



## Donors

Steve Chitty, Stephen Gatti, Mike & Karen Yates

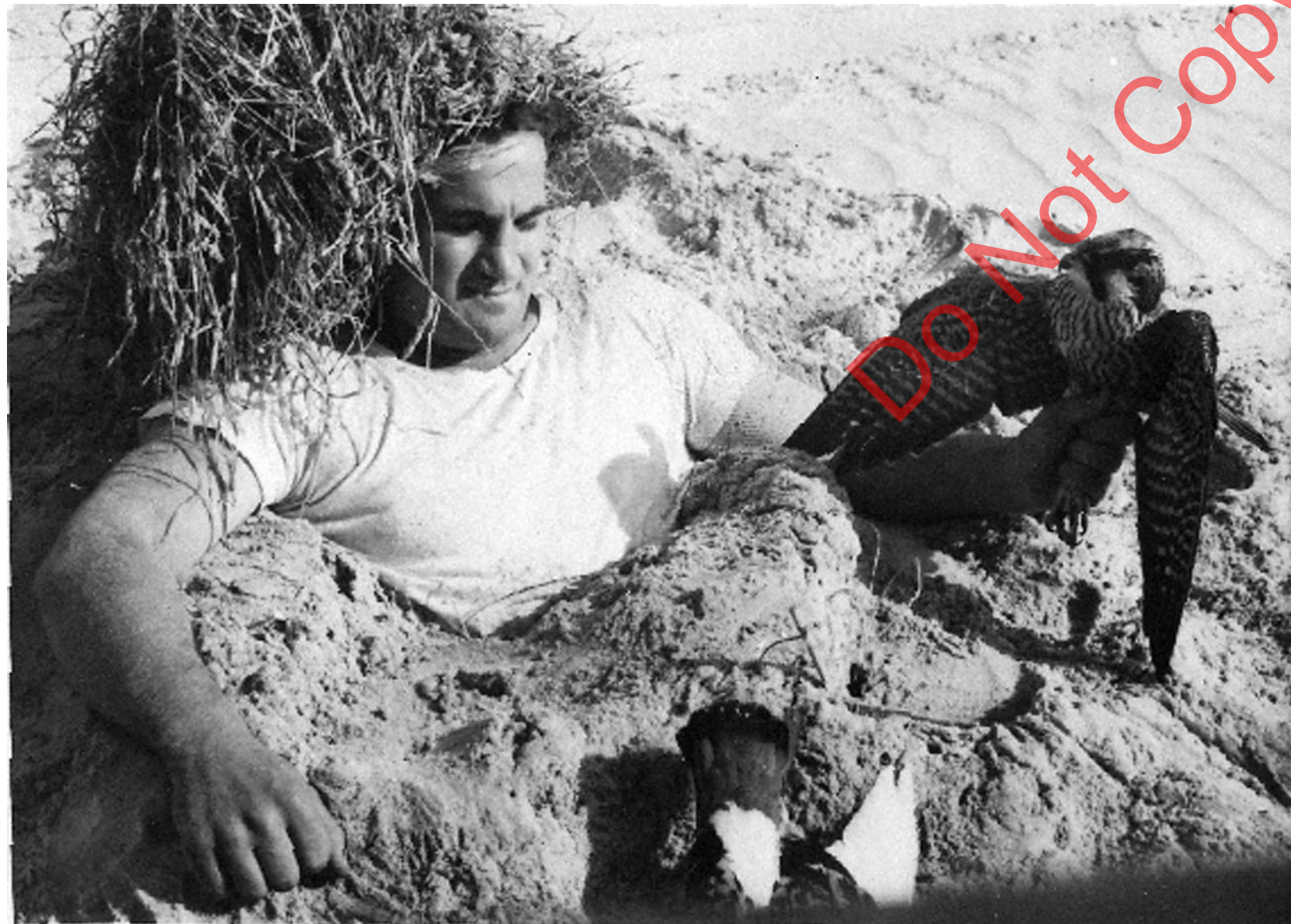
HAWK CHALK Vol. XXXII. No. 3, Dec. 1993

### **Alva G. Nye, Jr., His Contributions To Falconry And Personal Memories Of Some Of His Friends**

— by Mike Yates

Where does one begin to recount the life of such a man and all he has meant to American falconry? First, a few of the basics: married to Dorothy and raised three fine sons; graduate of the University of Pennsylvania, where he was All-American in both football and lacrosse; member of the college lacrosse hall of fame; Navy veteran of WWII; retired in 1974 as a Defense Department aviation procurement analyst and

was a recipient of the Department's Meritorious Civilian Service Medal; expert bowhunter with well over 50 deer to his credit; Eagle Scout; began practicing falconry in the late 1920s; founding member in 1933 of the first American falconry organization (The Peregrine Club), and of every subsequent national entity, serving each in various capacities; chairman and organizer of the first national falconry meet in 1938; discovered in 1938, with Bill Turner, the tundra peregrine migration at Assateague Island and captured the first falcon in 1939; founding member in 1961 of the Potomac Falconers Association; eloquent spokesman for raptors and falconry in many forums, including the halls of Congress.



Impressed yet? The man, however, was so much more than even these monumental accomplishments indicate. His influence on the course of American falconry and on the individuals who continue to sustain it are pervasive. No less a figure than Bruce Haak wrote Al (in part) shortly before his passing: "...Because of one fortuitous phone call back in 1963, you had a major influence on the course of my life...It would be interesting to know exactly how many sets of feet you set on the proper path of falconry over the years...you and the old guard made American falconry what it is. Others merely copied your moves and, hopefully, added something to the larger pool of knowledge...In retrospect, I am amazed at your patience and perseverance with would-be falconers. These are indeed virtues that most of us simultaneously admire and lack... You will never know the extent to which I have benefited from your counsel and good example."

In the words of John Harrell, an excellent falconer of long standing who, along with Steve Gatti, was as close to Al as anyone: "First, and most importantly, he was an honest, caring, thoughtful and generous man. He was a true gentleman in every sense of the word. Alva would talk to or listen to everyone, no matter what their stature was in life...He not only was a fine falconer but a fine representative of falconers and falconry here in America. He spoke in front of the Congress of the United States, state legislators, game departments and others in support of falconry and the birds it employs. Al was well respected and commanded their attention when he spoke. We all have him to thank for his efforts."

Several anecdotes from John follow which tell us more about Alva the man— "Alva loved falconry and hawks, especially the peregrine. Most are aware that when he commented on someone's equipment or how they were caring for their bird he was trying to help the person and the bird at

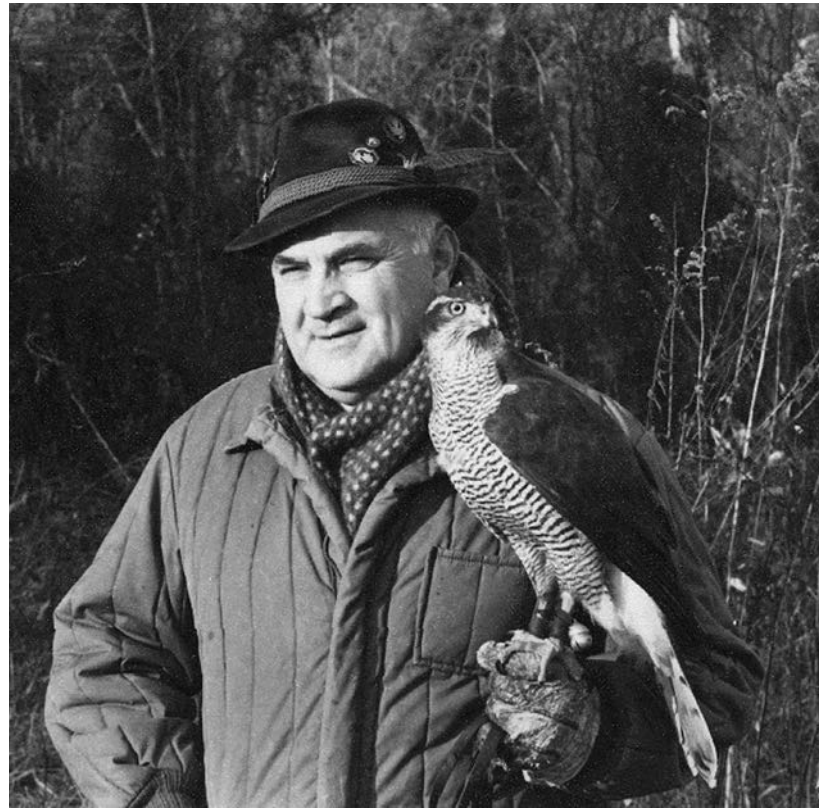
the same time.

"Al and I together took our last trip to a barrier island to trap our last passage peregrine falcons. The island was accessible by a 7-mile boat ride through the marsh. During the week a bad northeast storm blew up and we were forced to retreat back into the marsh to a shack... built up on tall poles... Our tent site was covered by a foot of water...the lock (on the shack) had been broken and lay at the door. Nothing looked disturbed. We entered and made ourselves at home, fixed dinner and spent the night. The next morning we awoke to the drone of an outboard motor. Looking out the window we saw a man approaching in a small skiff. I wondered aloud what he would say when he found his cabin had been broken into. Al said, 'Give me five minutes with him and he'll be asking us if he can use it for two weeks next summer.' Al was right; the man showed us where a new key would be hidden and said to use it whenever we liked. Old 'silver tongue' did it again."

John adds that "Alva lived a very good life thanks to his wonderful wife, Dorothy (Dot) Nye. Behind a good man stood a better woman. She is a peach." Amen, John.

I first met Al in the late 1960s and our friendship grew as the years passed. We spoke often of life in general, his bunny hawking, my duck hawking and trapping of hawks near Sterrett's Gap, Pennsylvania, and peregrines on Assateague (both of which Al pioneered). With early beach trappers such as Alva, Jim Rice, and Brian





Al flew Susie for about 20 years

McDonald, our mutual love of peregrines and Assateague fostered special bonds between us over the years. In 1982 I helped to organize a celebration of 50 years in falconry for Alva, Jim and Doc Stabler (August '82 Hawk Chalk). Serving as M.C. at the banquet, it was my distinct pleasure to rib Al about his 'invention' of telemetry and the Harris' hawk (he was initially skeptical of both but soon embraced them with all the zealotry of a true convert). I moved to Nevada in 1987 and we talked less frequently after that, but a high point of each trip through the D.C. area was a visit with Alva and Dot at 'Hawk Hill'. In 1989 we staged a celebration at Assateague honoring the 50th anniversary of Al's capture of the first peregrine there (December '89 Hawk Chalk). It was to be Al's last trip to the beach. In the summer of 1990, along with Bill Seegar and Tom Maechtle, I located a new peregrine eyrie in our west-central Greenland study area. Bill Mattox and the Greenland Peregrine Falcon Survey took great pride in dubbing the eyrie 'Nye's Honeycomb', in honor of Al and his all-time favorite tundra falcon.

These are just a few of my memories of Alva, and I apologize to the reader if there seems to be too much 'me' in them. To get to the true purpose of this remembrance, what do I think was so special about Alva Nye and why was he so important to American falconry? I will try not to belabor points made previously by Bruce and John, but Al was the personification of the all-American 'can-do' guy. When he decided to fly hawks, he had access to very little guidance. He attacked the problems and conquered them through a rare combination of ingenuity, raw talent, and force of will. Al could somehow devise a way to accomplish anything he wanted. An example: In 1947 Al wanted to capture a tiercel peregrine at the Harper's Ferry (WV) cliff. Through intense observation he determined its preferred night roost, then established a free-climb route on the cliff

and repeated it in daylight until he had mastered it. He then returned at night and, using only the ambient light from the small town below, quickly and silently negotiated the route and stood below the sleeping tiercel. Using a net of his own design stretched between two long poles, he soon had the tiercel in hand.

No goal was out of reach if he put his mind to it. Want that tundra falcon sitting on the beach? "How about getting someone to bury me in the sand, put a woven grass headset over my head and a pigeon in my hand?" He brought this enthusiasm and will to succeed to everything he ever did. When many others were content to throw pigeons out to their peregrines, nothing but gamehawking would satisfy Al. He would put his fine tiercel 'The Senator' up and run for miles through the countryside, getting flights at any-



Steve Gatti and Al: lifelong hawking friends

thing he might flush and having success at it.

He was not only a first-class hawker but a naturalist. He was an eloquent spokesman for birds of prey and falconry, winning us many supporters and friends through the years. When there was a battle to be fought, you didn't have to look far for Alva; he was right there, usually three steps in front of you. He was opinionated and full of advice, and he was not shy about sharing any of it with you. But anyone who truly knew Al never took offense because his love for the birds was at the root of it all. He abhorred the thought of a hawk in the hands of anyone who was not dedicated and competent, and so was quick to give others the benefit of his experience. Alva was a fountain of knowledge, and it could all be had by anyone with the interest and sense enough to ask.

In his later years he was slowed considerably by the abuses his body had absorbed during his All-American careers in football and lacrosse.

He never quit hawking, however, and the slow and enjoyable pace of afternoons in the field with his Harris' hawks served him well. Scarcely a month before his passing and knowing the end was near, he was afield with friends at the Pennsylvania Falconry and Hawk Trust meet. Who would have expected less?

Alva didn't just live falconry; he wrote about it. Throughout the years he kept detailed notes on everyday events and on uncommon occurrences. The more remarkable experiences he wrote up in narrative form and kept under the heading 'One for the Book'. The book, sadly, was never a reality in his lifetime, despite the constant nagging of his inner circle. Even deep into retirement, Alva led a full and busy life. 'Next year' always seemed to be the time for the book. Perhaps in the future these literary treasures will see the light of day through the efforts of Al's son Geoff. We have seen fine examples of Al's narrative skills in NAFA publications over the years on subjects ranging from his famous European goshawk "Susie" to the use of Brittany spaniels in falconry. I look forward to the day I will see in print the oft-told stories, like: The time he stayed at Doc Stabler's house on the way to and from the Kintnersville (PA) eyrie, never knowing that Doc already had the eyases in his basement; the whole story of the first capture of a peregrine at Assateague (as told to the fortunate attendees of the 1989 NAFA Meet banquet); his ingenious

capture of a haggard Eastern anatum peregrine weighing **54 ounces** off the D.C. post office building; the Nye/Gatti trip as Geoffrey Pollard's guests to hawk red grouse in Caithness with their tundra falcons; the time Bill Turner (and his girlfriend) went into the woods above the Harper's Ferry cliff to lower a needed rope to Al (on the cliff and unable to go forward). Turner got 'lost', it grew too dark for Al to retrace his steps and he had to be rescued by the fire department! Put this stuff in a book and we're talking best seller here.

Winter before last, as his parting approached, I reflected on the life of my dear old friend. Falconers in this country today, building on the solid foundation laid down by Al and a few others, are enjoying the finest quality gamehawking the world has ever known. Centuries from now, I feel confident that true falconers will still be aware of and honor his accomplishments and the role he played in the establishment of American falconry. While this part of his life was an immense satisfaction and source of pride, so were his family, career, and outside interests. No one ever balanced them all in such a consistently excellent manner. As his life itself was a celebration and an affirmation of all we can be, let us be thankful for the time he spent among us.

We lost a giant of a man we loved so well. We will not see another like him. It hurt then; it hurts now. I miss him.

