

Charles Keller



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IN APPRECIATION

**THE OFFICERS, BOARD
OF DIRECTORS, AND THE
MEMBERS**

**DEDICATE THIS ISSUE OF
THE INDIANA AUDUBON
QUARTERLY**

TO

CHARLES E. KELLER

**IN APPRECIATION FOR HIS
DEDICATION AS EDITOR
1987-2005**

BIOGRAPHY OF CHARLES KELLER

by Bill Murphy, 7835 Tufton St., Fishers, IN 46038

Youth

The Vice President of the Indianapolis National Bank, John W. Keller, was a very happy man. The date was February 27, 1929. The economy was booming. His wife, born Lucille J. Laker, had just borne him a second son. They had named the child Charles. The stock market would crash eight months later, but over the next eight decades Charles E. Keller would rise to become a beloved, hallowed figure in the Indiana birding community. It is my privilege to tell his story.

Although they were not particularly interested in nature themselves, Charlie's parents encouraged the lad to enjoy the outdoors. His parents had been born and raised in Indianapolis and were very much at ease with their son's wanderings throughout their neighborhood and beyond. Indianapolis would quickly develop into far more than just another Midwestern crossroads city, but during the Great Depression no one thought twice about allowing their children to roam at will. Within easy walking or biking distance from the Keller home were more than enough woods, creeks, and swamps to satisfy the needs of a boy like Charlie.

From just after his birth until he was almost 24 years old (1930-1953), Charlie lived in a two-story frame house at 637 Eastern Avenue in what is now called the Near Eastside. His only sibling, elder brother John W. Keller, Jr., like Charlie, still lives in the Indianapolis area. Unlike Charlie's insatiable appetite for birding, John Jr.'s interest in birds peaked at the level of feeder watcher.

Charlie's first concrete memory of a bird involves a female Baltimore Oriole that had crashed into the back window of his house. He was six years old and curious about what kind of bird it might be. He looked it up in *Useful Birds of America*, which his grandmother had given him, and was able to identify it. Thus began his lifelong quest for knowledge of birds.

Good fortune smiled upon him when he started school. Charlie's parents were Catholic and raised him Catholic. It was the Catholic tradition to send one's children to a Catholic school rather than to a public school. The elementary school to which Charlie's parents sent him was St. Philip Neri at 545 Eastern Avenue, just one block south of the Keller home. It was at St. Philip's that Sister Alma Cecile, his fourth-grade teacher, became the first person to exert a strong positive influence on Charlie's interest in birds. One of her methods of teaching bird identification to her young students was to hang posters of birds around the perimeter of the ceiling in her classroom. Occasionally she would ask each of her students to name all of the species and would then remove the names on the

posters and ask the students to identify the birds again. She was impressed that one of her students, Charlie Keller, could remember the names of all of them.

Repetitive drills such as this honed Charlie's ability to notice and recall subtle differences, a skill that would serve him well as he learned to identify difficult bird groups such as shorebirds. Sister Cecile's positive feedback doubtlessly encouraged him to pursue birding even more vigorously than before. (Years later when Charlie's son, Tim, was four years old, Charlie would use the good Sister's technique to teach Tim to identify the birds species depicted on plates in the Kellers' bird books.)

Charlie could soon identify most of the birds found in his neighborhood year-round and some of those that only passed through. The identity of many less common species eluded him. He begged his father to buy him a copy of *Birds of America*, T. Gilbert Pearson's monumental 1936 tome. His father acquiesced and in good time presented Charlie with a copy of that book, which Charlie still owns. Soon he was able to identify far more species than before, yet the ranges of some species, as presented in Pearson's book, confused him. While studying the photographs and 106 color plates by Fuertes in *Birds of America*, Charlie was thrown by the depiction of certain shorebirds in habitats such as coastal marshes that are not found in Indiana. Imagine his surprise when he discovered a number of those species in the heart of landlocked Indianapolis. As he studied those species, read about them, and eventually ferreted out their true ranges, he developed a passion for shorebirds that has lasted a lifetime.

Pearson's book was much too heavy and bulky for Charlie to carry with him in the field. Initially he carried a copy of Chester Reed's pocket-sized (3"x5") *Bird Guide* in his explorations, as did many birders of his era. In time he switched to the increasingly popular and far more comprehensive Peterson's field guide, the plates of which had little 'pointers' highlighting the critical characteristics of each species. Peterson's remained Charlie's favorite field guide for many years, later to be joined by his second most favorite field guide, the *Golden Guide to Birds of North America*, by Chandler Robbins. Today he uses the Sibley guide, primarily because it depicts more plumages than do the other current field guides.

In grade school Charlie mostly birded alone, venturing at most a few miles from home. As he grew up his explorations took him farther afield, by bicycle, streetcar, or city bus. Bacon's Swamp was one of his favorite haunts. This 30-acre glacial remnant offered myriad habitats and was thus a magnet for naturalists of all kinds. It was considered to be the southernmost sphagnum bog in Indiana if not in the entire United States.

Bacon's Swamp occupied a natural depression west of Keystone Avenue, south of Kessler Boulevard, and north of 54th Street. Natural history notwithstanding,

in the 1950s the City of Indianapolis deemed it to be dangerous because of the accidental drowning deaths of four children in two separate incidents. They also cited the abundance of mosquitoes in the area as a secondary justification for a "Fence n' Fill" program. Bacon's Swamp was drained and filled in the late 1950s, leaving only a remnant called Bacon's Lake.

Another of Charlie's favorite haunts, this one closer to his home, was the rolling, heavily wooded 108-acre Brookside Park. Located between North Rural Street and North Sherman Drive north of 19th Street, the park featured a creek called Pogue's Run. Charlie remembers Brookside Park as having been a particularly productive site for finding warblers.

Yet another of his favorite haunts and one he still frequents was the area now called Eagle Creek Park. Charlie first began visiting Eagle Creek in 1950, before it was opened to the public. He used to climb over the fence. One time he was stopped by a guard who worked for Eli Lilly & Co., which owned the property. When Charlie explained that he was only there to study the birds, Mr. Lilly himself commanded, "Let the boy come in!"

Other areas Charlie favored for birding included Geist Lake, a remote, undeveloped impoundment known at that time as Oaklondon Reservoir; Holliday Park at Spring Mill Road and West 64th Street; Riverside Park south of 30th Street; Brookside Park (the park nearest his home); and the Butler Towpath, which runs along the canal south of West 52nd Street. Charlie used to walk the canal from Butler University to Washington Street and then catch a streetcar home.

It is no secret that a lot of birders have a special spot in their hearts for two unusual kinds of habitats - sewage plants and landfills. Thus it should come as no surprise that of all the local birding sites that were special to the young Charlie Keller, the site closest to his heart was the sewage treatment plant at the southwest corner of Harding Street and Belmont Avenue, just south of Raymond Street. It offered habitats unique in the Indianapolis area, being both aquatic and aromatic. He visited the sewage plant many times, taking the Raymond Street bus to Raymond Street and South Meridian Street, then walking two or three miles to the site.

It is clear that some of the traits that were conspicuous in Charlie's boyhood served him well as an adult - independence, dedication, perseverance, self confidence, meticulousness, and a spirit of adventure.

High School

After Charlie finished elementary school, his parents continued his secular education by enrolling him at Cathedral High School (located during this time at 14th and Meridian Streets), about four miles northeast of his home. As a high school student he had no interest in sports. Initially he had no birding friends and continued birding alone. While attending Cathedral High he added to his list of favorite birding sites Lake Sullivan, just south of 38th Street on White River.

A simple inquiry brought Charlie's solitary birding days to a close. He asked an Indianapolis Children's Museum staff member how he could meet other birders. In a response that turned out to be truly life changing for Charlie, the staff member suggested that Charlie contact the Shortridge High School Naturalist's Club. So he did, and he was accepted by its members. Ms. Mildred Campbell, a biology teacher at Shortridge, ran the club. She believed that nature is meant to be studied in the wild, not just in the classroom. The club's field trips met at Holliday Park, the Butler Towpath, and at Lake Sullivan. If one of the members who owned a car — Howard F. Wright, who was a biology teacher at Shortridge High, or Steve Wainwright — were present, the group would pile into the car and head for Oaklandon Reservoir.

Birding with his new friends and having access to private transportation provided Charlie with far greater birding opportunities than before. He was able to visit more places, see more birds, and finally be able to discuss birds with others. It was as if Charlie's birding career suddenly had been kicked into high gear. Among his birding pals were Charlie Berriman, Ed Mockford, and Dale Rice, all students at Shortridge. In fact Charlie was the only member of the Shortridge High School Naturalist's Club who did not attend Shortridge High.

Another of Charlie's birding friends was Scott Calvert, an automotive engineer for Chevrolet body parts. He was already a senior citizen when Charlie knew him. Charlie describes him as having been very generous to a greenhorn kid. Charlie would get up at 4:30 a.m., attend 5:15 a.m. Mass at St. Philip's, hop a streetcar to the end of the Michigan Street Line east, then walk about half a mile to meet Mr. Calvert. Other birding companions of Charlie's over the years would include Henry C. West and later his own son, Tim.

In the 1950s when you found an unusual bird in Central Indiana the thing to do was call Henry West. Charlie and other Indiana birders remember Henry for his predictable if laconic response to reports of rare birds: "Interesting, if true." Charlie remembers encountering Henry at various gatherings, where Henry would greet Charlie with a cryptic, "I saw you if I wanted to speak to you!" Henry lived on the west side of Indianapolis, which, back then, was still countryside, far less developed than it is today.

Having found a home with the Shortridge High School Naturalist's Club, Charlie was grateful for the company of so many kindred spirits. His own family had been sedentary. They had taken Charlie to Detroit twice to visit a cousin, but that was it. He had made a single birding trip to Michigan City. Other than that, his solitary birding excursions had been almost exclusively within Marion County. With such a limited travel background it is no wonder that Charlie enjoyed the Naturalist's Club field trips so much.

In those days teachers who took students on field trips did it on their own time, not during school hours. Thus birding trips were made most often on weekends. Mildred Campbell and some of the other Shortridge High School teachers escorted the Naturalist's Club field trips. Those teachers or students who owned or could borrow binoculars shared them with those who did not. Ms. Campbell's binoculars were of World War II vintage with individually focusing eyepieces. As one was viewing a bird through them one was also viewing rangefinder etchings originally intended for use aiming artillery shells.

Charlie's first pair of binoculars were a present from his father in honor of Charlie's sixteenth birthday. They had been made in France, were very badly out of alignment, and cost a whopping \$50. Later Charlie purchased a pair of 7x50 Japanese binoculars, moved up to a pair of Zeiss 8x30s that he used until they were stolen, then to Nikon 8x30s, and finally to the Bausch & Lomb 8.5x42 binoculars that he uses today.

When it came to appreciating different kinds of birds, Charlie was interested in watching warblers and waterfowl, but his real love has always been shorebirds. The Harding Street sewage treatment plant became his favorite birding spot because of the shorebird habitat it provided. He recalls that his most thrilling moments there were discovering extreme rarities — a flock of four Buff-breasted Sandpipers and, on another visit, a female Wilson's Phalarope in gorgeous breeding plumage.

By being out birding so frequently during the 1940s, Charlie gained an appreciation for the number of birds that could be seen. When asked about changes he has noticed in bird populations between the 1940s and the 2000s, Charlie recounted an interesting story. In 1945 he and his friends "bugged" William Barnes, project leader in Indiana for Pitman-Robertson (a federal Act to provide funding for wildlife refuges), to drive the group to Jasper-Pulaski to see Sandhill Cranes. Barnes agreed, and the group made the long road trip to northern Indiana. At the traditional Jasper-Pulaski crane-staging area they observed a total of 16 Sandhill Cranes. That was a tremendous thrill for the group, but it was a miniscule number of cranes compared to flocks of tens of thousands of them that stage at Jasper- Pulaski most Novembers these days.

Two events took place during Charlie's high school years that helped shape his later life. First, he joined the Indiana Audubon Society (IAS) in 1945. Sixty-two

years later, he's still an IAS member. Second, in 1946, when he was 17, Mildred Campbell asked him to write an article for the *Indiana Audubon Yearbook*, precursor of the *Indiana Audubon Quarterly*, of which she was editor. She told him to write about something he knew well, so he wrote an article (which he now views as rather poor) about Bacon's Swamp. His article, "Bacon's swamp notes," was published in the 1946 *Indiana Audubon Yearbook*. To this day he remembers the thrill of seeing his article in print and thinking that it was the greatest thing on earth.

Always industrious, during his high school summers Charlie worked at a hardware store. He was paid \$7.50 per week for 6-1/2 days of work. On Saturday his boss let him leave at noon. It wasn't a lot of money, but he recalls that he was glad to have the job.

After High School

After graduation Charlie worked for two years (1947-1949) as an order clerk at Mooney-Mueller-Ward Wholesale Drug Co. in Indianapolis. In 1949 one of his customers suggested that Charlie put in an application for employment at Eli Lilly & Co., which he did. Eli Lilly Co. hired Charlie as an elevator operator, ferrying Eli Lilly himself to his office. Later Charlie transitioned to a position running autoclaves that sterilized ampoules.

Like many male birders, Charlie was drafted into the Army in 1951 and spent two years on active duty. During an Army company party at a dance hall called the Brown Derby he met a beautiful young lady named Shirley Ann Golding, who was a USO girl from Evansville. The two youngsters hit it off well. After he completed boot camp at Camp Breckenridge, Kentucky, he served in Germany for two years, during which time Charlie and Ms. Golding corresponded. During his stint overseas Charlie served as a medic. He continued to develop his birding skills, even though while in the Army his birding hobby was the butt of many jokes. Most guys went out chasing girls, but his buddies joked that he went out chasing birds. He participated in the Nurenburg Christmas Bird Count, publishing the results in a 1952 issue of the *Indiana Audubon Quarterly*. He received an Honorable Discharge in 1953 and returned to Indianapolis.

He went back to work at Eli Lilly & Co., washing cans and bottles. His friend Howard Wright also took a position at Eli Lilly. He and Charlie maintained a lifelong friendship that ended with Wright's death in 1971. The beautiful young lady Charlie had met at the Brown Derby was still around, too. Charlie and Shirley married on August 29, 1953. They moved to near Beech Grove, where their son, Tim, was born. In 1960 Tim was joined with a sister, Bernadette, who eventually married and bore four grandchildren. Later Charlie and Shirley moved to near Southport, where they resided for 34 years. They now live in a

condominium near Greenwood. As of this writing, the couple has been married for 53 years. May they have many more anniversaries.

Charlie had received no formal academic or technical training whatsoever. What he did have was a thirst for knowledge and the ambition to gain that knowledge. He learned a variety of skills entirely on his own. In time he worked his way up to Technical Associate and then Senior Technical Associate in Cardiovascular, the highest position attainable for a person without a higher education.

A longing for a higher education and those precious academic credentials drew Charlie to college at the ripe old age of 46. In 1965 he began attending night school at the University of Indianapolis. He was awarded an Associate in Arts degree in 1971. In the year 2000, in recognition of his work in ornithology and conservation, he was awarded an Honorary Doctor of Science degree from that same university. He continued working at Eli Lilly & Co., conducting research on norepinephrine synthesis in isolated superior cervical ganglia of rodents and on the electrophysiology of canine cardiac Purkinje fibers. He recalls that his favorite job of all was studying the biochemistry of the norepinephrine of the superior ganglia of rats.

Charlie's distinguished career at Eli Lilly & Co. spanned 37 years, from 1949 to 1986. His final position was that of Associate Pharmacologist in Cardiovascular Pharmacology.

During the 1940s and 1950s Charlie began leading birding trips for the Amos W. Butler Audubon Society (AWBAS). At that time AWBAS was, like all Audubon chapters in Indiana, a chapter of the IAS. It was not until the 1960s that the National Audubon Society offered incentives to IAS chapters to switch affiliations. Charlie served as Vice President and Secretary of the AWBAS. He edited the AWBAS newsletter, *Audubon News*, from 1972 to 1986. In 1979 the AWBAS sent Charlie and Shirley to an Audubon Camp in Wyoming to study conservation. Charlie recalls that although he learned a great deal about conservation at the Audubon Camp, upon his return he stuck with birding rather than becoming involved with conservation.

Charlie's interest in the occurrence of shorebirds in Indiana initially surfaced in the form of several lengthy studies he published in 1957-1958 about the shorebird families Charadriidae, Scolopacidae, Recurvirostridae, and Phalaropidae of Indiana - birds commonly known as plovers, oystercatchers, stilts, avocets, sandpipers, yellowlegs, curlews, godwits, turnstones, knots, dowitchers, snipe, woodcocks, phalaropes, and such. He rapidly became a highly visible force in Indiana ornithology, especially through his regular contributions to state publications.

He was very interested in organizing and publishing the observations of Indiana birders. During the periods 1958-1962 and 1967-1968 Charlie served as regional

report (field note) editor for Central Indiana, editing all four seasons at one time or another. He served as the Indiana May Count Compiler from 1963 to 1968 and as the Indiana Christmas Bird Count compiler from 1962 to 1965. He served as Assistant Editor of the *Indiana Audubon Quarterly* from 1962 to 1975 and as Subregional Editor for *American Birds* from 1972 to 1986. When Henry West retired in 1986 as editor of the *Indiana Audubon Quarterly*, Charlie was a natural to fill that position. And fill it he did, holding the position of editor of the *Quarterly* until 2005, a period of almost 20 years.

Charlie has a deep love of people and a sensitivity that transcends the norm. He has had the bittersweet privilege of writing obituaries memorializing many birders who contributed to Indiana ornithology. Among those for whom he has written such tributes have been many of his former birding buddies. The list so far includes Charles S. Berriman, Mildred Florence Campbell, Max Allyn Forsyth, Albert "Boyd" Gill, Charles M. Kirkpatrick, Charles A. Moulin, Catherine E. Pusey, Edward "Ted" W. Test, Henry C. West, Dorothy White, Howard F. Wright, and Virginia Carson Wright.

Charlie joined the American Ornithologists Union (AOU) in 1946 and retained membership in that august entity until 2003. He served as the AOU Literature Review Editor from 1972 until 1980, writing many book reviews, including in 1986 a fine review of my own *Birder's Guide to Trinidad and Tobago*. One of the many contributions Charlie made to Indiana birders was to publish articles describing the current thinking of the AOU when it came to splitting or lumping bird species.

In addition to ensuring that Indiana birders were kept abreast of ornithological news, Charlie served in administrative capacities. He was a Director of the IAS from 1963 to 1965, took a 23-year sabbatical, was elected again in 1988, and remained on the board until 2005.

In 1970 a number of states began developing checklists of birds seen within their borders. Indiana had no such checklist, so in 1972 Charlie collaborated with Russell Mumford in publishing the *Checklist of Indiana Birds*. This booklet served as a precursor to a much more ambitious project that was to follow a decade later. Initially Val Nolan, Russ Mumford, and James Cope had collaborated on what was to be the definitive Indiana ornithology book. Nolan and Cope became involved with other responsibilities that prevented their further collaboration with the project. That left Charlie and Russ, who began work in earnest in 1979. At one point they met in Brown County with wildlife artist William Zimmerman. They described their project to him and asked if he would be interested in serving as artist for the project. Zimmerman replied that he certainly was interested. He was able to obtain financial backing to subsidize the plates and produced many original works of art to grace the book.

All that was left was to find a publisher. Keller, Mumford, and Zimmerman felt that the Indiana University Press would be a logical choice. They approached John Gallman, Director of the Indiana University Press, to see if he would be interested in publishing the work. Gallman was very interested indeed and agreed to take on the project. The first edition, a run of 10,000 copies, was printed in 1984. That edition sold out in three months. Indiana University Press printed another 5,000 copies, which again sold out. A final 5,000 copies were printed for a total press run of 20,000 copies. Other publications published by Indiana University Press and authored in part by Charlie include *Indiana Birds and their Haunts* and *Birds of Indianapolis*.

For his extraordinary contributions to Indiana birding, Charlie has been presented the Earl Brook Award for conservation, the Robert and Ester Cooper Environmental Award, and (with Shirley) the James Mason Service Award.

One cannot simply write about birds and be considered a birder. Charlie has an extensive background in field birding. From 1969 until 1992 Charlie had a bird bander's permit. During that time he banded more than 1,000 birds of more than 100 species. During the warmer parts of the year you can usually find him and Shirley on Bud Starling's Sunday-morning bird walks at Eagle Creek Park in Indianapolis. They have birded extensively throughout the U.S. as well as in Mexico, Jamaica, Trinidad, Europe, Morocco, and Australia. Charlie considers himself not a lister but rather an observer. He thinks that the fact that some people find listing attractive is okay with him, yet he thinks that they are missing the job of observing.

Birding has played a tremendous part in Charlie's life, but he is no one-trick pony. Square dancing has always played an important part in his life, both here in Indiana as well as in the Kellers' winter home in San Benito, Texas, just south of Harlingen. He and Shirley first visited San Benito in 1990. Since then they have spent their winters in warm southern regions, escaping the harsh Indiana weather while continuing to provide useful service to others. During four Novembers in the 1990s they lived on the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge near Socorro, New Mexico, serving as volunteer Wildlife Interpreters. From January through March 1999-2004 they served as Wildlife Interpreters at Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge near Rio Hondo, Texas. During four Junes (1996-1999) they provided volunteer services at the National Bison Range near Moiese, Montana, performing 'point' bird censusing and 'coo counts' (Mourning Dove counts). Charlie reluctantly decided to quit doing that kind of service when he began losing his high frequency hearing. Today he serves as a volunteer at the Indiana State Museum, where he identifies bird eggs.

When asked about differences he has noted between his early days of birding and today, he replied that except for some critical woodland species (Cerulean Warbler, Red-eyed Vireo, Wood Thrush, goatsuckers), which have decreased in numbers, the overall differences seem to be positive. He doesn't believe that

hunting has had any ill effect on the overall populations. He thinks that all species of geese have increased greatly, especially in distribution, as have House Finches, although the population of the latter species is decreasing from what it was 10 years ago. He thinks that the state listserv, IN-BIRD, has good information.

Some of his friends shared stories about Charlie. Sue Arnold and Reta Rutledge both wrote about a memorable incident. Years ago when many IAS members camped out at the Mary Gray Sanctuary for the annual meetings, they would sit around a fire at night and enjoy each other's company and tell bird stories near the Kellers' camper. No one knows if the camper had hit a bump on the way or what, but somehow Charlie's Ding Dongs had gotten soaked in red wine. The consensus was that this happy accident had created marinated Ding Dongs, which were a great improvement over the usual kind. Sue commented that she can't look at Ding Dongs now without thinking of the surprise on Charlie's face.

Reta Rutledge recalled one spring weekend at Mary Gray when it rained and rained and rained. Those camped in trailers got stuck, so Bill Brown and Lynn Miller got out the tractor to pull folks free of the mud. Most people insisted on trying to get out first and then getting stuck in the deepest mud hole. Bill was the one who crawled under the trucks to hook up the tractor chains, and Lynn then pulled them out. Bill was a muddy mess. When people would thank him for his help, he'd offer them hugs. No one accepted until Charlie got pulled out. Shirley was standing back with the crowd watching. Charlie yelled back to Bill, "Thanks, Bill. My wife wants to hug you." So Bill hugged Shirley!

Charlie's advice for beginners is to enjoy the out-of-doors and the company of those with like interests. Following that course of action has allowed Charlie to accomplish in his lifetime a tremendous amount of good for Indiana birding. Too often men like Charlie Keller pass through our lives unrecognized, quietly performing service that benefits others. Fortunately the Indiana birding community is now recognizing Charlie for his lifetime of service. Others are recognizing his accomplishments, too. In 2000, the University of Indianapolis conferred upon Charles E. Keller an honorary degree of Doctor of Science. The certificate reads,

"In recognition of your tremendous impact on the field of ornithology and bird conservation in Indiana and bird conservation in Indiana and the Midwest, manifested by your many important contributions to the literature, your years of dedicated service to environmental and conservation organizations, and your legacy of years of service in education and research, the Faculty of the University of Indianapolis has voted to grant to you, and its Board of Trustees has authorized to hereby confer upon you, the honorary degree of Doctor of Science".

We, the members of the Indiana Audubon Society, extend our heartfelt thanks to Charles E. Keller. Thank you for sharing your time, energy, enthusiasm, and humor with us. It is an honor to know you.

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