

Founding the Mecklenburg Audubon Club:

Charles Grier Sellers Jr. – “A Very Inspahrin’ Fella”

By Donald Seriff, Carolina Bird Club, Charlotte, NC

Charles Sellers, Jr., was descended from generations of “two-mule farmers” who had grown corn, hogs, and cotton along the rich bottomlands of Buffalo Creek in Cleveland County, N. C., since the early nineteenth century. Charlie’s father was the first family member ever to venture east across the Catawba River to Charlotte, where he married a graduate student in mathematics whom he met at church. Their first child, Charles, Jr., was born Sept. 9, 1923.

In the summer of 1931, Charlie’s prospering father moved the Sellers family from its modest abode on the eastern edge of Charlotte to a spacious two-story home on fashionable Clement Avenue in the Elizabeth neighborhood. The next-door neighbors on the south gave Charlie free run of their show-place estate, and he quickly discovered that its lavish plantings were attracting for him a constant host of new bird species to identify and list. He was especially excited by periodic fall-outs of migrating warblers, with their varied songs and beautiful feathering. When Charlie turned twelve in 1935, the Boy Scouts provided him an avenue to birding skills. Promptly he earned a Bird-Study Merit Badge by convincing an experienced adult birder that he had identified forty species in the wild.

Once Charlie’s birding goals were clear, he set about improvising for himself several important tools of modern birding. In the absence of field guides, he clipped color photos of bird families from old *National Geographic* magazines and pasted them into a cloth-bound volume, which became his field guide. By rising daily at 4 A.M., to deliver the morning *Charlotte Observer*, he managed to earn enough from a newspaper route to purchase a pair of six-power

opera glasses. Charlie's early study of birds in the Boy Scouts sparked a lifelong passion for nature and love of birds that never waned.

During this time, Charlie was also birding the surviving farmlands that could be accessed near Clement Avenue via the handy Seaboard Railway all the way down to the next major creek. He still recalls the excitement of identifying a White-eyed Vireo in the swampy swales above Briar Creek. In the ornately planted residential estate door, frequent fallouts of many warbler species added new birds to his list. On an overnight Boy Scout hike into still forested areas east of Charlotte, he was kept awake all night by a full moon and the ghostly Whip-poor-will cries of the Whippoorwill.

In 1939 Charlie reported his bird sightings to the federal Bureau of Biological Survey (later the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service), which was using bird migration data from all over the country to enforce the wildlife protections required under federal treaties. So highly did the Bureau value his careful records for 1939 and 1940 that the four North Carolinians on the "Honor Roll" published in the Bureau's *"Bird Migration Memorandum No. 7"* included Charlie along with H.H. and C.S. Brimley, the ornithologist brothers who wrote the definitive work on *The Birds of North Carolina*.

During this time, Charlie joined forces with the bird-loving Potter and Clarkson families, who lived in the upscale suburb of Myers Park several miles from Charlie's home. The Clarkson's Winghaven Garden was open to the public and designed to attract and display as many birds as possible.

By April 1940, the 17-year-old Charlie was inspiring these senior birders with his call for a Mecklenburg Audubon Club that was committed to protecting birds as its highest responsibility. The resolution establishing Charlotte's first Audubon club was signed by Mrs.

Beatrice Potter, Mrs. Elizabeth Clarkson and attorney Francis Clarkson. From then on Mecklenburg birders organized through the new Audubon club. That April Charlie attended the statewide North Carolina Audubon Society's annual meeting and field trip in Henderson, where the group tallied a list of 75 species. Following this trip, he officially joined the statewide society and attended the fall meeting held in Charlotte.

The next spring, on May 2, 1941, Charlie traveled to the annual meeting of the Audubon Society in Statesville, where he birded with Audubon members at the McLaughlin family farm. Soon he would be leaving Charlotte to attend college at Harvard, where he would have the extraordinary luck to fall under the tutelage of Ludlow Griscom, America's pioneer birder with binoculars. Harvard's 1941 freshman Red Book for Charlie's entering class of 1945 (p. 216) shows him meeting with five other members of the Harvard Ornithological Club. For this academic year their club recorded more species on its field trips than any other Massachusetts bird club.

Charlie's most important contribution to ornithology in the Charlotte region was not, however, the records he collected. It was his "inspahrin" call at age 17 for a Mecklenburg Audubon Club that was devoted to bird protection as the highest obligation of birders. This original Mecklenburg Audubon Club later grew into today's Mecklenburg Audubon Society, which will soon celebrate its 75th anniversary. Thousands of birders in today's club have maintained and augmented over the past seven decades thousands of records for the federal program that enables the government to enforce, for our part of the northern hemisphere, the protection of birds guaranteed by the Migratory Bird treaties. Today's permanent, detailed ornithological record of the Greater Charlotte region provides the data for conducting the Charlotte Spring Bird Count and Christmas Bird Count that young Charlie helped to start almost

75 years ago, as well as marshalling the data for global warming in that part of the world.

Today's Professor Sellers proves "a very insparhin' fella'" as he reaffirms the primacy of bird conservation for a new world of birding.