Chat 12:85.
- 1949a. Dickcissel (?) at Wilmington, N.C. Chat 13:33.
- 1949b. Arkansas Kingbird seen at Wilmington, N.C. Chat 12:48.
- 1949c. Wilmington, N.C. [Winter bird reports.] Chat 13:48.
- 1949d. Brown Thrasher nests in hole in ground. Chat 13:63.
- 1950. Wilmington, N.C. [Fall migration reports.] Chat 14:31..
- 1951. Noddy Tern seen in Brunswick Co., N.C. Chat 15:33.
- 1953. Shore birds at Wilmington, N.C. Chat 17:94.
- 1955. Christmas counting in Wilmington, N.C. Chat 19:82-83.
- 1957. White-tailed Kite at Wilmington. Chat 21:70-71.
- 1958a. President's page. Chat 22:30.
- 1958b. Winter hummingbird at Wilmington. Chat 22:46.
- 1958c. Wilson's Phalarope at Wilmington. Chat 22:69-70.
- 1958d. President's page. Chat 22:72.
- 1959a. A spring observation of the American Golden Plover. Chat 23:36.
- 1959b. President's page. Chat 23:45.
- 1959c. Redstart nesting at Fayetteville, N.C. Chat 23:89.
- 1961. Black-whiskered Vireo, a new species for North Carolina. Chat 25:17-18.

About the Author. Mrs. Mebane is the last surviving charter member of the Wilmington Bird Club.