

Fern Zimmerman, A Personal Remembrance

1899 - 1996

Sea and Sage has lost a member whose dedication to the chapter was unequalled. On Aug 22, 1996, Fern Zimmerman died peacefully in her sleep. If I am not mistaken, Fern was Sea and Sage's last remaining charter member. Certainly she was the only person active continuously since the society was formed in the early 1950's.

I met Fern on my first day of birding with Sea and Sage members--July 12, 1971, according to my field notebook. She and Carolyn Honer took me to Blome Ranch, now Santiago Oaks Regional Park. My personal list for the day had just 19 species on it, including two life birds--California Quail and N. Rough-winged Swallow. I was a pretty new birder then.

That was the first of many happy days I spent learning birding from Fern. We went out once a week for years. She taught me how important habitat, behavior and voice were in identifying birds. I had thought I was merely *bird-watching*. She was full of little tricks for remembering songs. For example, she said the Solitary Vireo asks a lot of little questions: "Do you see it? Can you hear it? Would you believe it?" The Orange-crowned Warbler sounds just like a silly little whistle she had.

Although she was too modest and unassuming ever to accept the presidency of Sea and Sage, she was newsletter editor and Christmas Count chairman during the early days. But perhaps the main thing we should remember her for was her dogged determination behind the scenes, which truly kept the chapter from collapsing during some difficult years. She was the prime recruiter of officers and committee chairmen until her health began to fail in the last decade or so. I still laugh as I recall how she persuaded Lois Loughran and me to be Christmas Count co-chairs. She told me that Lois would do it if I would. She told Lois that I would do it if she would. Of course, she had no commitment from either of us to start with. We weren't really qualified for the job, but no one else in Sea and Sage at the time was either.

Fern was an active member of both the Education and Conservation Committees. For years she hosted both committees every month in her apartment--and what refreshments she laid out! When I visited her between meetings, her old portable typewriter was always set up on a card table and surrounded by letters in progress to elected officials and newspapers--as well as to a lifetime of friends in far places.

I last saw Fern a few months ago when I visited her in the Town and Country Retirement Home, where she spent her last years. She was reading her daily newspaper when I arrived. Although her failing heart kept her confined to a wheel chair, her mind was as alert as ever. We had a wonderful chat.

Many Sea and Sage members only know of Fern Zimmerman when they see the sign, Fern Zimmerman Library, at Audubon House. (Her lifetime collection of books on birds and other natural history subjects was the nucleus of this library.) But whenever we see that sign, we should remember that the vibrant organization we know today might not even exist were it not for her loving commitment over the years.

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