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West Virginia & Regional History Center

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West Virginia and Regional History Collection

NEWSLETTER

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A Dog, a Gun and Time Enough The George Bird Evans Collection

“A dog, a gun and time enough.” These were among the things that George Bird Evans treasured most. One of the world’s foremost authorities on upland bird shooting and fine bird dogs, Evans had the good fortune of enjoying an abundance of all three during his ninety-one years. In addition to experiencing and meticulously recording the results of more than sixty-five hunting seasons, spent primarily in West Virginia’s Allegheny Mountains, Evans found time to author more than two dozen books and countless magazine articles about the sport that was both his vocation and avocation. He also bred a line of English setters whose descendants are treasured today by bird dog enthusiasts throughout America.

Evans’s life was in many ways a charmed one. Born in Uniontown, Pennsylvania in 1906, he was raised by parents who were cultivated, loving and highly supportive of their precocious and multi-talented son. His father, a tailor by trade, preceded him in his love for dogs and fine guns both of which figured prominently in many of Evans’s earliest memories. An only child, he found his first playmate in his father’s English setter, Ted. In Ted’s company,



George Bird Evans poses with Blue and Dawn, ca. 1940.

and in that of Ted’s several successors, young George spent much of his youth roaming the Chestnut Ridge hills east of his hometown, exploring, fishing and eventually hunting.

Bright and inquisitive, Evans also shared a love of learning, literature and the arts with his father. An excellent student, he skipped a grade in elementary school and was, thus, only seventeen when he left home to attend Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh in 1924. Intent on pursuing a career in art,

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he earned his keep while at college playing saxophone in a dance band.

It was at a band engagement that George first laid eyes on fellow Carnegie freshman Kay Harris of Wheeling. The two enjoyed a casual friendship during the year that would have ended when the aspiring artist decided to transfer to the Art Institute of Chicago the next fall had fate not intervened. On his journey from Uniontown to Chicago in August 1925, George thought of "the girl from Wheeling" as he approached the latter city on U.S. Route 40 in his father's convertible. As he pondered, an open roadster approached carrying none other than that very girl! Waving enthusiastically to each other, their chance passing led to a lengthy correspondence, courtship and ultimately to marriage several years later.

After two years study at the Chicago Art Institute, George decided that he was ready to break into the field of illustration in 1927. Moving to the nation's publishing capitol, New York City, he found work with a variety of publications including *McCall's Magazine*. He spent the next eleven years working on a freelance basis for these and other clients before landing an exclusive contract to illustrate mystery and detective stories for



Young George and his first playmate, Ted, 1906.

Cosmopolitan in 1938. The job paid well, well enough, in fact, for George to begin contemplating a very early retirement while still in his mid-thirties.



Evans contributed more than 100 illustrations to Cosmopolitan. This one appeared in the magazine's June 1939 issue (p. 47).

To prepare for that eventuality, the Evanses bought a Revolutionary War era hewn-log farmhouse in Preston County, West Virginia in 1939. Though it lacked utilities and was primitive by all other means as well, the couple quickly decided that they could not wait to until retirement to move in. Convincing his editors that the mountain air would stimulate his creativity, George and Kay left New York for good in June 1939. For the next three years, George's work commuted back and forth to *Cosmopolitan* headquarters via the U.S. Mail.

As his assignments usually required the equivalent of no more than two weeks time per month to produce, in addition to rejuvenating the farm, George found ample time to pursue his ever growing passion for bird dogs, guns and grouse. Throughout his sojourns to



George and Kay pose proudly in front of Old Hemlock, October 1939.

Pittsburgh, Chicago and New York, he had returned to Uniontown regularly to hunt, often with his father's bird dogs by his side. George began documenting his forays into the woods in a "shooting journal" begun in 1932. He would continue this journal for the next six and one half decades.

Life at "Old Hemlock," as the Evanses dubbed their home, was shaping up quite nicely when it was suddenly interrupted by World War II. Desiring to serve his country in the manner in which he felt he could be most useful, George offered his graphic talents to the U.S. Navy. He was put to work in Washington, DC, illustrating naval and aeronautical equipment repair manuals that showed how complicated things fit together in a pictorial language anyone could understand.

At the war's end, George returned to Old Hemlock and resumed his illustration work but soon found that the industry was rapidly changing. People were turning increasingly to television for dramatic entertainment and magazines were responding by gravitating away from fiction and original artwork towards nonfiction and photography. Having grown tired of deadlines, and on relatively firm financial footing, George decided that it was time for a personal change in direction as well. Rather than

working on assignments and timetables imposed by others, he would henceforth work for himself at his own pace, not as an artist but as an author!

Both George and Kay were voracious readers. The two had often speculated that they could write as well as many of the popular authors whose works George had illustrated through the years. Thus, it came as no surprise to Kay when her husband announced one day that they would collaborate in writing mysteries!

The couple patterned the protagonists of their first novel, *Never Wake a Dead Man*, after the people they knew best — themselves. Hamp and Carmel, a stylish couple from New York, find themselves embroiled in a whodunit mystery while hunting grouse in the Appalachian Mountains. Accompanied by their faithful English setter, Ruff, the two proceed to unravel a grisly tale of multiple murders at a sprawling mountain estate. Though the plot and setting would change in each of their succeeding works, Hamp, Carmel and Ruff would return in all but one of the four more mysteries penned by the couple that were to follow. Published between 1950 and 1961 under the pseudonyms Brandon Bird (novels 1-4) and Harris Evans (novel 5), the "Old Hemlock Mysteries" as they later became known won George and Kay a modest fame and fortune. More importantly, they honed the pair's writing and editorial skills for the more significant literary ventures that lay ahead, ventures focusing on George's life-long passion for dogs, guns and game birds.

Considering his upbringing, it is not surprising that in George's opinion, a house was not a home without a dog, not just any dog but an English setter. Nor would just any English setter do. He had inherited his father's keen eye and appreciation for pure bred and well-trained hunting dogs and he would have nothing less for himself. The dog he desired would have beauty, an excellent nose for scent, and an amiable personality; a dog that was intelligent and cool under fire; a dog with old bloodlines carrying the best traits of the various setter breeds. When it occurred to George that such a dog might not yet exist, he decided to create one!

Seeking a solid foundation upon which to craft his own breed, within weeks of taking up

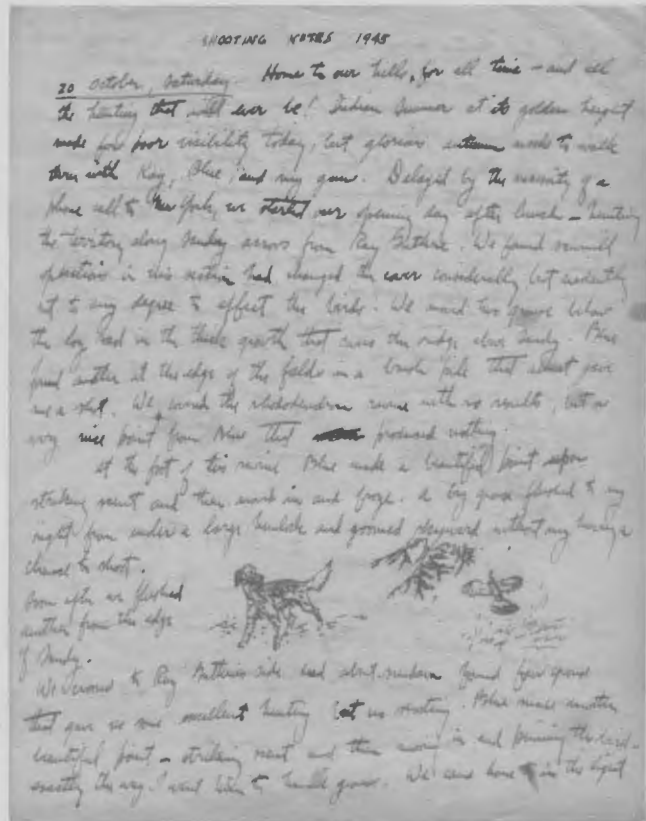
residence at Old Hemlock, George wrote to champion setter breeder George H. Ryman of Shohola Falls, Pennsylvania, explaining precisely what he had in mind. Ryman responded that he had just the dog – a “blue belton” setter (white coat with blue/black flecks and patches) with an excellent pedigree and lots of promise. This dog, which George and Kay promptly named Blue, proved to be a worthy progenitor of the Old Hemlock setter line. George spent the next two seasons training Blue in the field. His efforts were well rewarded as the dog proved to be an outstanding hunter, retriever and companion.

Finding an ideal mate for Blue was not an easy task, a task made harder still by George’s extended absence from Old Hemlock during the war. Yet, serendipity intervened once again when his father informed him that he had discovered an exceptionally handsome orange belton (white coat with orange flecks and patches) female at a kennel near Pittsburgh. Upon personally inspecting the dog, which he later named Dawn, George heartily agreed.

Blue and Dawn were successfully mated at Old Hemlock after George’s return from military duty. Their brood of nine became the foundation of the Old Hemlock line of setters and set its dissemination in motion. The descendants of the offspring of this legendary couple are treasured by bird dog lovers to this day.

As the hunting seasons passed, George continued to plan his life around his forays into the woods with dog and gun, and usually with Kay at his side. As he had done since 1932, he continued to document his outings in a journal that traced his steps, described his experiences, and documented his observations right down to the precise number of birds flushed and shots fired. It was not long after the couple had begun their literary career that George realized that his shooting journal notes “cried out to be magazine articles.”

When George’s article “Design for Setters” appeared in *Field & Stream*’s December 1956 issue, no one could have realized its significance as the debut of the preeminent voice in upland game bird shooting of the second half of the 20th century. Focusing on his experiences and philosophy regarding the breeding and training of English



Shooting Notes, October 20, 1945. See transcription, p. 6.

setters, it was evident, however, that this voice spoke with an eloquence, a breadth of knowledge and a sensitivity that was all too rare in this genre.

Over the next decade and a half, Evans published an average of three articles per year. Most appeared in either *Field & Stream* or *Pennsylvania Game News*. In addition to more essays on breeding, training and simply admiring fine bird dogs, he wrote about firearms, birds, habitats and especially on the joy of experiencing and appreciating the glorious interaction of all of the above. For Evans, hunting was not about the kill but about the entire experience. It was about the exuberance of the dog and the pleasure of working with a well trained animal. It was about the solitude and beauty of nature. It was about the quest for and flushing of the quarry, the smell of gunpowder, and the thrill of a fine shot. The kill was undeniably a critical part of this grand scheme, yet, it was a part that was inherently flawed, a part made bittersweet by the remorse of destroying something cherished. This remorse grew keener for Evans as the years passed and game birds declined in number, due in his view to overhunting and seasons that were too long. (He aired his views in this regard to the West Virginia



George and Kay with Briar, ca. 1970.

Department of Natural Resources repeatedly during the 1970s and 1980s to no avail.)

Evans published his first monograph about his sport and the utopian existence he had forged at Old Hemlock, in 1971. Titled *The Upland Shooting Life*, the book is a manifesto, an autobiography, a manual, and a wildlife romance all rolled into one. In the first chapter, "A Way of Life," the author introduces readers to his world. It is a world where game birds and bird dogs are not simply a pastime but a *raison d'être*, a purpose around which everything else revolves, not just during hunting season, but throughout the year. In chapter two, "An Attitude Towards Game," Evans reveals a philosophy regarding the killing of game that was certainly unorthodox among hunters at the time: "If I could shoot a game bird and still not hurt it, the way I can take a trout and release it, I doubt if I would kill another one." According to the Evans code of honor, respect and fairness should come into play whenever a hunter enters the woods. Kills should be judicious, quick and dignified. And where birds were concerned, fairness dictated that the quarry must always be in flight. Any hunter who would blast a sitting duck was no sportsman in his eyes.

With these basic tenets established, Evans goes on to write of the marvels of the woods, the beauty, character and habitats of assorted game birds, and the breeding and training of bird dogs, all illustrated with deft line drawings and tales of countless personal experiences regarding all three.

An instant classic in the literature of this field, *The Upland Shooting Life* gained George Bird Evans a loyal following that would last for the rest of his life and far beyond. Many more books were to follow including *Troubles with Bird Dogs* (1975), *The Upland Gunners Book* (1979), *Grouse Along the Tramroad* (1986), to name but three. Altogether, these books would solidify his position as one of the foremost writers of all time in his genre.

By the time of his death in 1998, the bibliography of books by George Bird Evans had grown to some twenty-seven monographs (including re-issues) and well over 100 articles. Adding to his legacy is his enduring contribution as the breeder of the Old Hemlock line of English setters whose descendants are still treasured by bird dog enthusiasts everywhere.

In his own eyes, however, it is quite possible that Evans would consider his greatest accomplishment to be his very existence and the manner in which he lived it. Still hunting at age ninety-one, just a few weeks before his passing, his life was, after all, the epitome of everything he desired – a life well spent, in the company of his beloved wife Kay, with "a dog, a gun and time enough."

A Page from the *Shooting Journal*.

The Regional History Collection is pleased to announce the receipt of a vast array of publications, manuscripts, illustrations, audio visuals and personal papers of George and Kay Evans from the Estate of Mrs. Evans who died in 2007. Among the many treasures of the George Bird and Kay Harris Evans Collection is George's voluminous "shooting journal" which documents the details and results of some 65 years of hunting.

The following entry, one of thousands of similar entries, is the first of the 1945 season. It was

the first entry made by Evans after his return to Old Hemlock after World War II.

Shooting Notes 1945

20 October, Saturday. Home to our hills, for all time – and all the hunting that will ever be! Indian Summer at its golden height made for poor visibility today, but glorious autumn woods to walk thru with Kay, Blue, and my gun. Delayed by the necessity of a phone call to New York, we started our opening day after lunch – hunting the territory along Sandy [Big Sandy Creek] across from Ray Guthrie. We found sawmill operations in this section had changed the cover considerably but evidently not to any degree to affect the birds. We moved two grouse below the log road in the thick growth that covers the ridge above Sandy. Blue found another in the edge of the fields in a brush pile that almost gave me a shot. We covered the rhododendron ravine with no results, but a very nice point from Blue that produced nothing.

At the foot of this ravine Blue made a beautiful point upon striking scent and then moved in and froze. A big grouse flushed to my right from under a large hemlock and zoomed skyward without my having a chance to shoot. Soon after, we flushed another from the edge of Sandy. We crossed to Ray Guthrie's and about sundown found four grouse that gave us some excellent hunting but no shooting. Blue made another beautiful point – striking scent and then moving in and pinning the bird – exactly the way I want him to handle grouse. We came home in the light of the full "hunter's moon" after a beautiful day in beautiful woods. No Shots (flushed 10 or 11) moved 10-10

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Introducing Beth Carmichael

There is another new face in the West Virginia Collection. It belongs to Adjunct Librarian Elizabeth G. Carmichael. A specialist in the science of arranging and describing archives and manuscripts collections, Beth's efforts will be devoted primarily to processing new acquisitions and upgrading the descriptions of existing collections in order to improve the quality and accuracy of the Collection's automated *Guide to Archives and Manuscripts Collections*. Her first assignments have included processing of the papers of two of West Virginia's foremost twentieth century authors, Louise McNeill and Breece D'J Pancake.

Beth brings a variety of archival and manuscript experiences to her new position. Most recently, she served as the curator for the Women Veterans Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, a collection



Elizabeth G. Carmichael

devoted to documenting the service of women in the United States military from World War II to the War in Iraq. This collection consists of a wide range of materials including letters, photographs, posters, scrapbooks, artifacts and textiles, and more than 200 oral histories. While overseeing the collection, she processed collections, conducted oral history interviews with veterans, transcribed and posted oral histories on the Web, created classroom presentations, and worked with a digital projects team to create a fully-searchable database of digitized items from the collection. She also developed an Encoded Archival Description (EAD) program and managed the creation of the department's EAD finding aids.

Prior to her employment at UNC Greensboro, Beth served as a graduate assistant in public services and technical services in the

Manuscripts Department at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill where she earned a masters degree in library science in 2003. She received her B.A. in American Literature from Middlebury College in 1997.

Selected Recent Accessions

John, Ralph. WWII Letters and Other Material, 1897-1962, 2ft. 1 in. Donation, 2007, A&M 3600.

Letters, 1941-1944, authored by Private Ralph J. John of the 3rd Battalion, Headquarters Company, 112th Infantry, 28th Division, U.S. Army. The letters document his experiences in the military, including training in the United States and time overseas when stationed in England prior to the invasion of France. He was killed in action near St. Lo, France on August 15, 1944, at the age of 30. Ralph John was a native of Mt. Morris, Pennsylvania. There are also family papers of his parents, including greeting cards and postcards, and printed ephemera, including a telephone index with Morgantown advertising (1940-1941), an Army Song Book (1941), and a History of the 28th Division, Condensed (18 pp., 1941).

Winchester Avenue Christian Church, Martinsburg. Correspondence, 1901-1962, 2.5 in. Donation, 2007. A&M 3603.

Correspondence of Reverend William A. Cook of the Winchester Avenue Christian Church of Martinsburg, West Virginia regarding a sit-in in Lynchburg, Virginia for civil rights; there are also clippings regarding this event including information regarding the response of Lynchburg College to its students' involvement with the sit-in. Also includes solicitation for funds to build the church (1901); a resolution of church elders (1913); membership committee records (1961); and miscellaneous records (including bulletins, constitution, financial records, and reports), 1960-1962.

Snodgrass Family. Genealogy, 1970-2007, 5ft. Donation, 2007. A&M 3604.

Genealogy records of the Snodgrass family, including the family of Charles Snodgrass and the Snodgrass family in Monongalia and Marion counties, West Virginia; as well as the Snodgrass family in Pennsylvania. Also includes information on the Foulk and Ice families of Monongalia County, West Virginia.

Hughes, J. Letter Regarding Response of Berkeley County Citizens to the Ordinance of Secession, 1861, 2 pp. Acquired, 2008. A&M 3615.

Letter of May 14, 1861 regarding response of citizens of Berkeley County, (West) Virginia to the Ordinance of Secession and the Wheeling Convention, authored by Berkeley County resident J. Hughes from Martinsburg to Convention delegate J.S. Bowers who was representing Berkeley County. The letter records strong Union sentiment in the county, and a meeting of Berkeley County residents in support of the Preamble and Resolutions adopted at the Clarksburg Convention of April 22, 1861 that led to the Wheeling Convention of May 14, 1861. The letter also refers to a printed account of the meeting.

Brady, Bill, Collector. Glass Plate Negatives of Helvetia, West Virginia, 1890-1915, 1 ft. 6 in. Donation, 2008. A&M 3617.

Glass plate negatives of photographs taken by Uriah C. Shock documenting Helvetia, West Virginia, a small community of German-speaking Swiss immigrants located in Randolph County. Includes portraits of individuals and groups of family members and community groups. Many images feature woodland settings, and some include logging operations, horse teams, buildings, and livestock.



Helvetia area logging scene, ca. 1900.

Barnes Family. Papers, 1863, 4 pp. Acquired, 2008. A&M 925 ADD.

Letter authored by Union soldier Sergeant Thomas Rufus Barnes of Company K, 10th Virginia Volunteers, to his mother Mary Barnes of Harrisville, Ritchie County, West Virginia. He writes from Winchester, Virginia on 20 February 1863 regarding a soldier getting drummed out of camp for "worthlessness and disloyalty". He also describes a food ration made by soldiers in his camp from "refuse" vegetables made into squares of ten to twelve inches.

Photographs and Postcards of West Virginia Scenes. .75 in. 1895-1915. Loan for Duplication, 2008.

Photographs (ca. 1895-1915) include: regimental band of the First Infantry, West Virginia National Guard; group

portrait of cadets or soldiers; two women and a man posing among icicles, Mannington; town of Wolf Summit, 1902; Duff St. U.B. Church, Clarksburg; hotel in Newburg; hotel "Frank" in Mannington. Postcards (ca. 1906-1913) include: seven items regarding Harrison County (one of West Milford, one of oil or gas derrick with crew, one of Owings, three of downtown Clarksburg, including parades, one of Shinnston); three items of 1913 flood on the Ohio River (two of Sistersville, one of St. Marys); three items relating to the Monongah mine disaster of December 1907; one item of the Lewis County court house in Weston; and two items relating to "Stonewall" Jackson (packet boat that carried the dying Jackson, and stone wall at Fredericksburg, Virginia).

Wilson and Stribling Families. Papers, 1804-1849, 3 items. Donation, 2008. A&M 880 ADD.

Three letters, including: 1) 1804 letter to James Wilson, lawyer, in Alexandria, Virginia (forwarded to Morgantown, Virginia) from his friend John A. Smith in Falmouth, Virginia (near Fredericksburg) regarding business and travel; 2) 1836 letter to New York



Coal miners and mules, Wolf Summit, WV, 1902.

from Toulmin Hazard in Mobile, Alabama; 3) 1849 letter to Robert M. Stribling in St. Albans, Kanawha County, (West) Virginia (Coalsmouth, Virginia) from his mother in Buffalo, Putnam County, (West) Virginia regarding possible routes and methods of travel to Buffalo.

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George Bird Evans, "A perfect point." See page 1.