

The *Old Hemlock Letter*

An Exclusive Publication Dedicated to the Continued Development of the Old Hemlock English Setter



“If Time may seem a sorrow, it is mellow, too. Those grand dogs and grand birds are gone with the leaves of yesteryear, but while they were here they gave immeasurably to the men. Looking back, it was a good life, the world seemed smaller then, and less mixed-up. Those gunners with their dogs and their birds somewhere in that odd cirrostratus from which they come when we bring them to us by remembering, left words almost tangible. Taking their books from the shelves, like looking at period portraits, is seeing ourselves in the past.”

George Bird Evans Men Who Shot 1983

The Old Hemlock Foundation, Preserving and Promoting the Legacy of George Bird Evans and Kay Evans

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“Walking up our lane with Kay with our sugar maples sifting gold, I try to think what it would be like to see such a house with its boxwood, sleeping away its centuries under these giant trees in the dignity of solitude, and not possess it, and I grasp that Indian summer and all of this is just for Kay and the setters and me.”

George Bird Evans A Dog, a Gun and Time Enough 1987

Following the tragic loss of our friend Jim Nichols in September, Phillip Gilmore has been entrusted with Jim’s OH Icarus, a sad way to join the Old Hemlock family, but that does not diminish his welcome to our hearth.

I asked Phillip, as his close friend, to write an appreciation of Jim for the Letter. What follows is a fitting tribute to a great guy who is missed and will be remembered.

~ Editor

Memories of Jim

Phillip Gilmore

I was a Marine for twenty two years. My wife Jenny and three of our five children moved many times from duty station to duty station. During that time we made some life-long friends, but I never had a friend like Jim Nichols.

Jim and I met by chance. I saw a flyer at the Kroger store in Proctorville, Ohio advertising a bird dog trial in Kentucky. There were two numbers listed for more information, and I chose Jim’s. We spoke briefly about the trial, dogs, and training and that was it. Several months later Jim called me and invited me to go to Crown City to run the dogs on some wild quail. I met him and two other guys, Gary and Scott, at his house. Jim had breakfast already prepared for us so we ate and then we went to Crown City.

Jim had his setter, Old Hemlock Colt. Gary and Scott brought several dogs apiece. One dog that Gary brought was pretty much uncontrollable. We couldn’t catch her and had to wait for her to come back to the truck. However, even with that we had some fine dog work and flushed several coveys of quail.

Jim and Gary took an annual ten day grouse hunting trip to Wisconsin. When they returned, Jim called me and asked me if I wanted that dog. Gary had too many dogs and wanted to find homes for some so he could focus on the ones he thought were better. I hadn’t had a bird dog for a while and was eager to get back to bird hunting so I agreed to take her. Jim and I were both retired so we spent a lot of time with our dogs at Crown City, becoming good friends, honing our skills and training our dogs.

I quickly realized that Jim Nichols was not just an acquaintance. Everywhere we went I met people who knew Jim. Many of those people said that he would give you the shirt off his back. He would! He made everyone smile. He made everyone feel welcome at his home or church with a warm smile, firm handshake, and a hug.

He was a special friend and a wonderful neighbor. If you needed anything he had it. What was his was yours. If you broke it, he’d say, get it fixed, no big deal. If he needed anything I tried to emulate him and be as supportive as he. He called me from Wisconsin one time when his wife was having trouble keeping his new puppy Icarus’s energy level in check. Jim said that Icarus needed to be run at Crown City and asked if I could take him with me the next time I went. I said sure. I was hunting my dog there and didn’t see a problem with taking Icarus with me too. I could always count on Jim and I wanted to make sure that he and his family could always count on me for whatever they needed.

Jim felt that it was our job to mentor the younger generation, and loved to pass on all his experiences as a bird dog trainer to all who would listen. We shared many ideas and training techniques. He had an extensive library on grouse, bird dogs, bird hunting, and training. He would let anyone borrow his books if he thought it would help. We spent countless hours together in the field working our dogs on wild birds, exercising them and ourselves in the process.

One thing that I liked about Jim is I never saw him frustrated or angry. Jim was always very patient. He used say the first year of a puppy’s life he could do no wrong. We took

our time training our dogs and let the dogs make mistakes. We also made mistakes, but he never dwelled on any of them. That's not to say that he didn't laugh when we messed up. We always laughed at ourselves.

Jim's sense of humor was well known among his friends. He was always smiling and loved to find humor in all that he did. When it came to the other bird dog owners that we knew, he was a prankster. There were so many instances where he would tell stories about his dog or my dog or another friend's dog. He videotaped a guy's dog once and the guy said "whoa" twenty six times; that got a lot of mileage.

He was a dedicated family man who loved his wife and grandchildren very much, and he loved being Paw Paw. He tried to pass on to his grandkids and other children the love of bird hunting, fishing, and general stewardship of the outdoors. It was important to Jim that the next generation embrace bird dogs, bird hunting, and the outdoors. One winter day my girls and his grandchildren were out of school

because of snow. He called me and asked if they wanted to go sledding. We all went, and then later went to his house for cocoa that his wife Karen made. It was an awesome memory, and that's when my girls started calling him Uncle Jim.

Jim always asked how my family was doing, to include our two older children. He was always interested in how they were doing in school. He actively participated in any and all of their fund raisers for school. It was as if my kids had another set of grandparents that were genuinely interested in what was happening in their lives and wanted to support them any way they could.

As I have said throughout, Jim loved to pass on all his knowledge and passion for bird dogs, grouse hunting, and life. All who would listen could learn from him. He taught me what it truly means to be a friend and he will be dearly missed. He was my friend.



**A LATE AFTERNOON POINT.
THAT WOULDN'T WAIT.**

“You counter what is going to happen by clinging to the now, talking to them, touching them, doing small things that brighten their time between seasons. Our gun dogs teach us how to live, day by day.”

George Bird Evans Living with Gun Dogs 1992

David wrote this story in 1998, and it has been in his files ever since. We are delighted that he shares it with us now. There is much more OH history in his journals, and he is one of the few who had the opportunity to hunt with George and Kay. Perhaps as time permits we will hear more.

- Editor

Carpe Diem

David L. Hall

Sonnet was eight and a half years old as the Pennsylvania extended grouse season welcomed 1997 — still young enough to be a wonderful grouse dog but old enough for me to face the fact that she will not be able to handle grouse coverts for many more years. Trying to anticipate that, Flare joined the entourage in July. Old Hemlock Quest was Sonnet’s sire and Flare’s grand-sire. Flare was the first of the litter coming from the brother-sister OH Manton and OH Spirit breeding to leave the nest. Sonnet, with her phlegmatic disposition, must have thought her world had been turned upside down as Flare’s uninhibited exuberance exploded on the scene.

I had wrestled with my thoughts and emotions as I entertained the timing of a new pup. We humans are most comfortable with familiarity, and having had a pleasant experience with a particular breed and line of dog once is all it takes to initiate an addiction. Neither was the joy of having a dog whose ancestors are brought to life in the writings of George Bird Evans an impediment to my desire for a first Old Hemlock setter.... and a second. But Old Hemlock litters are not common occurrences, and as I thought about Sonnet’s age it seemed right to give Sonnet and me a young partner. Having a friendship with Jeff and Kendra Kauffman and enjoying a few hunts over Spirit completed the “bookends” of friendships and hunts with Kay, George, and Manton.

But there is still an awkwardness when the pup comes, or at least there was for me. *Time—the measure of your relation with your bird dog* is the inscription George wrote in my copy of Troubles with Bird Dogs. Sonnet was accustomed to all of my time and attention. She had her settled routines, a key one being unsupervised

time alone in my study when I was away during the day. Sonnet—so laid-back and so honorable—would never molest anything, not even an open box of dog biscuits on the floor. She seemed always to accept a code that only those things presented to her were appropriate. Then there was the upcoming bird season; Sonnet knew me as her always and usually only companion in field and wood. But if Flare was going to bond and learn the basics of obedience, to master the self-control of a gun dog, it would mean Time. And of course, time with Flare in those contexts often meant time shared with—not apart from—Sonnet. I don’t know of any prescription that offers anything close to a totally satisfactory answer with that conflict of time and soul.

The bonding happens. Flare immediately projects onto Sonnet a compensation for the loss of mother and litter-mates. Sonnet wasn’t nearly so enthusiastic, but within a few weeks they were snuggling together in their sleep crate. Sonnet lost her long days in my study; Flare lets the whole neighborhood know if her “auntie” is absent. Weeks pass though, and the time finally comes that both dogs can spend hours with me in “our room”, but Flare gives no indication she will ever earn the unsupervised trust that Sonnet has. Sometimes I let Sonnet enjoy the old privilege for several hours. Like me, Flare will have to live without Sonnet at some point. So I’m back to that unpleasant realization.

I had given Flare a few solo “hunts” both at a preserve and during the early grouse season. Flare had also accompanied Sonnet and me on several grouse excursions—especially a couple of extended days at an upstate cabin—an opportunity for exposure, socialization and

extended control. But some days I needed, and felt like I owed to Sonnet, a day alone in the coverts with the veteran.

A January Monday in the study intensified that with startling emphasis. I had given each dog a period of cuddling and petting as I held them, sitting in a big stuffed chair (fifty pound lap dogs!?), and had shifted the attention to a tummy rub as they lay on the floor. As I rubbed Sonnet I gave her mammarys my customary inspection, and there they were: little lumps. Mammary tumors? I called my vet to verify my diagnosis; a quick trip ended with an appointment for surgery for the following Tuesday. Thursday is my usual day off. I planned a hunt for Sonnet and me before the uncertainty of the week ahead.

January of 1997 opened with early November kinds of days, forties with low grey skies, which is my favorite weather. I relished the thoughts of an extended grouse season with such ideal conditions. I began to mentally sort through the covert options for my special day with Sonnet.

Thursday's weather broke with the promise of the first real winter storm of the season: snow starting in the morning, turning to sleet and freezing rain. Not the kind of day to entice me far from home on any kind of mountain back roads. My options shrank away. I thought of one place, maybe forty miles away, that I had not yet hunted in the season. On the way there, with snow starting to fall, I gave it up too.

But Sonnet had to have at least part of a day. I had one remaining option, a faithful covert not twenty miles from my house. Its one drawback is that I hit it too often. To give the whole picture though, it is really one place with five separate small coverts. A person could cover them all in one hard day, but I usually do a cursory move through about three. I had taken two birds in one section back in November, so I avoided that area. But there was another portion where I have often moved birds but never connected because of density and terrain. We headed there, with the caveat of circling around and taking the cover from a reversed direction.

Sonnet was ranging nicely in the ten year clear cut regrowth. It was dense with birch saplings interspersed with low laurel and wild grape tangle. In the winter sparseness I could see Sonnet as she quartered at about sixty yards. The snow was falling steadily.

I was following the contour of a gradual ridge which rose and crested with a discernible thickness of cover

along the edge of a more drastic drop off to a stream bed. On the other side of the ridge crest the slope fanned out in a variety of laurel thickets. Sonnet knows birdy cover, and she was over and below weaving in and out of the laurel.

I had it in mind to follow the contour edge, but my peripheral vision registered a sight even as I recognized that I no longer heard Sonnet's bell. One of the great things about hunting alone with your dog is the ability to drop any preconceived route. I repeated to myself something I've written in my shooting notes over and over again: "Trust the dog!" I turned and traversed the sixty or so yards of cover as quickly as possible while simultaneously trying to avoid too much havoc and noise.

As I drew to within twenty or so yards of Sonnet I slowed and began to sweep the surrounding cover with my eyes. "Where would a bird likely be hidden?" If I had not seen the flush I would have never known the bird's presence. The flush was smooth and quiet as opposed to the usual explosion that signals a grouse's departure. It went up about twenty yards off my left shoulder; Sonnet was on point about fifteen yards off my right shoulder. She had scented that bird at a good twenty five yards, as I was triangulated off of each.

The flush took the direction for a hard left-quartering shot. In that blur of time where milliseconds are seemingly compressed even more, and yet at the same time stretched into a beckoning eternity, my eyes detected the bird and my mind computed the direction and angle even as I brought the gun to my shoulder, moving the barrels in line until that sense of perfect coordination signals the trigger pull.

It never happened. Just as I was about to fire, my barrels collided with a small birch tree. It would have been, I think, a decent shot. It could have been the perfect culmination of a perfect point. Instead, Sonnet had to settle for the (delicious?) distant scent of a grouse she never saw. I had to settle for the joy of a productive point (and the shocking intrusion of an interrupted shot). The grouse had to settle for its life and the chance of another day. Not too bad, really, when memory re-plays the tape.

The snow was beginning to cover the ground. I couldn't imagine reproducing that opportunity, even if we tried for another couple of hours. Sonnet had gotten out for the hunt. I had had my chance. It was time to go.

The following Tuesday Sonnet went for her surgery.

The phone call early in the afternoon was better than expected: benign cysts between the skin and the actual mammary glands. Everything was going to be okay—at least for now. Flare would not be missing her surrogate mom in the immediate future, anyway.

And maybe that grouse lived to contribute another brood for another season. Would the next point be Sonnet's? Or Flare's? Or Both? I have to do my part in order for them to do theirs. My part is to make the opportunity. *Carpe diem*: "seize the day". Time, especially for our dogs, ends all too soon.

Now it's almost a decade and a half later. Both Sonnet and Flare have succumbed to Time. As I look on life from the perspective of my mid-sixties, I find it is not what I would have envisioned fifteen years ago. I believed life would get simpler and slower in this "retiring" decade. Instead, my life is more complicated than ever; I hardly have time for an occasional hunt, and no time to develop a bird dog and give the ongoing attention such a commitment entails. Yet I have memories that cannot be erased, and I find myself going back to my hunting journals. And I'm reminded of another wonderful GBE quote: "Memories are moments stretched from seconds into years."

David



"Memories are moments stretched from seconds into years. At some time each of us has had a thought escape him that he has recaptured when he returned to the place the thought was born."

George Bird Evans Men Who Shot 1983





WWGD

Mike Krol

Strange title for an Old Hemlock Letter article for sure. The meaning will be revealed at the end of this brief piece, but I'll bet a few of you have already guessed the right answer.

This is a little snippet on my experience with modern canine technology, and my subsequent embracing of it. It all started with the e-collar, something which we all are so familiar with and I would guess most of us use. Although there may be a few old school (meant with total respect!) folks who steadfastly refuse even considering its use. As we all know, while George was initially reluctant to employ an e-collar, he eventually came to accept it as one of the most useful training tools, and most humane if used properly. I won't bore you with a treatise on e-collars; we all know them well. All I will say on the subject is that there is no better tool for trash-breaking. For my setters who have their first porcupine contact (hopefully a point, which has been my experience), one single tap at a fairly high intensity will cure them for life. That one intense tap can save very painful (and sometimes expensive) future encounters.

But on to some of the newer stuff, specifically beepers to start. Now I know how many folks react adversely to such abominations, "I'll be darned if I'll run my dog in the woods with something that sounds like a backhoe in reverse". "There is nothing more delightful than the gentle tinkling of a bell in the autumn uplands". "There's a tradition that was passed on by those before us that must be maintained". And more and more. I used to be of this school as well, back when I could hear. But as George would have said, Anno Domini has taken its toll on me (as well as too much loud music in my youth and too much improperly protected gunfire in later years), and now at the ripe old age of sixty four I can't hear very well. To add to that, in my later years I have become downright paranoid when my dogs are running and I don't know where they are at all times. Enter the beeper collar. With my hearing loss I have found Lovett's VLT (very low tone) collars are best for me. Even with hearing aids, though, the best I can keep track of the pups is about seventy five yards out, perhaps a wider cast than some might like but to me perfectly reasonable. You'll never hear anyone say "There is nothing more delightful than the sound of a beeper collar in the autumn uplands", but I have found them to be superior to a bell in two very important areas:

1. When you need to whistle your dog in, you can time your whistle with when the collar is not beeping. From the time I first tried beepers, I immediately noticed how well the dogs responded, no constant bell clanking to confuse them.

2. Ahh, the dog is on point but where is the rascal? I can well recall my son Grayson's first experience with beepers on our pups: "Dad, why didn't we do this years ago?" He had the opportunity to hunt in the older years (the younger Mike years), when all we had was a bell. The bell goes silent, you go looking for your dog. Not to say there wasn't a certain charm to this; I recall with great fondness my first Old Hemlock brace, Blossom (sired by Quest) and her son Shay, about as fine a bird dog as I will ever see. Blossom would range farther out, her bell would go quiet, Shay would swing back and I'd tell him "go find your Mama", which he would seem to understand and religiously do, back pointing loyally. Glory days indeed for the three of us.

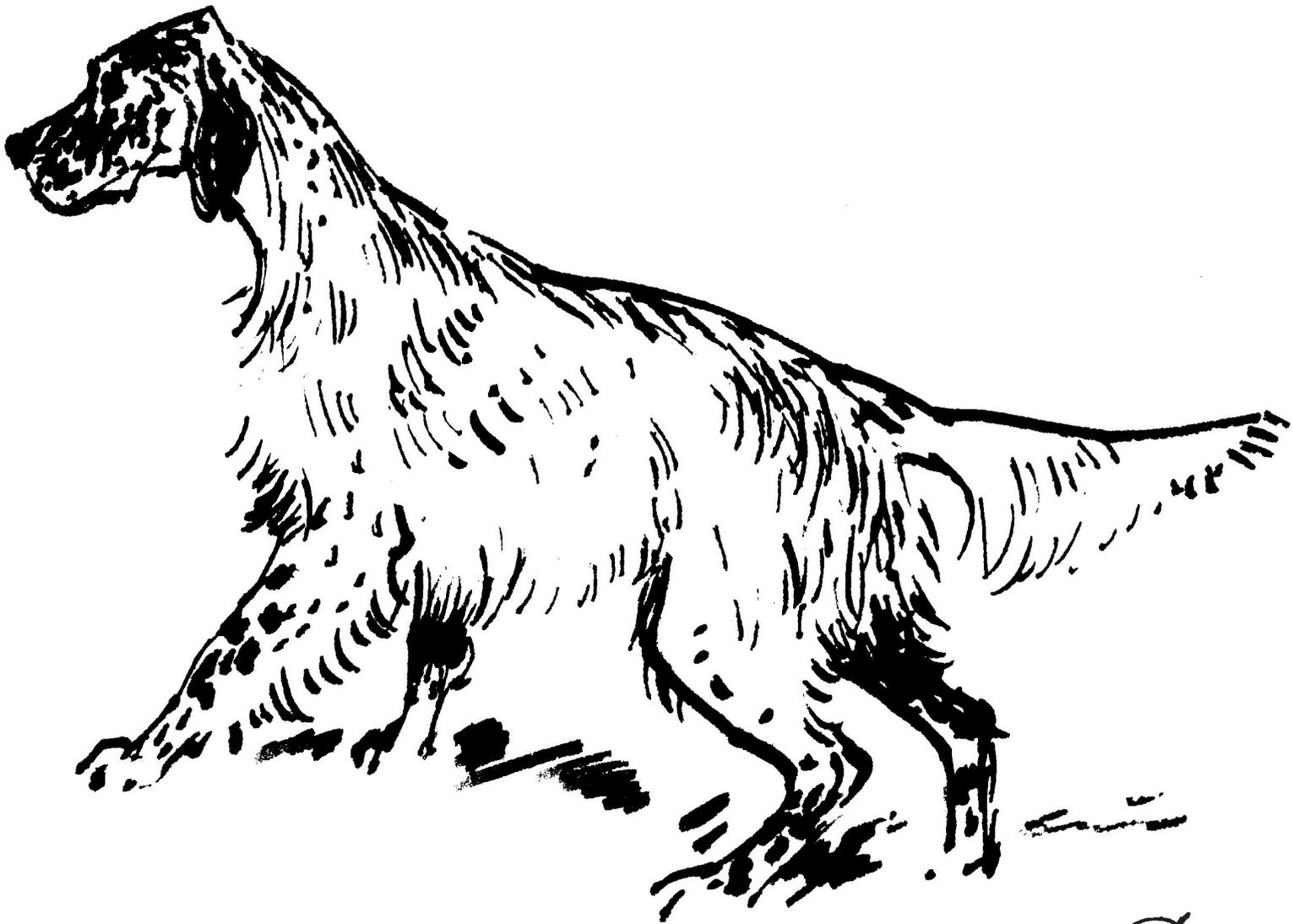
And one third point that I can't substantiate but one in which I am inclined to believe: the potential for hearing loss for the dog due to the constant clanging of the bell just under their sensitive ears. Most of us have had to deal with aging gun dogs who still have the drive, desire and physical wherewithal, but have gone somewhat deaf, frustrating for both dog and owner.

Enough on beepers, now on to the really cool stuff: GPS technology! I first started with the Garmin Astro, and have subsequently moved to their Alpha. I cannot begin to describe what a godsend GPS capability has been for my hunting and peace of mind. There is not a day in which I give my dogs their daily exercise, not to mention a true hunting experience, in which a GPS collar is not on their neck. To know your dog's exact location at all times is such a relief, and can be life changing, for both them and you. In Promise's first year in the grouse woods, on two occasions she became disoriented, couldn't determine the location of my whistle blasts, and was headed at full speed in the opposite direction. I could see on my receiver as she went 300, 400, 500 yards running full tilt, all away from me. With the Alpha I was able to get onto her quickly and reign her in. Many of us have had to endure the angst of a lost dog, hopefully all with happy endings, but the opportunity for heartbreak is ever-present. I well recall one day with Beretta in her earlier years when she was gone for two hours, and my going through the motions of leaving a dog box and my hunting coat in the woods where I had last seen her, then driving around with my heart in my throat and tears in my eyes until, praise the Lord, I saw her trotting down the road toward me about a half mile away. That story could have ended tragically. Many will recall when Jim and Karen Killay's setter went missing for two hours at one of our reunions a few years back. The fact that the pup was finally found on point (how long had the pup held?) gave it a classic and very happy ending, but it could have been dif-

ferent for sure. I cannot say enough good things about GPS technology.

Which brings me back to my title. As I begin a hunt with my setters, strapping on their annoying-to-some beepers, their Alpha collars with antennas reaching skyward, looking and sounding like dogs from that old cartoon show *The Jetsons*,

I often pause and wonder “What would George do?” And I am convinced he would have done whatever was necessary to keep going, which is what this stuff has done for me.



“No man can shape his past or, in some ways, even know it, nor can he do more than try to form his future. But he can certainly, by his values and his principles, make himself what he wants to be in his present.”

George Bird Evans An Affair with Grouse 1982

Devin is the current AmeriCorps volunteer with the Preservation Alliance, working with the Old Hemlock Foundation for a year after graduating from the University of Pennsylvania, where he majored in classical studies and political science. He plans to pursue a joint JD/PhD program preparing for a career in property and cultural heritage law. We look forward to meeting him at the Reunion.

- Editor

Learning to Love Bird Dogs

Devin Scanlon

My title may be a bit deceiving. There really was no serious “learning process” involved in my education on the exulting experience that is hunting with a talented setter. I was convinced in an instant the first time I had the privilege of seeing an Old Hemlock Setter in action. Everything after that just served to deepen my feeling of profound respect for these gifted animals. At Hunting Hills in mid-October with LeJay and Willow, my appetite for the sport was sincerely whetted; not by a bloodlust for a blood sport but rather in the manner that George Bird Evans had described, wherewith “much of the pleasure of shooting is what accompanies it and sharing it all with a good friend” (The Upland Shooting Life pg. 156). My readings of this great sportsman prepared me to appreciate gunning, but it was nothing compared to being physically in the field with **a dog, a gun, and time enough**.

Even though I grew up in a rural area of northeastern Pennsylvania (twenty minutes from DeCoverly Kennels, actually) that was so hunting-minded that the local school district gave the first day of deer season off instead of MLK day, I had never hunted any form of game before coming to Old Hemlock. The totality of my experience with firearms consisted of a single day with a shotgun shooting clays and a solitary outing to an indoor shooting range with a Walther PK380. Regardless of my lack of personal experience though, the sport is in my blood. My paternal grandfather hunted birds with setters for much of his life in the forests around Scranton, Pennsylvania but my father gave up the pastime while a teenager. The only youthful memory of birds or setters I have is of my grandfather’s last setter, Rosie, who, when my grandpa grew too frail to take care of her, came to live with my family. She was a fine and friendly dog but as I was seven years old at the time that she passed away, I can recall little more than the most general about her (In fact, until recently, I mistakenly remembered her blue Belton coat as the spots belonging to a Dalmatian).

So, as we set out that day in October, although I didn’t know what exactly to expect, I was indeed expectant. Willow certainly knew the specifics though, and her excitement over the events to come was contagious, casting any shadows of doubt out of my mind. As we set out in search of pheasants, following Willow as she bounded ahead, doing what comes naturally to her, I quickly came to understand the allure of this ancient sport. No amount of dry academic study of the subject can prepare one for the bodily experience and the effect which it has on one’s soul; man and dog working together is truly something to behold. As Willow sought out and pointed pheasants from all manner of coverts, looking back at LeJay from time to time in search of his approval – a bounty more coveted in her mind than even the birds we had driven an hour to find – the relationship between a fine master and a good dog became apparent. It is a connection which one has to see himself to grasp even the glimmering outline of, and which one must feel firsthand as accomplice in order to truly understand.

As we plodded along, I realized just how poor I was at my part in the act in relation to Willow’s fluid and natural ability. Although I landed only a single blow for all the pheasants Willow found for us, I think back on how little I really cared about that fact. Sure, it was frustrating as I tried – and mostly failed – to quickly learn the proper means for aiming as we went along but the part my botching played in the whole was diminished to such an extent compared to Willow’s flawless execution that it was ultimately negligible in summing up the happiness that I derived from working with her. Though my observations are obviously through the eyes of a novice, even Raz Sisler, the manager of Hunting Hills, had to comment on Willow’s ability, advising LeJay that she had it right and the path to further improvement was simply getting her more birds. As we progressed, I began to hope to make the next shot not merely for my own edification but for that of the dog as well. She had found the bird and it was my fault when

I let her earned prize get away. The connection I felt with her in the field, after only knowing her a little over a month, was something akin to that which I feel for my own dogs, who I have known for years but have never had the advantage of building this variety of relationship with. The connection a master builds with a working dog is something singular and really apart from that which one builds with a lap dog. This must be so if I could feel what I did after just one hunt.

The next time I saw Willow in action, we were not at a preserve with a guide but out in the woods around Bruceton Mills. We had our first flush maybe five minutes after getting out of the car and then walked an hour without seeing another bird. But then as we walked back, in almost the same covert that she had found the first bird, Willow pointed again and another woodcock was flushed. LeJay got a shot off and downed the bird. As we searched with Willow to find the downed bird, we realized that it had fallen into a stream and, more, was not yet dead. Willow dove into the icy waters without a second thought in order to make the retrieve. The trusty setter and the worthy fowl fought in an aquatic battlefield, conditions foreign to both, with the woodcock desperately battling its tattered wings against Willow's clenching maw in an attempt to escape with its life. Willow is not one to give up so easily though and she kept at it, ignoring its incessant striking at her jowls until she vanquished her opponent, retrieving the now still poultry out of the drink, enclosed safely in her sopping chops, and handing it over graciously to her overjoyed master. Both master and setter got what they wanted that day. To be truthful though, the two of them seem to get what they desire every day they're able to spend together; it

only being especially the case when they get to use that time with each other out in the field doing what comes natural to them both.

The next time we visited the same part of the forest, another important lesson that I had read of but not yet experienced was brought home to me; that it truly is not mostly about the kill or even getting a shot off. Although it is certainly an important and exciting part, it is not the only important – or even the most important – aspect of the hunt. Even though there were no flushes this time out, the experience was still one that I would repeat without even the thought of hesitation. It is a walk in the woods in the company of a canine friend with the added excitement of a quest for some feathered treasure, the coordinates of which only your faithful companion has the power to decrypt from the scent-written map of the environment. Even if you come up empty once, not only do you know that the journey was well worth it for the sake of the training, bonding, memories, and sheer enjoyment in the moment which it imparts, but there is also always the promise of tomorrow, when a new trove of plumed gems will be sought and may be found if the right amount of raw and trained talent is mixed with just a little bit of luck.

I'm pleased with my choice to serve at Old Hemlock this year. My work for the Foundation itself is extremely gratifying, but the added perks that working with gun dogs offers makes it an experience for which I am truly indebted to Old Hemlock.



“Without a dog, upland shooting is a poor, drab, lonesome, and generally unsatisfactory business. Much of the joy of shooting is dependent upon the companionship of a favorite dog.”

Dr. Charles Norris Eastern Upland Shooting 1946



Travels with Flicka, Our Journey to Old Hemlock

Glenn Jonsson

Nearing the one year marker for Old Hemlock Flicka, I have to ask myself “what took me so long to have an Old Hemlock setter?”

My fascination with Old Hemlock dogs began when I was a teenager. I would borrow my older brother Eric’s copies of the George Bird Evans books and his issues of the “Pointing Dog Journal”. Inspired by GBE’s descriptions of hunting behind his beloved setters and his life at Old Hemlock, I knew it was only a matter of time before I would follow in this shooting lifestyle. Within months of graduating from college I would have my first setter. I chose to go with setters from nearby Llewellyn stock. These were glorious dogs but I still maintained my fascination with the larger, slower working Old Hemlock setters. Fast forward twenty years and two setters later: we were ready for our first Old Hemlock.

Steve Hitsman’s litter (s.OH Casey, d.OH Sass) was born on February 1, 2014 and I can tell you exactly where my son and I were (leaving a hockey rink) when we got the news that “puppies were on the ground”. Fueled by Steve’s almost daily Facebook updates, the next eight weeks were full of anticipation and excitement. Each night, our family dinner conversation inevitably focusing on the ideal dog name. After many arrangements (and a carefully selected short list of dog names) I was boarding a plane from Portland, Maine to St. Louis for “Puppy Day”.

It was a pleasure to finally meet Steve at “Old Hemlock West”. He was incredibly patient (downright tolerant, actually) of my “hand-wringing” over which female to select. In the end, as is often the case, there was one pup that chose me as much as I chose her. Due to her appearance and demeanor, we decided to name her Old Hemlock Flicka, Swedish for pretty girl. It fit her perfectly.

After an emotional goodbye, Flicka and I boarded a plane and headed back east to her new home. After a long flight, and many oohs and ahhs from strangers at the gate including the pilot, we arrived in Maine. I’m sure all of you who have had young children know this was one introduction that I will never forget. The instant mutual outpouring of affection was overwhelming, and continues to this day.

Over the next several months, Flicka settled in to Maine living. There were lots of pen raised quail for her to work on, boat rides, trips to the lake, and nearly constant doting from my wife, son, and daughter. Through much of the summer it seemed GBE’s motto prevailed: “Good living never spoiled a bird dog”.

Once October rolled around, the training quail were simply not enough for Flicka; it was time for the real McCoy. She made a quick adjustment from yard training to the clear cut coverts of northern Maine. It seemed like each day out her confidence grew, and subsequently her range which I believe to be ideal for these coverts. She handled her woodcock almost immediately and learned quickly to be more cautious on the grouse. I was very happy that her first pointed and killed grouse was during Steve’s visit to Maine. We enjoyed very good woodcock numbers this year and below average grouse populations. Flicka and I were fortunate enough to get out many days this fall. While I’m not a big fan of numbers, I do enjoy tracking points and flushes simply to monitor dog contacts and to better understand the bird populations and cycles. As I write this today with the drifting snow piles outside, the numbers are forgotten but the experiences are not. It was all a series of “firsts” this year for Flicka and that is what made this season so special.

I am continually reminded that we have gotten so much more than a dog. Flicka has become a new family member. In addition, we’ve met so many wonderful like-minded people in the OH community who have helped provide counsel in her development from puppy to dog. Special thanks to Roger Brown, Bob and Kandice Tuttle, and Steve Hitsman.

Opening up a George Bird Evans book is a different experience for me now. I look at the dogs in the photos and I see faces that are almost identical to Flicka. The same expressions. Same eyes. Same poses. The books come to life for me. I am so thankful to George and Kay for developing this truly special strain of gun dog. Joining the Old Hemlock family has been a wonderful experience and I am forever grateful.

“Let there be Birds”



“When you start out with a puppy, you are shaping a life, his and yours, which should be one. Like your gunning, your puppy will be what you make him by your attitude toward him, not as a tool to get birds but a bond between you that is the finest thing a human and a dog can know.”

George Bird Evans A Dog, a Gun, and Time Enough 1987



"It was another eon, a long ago faraway place where sunshine came through dappled. Those days in my gun diary are like the chaff in the corners of my game pocket mixed with peacocked back feathers conjuring old coverts. I lived the dream and the grouse were there, Heaven each time Indian Summer came, Paradise Lost each time it went."

George Bird Evans Grouse on the Mountain 1994

Two Seasons to Remember

Jim Recktenwald

The first Season was for hunting. September thirteenth was the opening day of the season. For the first time in my short life we had an opening day that required more than a short sleeved shirt. It was gray with an October type cold northwest wind. Bill was putting his finishing touches on his new home but agreed to take a break and bring OH Kodiak. Two hunters and three Old Hemlocks, not a bad way to start the hunting season. Patches had the first point of the day forty-five yards away according to the GPS. As I walked up a creek bed I saw her locked up, with Becasse backing her five yards away, but as I approached nothing happened. At three yards six grouse exploded like a cheap party favor: up down, left right, front back, grouse got up and crisscrossed through the air. I stood there watching them scatter. I think I fired the gun once all day and we had a total of twelve productive points from Becasse, Patches McNab, and Kodiak.

The second hunt was opening of the woodcock season on September twentieth. We had a chance to hunt with Aaron Hislop, along with his son Body and OH Sky. Sky was tracking a grouse toward us when it flushed wild. As it disappeared I let a volley go. The grouse was not hit hard, but a wing was damaged and it was running. Becasse refused to hunt dead where I requested and I glad she did. Fifteen minutes later as I started suggesting to Aaron we move along I heard a flutter and growl. Becasse had her prize and McNab was trying to take it away from her. That day with Aaron I learned that McNab would not point local woodcock, and it would be another two weeks before she pointed her first woodcock this year when the flight birds appeared the first weekend in October. McNab will run over local woodcock but point flight birds.

That first weekend in October Barb and I spent three days in Moose Lake. The first day Bill and I hunted the Namadji National Forest. We encountered whiteout conditions in land we didn't know. For the first time we cut our hunt short to avoid being stranded in this wilderness. The next two days were successful, with dozens of productive points on grouse

and woodcock. The most memorable moment for me was seeing McNab track and point a mature grouse with Becasse backing. The bird had a thunderous flush and I yelled out to Bill and Aaron. I thought it flew straight out and then I heard a shot behind me but thought they must have found another bird. It was the same bird and Sky got the retrieve. What better way to end the day with Old Hemlock friends?

November had two very different memories. The first is that during every Minnesota hunt the temperature never got above fifteen degrees. Bill and I were so cold that it was hard to get the guns up to our shoulders but we did find birds. The dogs had a miserable time scenting and most birds got up wild. The second was a little more pleasant as we met OH Casey, OH Covey, and Rick Baylor at the Palmquist Farm in Brentwood, Wisconsin. The Palmquists have some delightful lodges, good home cooked meals, and the hospitality is great. In the morning I would have coffee with Mr. Palmquist's cousin who was in the logging business and knew where he had seen grouse while logging in a twenty square mile area. The topography was flat with an occasional hill, but the land was primarily swamps surrounded by spruce trees. My dogs were taking big swings fifty to ninety yards into the hazelnut trees and finding woodcock and grouse. Without a GPS this would not have been possible. Becasse and McNab took pleasure in making me go through fifty yards of swamp to find them on point for a grouse or a woodcock. Both dogs pointed and backed for each other. However, my weak shooting again resulted in another wing tipped bird. Five minutes passed and then McNab and Becasse pinned down the bird and we had our first grouse. Covey and Casey were perfect gentleman during the hunt and found grouse and woodcock as the days passed. Bringing some rawhide bones and a Mammoth bone helped keep everyone busy when the dogs got together.

I started the hunt with Rick with my restocked 28 gauge, but after it fired on its own twice I had to put the gun away. Eighteen months and it had a hair trigger. Fortunately the

gun was either pointing at the ground or up in the air. I stopped using it. A quick stop at the gunsmith fixed the shearing pin for the first barrel.

The second season started on December twentieth. December is a month of numbers like .5 and .6 that correspond to day 4 and day 8. Patches McNab is in season and we are testing every four days for progesterone. At one pm New Year's day we got the call from Dr. Debbie, our veterinarian. Her first words were "start driving". The progesterone test came back at 5.5 for day 12. Two hours later we were in the car driving to see OH Boswell in Lenoir, North Carolina. We dragged into Tom and Pam's home at 6:15 pm on Friday January second. This will be Patches' first litter and we want to make it a successful one. Steve and Carla Marshall were visiting the Bowmans and he took Becasse for a long walk while Tom and I introduced the dogs. It was a beautiful southern night that was almost sixty degrees warmer than it was in Minnesota. After a five minute romance we had a tie.

We celebrated with two fingers of Woodford Double Oak Reserve. I went to bed dreaming of a litter of tri-colored setters. This morning we took the two dogs outside again in a warm Carolina rain. Boswell made his overtures but Patches would not have anything to do with him. We immediately went to plan B: an A-I would be needed. We had the good fortune of having the services of Dr. Jane Barber, a reproductive expert (Theriogenologist). She had studied under Dr. Peggy Root Kustritz and then taught with her at the University of Minnesota. After an hour drive through the foothills of the mountains we arrived at her world class clinic in Sherrill's Ford, North Carolina. Over the next two hours I learned a lot more about canine reproduction than I ever intended to learn. We will try one more time tomorrow morning, but we will go to bed tonight knowing that we have done everything we could do to have a litter.



(VMS)

A LOVELY DOUBLE.

Another Dimension

LeJay Graffious

George's thoughts about hunting have affected so many hunters' attitudes. The mission of the Foundation is to share his legacy. As point man at Old Hemlock, I feel my goal is to promote his philosophy of "valuing the experience". Accompanying my maturation, my reading and my reflections on George's work take on deeper meaning. With our first Old Hemlock setter, Black Willow, now six years old, all the joy and pain of owning a setter has shifted through stages as George so eloquently penned. We have passed from the lowest cognitive levels of knowledge through the stages of comprehensive, application, analysis and evaluation into the affective domain of reacting emotionally to the joys and pains of other living things. Social media has intensified this for me. I see so many friends and acquaintances sharing hunting adventures of their dual setters on point, with the follow through of well-made productive shots. Those highs are then balanced by the emotional lows of their canine hunting companions' season being cut short. I am more aware than ever of my time living with an Old Hemlock setter. Before Willow I knew George's words, now I feel them in my chest.

My season started with a gift from friends to spend the day with experienced bird dog trainer Raz Sisler at Hunting Hills as a dog handling tune-up for me. With Willow being my first full time setter, I am an inexperienced trainer and I value hands-on input. I have made a lot of mistakes by listening to too many folks, thus confusing Willow with my lack of focus. After a day with Raz watching Willow and me work pheasants, his only advice was "get her into more birds." So I made the commitment to be in the field more this season. After more than thirty hunting days varying from one to six hours in the field, in my opinion, Willow is in her prime. We found birds on all outings except two which had terrible weather. On those days the birds had more sense than I did. We hunted more as a team this season. I eased my role as her controlling master and she behaved less like an independent dog who my wife described as a "woman at a bargain sale." The season was so much more gratifying.

The season was also rewarding beyond the birds and our new team dynamic because I shared many days in the field with friends. I look forward to sharing our annual first day of grouse season hunt with Steve Marshall and Carmel, and as many other days as possible during the season. Hunting the Blackwater/Canaan/Dolly Sods coverts with Jeff and Gabby Leach has become an annual happening. I enjoy a great sense of fulfillment watching Willow and Amwell work the same environs that George's Old Hemlock setters hunted. These high West Virginia mountain hunts were even more special this year with Old Hemlock family members Tom and Pam Bowman and Bob and Kandice Tuttle in the valley at the same time.

While hunting in Canaan Valley this season, I had an encounter that brought George's quote from The Upland Shooting Life into reality. He wrote, "If I could shoot a game bird and still not hurt it, the way I can take a trout on a fly and release it, I doubt if I would kill another one." On this occasion, Willow and I were hunting west of Cortland Road. Her bell went silent and I moved toward her location. She was under a dense, low-limbed hawthorn which oddly had not been browsed high by the whitetails. Her chest was low to the ground in a crouched position. From her staunchness and intensity I could tell the bird was very near. I positioned myself about eight yards away with open lanes both right and left. Then, within inches of Willow's nose, a woodcock flushed nearly vertically and bounced off a branch back into the grass. At this point Willow could not take the action any longer, broke her point, and lunged at the panicked winged creature. In haste to escape, the 'cock flushed directly at my mounted Beretta. At this point everything seemed to be in slow motion. At mid-distance the timberdoodle was not veering from its path. George's words flashed through me; I dropped my right hand from the gun's grip and reached for the bird. I only succeeded in batting a wing, causing her to do a barrel roll with a 135 degree turn to a straight away escape flight into the right opening. Remounted, I pulled a bead on her. But after the personal encounter of looking into her eyes, I lowered my 12 gauge to savor the experience, longing to make George's words a reality.

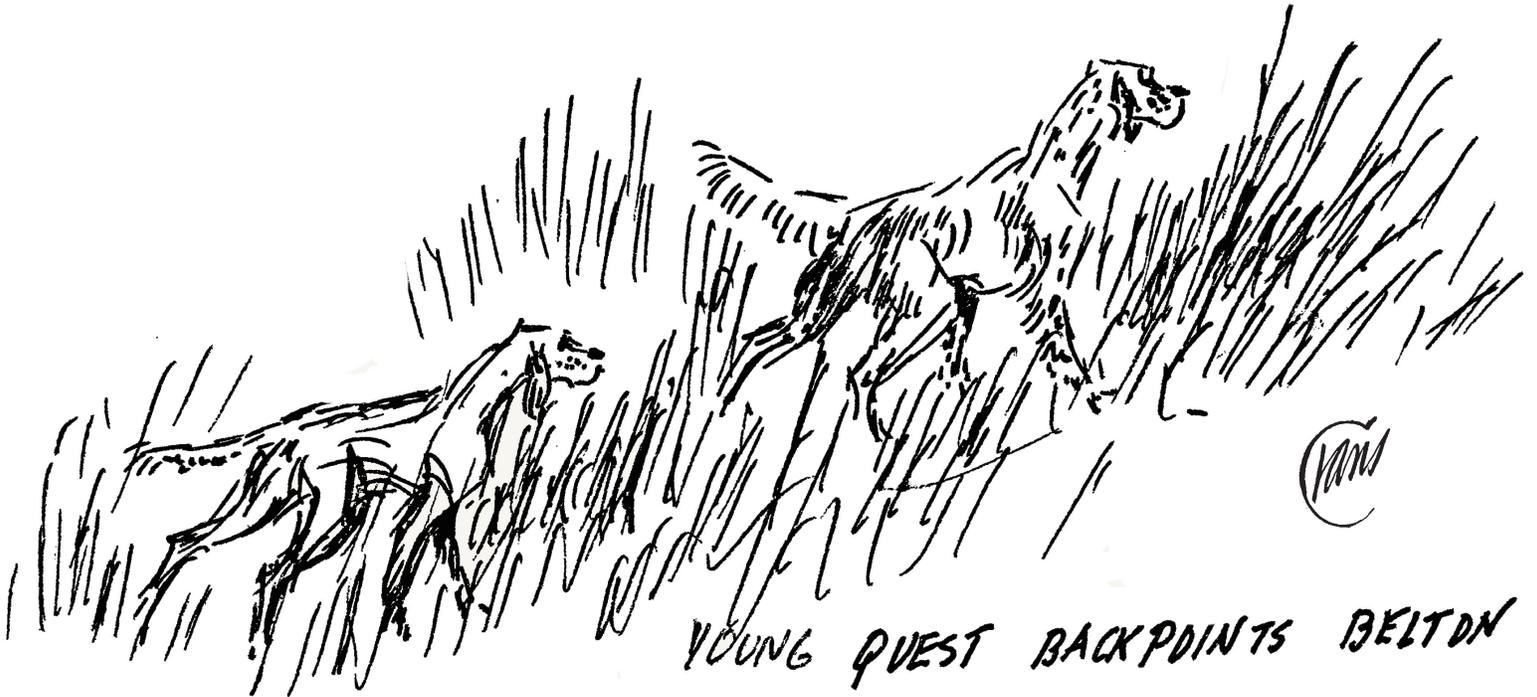
This encounter brought to mind a 2013 Reunion experience at Hunting Hills with Cody Joseph as the guide. We were hunting Field A and making the transition to the upper fields. As we entered the clearing, Willow flushed a chukar which flew to our left and took cover in weeds near the wood line. I called Willow back then released her to follow the bird. The gallery followed with Cody in the lead. The already nervous chukar flushed at Willow's approach directly at the guide. Cody's high school tight-end experience kicked in. He leaned out to his right with two hands extended, pulled the bird out of flight, and tucked it like a protected football. I asked him if it felt strong. Cody replied, "It's kicking the hell out of me." The chukar was repositioned in the switch grass and did not receive the sympathy of the wild bird.

I savor every experience in the field with Willow whether birds are bagged or not. Hunting over genes aligned by George's design has allowed me to internalize the feelings George was so able to articulate. Perhaps my maturation is reflected in my satisfaction with the experience of Willow's intense point with the woodcock flying free to migrate.



"The sorcery of woodcock – dropping almost out of nowhere into remote coverts, bringing them alive for a few days, then vanishing – working their spell each autumn in places many times unseen by men, is a wonder I can never take for granted."

George Bird Evans Men Who Shot 1983



News from Old Hemlock

LeJay Graffious

December 26, 2014 at 7:53 a.m. was the climax moment when I received the official email announcing Old Hemlock was on the National Register of Historic Places. This was the culmination of a year's work to organize, write, and rewrite the application. What stands out to me was that we did not qualify on the uniqueness of a house built in 1782! The house and property will only serve to honor the contributions made to American society by George Bird Evans and Kay Evans between 1939 and 1972. These dates were chosen because they are benchmarks of their life line. The log house was purchased at a sheriff's sale in 1939 and brought back from its doom of neglect. The period from then to the publication of *The Upland Shooting Life* in 1971 and its national acceptance in 1972 encompasses a multitude of accomplishments. Over this time they designed a line of setters, published five novels, gained national attention in periodicals, and cemented a philosophy of hunting to value the experience over quantity.

This achievement was accomplished through the expertise of many. I am so fortunate to be able to share the Evans' story and gain the support of so many. The process saw the light of day when Danielle LaPresta, Director of the Preservation Alliance of West Virginia, made possible that non-profits like Old Hemlock would qualify for AmeriCorps members. Then Public History professor Dr. Melissa Bingman guided me toward one of her master's level students, Eliza Newland. Eliza had the interest and ability to coordinate and write the detailed application. She networked with Erin Riebe of the West Virginia State Historic Preservation Office. In fact, Ms. Riebe was so impressed with Eliza's work that Eliza was asked to present her work at the state conference. Ms. Riebe fine-tuned the application for the state committee which accepted it in September and submitted it for national acceptance. I want to thank the Foundation Directors and many others who gave their support for the process, especially those of the Old Hemlock Family who submitted letters of support.

I know I have been reporting on the upcoming availability of a movie featuring the Old Hemlock Setters. This has certainly been a learning process for me to coordinate from inception to script writing to collecting historical film and photos to finding a local production company to video tape and edit. We are still in the editing process and I am backing off on predicting a release date. To me, getting the best film we can is more important than the release date. Initially, we tried to compact the history, current status and future of the setter into fifteen minutes. Now we hope to do it within thirty minutes. I want to give kudos to Craig Kulchak for his

willingness to volunteer his experience and expertise in all levels of this project.

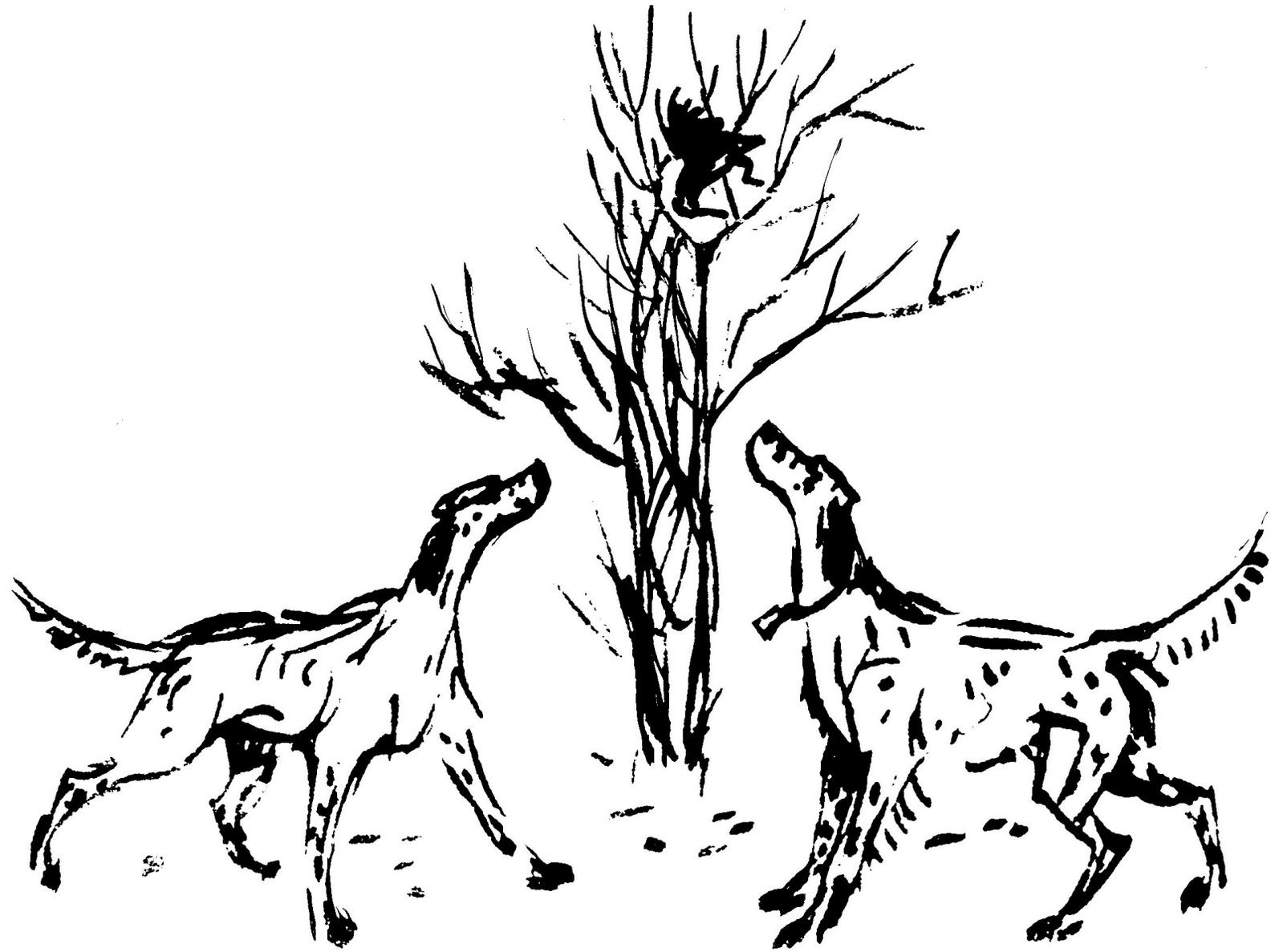
We continue to attract visitors to the property and on the Internet. More than 400 folks came to Old Hemlock this past year. I continue to meet new readers of George and love sharing the story with those who are just learning about his life. His writing is still being reprinted and shared in national magazines. We operate Old Hemlock as a "study house" so I enjoy working with college students who augment their classroom work with authentic experiences inspired by the Old Hemlock story. This past semester three groups of West Virginia University students did projects here. Five wildlife students planned a summer children's program to be held at Old Hemlock. Two senior communications majors created a portfolio of public relations materials. The most interesting to me was nine graduate level students in Public History who each selected an object inside the log house and wrote a fifteen page research paper on the item.

I also continue to do activities with local school students such as leading walks on the property, storytelling with puppets to the young students, and assisting students with projects that meet the mission of the Foundation. I also often have high school and college students do their community service hours here. I appreciate getting young people's feedback on how we can promote the legacy of George and Kay to others of their own generation.

We are looking forward to the coming year and cannot overemphasize how important the members of the Old Hemlock Family are to the Foundation's mission. I want to thank those who respond when I make a request for assistance. One Old Hemlock family member who shared her talents, time and energy with us is Toni McGranaghan who laid out and produced the Old Hemlock Setter calendar. She said they sold like "gang busters" this year. I know all who have one are enjoying it. I am looking forward to seeing you all in March at the Reunion.

In closing, we mourn the loss of any of our Old Hemlock family or their setters. Each will have a place in our hearts and thoughts. And with equal intensity, we celebrate new life and the placement of each new Old Hemlock puppy. As always, we have an open door at Old Hemlock for our setter family.





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"I think there are few sights more lovely than dusking woodcock in a sorrowing sunset sky."

George Bird Evans Grouse and Woodcock in the Blackwater/Canaan 1997

Editor's Note

Once again we are in that limbo that is an upland gunner's late winter. Despair not, the Old Hemlock Reunion is at hand, that wonderful and timely bridge from the old season to the new. Somehow it helps to cement the memories and shorten the way a little to our shared October future. Just watching that large group of joyful setters carving up Hunting Hills is reward enough.

There have been tough losses in the year past. The untimely death of Jim Nichols in September was a rude shock to all of us, a reminder that all this is both precious and temporary.

"It is easy to be hypnotized into thinking it will last, and then the leaves of the North Porch Maple suddenly turn gypsy and are gone."

George Bird Evans A Dog, a Gun, and Time Enough 1987

OH Katie (5/02) – George Dobson

OH Forest (12/03) – Cathy Harper

OH Blue Autumn (8/06) – Steve Hitsman

DeCoverly Blue (1/02) – Bill and Robin James

OH Zephyr (10/02) – Bob Rose

Like that fabled North Porch Maple, the Old Hemlock Family tree endures its Winter, always awaiting the rising sap of Spring and the life forces of renewal.

The Old Hemlock Letter continues to benefit from and be defined by the support of its contributing writers, and we all owe you a debt of thanks. In this age of social media, the relevance of the Letter is found less in sharing news, a job usually already done by the time we could get to it, than in casting a wider net and trawling deeper. I think the continuing improvement in quality of both subject matter and writing demonstrates that, and hope you agree. Either way, why not participate? Sure, writing an essay for the Letter involves a little work, but is not difficult if you have something to say – and you do. C'mon in, the water is fine.

Bruce



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