



William J. "Bill" Shinnners 1933 – 2007

Bill Shinnners was NAFA's founding Vice President and host to its first field meet in Reno. Will, as he preferred to be called in his later years, was born to fly hawks. He did so with skill and passion until he became physically unable a few years before his passing. He left behind a loving wife (Carrie) and family, along with countless friends. Will always had a good story and a reputation for embellishment that led to the coining of a term among his many friends. Any statement that stretched credulity, no matter how slightly, became a "Shinnerism." It was not unusual, however, for such a statement to be absolutely true. In May of 2003 he was interviewed for the Archives of Falconry's Oral Histories program. His own words below, taken from the transcript, tell important parts of his story:

I was about ten years old in the fifth grade, the teacher was reading us Ivanhoe. That was my first exposure to falconry. My eyes rolled back in my head. At the end of the book she asked why knights wore armor. My answer was "to keep the falcons from hurting their arm." I got an F, but I still think I was right.

Anyway, when I got a little older, I got to be a fireman. [11 years later Will went to work in the casino industry, retiring at 63] And that's the job for a falconer because you work every other day and I had all day to look for hawks and all day when I was working to think about hawks. So at about that time, about 1950, I guess, I would be 17 years old. I had Hawks in the Hand. I read that. And that's the only book the library had, but somebody told me about the university library. I went up there and I found the Frederick's book and they had a display from McGill University. I wrote McGill and they put me in touch with Tom Ennenga and the trail started. Anyway, I sent Tom...20 silver dollars for my dues, my initiation fee. And he said as soon as they got somebody to come over and qualify me, I could be a member of the Falconry Club of America. Well, a month went by and Tom... wrote me a letter and said: "Is there any chance you could catch a prairie falcon?" I

called him up on the phone and I said "I think so." I went out that afternoon and I caught a prairie falcon. The first one I ever, ever, ever caught. And I sent it to Ennenga and he fired right back and said anybody who could catch a hawk that fast has got to be a falconer. So I passed.

By then I had run into a young man named James Nicholson, who was in the same shape I was. He was absolutely hawk-nuts and didn't know anything about it. We took a goshawk from a nest by Donner [Lake] that we caught some game with. We caught some ducks and tried to catch rabbits, but the bird was a little 32-ouncer. It wasn't big enough to catch jackrabbits, but it would try. I think I caught my first head of game [with a longwing] with Jezebel, that was a [1958] passage peregrine from Brian McDonald. And it was a duck. I remember the high, the excitement. What we did, we got home with the duck and we had the duck for dinner, of course. And we sat the hawk on the perch in the kitchen and we ate the duck...

About 1957 or '56 I wrote [Brian McDonald] a letter and said blah-blah-blah, blah-blah-blah. And I had this much experience and I need -- I need a peregrine, and there is absolutely no way I can possibly get one where I live. And he wrote back and said: "You're absolutely right. And it's special" -- he took it upon his sweet self to see that I got a peregrine. Well, that was also a fortunate, fortunate acquaintance because he took me on to the beach three times. And you [Mike Yates] took me once. So I have four experiences on the beach.

I went to school with [David Jamieson], although I didn't know him a lot. And David was a true falconer. It was in his blood. And he heard through the grapevine somewhere -- I guess he was trying to learn how to get started in falconry and somebody passed along the information that I did it. And he

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Stephen Baptiste, David Jamieson, Brian McDonald, John Swift, Michael Yates

said: "Oh, boy, I know him." So he sought me out and I kind of shined him on because there were so many people that wanted to play. I needed somebody to clean the hawk house and steal pigeons. I gave him a book, The Lure and The Cure, the reprint from Bate and Slice Society, and said "go read this." And he did. And the rest is history. David went into the breeding business... he tried to get me to go into the breeding project with him and I told him you're just wasting your time. I'm not going to do it. All of history they tried this and it's just not to be done. Which is another smart move I made, to show my brilliance.

Without Brian McDonald and David Jamieson, I would never have been able to

realize the joy that I've experienced through the sport. Brian got it started and David finished it off. David and I spent 27 days in an 18-foot trailer somewhere. The temperature was 40 degrees below zero at night. And it would warm up to ten below zero in the daytime. We were this close face-to-face for all those days and I remember one time we -- I think it was my smoking cigarettes. He would ask me to go outside and I would say "no, it's too damn cold." He finally said, "Listen, this is my trailer." And I said, "Yes, and you're going to be watching it from the outside if you don't dummy up."

My first peregrine from David was a big, old black Peale's who was just so pretty. I named her Uhura because ... she was black and I



was a Trekkie. And we kind of hacked her and she was an imprint. I raised her in my, rolled up in my shirt. And she would follow me around in the garden like imprints do. I talk, she'd talk. She never screamed, but she would talk. She thought she was people. She was a high flying bird...and I kept her nine years. And I had one little old pickup truck that I had all the time. And on a few occasions...I turned her loose and got in that truck and drove with the dog out, trying to get up a hun or something. Drove for seven, eight, 10 miles. So, down the road, get out and not being able to see her and get the telemetry out and she would be dead overhead. She would just follow you. That was the best bird I ever had by far. And one day I caught three ducks in one flight with Uhura. She went up and knocked down a duck right at my feet. I grabbed it. It was a bufflehead or some little duck. I grabbed it away from her and she took off and caught another one and I grabbed it away from her and she took off and caught another one. All within a ten minute span. I've got a picture holding all three of them with her with a great huge full crop, standing on the fist looking down at them.

[On the formation of NAFA and the first Meet] I think it was an old perfume salesman named Fogerty that came through. He had a route. He was from England. And he had a route that he traveled and sold perfume to these stores. And he carried a little kestrel in an overnight bag everywhere he went. He would look for falconers and he came across us and said that Webster was organizing, trying to organize a group in Denver in 1960. I can't remember the figure, exact figure, but I'm sure it's readily available, how many of us went to Webby's. And of course, the names that I heard that were there were, you know, kind of icons to me. I recall Beebe sitting there on the mantle of his new fireplace, slate mantle and drew a goshawk, which I wanted right away to go get some shellac and shellac it. They didn't bother. Anyway... my idea was to throw a monkey wrench into the idea. I didn't want them to come up with any kind of club.

And Webster and I got to drinking, and I was going to drink his little ass under the table and just find out what he was all about. We were drinking Black Russians. We got awfully, awfully drunk. I don't think either one of us went down, but I'll tell you this, not much intelligible conversation went on after awhile. And to this day, he won't drink a Black Russian with me, although he did at the Reno meet. He drank one. But he signed

my book, the book that he gave me, "To the greatest Black Russian drinker of all time." Anyway, he won me over. I realized there was a need for a club, I guess. And there is. I don't know where falconry would be today without a good, strong organization. Certainly wouldn't be where it is now...so that was the informal start of NAFA right there.

So we decided we would meet in Reno the next year and formalize the organization, which we did. And I hosted it. And I was just proud as punch. Some people were disappointed, but Reno at the time was pretty much full of game. And I think there was relatively quite a few head of game taken compared to what you could do there today. I'm sure that ten different guys caught heads of game. [Mostly they flew] peregrines, goshawks, and prairie falcons and Cooper's hawk. Lou Davis had a little Cooper's hawk. The people at the meet, I remember the ones that took game mostly. Smiley had a peregrine, beach bird that scooped down across a lake and tried for a duck and came up with seaweed. That's memorable. And Jimmy Adamson had a European bird that caught a couple of rabbits. And there was a fellow that I, his name escapes me for the moment. Had a big haggard goshawk that dispatched a big giant jackrabbit so fast, I couldn't believe how easily that was done. And it was caught as an older passage bird. Made me realize the difference in an eyass and a passage goshawk right away. He had had it for some time. He was a teacher in California somewhere.

[Enderson] caught a pheasant [with a falcon]. Yeah, Enderson was there and Webster's little boy caught a quail with a little tiercel, beach bird. We mostly met at my mother's home at the time. She had a pretty big house, but we had a couple of parties. We went down to John Ascuaga's Nugget and showed some movies. I can't remember whether Morley was there. I guess Morley was there and brought some films. [Attendance was] thirty? Twenty-eight or thirty. I built a big weathering pen. Took me three weeks...it had a roof on it. We didn't have a guard on it like they do now.

Will reflected on his life as a falconer, and his words ring true for so many of us:

Well, you know, [falconry is] such a passion that I turned down good jobs. I turned down this, that, so on because of falconry. And I lived a whole different life because of falconry. As do all falconers. I think we've all got about the same story...I think falconers

are born. I think you go along until you discover that it's possible and then you do it. Or you attempt to do it. The highs are so high and the lows are so low, I don't know why anybody does it, to tell you the truth. Nothing can break your heart harder. Or nothing can make you feel better. The friendships that I have had. The hunting experiences...

— by Mike Yates



Bill with Ollie North (photo by Carrie Shinnors)

