

OF BIRDS AND TEXAS

Newsletter - March, 1985

We are very pleased to announce that the actual printing work is under way on the book, Of Birds and Texas, by Scott and Stuart Gentling and John Graves. It has been a long time getting to this point which is the final stage in the creation of this extraordinary book. Unfortunately, in spite of our most earnest efforts to avoid delays, we have gotten off to a later start on this critical phase that we had anticipated. News of this sort will certainly not come as a surprise to collectors of custom printed first editions, but since so many of our patrons are collecting this kind of book for the first and perhaps only time, a few words of explanation will, I think, ease your minds and relieve any possible apprehension.

We have known for several weeks that we were not going to be able to meet our publication deadline of March 1985. We have consistently held on to this date, however, because we simply could not name another time with any certainty, and we did not want to give one customer a publication date that would be different from the deadline that we might give to another customer. We thus decided several weeks ago to break the news to everyone at the same time. Our printers and craftsmen have told us that the book, Of Birds and Texas, will be completed and ready for delivery to our patrons by August 1985. They have signed contracts to this effect and we hope that there will be no further significant delays.

Some of our patrons may ask why there are any delays at all? I shall respond to this by declaring that our customers will be receiving a far finer and more ambitious book than they thought they were buying when they signed the purchase contract. From the very first day when we began to offer this magnificent volume to the public the Gentlings have been making changes and adjusting their original concepts in order to widen the scope of their book and to insure that the design and printing of the work and its presentation in its special portfolios and linen box meet the highest possible standards of quality. I think that citing a brief history of this book and the changes that the Gentlings have made in the last eight years will give you a useful insight into the evolution of this important project.

In 1977 when Stuart and Scott Gentling first approached author John Graves about becoming involved in their project, they had it in their minds to produce a large traditionally bound volume containing twenty-five color reproductions of Texas birds shown against white backgrounds in the manner of most eighteenth and nineteenth century natural history prints. The Gentlings planned to write brief commentaries to each of the reproductions, but the main body of the text was to be by Graves. Scott and Stuart planned to design the book themselves, and it was their intention at that time to have both the color plates and the text printed by a reputable commercial printing company which would produce all the pages of the book by the offset printing process, the method by which all standard commercial publications are produced. This book was to be for sale at the price of \$1,800.

It is exciting to see just how the original concepts for this book have changed over the years. From the idea of being a bound volume of twenty-five prints with text, this book has reached its final design to include fifty-three color reproductions -- forty of which are of birds, not displayed against neutral white backgrounds as previously planned, but against vivid landscapes showing the richness and variety that is Texas. In addition to the forty bird prints, the Gentlings have decided to include ten reproductions of some of their favorite Texas landscapes which are painted in the drybrush watercolor style for which they are best known. These pictures will be included in the introductory section of the book as a kind of visual overture for the striking bird plates which are to follow in the second portfolio. The final three reproductions concern the man in whose memory the Gentlings have created this book.

Since 1966 when Scott and Stuart first began to talk among themselves about doing a book on Texas birds, it has been their aim to create a publication to honor the memory of John James Audubon. Audubon's paintings of birds have been a constant source of inspiration and pleasure from the earliest time when the Gentlings first began to paint seriously. It is an interesting coincidence that their book is being published in 1985, the bi-centennial year of Audubon's birth. In homage to John James Audubon and as an added treat the Gentlings are including three additional color reproductions of Audubon memorabilia which will weave the memory of this great bird artist throughout their book. Scott has painted an exquisite small portrait of Audubon which will appear in the introductory pages of the book, and there will also be a facsimile reproduction of the first page of a rare autograph manuscript which Audubon wrote as commentary to his painting of the Red-shouldered Hawks which appeared as plate 56 in his great Elephant Folio edition of The Birds of America. This manuscript which is the original draft for the commentary which was printed in 1831 in the first volume of Audubon's Ornithological Biography has never been published in its original unedited version. The Gentlings are presenting for the first time the entire text of the piece just as Audubon wrote it, complete with all of his errors in spelling and punctuation and his quaint command of the English language. It provides the reader with an intimate and wonderfully revealing look into the mind of this great artist.

Finally, the Gentlings are including a facsimile-sized reproduction of an original Audubon watercolor which has only recently been discovered and purchased by the artists. The painting has never been reproduced and it has a very interesting history. This small ten inch by fourteen and half-inch picture is a painting of a pair of Boat-tailed Grackles. It was painted by Audubon in Philadelphia in May, 1824, for Charles Lucien Bonaparte to be included as a hand-colored etching in Bonaparte's four volume supplement to Alexander Wilson's American Ornithology. Although the watercolor was altered considerably in its printed form, Audubon, nevertheless, received credit for the plate. The Audubon painting which the Gentlings have included in their book is the very first Audubon painting from which a reproduction was made, and it is shown for the first time as it was originally conceived. By including this historically important picture which has not been seen by the public in the nearly 160 years since

its creation, the Gentlings have symbolically linked their publication not only to Audubon's work, but also to the books of Bonaparte and Alexander Wilson and thus to the creators of the first great nineteenth century books of American ornithology. We know of no other contemporary publication which can claim this unique quality.

Scott and Stuart Gentling have made other changes in addition to the extra bird and landscape prints and the Audubon reproductions. They have also made significant changes in their approach to improve the design and printing of the book. After having discussed the matter with printers and bookbinders as well as with their early patrons the Gentlings changed their minds about having the pages of their book sewn together in the manner in which most books are bound. The weight of the heavy rag paper would make traditional binding difficult and not very permanent. Also many of their customers had voiced a desire to have the prints freed from the text so that they could be easily removed for viewing or even for framing and display. In addition to this advice the Gentlings were told by a number of rare book dealers that having both the pages of the text and the prints unbound would follow a practice frequently employed in the presentation of important contemporary art publications of this magnitude. Instead of being presented within standard bookcovers, the unbound pages of this book will be contained in two linen-covered portfolios placed within a handsome and durable bookboard box that is also covered by linen. All of this special construction work will be custom-made. In charge of this massive undertaking is Craig Jensen who for seven years was the Chief Conservator at the prestigious Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin. He will personally see to it that all of the materials and construction work will meet his rigorous standards of archival quality which will insure that the Gentling book will be enjoyed by future generations who will be able to see it in the same fresh condition in which it is delivered to our patrons.

Perhaps the most important change of all concerns the brothers' decision not to design the book themselves or to have the text or the color work printed by standard commercial methods. It became apparent to them as their paintings began to increase in number and as John Graves finally committed himself to the enterprise, that a book of this ambitious size and scope had to be printed in a special way. This book had to be printed with the care, artfulness, and integrity that only a private printer could bring to the project. Fortunately it did not take the Gentlings long to find just such a printer, for the name that was consistently mentioned, even as they made their first inquiries, was the name of the Holman Company of Austin which is called Wind River Press. David Holman and his parents, William and Barbara Holman, have worked together for years and have established a reputation for taste, quality, and excellence among collectors and aficionados of fine books throughout Texas and the United States.

They are the finest book designers and printers in Texas. The fact that they are very discriminating about their choice of projects and that they have accepted the Gentling commission with spirit and enthusiasm is evidence enough for knowledgeable book collectors that this book is going to make publishing history in this state. In order to undertake the

difficult task of designing and printing a book in the large Imperial Folio size of 22 inches by 28 inches, it has been necessary for them to purchase two large presses. One press is for the color work, and the other press is a special letterpress for doing the printing of the text. They will bring their award-winning skills to the project by not only designing each page of the text but also by printing it in the old fashioned custom process of letterpress which is both time-consuming and expensive. Each printed page of the text will be a work of art in its own right.

By acquiring their own press to print the color plates for the book, the Holmans will be able to devote a special kind of individual care and attention to faithfully reproducing the original Gentling paintings. It will be the same kind of custom printing which has won for Wind River Press the respect and admiration of collectors of fine books everywhere. A large commercial firm simply cannot devote the time for such care, because there is always another project waiting to be printed, and such companies must eventually bow to these pressures. The Holmans are devoting their attention exclusively to the task of doing the color work for Of Birds and Texas, and while they are printing the plates, no other project will be undertaken with their press.

Another benefit of the Holmans' custom touch is the use of finer screening to achieve a much sharper image than is possible through most commercial printing. Such fine screening too often clogs the presses so that they must be stopped periodically for cleaning. This requires a costly delay for big printing firms who have other projects lined up to be printed, but for the small custom printer and his press, it is all in a day's work. Mr. Holman has pointed out that the color work will be printed with the world's best equipment -- a Heidelberg 2-color press, so that there will be less problems with the ink trap. The unquestioned quality and reliability of the press will insure an accurate register, ink dispersion, and the use of the finer screening for sharpness of image. He also maintains that since the work is being done by an acknowledged craftsman and not a worker handling just another job, this project will be treated with the kind of care and taste that will assure a product of fine quality.

Quality is the key word here for the Gentlings, and for the fine artists and craftsmen who have joined them in creating this project. To create a publication that will be treasured in the years ahead for its beauty and its uniqueness has always been their aim, and it is their single-minded pursuit of excellence which has characterized the Gentlings' efforts from the very beginning. They have spared neither their time nor their labors to produce a truly exceptional publication. The fact that all of the printing is now in the hands of the Holmans at Wind River Press will greatly enhance the quality and prestige of this already very important book so that this publication is certain to appreciate in value at a faster and higher rate. Libraries, museums and knowledgeable collectors respect the fact that the Holmans are doing all the printing, and I am certain that historians will not forget that fact either.

But the pursuit of quality takes time as well as skill. The Gentlings have been working for over eight years to bring their book to the public, and now that the printing of the book has actually begun they are determined to avoid the temptation of making short cuts which, though they might speed the production of their book, could nevertheless compromise the quality of the work. It is true that nothing quite like the Gentling book has ever been produced in Texas, and we feel that as a work of art and literature the book, *Of Birds and Texas*, belongs in the same category as the great bird books of the nineteenth century. The combined talents of Stuart and Scott Gentling, John Graves, Craig Jensen and the Holmans of Wind River Press are going to bring this magnificent volume to reality. An incomparable piece of Texas publishing history is now being created for the enjoyment of this generation and for generations to come, and we ask for your tolerance and your understanding as we enter this last important phase of the book's production. Please bear with us. Your patience will, we think, be wonderfully rewarded.

If there are any questions concerning the publication of the book, please contact me at the Gentling Studio (817/332-7059).

Sincerely,

E. Ralph Carr

ERC/dlm