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Cornelius F. McFadden (1911-1971) An Appreciation

— by William G. Mattox December 1971

One of America's outstanding falconry figures is gone. Cornelius (Corny) McFadden died on 19 July at the young age of 59. I met Corny 23 years ago, but know little about his early life—we never seemed to reminisce beyond World War II! Hence this essay is more a personal appreciation than a necrology. I may not have known Corny as well as some falconers, but we trapped the eastern beaches together and endured the rigors and thrills of a trip to Greenland for gyrfalcons, experiences which make up for not having years of daily contact.

I met Corny first in 1948, but soon thereafter I went away to college and we hawked together only during holidays and in the summer. We kept contact by numerous letters throughout the 13 years I was in Quebec-Labrador and Europe. Corny's letters were unique, including cryptic comments translatable only by using one's knowledge of the man, exciting hawking



In the Poconos around 1940. Corny with gun, sidearm and buckskin.

tales, and what his close friends called “shopping lists”—a long enumeration of items which he wanted you to acquire for him and which he deemed essential to his life-style. His exuberant personality always shone through in his colorful prose, whether it expressed his perennial hopes of “getting back to Greenland and don't tell Mary a word” or his desire to acquire enough wolf pelts to have a fur coat made for his daughter Crissy.

Here was a man whose unique type will never be known again in our sport. Corny was a colorful figure who cut a wide swath. Everything was done with his own personal pizzazz, which showed him to be a man of courage and flair.

The mark of a man is the influence he has upon others. Corny's influence was great. He was the very essence of a man's-man with a magnetic personality. His “army” included young men who hawked with him and went on to become successful in many fields. There are salesmen, executives, mechanics, PhD's and surgeons who got the encouragement, inspiration, and oftentimes harsh words they needed from the “Big Man”.

No one who had the colorful and unique personality of Corny could possibly go through life without antagonizing some. There may have been men jealous of Corny's casual and grand style. Others may have used the word “gall” on more than one occasion, but these people could not possibly have known Corny well, for all who did know him took Corny's idiosyncracies and mannerisms for what they were—the excusable traits of a man who was different.

For here was a man many lesser men would like to have been. Here was a man who said, “I'll do it.” And he did. Indeed, some of his accomplishments, like the Greenland trip, seem impossible in retrospect. He approached things in a singularly energetic way, exemplifying the thought that “you only go around once in life”, and lived life

to the fullest—an approach bound to dismay the more timid.

This might lead the reader to think that Corny led a high, racy, and tenuous existence. The key to the man was just the opposite. Corny was almost puritanical in his life-style. If there was a family man, a church-goer, an idol for growing youth, and a one-man crusade for not wasting a moment of precious life, Corny exemplified that man.

Though a holder of the puritan ethic, Corny was no tin-pot saint, no zealot out to convert others. As an athlete and a clean-liver, he considered smoking messy and, of course, an insult to the body. But he pressed his point only half-heartedly, not wishing to offend. (He was never able to convince Lou Woyce to kick the habit, and regretted the fact.) Nor did he do more than snort a few times when the rest of us opened the beer after a long day of running the beaches of Assateague. I guess Corny preferred friends to have a beer or two rather than to threaten his ubiquitous orange juice and milk supply. And beer never did go well with ginger snaps, or with his famous “dirty cookies”.

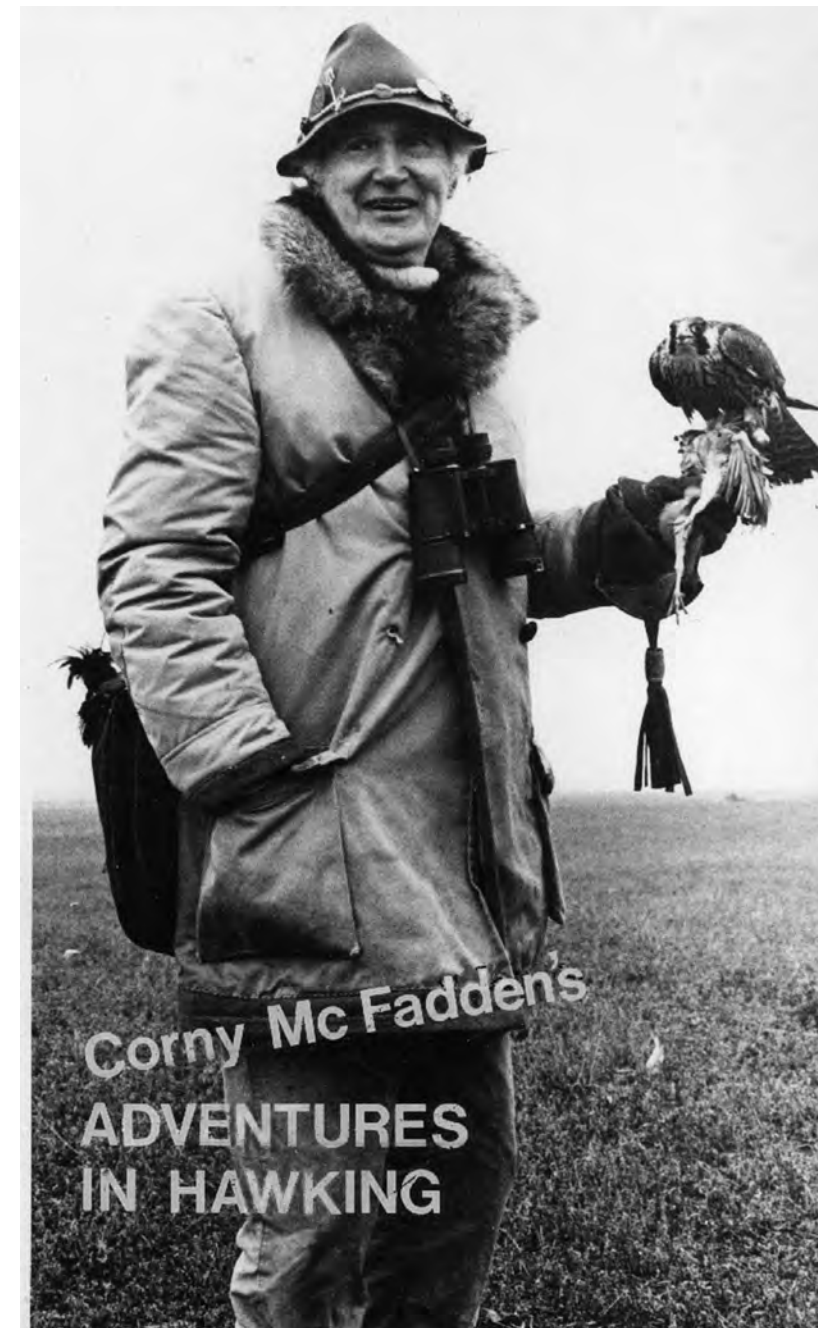
An honest appreciation of Corny McFadden must include facets of the man which he himself made no attempt to hide. Corny spoke often of “conning” someone, usually involving extensive use of his well known “gift of gab”. Most everyone was powerless to resist the golden tongue of Irish blarney, the probing wit, the poking finger in chest, the “con” at its most refined, honest, and harmless level. Whether it was sanding the sailboat or cleaning the hawkhouse, the young men who frequented Corny's home in Chestnut Hill were put to work on a variety of tasks considered a fair *quid pro quo* for just being around the man. The jobs were attacked with vigor, for it was a pleasure to please the master. Everyone seemed to develop a specialty as part of the “army” from printing up photos, taking jeeps apart down to the last bolt, or stitching hoods. Everyone was eager to please Corny, because his close friends knew he had a heart of gold and that he always gave more than he received. In short, Corny would do anything for those he knew, and the attitude was contagious.

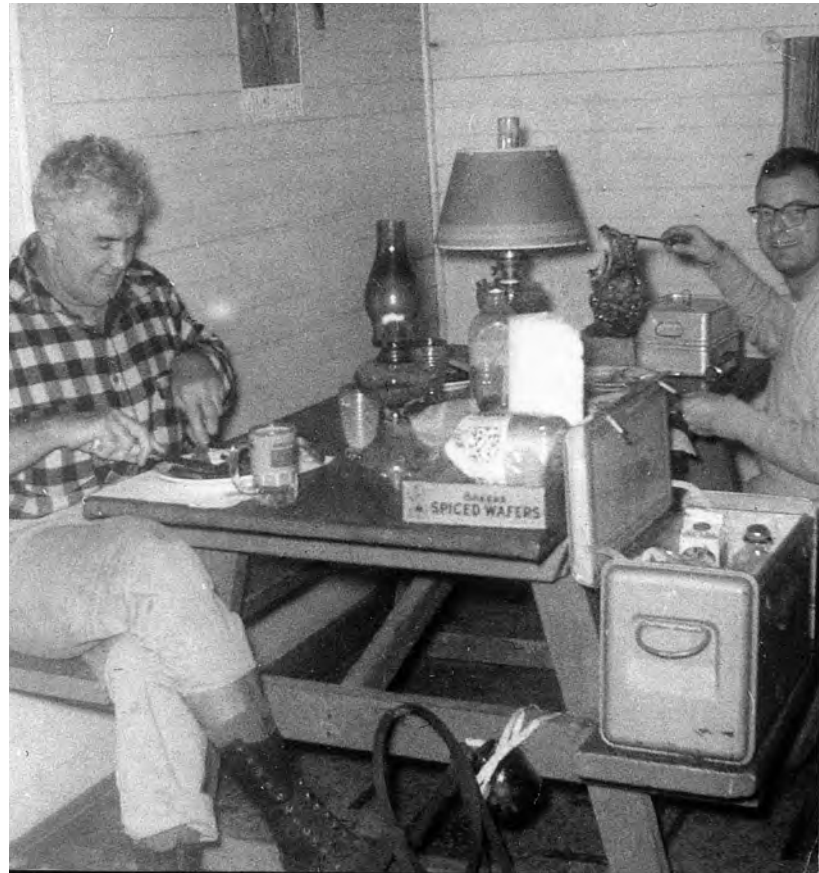
It might have been “conning”, but it was a most benevolent kind.

This all leads to an attempt to sum up Corny McFadden as a man, a friend, and a falconer. His little quirks of tardiness, his overbearing personality, his monopoly of most situations—these all were but a minor part of the man. More to the point was Corny's genuine interest in people, his complete dedication to the ideals he held, and



L-R: famed arctic explorer and author Peter Freuchen, Bill Turner, Corny, and Bill Mattox, in New York at The Adventurers' Club where McFadden spoke on the Greenland Gyrfalcon Expedition (December 1951).





Corny and Jim Gerlach at ranger's cabin on Assateague. Notice Corny's spiced wafers and Jim holding one of Corny's famous steaks. 1964



Mrs. Brian McDonald, Halter Cunningham, Artie Donahue watch Corny release Peregrine on Assateague



1951 Greenland Trip



NAFA/GLFA Field Meet 1967, Wilmington, IL

the multi-faceted personality of an utterly kind and thoughtful person. Corny would do anything for his friends, and he expected the same in kind. As his brother John remarked following the funeral in July, "Corny would give you the shirt off his back, but he'd have your trousers in return."

Corny showed interest in a variety of subjects. He was knowledgeable in the diverse ways of wildlife, and although he was no scholar he had keen powers of observation and an astounding memory of past events.

Corny had a passion for clothes, the more the better. Fabrics of Cheviot and Shetland wool for his jackets, handmade shoes and Icelandic sweaters all went into his wardrobe, which he planned with care. Being particular about his clothing carried over into falconry equipment. He disdained Indian hoods because he felt they didn't have the classic looks of the Dutch style. He ridiculed those of us who didn't have proper hawking bags and who used Army satchels instead. He was correct, of course, for he felt strongly that falconers should look their best in the field in an attempt to dispel the accurate observation of outsiders that here was a real rag-tag group of fanatics.

Though he placed a premium on looking good in the sport, Corny always had fine-flying falcons as well, despite the lack of suitable game country near his home. His peregrines were always reliable and waited-on well. He seemed to prefer tiercels above all birds, despite occasional problems in hooding them.

Corny always had a goshawk, but seldom the same bird for long. He preferred his hawks well-manned ("tame as stink", he'd say), and he loved tramping the brush for bunnies, partly as a means of keeping fit.

Corny was a big man ("five feet sixteen and a half in my stockings") forever trying to peel weight off his massive frame. He'd been an outstanding athlete: football and boxing, not unusual pursuits for a large man. But he also excelled at tennis and squash because he had exceptional grace and agility for his size. He hunted deer annually and relished the prospect of a few days of isolation in a mountain cabin as much as the gregariousness of autumn trapping sojourns on the beach.

Corny was a good companion, always evoking a laugh as he sought humor out of even the most miserable situation. The 1951 Greenland trip was, of course, one of the highlights of his life. His booming laugh and flashing smile captured the hearts of the Danes and Greenlanders we met along the way. People liked him immediately,

despite not being able to understand everything he said. The scene of Corny giving the quick-course, 15-minute lecture on falconry to a Danish schoolteacher who had an eagle in a cage was worth the trip to Greenland in itself.

His talking ability and charm combined to spell success in both his advertising sales business and in lecturing. He was one of the best salesmen for Brown and Bigelow. In his lectures he could keep an audience spellbound by colorful anecdotes which only occasionally wandered into fantasy. These little embellishments were designed to spruce up a tale, without intentionally departing from a strictly factual accounting. I was surprising to learn during one talk that we had survived on whale blubber in Greenland, but it **did** sound better that way! Of course, the truth was that we had very little to eat at **all** during some periods. I guess the whale blubber was more credible than eating nothing. Corny got on well with Peter Freuchen. Both were great raconteurs, large men with a zest for life and people, hunting, and the out-of-doors.

In Corny's passing we have all been deprived of a certain richness in our lives. The hearty laugh, the warm smile, the overpowering presence of the man are gone. But we are left with memories of these, and much, much more. Corny left us with an appreciation of a fine way of life. We know now what friendship and kindness can really mean and we realize that this man himself was a poignant example of what Americans once were before the soft life crept in.

For some of us a close, father-like man has gone who cannot be replaced. And for me, personally, to have lost two friends like Hans Pieters and Corny McFadden within the space of a few months is almost unbearable.

God rest you, Corny, we will honor your name and try to continue your good works.

