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Great Lakes Falconers Association, Chris Kotsiopoulos, Tom Kotsiopoulos

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George Thomas Kotsiopoulos

— Excerpted from the Tribute by Bill Murrin

The falconry community has lost another great contributor to our heritage when George Kotsiopoulos passed away on October 7, 2003. He was born on November 25, 1928 in Chicago, the son of Greek immigrants. He is survived by his two sons, Tom and Chris.

George was a generous falconer who was willing to talk to newcomers and offer some advice. He would reminisce about his early days in falconry, explaining the limitations and the discoveries of those times. He also loved to share his marvelous meals with his guests and was happy to teach anyone how to cook his wonder-ful dishes. Falconer friends would frequent his popular restaurant, Pancake Francais. George was an exemplary



As the former owner of a popular restaurant, George's culinary skills were evident in the many picnics and barbecues that he would host for his fellow falconers.

George's early experience with falconry is interesting though perhaps not so unique for the times. In the early 1940s he befriended a boy, Ted Solomon, a couple of years his senior, who was attempting his luck at falconry. George was enchanted with the idea and wanted to join the adventure. The two of them would sneak, after hours, into a local cemetery. They managed to trap a couple of kestrels. From that point on George was hooked. This was a time when there were very few falconry books available. There were no falconers to teach a boy in Chicago at the time. It was strictly learn on the fly. Many birds flew away.

After the first kestrel, George tried other birds such as sharp-shinned, coopers, and merlins, but none of species moved him. After he started flying tundra peregrines he discovered his true love. He endeavored to learn as much about them as he could. One thing that moved him about passage peregrines is what he called their aloofness. He liked to think of them as royalty, always standing above the fray and never wearing their emotions on their sleeves, in a manner of speaking. He would say other birds were easy to read, but not tundra peregrines.

When George was old enough to drive, he would blind trap for peregrines every fall. He kept accurate notes of his trapping days. He tried trapping in different locations but found Lake Michigan to be the best. He discovered here he could find concentrations of them. Over time he realized that weather patterns, unique to peregrines, played a significant role in his success rate. Whereas hawks migrate on west to northwest winds after a low pressure cell passed through and the barometer was rising, peregrines migrated as the low was approaching, causing a falling barometer and the winds were south to southwest. On such days he could trap several peregrines. Once he had refined his knowledge — realizing, for example, that even wind speeds played an important role in concentrations — he no longer spent many days trapping. Instead, he would trap just a few days in late September and/or early October and would bring home enough peregrines for himself and his closest friends.

Many falconers were typically covetous of their trapping knowledge, but George would share it with those he trusted. He would joke (not maliciously) about the eastern falconers who would trap peregrines while driving up and down the beaches, saying that that was easy. He would exclaim, "Try trapping inland peregrines and this will really make a trapper out of you!"

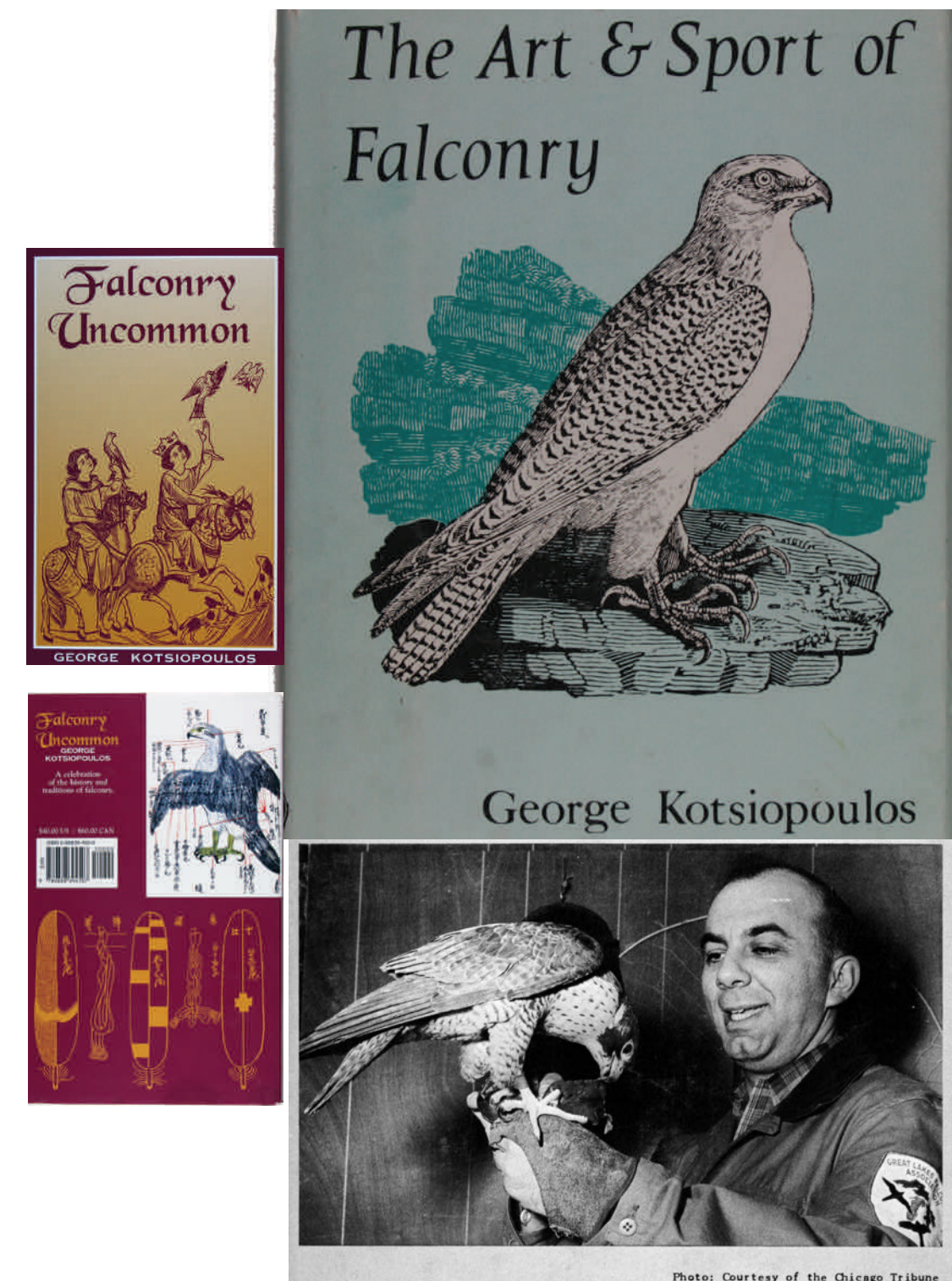
If you look at hawk counts of peregrines in places like Cape May, New Jersey and compare the numbers to Lake Michigan, you'll understand his meaning. Cape May typically sees ten times the number of peregrines and you won't find Lake Michigan peregrines sitting on the beach; they're like a jet plane hell-bent for South America. George was not trying to say one way is better than another. What it demonstrates is that different circumstances require different strategies. Falconers like George combined intuition with experience to adapt to a unique environment. This is how progress occurs and thanks to George, midwest falconers benefited from his experience.

George's hunting experience with peregrines was unique. Since he lived in the heart of Chicago, it was difficult for a man of modest means to frequently spend the time traveling outside city limits to find game birds. Besides, his job and family limited the time available for such excursions. George was innovative. He flew his falcons on wild city pigeons. The way he flew them was unique. He found the most effective means to pursue this quarry was to fly

pigeons found under viaducts, out of sight of the falcon. He would cast his bird off and wait until it was over the viaduct and then run under it making a lot of noise, flushing them for his bird. He would say, "This was not classic falconry, but it's all I had available." Understand: this is extremely difficult terrain to fly in. There are buildings everywhere and flights would go out of sight in seconds. If the falcon caught the pigeon, it might be difficult to find. If the falcon didn't catch it, he had to rely on it finding its way back to him.

This led George to a concept he always promoted, "bonding with your bird." If the falcon is bonded to the falconer, she will seek him out when flights would go out of sight, which was an absolute must under the conditions in which George flew. Of course it doesn't always work out this way, but it is a principle he believed was fundamental for long term success in falconry.

To George it was always a good feeling when his bird would return to the point at which the flight originated. This is why he had reservations about telemetry when it came on the scene. Instead of the falcon seeking out the falconer, it is now the reverse. However, the new technology shouldn't deny the falconer the opportunity to continue to work with sound old principles, therefore he eventually decided to invest in this innovation conceding that it offers one a sense of security even if you choose not to chase your bird but wish to wait for it to return to you. He felt this is all the more important with hybrids, which falconers have an obligation to bring back home unlike passage birds where there is no problem if they return to the wild. Bonding was the bottom line with George; if you

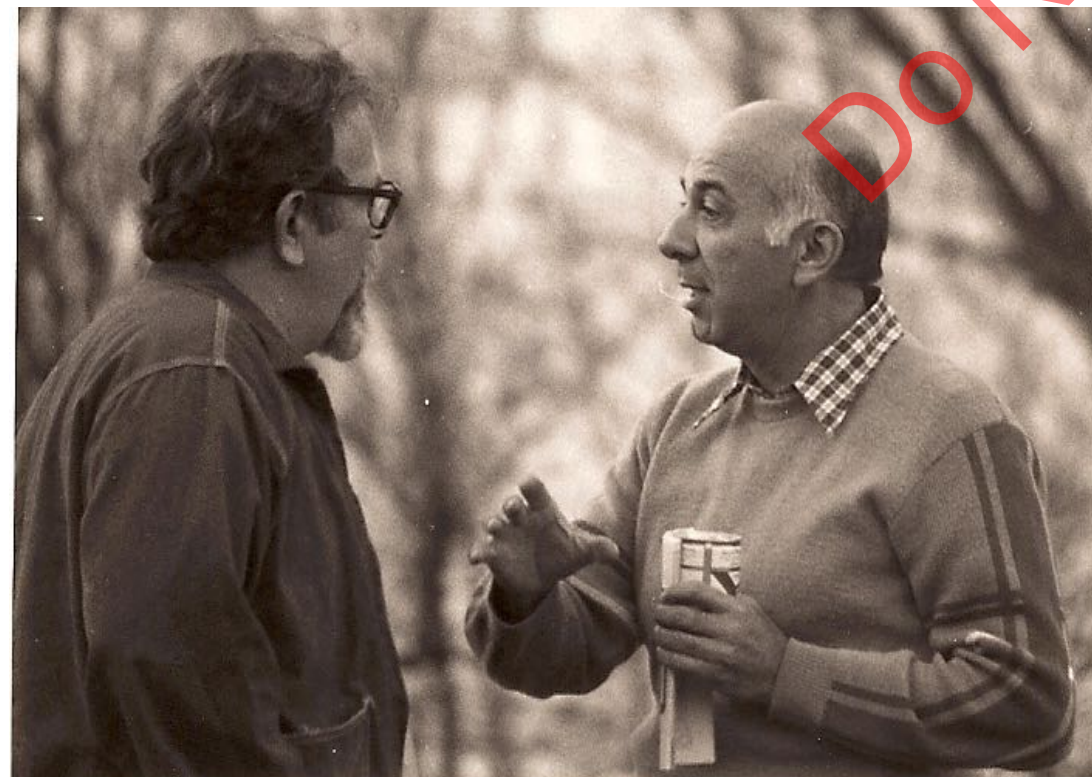




George K at Dan Cover's, May 1973

have a good relationship with your bird, more often than not, you will have greater success in falconry.

A situation occurred which provides an example of his bonding principle. George's son Tom told the story to me since he personally observed it many years ago. George had a tiercel prairie called Alex. Somehow, while the bird was still hooded on George's fist, Alex took off and was flying blind. George instructed Tom to keep quiet and then proceeded to whistle from his lips. Alex



George and good friend Stan Marcus, both former NAFA Presidents



circled him, tightening the circle with each pass until George was able to catch him, as Tom put it, like a football. Tom said it was obvious the bird was seeking George and looking to be rescued.

George was a diehard passage man. He occasionally took eyeses, but preferred passage peregrines over anything else. This is one important reason George didn't practice falconry for 20 years, from the early 1970s on. Once passage peregrines were off limits, his enthusiasm waned and he always worried that he would die before he'd be able to take another. His premonition, unfortunately, turned out to be true.

George was proud of the things accomplished in Illinois. He was the driving force behind the formation of the Great Lakes Falconers Association (GLFA). It was the first or second regional (not national) association in the country. GLFA was not meant to be a state club; it was founded as a regional club since there were no state clubs at the time. The scope of GLFA was reduced to a state club once the surrounding states formed their own clubs. He was proud to be one of the founders of GLFA and to have served as Director and President.

Other accomplishments for which George was noted were his NAFA Presidency in 1967, Director-At-Large and Secretary positions in the 1960s. While he was not a founding member of NAFA, he was one of those falconers who played "an important part in the formation of NAFA," as explained by Hal Webster in his paper *Humble Beginnings*. He loved to talk about those first NAFA Meets in Centerville, South Dakota. He enjoyed a particular jack-rabbit flight (I believe in '62), where his redtail flew with a variety of other hawks (gang hawking was popular back in the 1960s and 70s). Just about every bird hit the jack and eventually his bird and another's bound to it almost simultaneously. Don Anderson filmed the flight, capturing the excitement of it all.

George was fascinated with the history of falconry and collected an extensive library of classic books, many in foreign languages. He wished to see many of these works translated into English, but only managed to publish two books. The first was *The Art & Sport of Falconry*, published in 1969, and the second reprint was

Falconry Uncommon, published in 1999, with the addition of a new chapter on Japanese falconry.

George kept in contact with many highly respected European falconers throughout his years in falconry and in his later life, spent a lot of time visiting falconers and attending meets there. These trips meant a lot to him in that they provided a means of reaching back to our falconry heritage.

George was a romantic who viewed life with higher principles in mind. He was not content with the status quo; there were always different and higher principles to consider and he sought them out vigorously. The romantic in him exuded a charm rarely seen in men. Ladies have frequently referred to him as a gentleman with deep tenderness and a caring heart. Indeed, George's heart was always in the right place, even when one might consider it misplaced. You could never be angry with him for opinions or actions you might disagree with since you knew there was never any malicious intent. He had very strong convictions, but they were always with good intentions in mind.

When sharing thoughts about George, Jack Oberg perhaps said it best: "It doesn't matter who flies what bird, how well they fly it, or who one knows. Life comes down to what kind of human being one is. George was one of the best!"



George T. Kotsiopoulos
President, N.A.F.A.
1967