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Gary and Becky Boberg, Dennis and Rosalina Grisco, Dan Fenske, James and Beverly Fenske, Robert and Bettie Winslow

The Gentleman Falconer



Whether the “consummate gentleman” or “a gentleman’s gentleman,” the one word everyone uses when talking about Henry Tyler Swain is, quite simply, “gentleman.” He was an unassuming and courteous man who never missed saying grace before a meal and who never argued with another person or spoke badly of anyone. “He might make a droll statement, but he never spoke unkindly about a single person,” said Bob Winslow, who was his friend for 47 years and talked to him a couple times a week for many years.

Henry was one of those falconers who came from the earlier self-taught years of the mid-1900s, and then became one of the players who helped form the sport into what it is today.

Born in Mississippi, he likely dabbled with kestrels as a kid before moving to California, where he joined the Army Air Corps at age 17. With more than three decades in the service and government work, his career ranged from plane crash investigator to Deputy Director of the Titan Missiles Division at Norton AFB, where he helped write some of the manuals. (His son, Michael, remembers vacations to Hawaii, and how his dad was always afraid of being kidnapped because of his job. Henry had married his wife, Pauline, in 1941, and you have to remember that the 1950s and ‘60s were deep in Cold War.)

Henry put his writing and organizing skills to good use, and when Fish & Game regulations were written and when the North American Falconers Association was created in 1961, he helped write many of the regulations and was a regular consultant. He was also instrumental in the creation of the California Hawking Club and wrote many articles on hawking, as well as bringing in European falconer guests to speak. Henry was a big fan of the European methodology.

Thanks to his Air Corps background, Henry could hop on military planes and visit falconers in Europe. He regularly visited Master Falconer Ronald Stevens in Ireland, making annual trips for 10-15 years. He also knew falconer Geoffrey Pollard in England.

Henry was present when Stevens and John Morris created the very first hybrid falcon — a Peregrine and a Saker. Today a variety of hybrids are commonly available.

Even when not in Great Britain, Henry was a proliferate letter writer, and many of his communiqués with Stevens and others can be found in the archives at the World Center for Birds of Prey in Idaho.

While visiting Stevens, Henry also met and became friends with Tony Huston (son of director John Huston and brother of Angelica Huston) who was also a falconer. And since Henry knew other people in Southern California in the movie business, you might catch him in a couple walk-on roles on the silver screen. (He’s reportedly in one of the bank robbery scenes of Cloris Leachman’s 1975 “Crazy

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Mama.) Henry liked the majestic aspect of the Peregrine, but he loved to try to trap Merlins and was definitely a Merlin man in his later hawking years. When calling his Merlins back to the lure, he had a unique whistle “that would give you thrills,” said his friend Bob McCallum, who admired Henry’s great rapport with the falcons. Another friend, Bob Winslow, said Henry was not so much a hunter as he was a person who just had a great appreciation and adoration for the birds and their abilities.

Henry was also a perfectionist. He loved challenges. “I think falconry was something he could not perfect,” said his son, Michael. “I think that’s what really snagged him on it.” Even Ronald Stevens once remarked on Henry’s perfectionism by saying that “Sherlock Holmes himself could not have been more thorough.”

Henry developed a perfect flying weight for his bird. But he also made beautiful, handmade laminated bows and arrows. He even perfected and designed a telescope with a clock-drive. (He was interested in watchmaking, too.) Henry had been an expert shot in the military and he owned an AyA Spanish-made side-by-side shotgun which his son has refurbished. “Anything that required hand-eye coordination, he was an expert at,” Michael said.

Although some friends remember Henry driving a VW bus painfully slow with dead-end side-trips while on nesting hunts, Michael also remembers his dad’s Italian-made Alfa Romeo with plenty of speeding tickets and newspapers laid down in the back for his birds.

Henry even owned an ocelot and was a member of an Ocelot Club. But there was another talent Henry was also known for — he was a world-class table tennis champion. Trophies — too many to count — had piled up since he was in his 20s. He won two Gold medals and two Silver medals in the Senior Olympics. Does it need to be mentioned that he made his own paddles?

And the young falconers — always rapt in attention to Henry’s falconry stories — would have been wise to note the fleeting smile that crossed Henry’s face when they over-confidently challenged him to a game of table tennis.

Reminiscences: Dan Fenske, Bob Winslow, Michael Swain, Dennis Grisco, Bob McCallum



Morley Nelson, Heinz Meng & Henry Swain at the 1990 CHC meet.

“Henry is a very fine falconer and awfully nice gentleman.”

– Ronald Stevens during a televised interview.

