

THE OLD HOME

The old home is empty now. Cobwebs hang here and there and dust gathers on the mantle. Time was when the home held life, where people came and told a tale and laughter and talk continued on into the night.

The pictures on the walls reveal a family of long ago, and the scrapbook longs for the touch of a hand. Thumbing through it, one can hear the report of a shotgun or a duck-call sound, even though there is no one there. The imaginary sounds that fill the rooms are but memories; they will echo through the years. No one can silence them; they are there for everyone to hear.

To this old home, first came Lynn. He was not sure he wanted to share his world with a playmate, for it took him a week to decide if he wanted a brother or a sister after his mother asked him which he wanted. After much deliberation, at the tender age of 2 1/2, he told her, "I want a brother." Then came Jerry, three months later.

Three years passed, and while Lynn, no taller than his Daisy Red Ryder BB gun, worked the lever, Jerry grasped the muzzle with all his might, holding the stock firmly against the ground. It was all they could do just to cock the "dad-blamed thing," and another blackbird fell.

Month after month, through the years, every afternoon, from 4 p.m. until dark, they shot a bucket full of BBs, littering the yard with blackbirds and sparrows. They weren't wasted, for the cats took their share and the locals took theirs, making blackbird pies.

While Jerry continued shooting with the Red Ryder, Lynn, now 7, progressed to clay targets, shooting a .410-gauge, Winchester Model 42 pump gun. A year later, Lynn and Jerry, along with their Mom and Dad, loaded into their Winchester-red, Pontiac station wagon, with two humongous Western shells attached to the top, and headed north. Not only were these shells advertisement for Winchester-Western, but they also served as speakers for his Public Address equipment during exhibitions.

While Lynn sat in the audience at Greenville, Ohio — home of Annie Oakley, his Dad introduced him, who was sitting in the stands with several hundred Boy Scouts. Herb paused in the middle of the show to say, "Friends, I want to introduce a boy to you. He's just an ordinary American boy. I say that because it's the truth. But that's not the way I feel about it. I feel he's an extraordinary boy because — because he's my boy."

The pause between the first because and the second because was beautifully timed, and the last words came over with deep feeling enhanced by a Tennessee accent.

Herb used several devices in teaching his boys to shoot. He painted a croquet ball white for a target. He rolled this hard across the ground. When the boys shot, they could see where their shot charges hit the ground and thus learned how much ahead of the ball they must shoot. Another lesson was with clay targets thrown low over a pond. Here again the

boys could see where the shot charges went when it didn't break the target. It was only when the boys had learned to lead a moving target that Parsons began throwing clay targets up in the air.

So summer after summer, the boys and Oneita, their mother, traveled with their father, one year traveling west of the Mississippi and the next east of the Mississippi. Oftentimes, a highway patrolman pulled them over, curious about the large shells on top of their vehicle. They couldn't travel down the highway without some highway patrolman pulling them over, just to chat.

On the way to an exhibition, Parsons would stop at a supermarket where he collected what he called his "groceries." He bought oranges, grapefruit, potatoes, cabbages, turnips, and several dozen eggs.

When Jerry was eight, he joined Lynn for the first time in Cheyenne, Wyoming. There he shot a newly released, semi-automatic, 20-gauge Model 50, breaking target after target. When Lynn was a teenager, his Dad surprised him during an exhibition at the L.A. Coliseum by loading six shells into his Model 12, 20 gauge. Six targets were thrown into the air and all six splattered. A thunderous applause followed.

Herb Parson was born on a farm in Fayette County, Tennessee, in 1908. After six summers, ready to start school, he was given his first gun, a single shot, Winchester .22 rifle. He took it and slew himself a bobwhite on the wing. Then he progressed to the local coal yard, where he regularly turned hand-thrown lumps into black dust. His first limit of quail came at the age of 11.

While his friends were spending their money chasing girls, Herb tucked his coins away for ammunition. When hunting season was in progress, he stayed in the fields and forests until way past dark.

Every kid wonders what his fate in life will be. His was sealed when as a freshman in high school Herb witnessed a demonstration by Adolph Topperwein, Winchester's great exhibition shooter.

Topperwein was just one of the many exhibition shooters in the olden days. Traveling all over the nation performing exhibitions, establishing reputations as professional marksmen, and serving as goodwill ambassadors for the companies they represented, these men became legends in their own time.

In the 1870s, Adams Bogardus, an Illinois market hunter, set the pace by bursting glass balls out of the air. On July 4, 1877, in 75 minutes, he fired 1,000 times and missed only 27. Two months later, he tried another thousand; this time, 17 escaped his pellets. Before the year was up, he ran through a third thousand, shattering 990. And the race was on. In less than a decade, exhibition shooters were everywhere.

When the razzle-dazzle of Wild West shows ended, arms and ammunition companies got into the act. They put dozens of top-notch shooters on the road. Winchester hired Topperwein and his wife "Plinky." Remington employed Billy Hill, while Peters hired Dave Flannigan.

Nevertheless, it was Parsons who rose above them all in celebrity status. He possessed a flair for the spectacular, a gift of gab, and he also knew how to put birds on the ground.

Parson's opportunity came in the early 1930s, when Topperwein's failing vision caused him to look for a successor. Parsons was a natural, and spent a great deal of time with the master, perfecting his own routine. Like Topperwein, Parsons was a stickler for realism. He was an exhibition shooter, not a "trick" shot who performed staged or rigged acts. In addition, he knew the more pizzazz a shooting show had, the more a crowd would love it.

In the 1940s, Parsons gave 238 exhibitions to soldiers at military installations. He served as a shooting instructor teaching aerial gunnery to flight crews during the war. Moreover, when hostilities ceased, he returned to the exhibition circuit for Winchester, putting on thousands of exhibitions, touring every state in the nation plus Cuba and Canada. In his performances, he used 16 guns in 52 different ways.

His admirers, and their number was legion, claimed he easily outdid all the feats of Bogardus, Carver, Annie Oakley, Buffalo Bill Cody, Wild West Pawnee Bill, and the other famous shooters, not only owing to his brilliant gun pointing but because he was truly a showman-shooter.

He would toss seven clay targets into the air at once and shatter every one of them before any hit the ground. He remarked, "The hard part is not the shooting but the tossing of the seven targets so they spread well apart." He fretted every time he broke two with one shot and felt as though he cheated the audience.

He would suspend a can of gasoline over a candle inside a 55-gallon barrel, then render the whole works to a towering inferno from a safe distance. Using a mirror and two rifles, he would break two targets at the same instant - one in front, the other directly behind him. He could take five eggs in his hand, lay his gun on the ground, then throw the eggs behind him, rise, and shoot all five eggs.

Throwing a washer into the air, he said he would hit it so it would go to the right. It did. Then he said the next one would go to the left. It did. The only trick was to shoot at one side of the washer - on the left to make it go to the right, on the right to make it go to the left.

During his shows, he went quail hunting with "radar" ammunition - so he said. "The advantage of radar ammunition was that you can't miss. Radar directs the gun to the target."

Parsons walked along throwing eggs and shooting from the hip. He seemed infallible but finally ó on purpose ó he missed one. He said, "That was a hen quail ó the radar only works on rooster quail."

With that he threw another egg and smashed it. "You see," he said, "that was a rooster quail."

As a grand finale, Parsons would explode a jug of gasoline with the last shot of the show.

Parsons became friends with stars of the era. He shot trap with Clark Gable and Roy Rogers, hunted ducks with Wallace Berry and Andy Devine, and did the trick shooting for "Winchester 73," starring Jimmy Stewart.

Olin Mathieson, of the Winchester Arms Company, could not anywhere near fill the requests for his appearance. Young and old, novice gunner and veteran alike, all enjoyed a Herb Parsons performance. At the height of his career, Winchester was booking him three years in advance, paying him \$1,000 a month.

Herb performed before more people than any exhibition shooter in history. He starred in a color film, "Showman Shooter," which was seen by over 30,000,000.

Nevertheless, no matter how high his star rose, he never forgot his roots. When asked where he was from, whether he was on 5th Avenue of New York City or hunting bears in Alaska, he would grin and reply, "I'm from Somerville, Tennessee, half way between Warren and Laconia."

He was a regular attraction at the World's Championship Duck Calling Contest during the early 1950s. He won it in 1950 and 1951, adding the International Duck Calling crown at Crowley, Louisiana, in 1949 and 1950. Herb was later a judge of these contests. He also held shooting exhibitions at the Stuttgart High School football field for Winchester during the World Duck Calling Championships.

During one of the championships at Stuttgart, the family stayed on the third floor of the Riceland Hotel, as they usually did. Jerry, Lynn, and one of their friends, Marion McCollum of Stuttgart, got a little mischievous. Jerry had gotten in the good graces of the elevator operator and he let Jerry operate it. One night, they decided they would throw some fireworks out the window and then quickly head down the elevator for the first floor. As soon as Jerry opened the door, Herb and Oneita greeted them. Herb replied, "Let's hear your story."

Jerry, stammering with each word, went first and took the blame for opening the window, turning off the lights, unwrapping the paper on the firecrackers, and operating the elevator. Marion, squirming, admitted to throwing the firecrackers. After all this guilt was expressed, Lynn thought he was home free, so he puffed up his chest and blurted out, "I just lit them."

Not all his shooting was done for display, either. He was also quite competitive on the trap range. In 1954, he won the professional division at the Grand American trap shoot, and from 1949 through 1958, he was a member of Sports Afield's trap and skeet All-American team. He shot a Winchester Model 21 double-barrel, while most trap shooters of the time were using single-barrel guns or over-and-unders. When asked if he found the side-by-side a disadvantage, he always answered, "No sir."

He was inducted posthumously into the Trapshooting Hall of Fame at Vandalia, Ohio, and is an enshrinee of the Tennessee Sports Hall of Fame and the Tennessee State Trapshooting Association Hall of Fame.

Herb loved to hunt; it came naturally. His trophies included near-record Alaskan brown and black bears, moose, antelope, and many white-tailed and mule deer. Nonetheless, quail and waterfowl were his true loves. When hunting with Jerry and Lynn at their farm near Somerville, they hunted on horses with five ranging pointers. It was the boys' responsibility to flush the birds, once the dogs had pointed and backed, while Herb remained in the saddle and did his shooting. Oftentimes, three birds were dropped from a covey rise. The boys also dropped a few.

Moreover, his skills doubled in the duck blind. A paddler once remarked, "Ah never seen a man who could shoot like dat. Dat man was a machine. He never missed. After de hunt, he'd start throwin' things in de air. Little balls and eggs and stuff lak dat. He would toss up a cabbage, den he would look over his shoulder and ask how you wanted your slaw chopped. Fore it hit de ground, he'd grind it to bits."

However, every once in a while he could miss. The day after he won the World's Duck Calling Championship in 1951, he went duck hunting with Captain Charles Hopkins, the headman from Winchester. Hopson had the champion caller and champion shooter with him. How could he fail?

There was a stiff north wind, and the ducks were hedge-hopping down through the snags. Parsons shot a box of shells, killing just two ducks. He was good but he could miss.

It was Hopkins that hired Parsons, and he often said, "And this Tennessee boy is not only the best shot of them all, but he has real talent as a showman, a sense of timing with his lines as well as with his guns."

Because of his friendship with Reuben Scott of Grand Junction, Tennessee, secretary of the National Field Trial Champion Association, Herb gave several exhibition at the Ames Plantation, and there was no doubt that the dazzling display of his skill was one of the highlights of the respective meet.

Herb during the course of his career had three 12-gauge, Winchester Model 12s, which Winchester nickel plated for him; otherwise they were just like any other Model 12, not altered in any way. As each had bird-eye maple wood, he called them "Mae West," because they were "blonde and have such beautiful features about the forearm."

The original Mae West is on exhibit at Cody Firearms Museum, Cody, Wyoming. His Model 21, 12-gauge trap gun, is at Ducks Unlimited Headquarters, Memphis.

Some of Herb's happiest moments were when he had a large group of admiring youths sitting around the shooting circle. Watching his feats with a gun with wishful hope they could do the same, he would turn to the youth and tell them how important it was to get a good education and to be an expert in whatever they did. He told them to try hard to get to the top of the class, to be a good citizen and a leader in their school, work, or play. He told them the reason he could shoot the way he did was that he never used alcohol or tobacco.

And Herb didn't let a chance go by without taking a gig at his competition to his young audience. He would say, "Now you boys and girls wouldn't eat an apple before it was red and ripe. So never use those green Remington shotgun shells. Let 'em ripen . . . SHOOT WINCHESTER. Know your guns and know your ammunition."

Time came when Herb weakened, and fell at the age of 51. His mate, who helped him carry the banner high, was left to carry forth, but Oneita too had an appointment with our Maker, as we all do.

Through his feats of marksmanship, he achieved immortality, but most remember him for his gentle nature, his spontaneous humor, his simple farm boy character, for his love of people, and for the love of his family.

When he left his boys during the school year, he always expressed his hopes for them, their education and place in life. His concerns for his wife, parents, and sons were ever foremost in his mind. He always returned home and told his boys how much he missed them, and he was never any more contented than when he was sitting in his easy chair in the den with a roaring fire on the hearth, surrounded by his family, a few friends, and his many trophies and mementos.

At the end, just after his operation, the last words spoken to his boys, while still in the hospital, were, "I've had this operation so I can be well and we can hunt together again."

To me, he is best remembered as the man who coined the phrase, "Go hunting with your boy today and you won't have to hunt for him tomorrow," and he practiced what he preached with sons Lynn and Jerry.

Many tributes were paid the showman shooter, but none more so that the one paid to him by an old Negro, Uncle George, who had known him all his life and had worked for him for many years. Through tears streaming down his face, he said in a choked voice, "Mr. Herbert's gone; he was the best friend I ever had."

A good friend lamented, "So long as hunters thrill at the point of a well-trained bird dog, or sit in a cold wet duck blind, or gather around a camp fire, so long will the feats and life of Herbert be remembered. So long as these majestic trees shall drop their leaves each fall

to bud again in the spring, so long will we all remember that broad grin and ready wit. To all of us who knew and loved Herbert may his memory ever linger in our lives and may we ever recall that our lives are richer because we knew him.ö

Nash Buckingham celebrated his death by saying:

Although Herb's span of life was not great, it was a full and happy life, a useful existence unmarred by petty thought or deed, the life of one of God's noble men, who walked close to his Maker throughout his lifelong contact with God's creation, and his love for his fellowman; a man who appreciated fully, and made use of, the abundant blessings of nature; a rugged man of steadfast heart, who, although he excelled in many fields and achieved the highest pinnacle of success, remained a man of modest nature; who, though acclaimed throughout the world, and who knew and enjoyed the close association and friendship of celebrities, never lost the common touch,ö which impelled him to seek opportunities to promote the sport he loved, and to teach and counsel not only his own beloved sons, Jerry and Lynn, but all boys, in wholesome recreation and an appreciation of the better things of life; the rugged sportsman, who retained the strain of gentleness in his nature, which made him beloved of young and old alike, in all walks of life. The understanding humanitarian, who recognized the needs of others, and traveled to the four corners of the earth to exhibit his talents to the members of our Armed Services, with no thought of reward, except the pleasure of his contribution to the happiness of his fellowman; a man whose daily life bore witness to the practice of his religion and his innate faith in God, and whose greatness lay not in his fame, which was worldwide, and in his splendid accomplishments, but in the simplicity of his nature. Although Herbert Parsons achieved an enviable mark in the world of entertainment, and a record in sports which may never again be equaled by any individual, his fame can never overshadow the staunch goodness of his character, and the simple, down-to-earth qualities of this great soul, who lived his life, close to nature, and whose symbol of mortality now rests in the bosom of the good earth he loved.

That Herb Parsons, faithful husband and father, and our friend and companion on many happy occasions, the man who sought not fame but perfection in his undertakings, has gone to the reward to which his way of life entitled him. Rest in the assurance that his freed spirit travels that happy, untrammled realm, where the terrain is level, the air is crystal-clear, and the birds are ever on the wing.

Time cannot erase, nor even dull, the imprint of the good life of our absent friend upon the entire community. His sojourn among us was a never-to-be forgotten blessing, and his memory indeed öa thing of beauty and a joy forever.ö

Wherever Herb is in heaven, I know he is surrounded by angels sitting around the shooting circle watching and listening. He left something of value on this earth and the world is a better place for his having been here.

As I close the door of the old home, the voices are still, and those who gave us the memories are gone, replaced by a younger generation who dances to the beat of another drummer. Now it's their turn to make their mark in life.

As years pass by, I will cherish the memories the old home gave me, for they will linger on, never to die.

I only wish that time stood still.

POSSIBLE SIDEBAR

Parson's house leaves the visitor with no doubt of what he liked. As you go in you face eight or ten mallard ducks flying from the ceiling. There is a pair of Winchester 73 rifles, nickel-plated, over the fireplace. Another, a rusted relic, is embedded in the stonework of the fireplace. One of the rugs is the skin of an oversized Kodiak bear that Parsons shot in Alaska. And all about are mementos of a busy life.

In his bathroom, the commode tank's lid is emblazoned in Winchester red, "Stand close. That ain't no Winchester." (Published in DOUBLE GUN JOURNAL)