

The Meadow Lark

by Neil Byer

There is nothing sufficient said, as far as I can tell, about the meadow lark. The great bird, one which never deserts our climate (for which alone some commendation is due) has been little eulogized. Persons who report on such things as wildlife have given only the starkest sort of treatment to him. I shall not pause here to indicate the great wrong perpetrated, nor shall I expose my own ignorance. But I shall do what I can to rescue the bird (it should be a Phoenix-bird for the hard-thinking Kansan) from the shades of the accepted or the forgotten.

Told in various sources^o is the fact that the meadow lark became the official state bird on January 29, 1925, as the result of a contest sponsored by the Kansas Audubon Society. In general, sources relate with a sameness that the school children of the state chose the meadow lark by 48,395 votes over such runners-up as the bobwhite (38,544 votes) and the cardinal (19,863 votes).

It all was made official by the following:

Laws 1937, Chapter 319^o

An act designating the western meadow lark, *Sturnella-Neglecta* (Audubon), as the official state bird of Kansas.

Whereas, a widely and generally conducted election to choose a state bird, carried on by the Kansas Audubon Society, 1925, among the school children of the state of Kansas, resulted in nearly 125,000 votes being cast, of which the meadow lark received many more votes than any other bird, as the most popular bird in Kansas; and

Whereas, It has been the practice of various states of the union to designate an official bird: Now, therefore, *Be it enacted by the Legislature of the State of Kansas*

Section 1. That the bird known as the western meadow lark, *Sturnella-Neglecta* (Audubon), as preferred by a vote of Kansas school children, is hereby designated and declared to be the official bird of the State of Kansas.

Sec. 2 This act shall take effect and be in force from and after its publication in the statute book.

Officialdom has by its nature always a certain harshness about it. I am certain that we should be proud and pleased that a legislature sometime and somewhere saw through the mists and darkness, saw and reached out, though unaccustomed, the tender hand to ruffle the soft, silk breast feathers, golden the year through, of a bird, and said "You shall be ours."

"Hark, hark, the lark at heaven's gates sings," Shakespeare writes. Doubtless a different bird of the same family, beckoning us on to—if nothing else—an inspection of himself. For official declarations often fall short. Given a bird we must pray that it come alive for us. More than the romantic slapdash feathered friend, it must be a friend beyond nodding acquaintance. Go find the bird. Dare him to sing. Then slink away because he knows and sings so much more magic than you, than you even can think.

But Anne Reece Pugh, in her poem "Meadow Lark and Prairie Wind," has come closer to the great spirit and meaning of the great bird which was legislated into existence than I could in dozens of pages. Her poem follows.

Meadow Lark and Prairie Wind¹¹

An airy flutter of slender, brown wings,
And hark! is it joy or sorrow that sings
In the one swelling note,
That trembles and thrills through the long-lifted
throat?
A rush o'er the prairies, a sorrowful cry,
And the quivering grasses bow down with a sigh,
Stirred deep by emotion
That the wind sings and cries o'er the wide grassy
ocean.
A thrill of the heart, a tremble of grasses,
And wind-sound and bird-song a melody passes.
We puzzle long, but we may not know
If wind or lark first sang this song,
With its burden of exquisite woe.

Such a poem is enough. "Is it joy or sorrow that sings?" Go find the bird that was given us in 1925. Hark! hark! does he sing the song of wisdom, or forgetfulness. Does he sing of Kansas, of his habitation? Will he tease us out of thought?

EDITOR'S NOTE

In cases where it is unfeasible to compare a reprinted text with the original version of a selection used in the *Heritage of Kansas*, such emendations and alterations as seem appropriate are made by the editor. This is necessary only infrequently, and every effort is made to reproduce accurately the author's original text.

I wish to give especial thanks to Miss Myrtle Buck of the Emporia City Library and Miss Florence McKinney of Capper Publications for assistance in preparation of this number of *Heritage of Kansas*. Miss Buck has a wide range of knowledge about things of the state, but her greater attribute is her deep feeling for what things mean. Miss McKinney knows things about birds we all should know, but don't. Under her careful guidance, two small and informative volumes of Kansas bird-life have come into being. *Saluda* to these Kansans whose hearts are carrying them.

NOTES

- 1 (Topeka: The College Press, 1936), p. 118.
2. Courtesy of the Kansas State Historical Society, from **Kansas Day Club Addresses**, 1905. p. 33.
3. Mrs. William Starr Dana, **How To Know Wild Flowers**, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1900), p. 182.
4. Johnson County **Herald**, Overland Park, Kansas, September 26, 1957.
5. Kansas State Board of Agriculture, **Trees in Kansas**, (Topeka: State Printing Plant, 1928), pp. 67-69.
6. Courtesy of the Kansas State Historical Society, from the **Kansas City Star**, July 18, 1937.
7. Courtesy of the Kansas State Historical Society, from **The Aarend**, IX (Hays, Kansas: Fort Hays State College, 1938), 3, p. 185.
8. Arthur L. Goodrich, Jr., **Birds in Kansas: Report of the Kansas State Board of Agriculture, June 1945**, (Topeka: State Printing Plant, 1946), pp. 129-31.
9. **Ibid.**, and the **Topeka Daily Capital**, (January 27, 1957), p. 13A; **Kansas Facts** (Topeka: Charles P. Beebe, 1931), p. 201; Bliss Isley, **Early Days in Kansas**, (Topeka: Kansas State Teachers Association, by the **Wichita Eagle Press**, 1st printing, 1927), pp. 149-151.
10. Paul R. Shanahan (compiler), **Directory: State Officers, Boards, and Commissions, and Interesting facts about Kansas**, (Topeka: State Printing Plant), p. 52.
11. From **Sunflowers, A Book of Kansas Poems**, selected by Willard Wattles, (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1916), p. 80.

Vol. 1, No. 1, *Men Against The Frontier*, February, 1957:

Neil Byer, "Men Against the Frontier."

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Henry King, "At Kawsmouth Station."

Percy G. Ebbut, "Emigrant Life in Kansas."

William Allen White, "The Story of Aqua Pura."

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Neil Byer, "The Red Man Lives."

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L. G. Turner, "Uncle Tom's Indian Raid."

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Frank A. Root and William E. Connelley, "The Buffalo."

De B. R. Keim, "General Sheridan Hunts the Buffalo."

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Elizabeth Barns, "The Sunflower, Emblem of Kansas."

C. M. Older, "The Cottonwood."

Neil Byer, "The Meadow Lark."