

AVIAN ECHOES: THE STILLWELLS IN FAYETTEVILLE

AVIAN ECHOES is the name Jerry and Norma Stillwell gave their new home in Fayetteville in September 1950, six miles from the UA campus AND two miles from the pavement.

They were birding luminaries sixty years ago. The growing post-WWII US birding community knew them from their highly professional and well-received field recordings of wild birds. When they settled in Arkansas, the Stillwells were in the middle of a 12-year, 180,000 mile journey that would result in three ground-breaking long-playing records: BIRD SONGS OF DOORYARD, FIELD AND FOREST (2 for eastern US, 1 for western).

Today that house is in the city, on pavement, just past the Mt Comfort church, on Hughmount Road. That much has changed, but their bird recordings are fresh as the day they were recorded.

Doug James knew them early in his career and invited them to give a program at the very first fall meeting ever held by Arkansas Audubon Society -- at Lake Wedington in the Ozark National Forest west of Fayetteville, October 4-6, 1957. According to the AAS newsletter: "Friday evening everyone traveled to the home of Mr. and Mrs. Jerry Stillwell near Fayetteville to listen to their impeccably accurate recorded reproductions of bird sounds, which were accompanied by colored slides of birds, followed by refreshments... Saturday afternoon the Society enjoyed a visit with the Stillwells and with Dr. William Baerg, the author of Birds of Arkansas."

Jerry was born in Kansas in 1888, Norma, also a Kansan, in 1894. Norma would eventually write the book BIRD SONGS (1964). According to Norma, "I grew up under a mulberry tree, whose fruits are doubtless the best natural lure for the greatest variety of birds. Not until I met Jerry, as a classmate at the university in Lawrence, did I begin to realize there are many kinds of birds in addition to robins, redbirds, and 'Jenny-wrens'"

"After our honeymoon Jerry began telling friends that, sometime after meeting him, I had thrown away my violin and bought a bird book. I gave away my violin after he had given me the bird book."

Early in Jerry's career as a mechanical engineer, he was an instructor at UA-Fayetteville (1921-1922) in Heat Power Engineering. The couple lived below campus, on west Dickson Street. Starting in 1926, Jerry found a career as a technical editor for the American Petroleum Institute in Dallas, which became home base.

He got his first Brush recorder on March 20, 1948. On March 31, while Jerry was at work, Norma successfully recorded a Northern Cardinal in their yard. "There flashed in both our minds the dream of a new hobby: recording bird songs on tape..."

2.

WHEN IN 1950 JERRY AND NORMA STILLWELL PURCHASED AVIAN ECHOES, their country home near Mt Comfort in Fayetteville, they were 62 and 56 years old respectively, and retired from everything except collecting and publishing bird songs. They traveled North America during the avian nesting season, then returned to Fayetteville to relax and edit.

According to Norma, "Bird songs are more varied and they vary in more ways than we had dreamed."

In 1955, for example, they were gone six months while exposing nearly eight miles of reel to reel tape. This was edited in their living room to 40 minutes on an eventual LP, 5-10 percent of what was recorded in the field.

Editing meant, not digital keystrokes, but cutting with scissors, rejoining with actual tape. Laborious to be sure, but they had fun. On one LP Norma says "The quick three beers of an Olive sided Flycatcher is loud. It should bring quick service."



My Sony PCM-10 recorder uses two small batteries, stores hours of bird songs internally, has stereo mics, and fits in my shirt pocket. The Stillwells required a truck and later a loaded station wagon.

Jerry the mechanical engineer is at a suitcase-sized reel-to-reel recorder, an even larger switch box with all manner of important-looking plugs, wires, dials and knobs to manipulate power supply and recording levels. Up to several thousand feet of electrical cable are plugged into an outlet, plus cable reeled out to Norma managing a parabolic reflector oriented to the bird of desire, microphone mounted on a tripod.

Today, NASA could launch a moon shot with so much gear. Indeed, the Stillwells were exploring space, though not everyone recognized the unknown avian landscape.

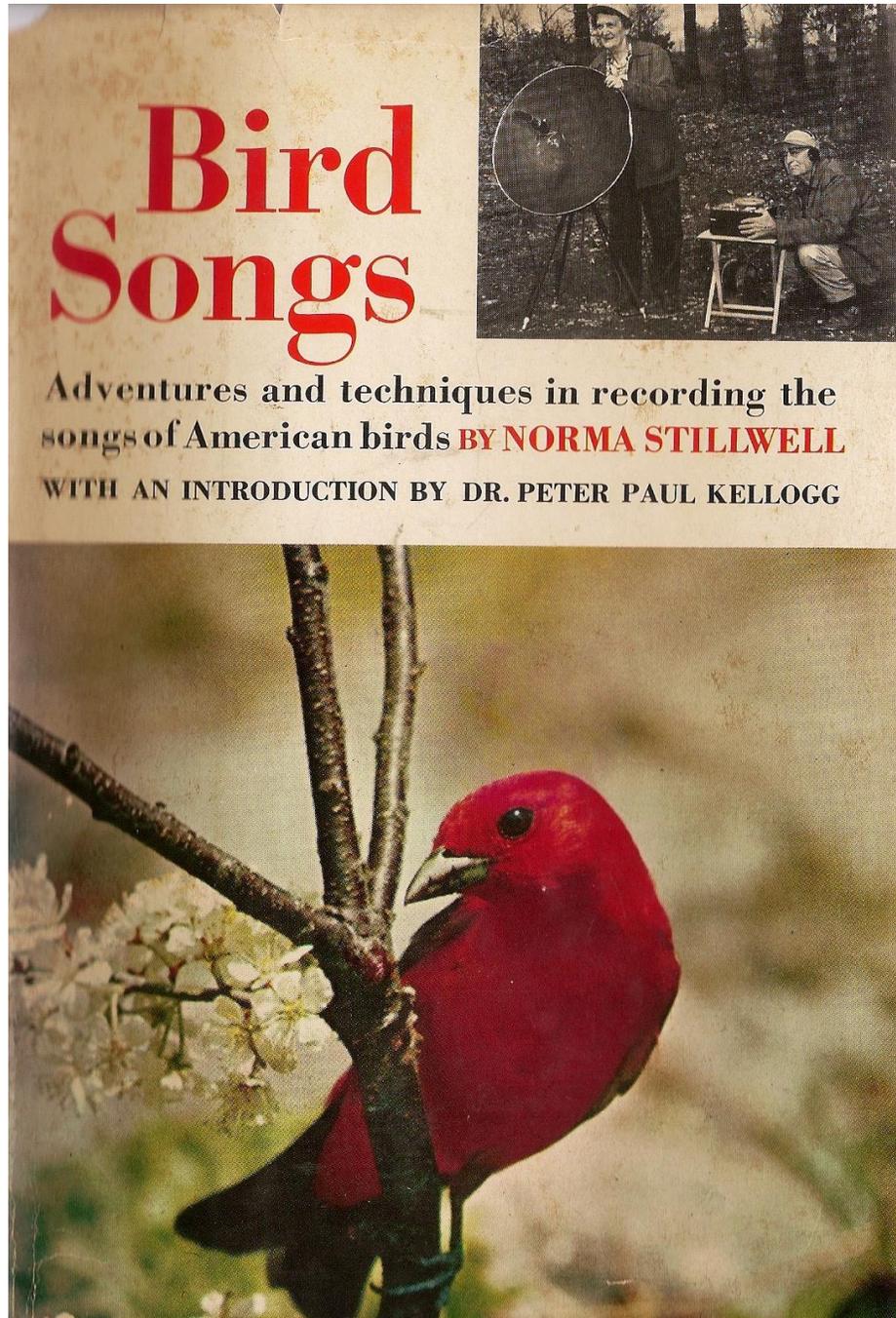
They sent recordings to one potential publisher who wrote back, "In this business, when there is a price tag on a few bird notes, they just use any kind of bird, or none at all..." Norma rejoined, "By this time we could have told that sound-effects director that it takes even more than a good engineer and a high quality tape recorder to obtain a good recording of a wild bird song.

"We decided that radio director wouldn't have recognized our bird-song pearls ... It is this attitude which causes them to use a mourning dove song and call it a screech-owl, or the screams of an eagle with a picture of a heron ..."

In Fayetteville they made friends including entomologist Dr William Baerg,

tarantula expert who published two books on Arkansas birds (1931, 1951), and Eloise Baerg, "a pillar of the cultural and religious circles ... sympathetic to birders."

Norma also found a special friend. "Evangeline Archer and I were kindred souls in our love of wild flowers and hatred of billboards." Within a few years, Evangeline would be a key leader in the fight to protect the Buffalo River from dams and create the nation's first National River.



3.



In the 1950s, Jerry and Norma Stillwell used the living room of their Fayetteville home, Avian Echoes, as an editing studio and generally as a retreat from bird recording travels across North America. However, they also taped local birds.

One Fayetteville subject was American Goldfinch, published on their first LP, BIRD SONGS OF DOORYARD, FIELD AND FOREST (1952). To reinforce learning, Norma imitates in a lilting voice two main songs, followed by recordings that,

though from 60 years ago, are as clear as yesterday. In the background: Northern Bobwhites, Mourning Doves, American Crows, and chickens from nearby broiler houses. The poultry industry was then just beginning.

All recordings are introduced, and variations in songs explained, with Jerry and Norma swapping duties as in their field work. First up is Northern Cardinal, recorded in Jerry's home town Erie, Kansas. Jerry explains, "No wonder the cardinal is popular. He's a friendly dooryard bird with a variety of musical songs with glides and crescendos, lyrics of a prima donna."

Between 1952 and 1956, they published three LPs with songs and calls of 165 species. Where it was useful, they included multiple songs, often placing songs of similar species together to

illustrate technical differences and sometimes manipulating tape speed to reveal internal song structure.

Introducing Ovenbirds, Norma claims one sings “Keep keep keep” while the neighbor sings “Keep it keep it keep it.” Providing an example of complexity in Veerys, Jerry slows the tape, producing a one octave drop, like a track from 2001 Space Odyssey. The Stillwells were for sure exploring space for ornithological education.

Off the road and back from months of recording, I can easily imagine the Stillwells at Avian Echoes, trying to figure out what to say as introductions to voices of their avian treasures. There must have been fun in the work of cutting plastic tape and putting it back together since the final products are replete with colloquial humor, the sort always shared on good field trips.

“Yellow-headed Blackbirds must have frogs in their throats” says Norma.

Jerry thinks flickers say, “IF IF IF.”

Gambel’s Quail call, “Where are you all?” according to Norma.

Jerry views the Red-headed Woodpecker as “a mischievous chatterbox.”

And Norma, who was studying violin when she met Jerry, views Northern Mockingbirds as “musical acrobats.”

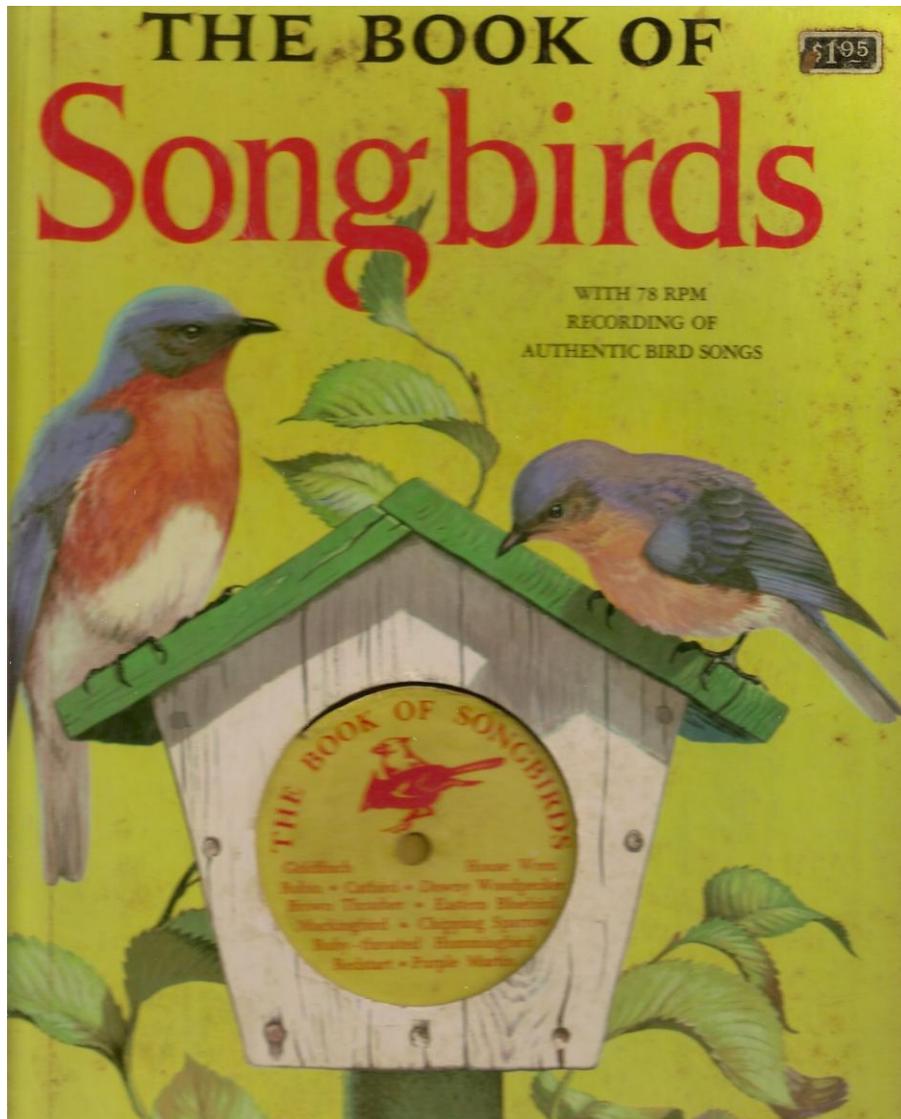
Think back to 1948, when the Stillwells started their odyssey. There was no Arkansas Audubon Society. No iPhones with instantly available MP3 recordings of 800 bird species. Field recordings of birds had been ongoing since 1931, but it was tough.

So you know when in February 1954 the Stillwells visited Little Rock as guests of Herb Daniels, then president of what is now Central Arkansas Audubon Society (then Pulaski County Audubon) their recordings must have made a deep impression. There was a dinner in the Stillwell’s honor. According to Norma, “We gave a bird-song recital for a gathering of folks who expressed heart-warming appreciation.”

Wouldn’t you like to have been there.

4.

THE BOOK OF SONGBIRDS by Leon Hausman, published in 1956, was an ambitious effort at environmental education for children. The format is 9 x 12 inches, sold for \$1.95, with wonderful Ned Smith paintings of common species. Inside covers are paintings of bird nests. The bluebird box opening is a label of a “78 RPM recording of authentic bird songs... captured by recording in their natural habitats” by Jerry and Norma Stillwell.



Starting in the late 1940s, the Stillwells traveled North America collecting bird songs “in their natural habitats.” Since fall of 1950, they had returned from these journeys to Avian Echoes, their home in Fayetteville. Here they relaxed, edited miles of tape, and created three of LPs, BIRD SONGS OF DOORYARD, FIELD AND FOREST (1952, 1953, and 1956).

In the summer of 1958, the Stillwells sold Avian Echoes and returned to Dallas.

Spring 1959 found them along the Atlantic coast north to Maine, working on a hoped for fourth LP.

Unfortunately, in some places they found that

“summer homes had ... completely monopolized the land. The few shorebirds were wary and silent.”

Norma would write a charming and often humorous account of these travels, sparing neither joys nor travails: BIRD SONGS, ADVENTURES AND TECHNIQUES IN RECORDING THE SONGS OF AMERICAN BIRDS (1964).

“The scenery was wonderful along the Atlantic, but the shore birds we had hoped for failed to cooperate. At last it became clear that our dream of a record of water and game birds was not to be, for us.”

And now Jerry was sick. After a long hospital stay, the technical guy of this dynamic duo died in Dallas, September 1959.

No maudlin adieu, BIRD SONGS is pure celebration, as good in 2015 as 1964. Like Kenn Kaufmann in KINGBIRD HIGHWAY (1997), she shares a passion that the inexorable passage of time cannot diminish.

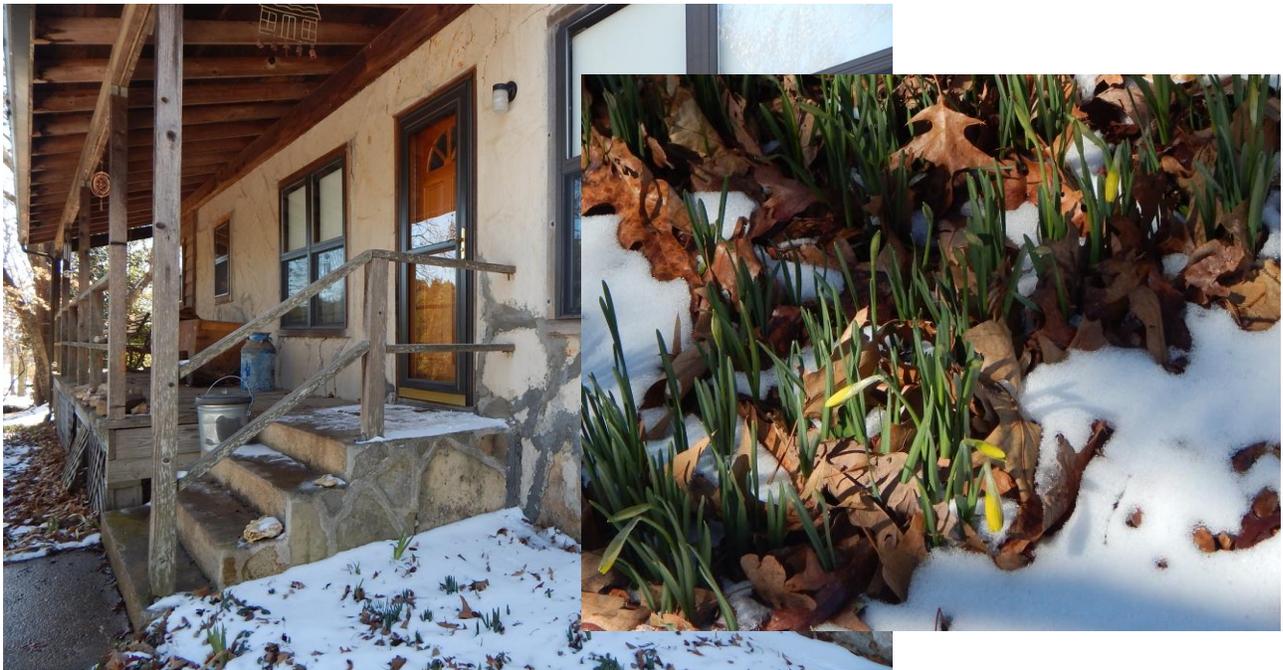
Back in those years before Avian Echoes, and before bird song recordings, Norma was a botanist. Native plants, and the connection to the health of native birds, are palpable in BIRD SONGS. She had published KEY AND GUIDE TO NATIVE TREES, SHRUBS AND WOODY VINES OF DALLAS COUNTY in 1939. I'll bet she returned to it, after Jerry and bird songs. Someone in the Texas botany/birding community will have the details.

This is a life's work, after all. No doubt she pursued it until her own passing, in October 1978.

As far as I know, there is ONE circulating copy of BIRD SONGS in the Natural State of Arkansas – a few used copies available on line. ZERO circulating copies of the vinyl LPs in Arkansas – check interlibrary loans. Cassette tapes with modest sound quality problems (\$8.95 + shipping). MP3 files can be downloaded from iTunes. Mitchell Pruitt told me yesterday the ones he listened to sound good.

“Younger recorders now scout the shores and crouch in the bulrushes,” according to Norma. Here's hoping. Go git 'em you bulrush crouchers. North America is ready for you now.

--Joe Neal March 2015



PHOTOS The three black and white photos are reproduced from BIRD SONGS (Norma says the country road was at Avian Echoes.) The Stillwells owned a home in Fayetteville from 1950

to 1958. Color photos are from Avian Echoes as it looks in March 2015. The rock house has been remodeled, but still recognizable as the Stillwell place of 60 years ago. There are lots of flowers and shrubs over the place, perhaps planted by Norma. The old bird box is what remains of many 25 years ago when today's owners bought the place. The pond, an old workshop that Jerry used, and foundations of a brooder house – all mentioned by Norma – these also remain.

