

# East Texas Historical Journal

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Volume 44 | Issue 2

Article 9

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10-2006

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### Recommended Citation

Palmer, Pamela L. (2006) "The Birds of Tanglewood and the Great Bird Storm of 1922," *East Texas Historical Journal*: Vol. 44: Iss. 2, Article 9.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj/vol44/iss2/9>

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**THE BIRDS OF TANGLEWOOD  
AND THE GREAT BIRD STORM OF 1922**

*By Pamela Lynn Palmer*

Turning the half-century mark often makes one reflective, and when Karle Wilson Baker reached her fiftieth birthday on October 13, 1928, she fell into an essay mood. Her journal entries and unpublished essays show that she was not at all morose about the inevitable march of time, but rather invigorated. In "The First Fifty Years," she wrote:

Lately "I stood tiptoe upon a little hill"- a birthday – and looked back. And it pleases me to believe that the first fifty years are the hardest. I am a writer. I hope the note of querulousness and injury will not creep into this paper; it aspires to be a paean, not a complaint. Not, heaven knows, that I would pretend that a writer has nothing to complain of. He has cause, aplenty; but by the time he is fifty he knows that everybody else has equal cause. That is one of the grand advantages of being fifty. By that time one has understood that, in the plain words of one of Wordsworth's homespun heroes, "our lot is a hard lot." Not to be any longer handicapped by youth's incredulous astonishment over the fact, means ease to the straightened shoulders, speed to the feet. One's astonishment, rather, has begun to turn in another direction: upon the unsuspected inner nature of such facts, once accepted. How they slowly turn themselves inside out, as it were, before one's eyes, revealing themselves for what they are: disguised incentives to courage, nurses of steadfastness, wicket gates to wisdom. When one has ceased to spend energy resenting the difficulty of life, he is able, at last, to do something about it: and lo, while he is rolling up his sleeves and tightening his belt, three-fourths of the difficulty vanishes. He can wreck his whole force, as youth can seldom do, upon the remaining fourth.<sup>1</sup>

Being in a meditative frame of mind, and feeling an underlying sense of urgency to accomplish all she could in the remaining years allotted to her, Baker began contemplating a book of essays. Perhaps the recent move to West Windows, her name for the home she and her husband, banker Thomas Ellis Baker, built at 1613 North Street in Nacogdoches, caused her to go through her old publications. She had accumulated a couple of shelves' worth by then – two volumes of poetry, a book of allegorical tales, and two books for children as well as poems, short stories, and articles in literary journals and mass circulation magazines such as *The Red Book*, *Atlantic Monthly*, and *Cosmopolitan*. Perhaps setting up the bird feeding shelves at her new home sparked the idea. At any rate, by January 1929 she had written a third essay about birds to add to two others originally published in *Yale Review*. With one more, she would have a manuscript of nearly a hundred pages.<sup>2</sup>

Baker's initial idea of writing informal essays about her feathered friends can be traced as far back as 1909. She sent a query to *The Delineator* and, nearly a year later, received this note from editor and novelist Theodore Dreiser: "In June, 1909, you wrote me about 'The Story of Tanglewood': how some of your friends made a home out in the wilderness. I suggested then that

I thought that would make a good story and I expected that you would some day really try your hand at it. Have you entirely abandoned the idea?" At the time Baker was expecting her second child, and a decade passed before she had a chance to pursue the topic. During the intervening years she kept notebooks of sporadic bird observations, for the little creatures had fascinated her since early childhood. She also used bird imagery frequently in her poetry.<sup>3</sup>

Baker's first essay, "The Birds of Tanglewood," appeared in the *Yale Review* in October 1921. She shared covers in that issue with such notables as British novelist John Galsworthy – best known for *The Forsyte Saga* – and poets Robert Frost, Sara Teasdale, and Edwin Arlington Robinson. "Tanglewood" was the name that young Karle and her family had given to the undeveloped lot across from their first home on Mound Street in Nacogdoches in 1900. As she later described the place, it

was a tangle of grape-vines and underbrush and great forest trees, which my father had just bought in the little town to which he had lately moved. He had drained it and fenced it, but left it otherwise unchanged; and when I first came from college to live in the little house across the street, the birds had no knowledge of its change of ownership. They went on singing and rioting and nesting there just as their ancestors had done through immemorial summers, untroubled by perplexities as to whether it belonged to France, to Spain, to one Sam Houston, to the Republic of Fredonia, or still to the friendly Tejas. All had claimed it at one time or another, but my own conviction is that the wood-thrushes were and are the rightful owners of the place.<sup>4</sup>

When Karle's parents lost their home to fire during Christmas week 1902, they cleared just enough of the Tanglewood lot to build a house there. They left the rest of the land in its natural state, thus offending some of the neighbors. Tanglewood was located on the northwest corner of Mound and Hughes streets, across from the campus of Thomas J. Rusk Elementary School today. Karle and her husband moved into Tanglewood after the death of Karle's father in 1916 and lived there for ten years.<sup>5</sup>

Baker's second essay on birds, "Window Lore," was written after a long illness that confined her indoors but afforded her hours to observe birds feeding on her windowsill at Tanglewood. She was in the habit of putting birdseed, grains of corn, and crumbled cornbread on a shelf outside a large window on the north side of the house. The birds were initially startled to see a human face on the other side of the windowpane, as Karle lay propped up on a pillow on the couch. After the birds grew accustomed to her presence, however, she was able to perceive differences in behavior not only between the various species, but also between individuals of the same variety.<sup>6</sup>

"Window Lore" appeared in the April issue of *Yale Review* in 1923. It must have been gratifying for Baker to glance through her collection of magazine publications. In the *Harper's Magazine* (May 1905), her poem "The Love of Ella" was printed across from an essay by William Dean Howells. Other poems and essays of Baker's had appeared with works of Amy Lowell, Carl Sandburg, Stephen Vicent Benet, and Vachel Lindsey. She had even rubbed literary shoulders twice with William Howard Taft in the *Yale Review*

(October 1916 and October 1920), and twice with Theodore Roosevelt in *Scribner's Magazine* (April 1910 and February 1920). True, they were both ex-presidents by then. But how many Texas writers could boast of such illustrious company by 1928?

Baker took for the topic of her third essay, "An Aerial Harvest," the astonishing "Bird Storm" that occurred in Nacogdoches the night of April 24-25, 1922. After a fierce overnight thunderstorm, residents awoke to find hundreds of dead, stunned, and waterlogged but brightly-colored birds strewn all over town. After examining them, Baker sent the following account to the local paper:

Knowing that all Nacogdoches has been interested in our remarkable visitation of migrating birds, I should like to share my records with the readers of the *Sentinel*.

I have had some fifty specimens, alive and dead, in my hands, and among these I have identified nineteen different species. Of some species I have only one specimen, of some two or three, and of a few – like the oven-bird and the indigo bunting – from six to a dozen.

By far the greater number of these birds were migrants; birds which are never seen here except for a few days in the spring and fall. Most of them breed in Canada, and winter in Mexico, Central America and South America.

Most of them belong to the family of warblers – a large family consisting of some sixty species, none of them much larger than an English sparrow, and most of them about the size of a canary or smaller. Nearly all of them are beautifully marked and colored, showing yellow, orange, green, blue, black and white spots and markings. Yellow, perhaps, predominates. They are not generally known except to bird – students, because, in addition to the fact that they are rare visitors, most of them are small and restless, and flit about among the leaves so quickly that it is hard to see their distinguishing marks. Most of them prefer to feed among the treetops, though they are often seen darting about in the shrubs and bushes, and a few feed on the ground. They are all insect – eating rather than seed-eating, birds. Among the dead and crippled birds I examined I identified 14 different kinds of warblers.

Three of the most beautiful larger birds were the Baltimore oriole (orange and black), the scarlet tanager (scarlet and black), and the summer tanager. Of the last-named species, the male is of a rosy or strawberry red, and the female a rich gold-green. It is a surprise to find that they belong to the same species.

In addition to the birds I examined at close range, I identified four other kinds in the trees about the house. Three of these kinds were warblers. One was the cerulean warbler, which, as the name indicates, is of a beautiful bright blue.

This vast army of tiny birds passes over our heads twice every year; but usually only a few of them stop with us, and those only for a few days. This time the rain and wind must have driven them down from the high air-lanes they usually follow, and, blinded by the street-lights they dashed themselves to death against buildings and wires – or else they were only wounded or stunned. I have read that thousands are picked up every year at the foot of

lighthouses. It seems, this time, that the dead birds were picked up only in town, and not in the country – which would also seem to support the theory that it is the lights which cause the destruction.<sup>4</sup>

Baker's calm account probably helped to soothe the frazzled nerves of her fellow citizens, who had more reason than Chicken Little to fear the sky was falling. In transforming the account from journalistic report to informal essay, Baker added human touches as she told how different people brought her the birds, how the townspeople scoured the town for bird cages and set up impromptu aviaries in window store fronts, how she and her daughter cared for the wounded, and how Charlotte – age eleven – conducted a decent "Christian burial" for those that failed to survive.<sup>5</sup>

With the three essays on birds, Baker had nearly enough material for a book, and she began to look for a publisher. Although Yale University Press had brought out her first four books, she felt they had not done enough to promote and market her works, especially in the Southwest where she was becoming well known through her readings at college and high school campuses and women's and literary clubs. Honored by Southern Methodist University with a doctor of literature degree, Baker had been in the English department of Stephen F. Austin State Teachers College since the summer of 1924 and she was in much demand as a public speaker.

The World Book Company had published her reader, *Texas Flag Primer*, but their titles were mostly textbooks. She knew that fellow Texas writer Hilton Ross Greer had been dealing with Southwest Press in Dallas in connection with a short story anthology he was editing became her short story "The Porch Swing" was to be included, so she wrote to him, informing him of her plan to put together a collection of bird essays. Greer responded on January 10, 1929, that he had spoken to P.L. Turner, president of Southwest Press, and that the publisher was not only receptive to the bird book, but would also like to bring out a volume of her collected or selected poems. Turner had published works by J. Frank Dobie and Eugene C. Barker, and was keenly interested in producing attractive, salable books. He had been the manager of Methodist Publishing House in Dallas for a number of years, gaining necessary experience before launching his own independent publishing venture.

Less than two months later, Baker had prepared a typescript of the first three essays, tentatively titling the whole "Nest Builders and Wayfarers." She submitted the manuscript and the publisher reacted promptly, offering a fifteen percent royalty. He thought the book should be illustrated, with decorative end papers and line drawings for chapter headings and endings. By March 22 Turner wrote that he hoped to bring out both the bird essays and a volume of Baker's poetry by the following fall, mentioning that the Yale University Press had reported a continuous demand for her two previous collections, *Blue Smoke* and *Burning Bush*.<sup>10</sup>

During the spring of 1929, P.L. Turner suffered from eye trouble and was away from the office for a time. During his absence, someone at Southwest Press returned the bird essays to Baker, having been told that the author

wished to revise the manuscript. There was no accompanying note, and consequently Baker was mystified when the package appeared on her doorstep. The confusion was soon straightened out, and she agreed to hold the manuscript for a fourth essay, on which she was still working.<sup>11</sup>

In the last essay, which told about nesting habits of various species Baker had observed, she stated, "my own ideal has always been precisely that of the birds: domesticity – with wings." She described the view from her new backyard:

West Windows is the successor to Tanglewood. I would not say that it has more birds than that other green haven of blessed memory, but I am certain that it has more kinds, and more varied facilities for nest-building. From the dooryard the land slopes back through the sassafras grove to the old elm, and from that point drops, still more rapidly, through an overgrown pasture to the creek valley. The roots of the old tree are in themselves an invitation to rest there, with one's back against the rough and friendly bark; to forget Time, as one gazes across the tangle of shrub and sedge and sapling to the wavy line of taller trees in the valley, where the creek – like a poetic gloss to a line of prose – meanders along beside the railroad. On the farther side the hills, partly wooded, climb slowly: they spread a sylvan back-drop of varied green, where blowing clouds and drifting smoke throw changing patterns of unheeded marvel, all day long. Beyond them, still, is the lovely line, gentle but full of awe, where the pine-fringed hills meet the quiet sky. For it is across that blue infinity above the pine-tops that the daily pageant of the sunset marches; and it is from its clear view of that august arena that West Windows takes its name.<sup>12</sup>

The final essay contained an epilogue to the "bird-storm." Among the injured birds picked up after the storm was a male indigo bunting. About five years after its capture it was placed in a cage with a female canary. The canary had nested unsuccessfully several times but finally one egg proved fertile. The chick was at first a deep blue like the bunting, but later changed to the yellow and cream coloring of the mother, with perhaps a slight bluish tinge. Both the canary and the bunting belong to the finch family.<sup>13</sup>

Baker mailed the completed typescript on June 3, 1929, the day she left for California to attend her daughter Charlotte's graduation from Mills College. But publication of *The Birds of Tanglewood*, as the book was finally titled, had to be delayed until 1930. Since the artist originally approached to illustrate the book was busy with other projects, Baker suggested that perhaps Charlotte could do the job. Despite pressures from her graduate studies at the University of California at Berkeley, Charlotte managed to produce the work in time, but she was not completely satisfied with the drawings. The portrait of her mother sitting under a tree, surrounded by bird guides and with binoculars in hand, was the finest picture.

Charlotte's endpaper design, red silhouettes of birds and leaves on a black background, was strikingly bold in a simple, folk-art way. But the crimson clashed sadly with the paper chosen by the publisher for the binding: gold and black flying birds on a turquoise background. Charlotte also designed the title

inset, calligraphy illustrated with two tiny birds among autumn tree branches.<sup>14</sup>

Baker dedicated the book to the memory of her father and mother, “the builders of the vanished ‘Tanglewood.’” But the concept of Tanglewood, the idea of leaving nature alone in its wild state simply to be what it is meant to be, remains alive and well in Nacogdoches. Charlotte Baker, later Montgomery, donated a number of acres of undeveloped land at the juncture of Pearl and Rusk Streets to create the Banita Creek Nature Reserve under the administration of the Natural Area Preservation Association. Dr. F.E. Abernethy spearheaded the movement to create a marked trail along Lanana Creek. Today Nacogdoches is twice blessed with wild areas where one may slip away from the noise and bustle of everyday life behind a veil of green into a mysterious realm where, except for the calls of birds and buzz of insects, the quiet compels one to walk softly, humble in the presence of those creatures whose forbearers ruled this land eons before humans had the audacity to intrude.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>“The First Fifty Years,” manuscript, Karle Wilson Baker Papers, East Texas Research Center, Ralph W. Steen Library, Stephen F. Austin State University, Box 26, Folder 3. Hereinafter cited as “KWB” with the box number followed by a slash, then the folder number.

<sup>2</sup>Karle Wilson Baker, “The Birds Of Tanglewood,” *The Yale Review* XI (October, 1921): pp. 118-129; Karle Wilson Baker, “Window Lore,” *The Yale Review* XII (April, 1923): pp. 614-624; Hilton Ross Greer to Baker, January 10, 1929, KWB 4/20.

<sup>3</sup>Theodore Dreiser to Baker, May 11, 1910, KWB 4/19; Diaries, 1906-1934, KWB 24.

<sup>4</sup>Karle Wilson Baker, *The Birds of Tanglewood* (Dallas, 1930), pp. 1-2.

<sup>5</sup>Baker, *The Birds of Tanglewood*, p. 2; Also informal interviews with Baker’s daughter, Charlotte Baker Montgomery.

<sup>6</sup>Baker, *The Birds of Tanglewood*, p. 21.

<sup>7</sup>KWB 53/56.

<sup>8</sup>Karle Wilson Baker, “About the Birds,” [Nacogdoches] *Daily Sentinel*, April 25, 1922.

<sup>9</sup>Baker, *The Birds of Tanglewood*, pp. 56-57.

<sup>10</sup>Baker, *The Birds of Tanglewood*, pp. 44-48; correspondence with Hilton Ross Greer and P.L. Turner, KWB 4/20.

<sup>11</sup>Correspondence with Hilton Ross Greer and P.L. Turner, KWB 4/20.

<sup>12</sup>Baker, *The Birds of Tanglewood*, pp. 60-62.

<sup>13</sup>Baker, *The Birds of Tanglewood*, pp. 69-70.

<sup>14</sup>Correspondence with Turner, KWB 4/21.