

MY GBE COLLECTION

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(Editor's Note: This is the text of David Hall's presentation at the Celebration of the GBE Collection being added to the WVU History Archives in Morgantown on June 20, 2008.)

I came to bird hunting as an adult. My dad was an occasional small-game hunter with rabbits, squirrels and doves the usual quarry. In my early teens his attention turned toward deer. But throughout my childhood and youth, Dad always subscribed to all or some of the "big three" magazines: *Field & Stream*, *Sports Afield* and *Outdoor Life*. It is quite beyond the boundaries of irony or even Providence to say I discovered one of George's early articles as a youth and became prematurely enthralled. What I do remember, though, from those years — beyond anything tangible with my dad or anyone else I knew — was my fascination with any illustration of a double-barrel shotgun or a setter. The ultimate was when both were presented along with a man dressed in high boots with pants tucked in, a field coat and a shirt and tie, much like the photo in Cathy's biography of "George and Grouse" dated November 9, 1939.

My bird hunting started when I moved to Pennsylvania as a young pastor in 1980. An older man in my congregation (about ten years younger than George), who became a dear friend, introduced me to pheasant hunting. He had a Brittany and I got an immediate taste of "real" bird hunting. Those images planted in my boyhood mind blossomed into reality. I was hooked.

I had always been an avid reader. I'm not sure when I realized there could be a delightful connection between the sedate pleasure of reading and my growing activity as a hunter, but at some point in the early-mid 80s — around the time that I began hunting grouse — I discovered a magazine called *Gun Dog*. I subscribed immediately but was disappointed to learn that, as a new reader in 1984, it was just a few years old and I had missed out as a charter member of the club. One thing that fueled the disappointment was my soon realization that a writer by the name of George Bird Evans was a regular contributor. As I would devour the ensuing pieces written by George, I felt a keen loss in the awareness that I surely had missed many earlier works.

It didn't take long for me to notice the advertisements of forthcoming books from George with the logo of *Old Hemlock*. I think the next one at the time was the limited edition of *Troubles With Bird Dogs*. A friend, knowing my desire, ordered it for me as a present, but there was some kind of mix-up and I received a very caring letter from Kay apologizing and offering several options to give me satisfaction. One was the assignment of a low number she had been saving for the limited editions. That began an intermittent correspondence with Kay in my initial quest for George's writings.

I very quickly acquired the reprint, dust-jacket copy of *An Affair With Grouse*. The effect of this book on me went beyond anything I'd ever read in the genre of "hunting literature." I'm not sure the *aura* can be described, although I am sure most of you have experienced it.

In 1986 my pastoral work involved a move from Pennsylvania to Kansas. Feeling as if I were moving almost off the edge of the earth (I was an East Coast person) and having read where Kay said they enjoyed meeting George's readers (I think it was in Dave Meisner's *Gun Dog* article, "A Visit to Old Hemlock," which only whetted one's appetite for the real thing), I wrote and asked if I might presume to visit. Kay's response was again gracious and quite inviting, so in June 1986, shortly before moving much further from Old Hemlock, I made the 3+ hour drive and had my first experience of Old Hemlock hospitality.

I left from that visit with three more of George's books, one of them an OP treasure that Kay had saved back. Not only was my interest now piqued to acquire all of George's writing that I could, I followed my visit with ongoing correspondence with Kay. She recommended resources where I might find other OP works at reasonable prices. George would "re-inscribe" them to me.

During my three years in Kansas I both wrote and called the Evans regularly. Several times during those years on visits back to Pennsylvania I would stop for some time with George and Kay at Old Hemlock. [One other glorious result of this was OH Sonnet's arrival in our family during our last year in Kansas, and on our move back to Pennsylvania Sonnet and I spent a night at Old Hemlock while my wife and children stayed with her sister in Ohio.]

Early in my acquisition stage I had noticed, in the opening pages of *The Upland Shooting Life*, acknowledgment of some of the material in earlier periodicals. I found a dealer who carried old copies of *Field & Stream* and *Sports Afield* and was able to order for a pittance the ones in which George had articles. A hunting club I am connected with had stacks of old *Pennsylvania Game News* and I found that many contained GBE contributions. I was told to take whatever interested me. I wrote to the PA Game Commission and inquired about other issues I did not have and was able to add several to the diminishing gap. Lacking only a few for a whole set, on one of my OH visits I asked Kay where I might be able to find the final issues. Taking my notes, she went upstairs and returned with every one I needed. These are the ones that have George and Kay's address on the mailing label.

It was during these years, too, that George quit writing for *Gun Dog* and only submitted intermittent articles to other various publications. One of them was *Sporting Classics*, and George told me of introductions he was writing for limited edition books by their publisher. Having been given the heads up, I subscribed to the series so I could acquire the otherwise hard-to-get works. It was also during these years that *Shooting Sportsman* debuted under the editorial guidance of David Wonderlich. It was a wonderful magazine and I wrote both George and Wonderlich urging them to get together for George to write articles. It happened, and George had good years there until others took over and both the appearance and editorial policy changed. George would not write for editors who reserved the right to change his work; he had his own standard of perfection and would not lower himself to another's.

By the time George began writing for *Pointing Dog Journal* his work was exclusive to either that particular magazine or his books. Two of my delights at this stage was being mentioned as “Sonnet’s man” in one of the articles that described a hunting trip I had with George and Kay in upstate PA, and having a poem I wrote honoring Quest — actually a sonnet as an implicit honor to her as well — as the preface to one of the chapters in *Living With Gun Dogs*.

There is no way to separate the quality of George’s writings from the quality that was the essence of the man, or to be more exact, the essence of who George and Kay were together. If all hunters left a legacy like GBE they would be some of the most esteemed people on earth. That is why I had the motivation to pursue such a collection, and the fact that I was able to encompass what I did was because of George and Kay’s gracious help. I certainly take satisfaction in knowing that what they helped me to build over those years now returns to them in a very real way so their legacy is extended in this esteemed environment.