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William F. Russell, Jr. M.D. and Falconer — by Jack Stoddart

(Text modified from article published in *American Falconry* Vol. 54. Mr. Stoddart's entire tribute may be found in Dr. Russell's file in the Archives of Falconry.)

William Fletcher Russell Jr. was born January 24, 1915 in Nashville, Tennessee to William Fletcher Russell Sr. and Clotilde des Jardins. He spent his early childhood living in several locations in the states and in other parts of the world. He spent his teens attending Horace Mann School for Boys, a private boy's school in New York City. He spent his freshman year at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, two years at the University of Arizona in Tucson and he obtained his B.A. Ed at the University of Denver in 1938. He obtained an M.A. Ed from Columbia University in 1940 and earned his M.D. there in 1945. After serving as a doctor in the army with a year in Yokohama Japan, Russell moved back to Denver in 1947. He researched tuberculosis at National Jewish Hospital until 1962, when he became the Medical Director of Jefferson County. He obtained a M.S. from C.U. in 1951 and frequently taught at the University of Colorado's medical school.

Dr. William Russell was the first falconer I contacted. Prior to meeting Russell, the only people I knew who had hawks were Charles Meiklejohn and Todd Hitchings. We were freshman attending the same junior high school in Littleton, Colorado. At that point, we knew how to trap mice and Kestrels. We flew our little falcons to the fist and tried to stoop them to the lure. During our sophomore year, our biology teacher Mrs. Rupel (who had worked with Russell when she was a lab technician at National Jewish Hospital) called and asked if he would coach us.

Soon after I started calling Dr. Russell, he came to my parent's home to get a look at the kid who wanted answers to all of the questions a beginning falconer asks. He arrived in a yellow school bus, which his family used as their car when they went to the mountains. (The Russells had 11 children, 7 girls and 4 boys.) He brought with him a 16 mm projector to show the color falconry movie footage

he had filmed in the early 1950's. The best footage was Pete Asborno and Larry Zuk hawking a small pond with an intermewed peregrine falcon. Another showed trapping Prairie Falcons with dho-gazza net system using a live Great Horned Owl to lure the falcons through the nets.

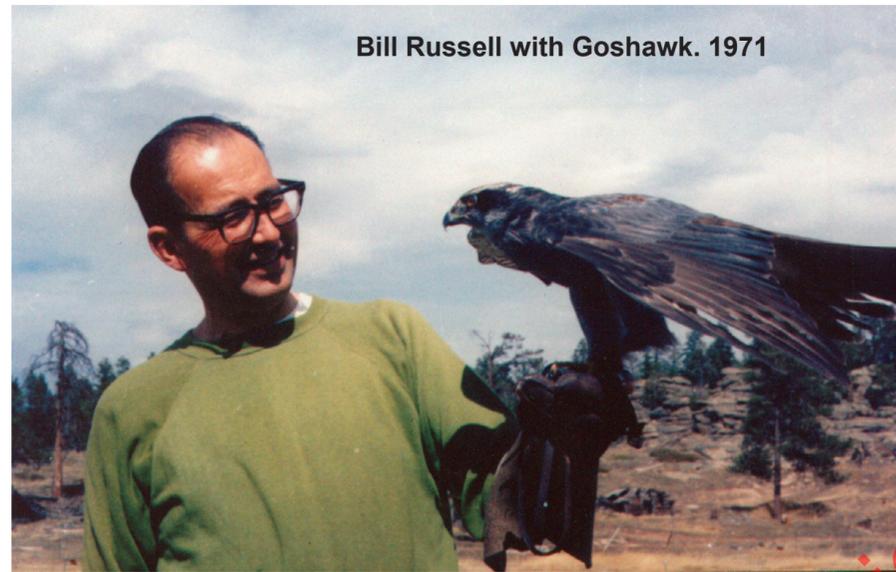
Falconers of Russell's and Pete Asborno's generation believed haggards were better hunters than passage hawks. They told stories about Asborno's haggard prairie tiercel. This famous tiercel took mallard ducks and cock pheasants.

Russell was a great teacher. Although I can weave dho-gazza nets, I know I could not describe how it is done, off of the top of my head, to anyone on the telephone. He could.

Young falconers living on the Front Range of Colorado during 1959-60 had a difficult time finding falconry books in the libraries. There were no falconry books in the book stores. Prior to meeting Russell, the only reference I found in libraries was the Encyclopedia Britannica, which pictured Captain Charles William R. Knight and his eagles. Russell told me that he had gone hawking with Captain Knight in England. Russell made it clear that he would not be in a position to hawk again for a long time, until his children were grown.

Within about six months of meeting Dr. Russell, we met Pete Asborno and we called him as well. Russell and Asborno readily acknowledge they were friends and had shared many experiences in the field together. Russell told me he had written the first falconry book in the U.S. and 250 copies were printed.

The Russells moved to the mountains in Conifer, Colorado in June of 1962. NAFA was formed over Thanksgiving weekend, at Hal & Katie Webster's home, in 1961. Russell did not participate and I don't think he ever joined NAFA. At that time in his life, his research was coming to a close. He authored and coauthored at least seven publications from his research for the treatment of tuberculosis. During that period he took on a new project. Several times a year, he would be flown to the Sioux and Navaho reservations. The small plane



would land on a dirt road close to his patients. Doctor Russell would treat his Native American tuberculosis patients in their homes with the Chemo drugs he had helped to perfect.

It took ten years before I had a chance to read a copy of Russell's book, "Falconry. A Handbook for Hunters". When Barry Watson obtained a copy of Russell's three chapter unpublished manuscript, I owned a copy of his book to compare with his manuscript. From the manuscript titled, "Action Anecdotes, Tales of Hunting with Hawks," and international passenger lists, we learned even more about this man's introduction to falconry and his adventures in the sport as a young adult.

Russell met Captain Charles W. R. Knight in 1931 and assisted him during his lectures in New York City. Knight was a naturalist, falconer, wildlife photographer, film maker and author who traveled the lecture circuit in the states and in England. Captain Knight played a major role in developing an interest in falconry in the U. S. His first lecture tour in the new world was in 1928 and his last was in 1953.

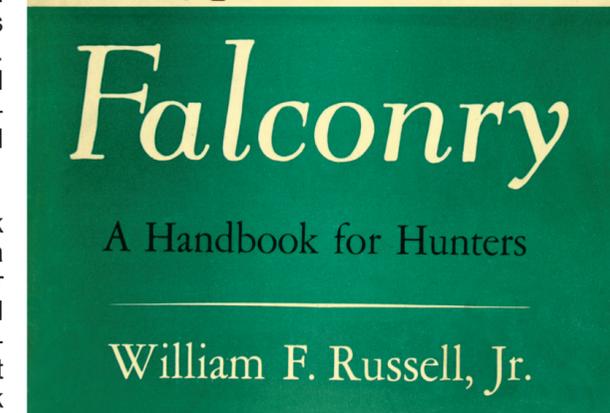
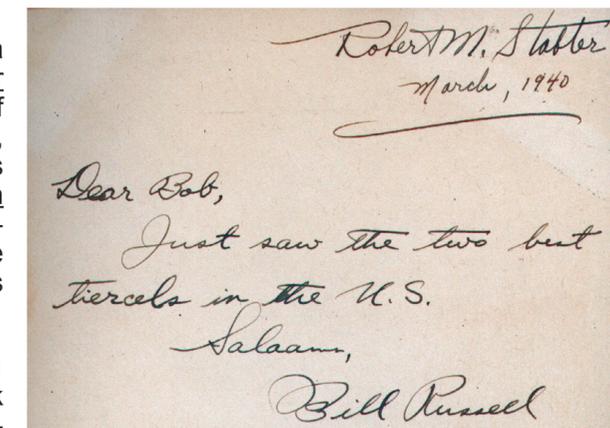
At age seventeen, in the summer of 1932, Russell traveled to Europe with his family. Early on the morning of August 6th, he arrived at Park Point, Captain Knight's home. He found Knight's eagle, Mr. Ramshaw, a red-tailed hawk named Susan, three immature peregrine falcons, one immature peregrine tiercel, two eyass goshawks and a tame great blue heron across the road from Knight's home in a fenced weathering area. There Russell met Hugh Knight, Captain Knight's brother, Hugh's son Norman B. Knight and nephew Phillip Glasier. The Knight clan weathered, trained and exercised their young peregrines to the lure. There soon after his arrival young Russell saw his first trained peregrine stooped to the lure by the Captain.

Norman, Phillip, the Captain and Russell took three falcons out to the country to enter one on a bagged Rook and provide slips at crows for other two. That evening, the Captain took Phillip and Russell to the Croydon Airport to pickup a shipment of hacked Finnish peregrines. For the cost of shipping, Captain Knight gave Russell his pick

of the two fresh hacked Finnish tiercel peregrines that were the property of the BFC. Russell had an exciting busy first day on his visit.

On August 10th, young Bill, traveled by train to the annual meet of the BFC, on the Wiltshire Downs with his new peregrine hooded on his fist and a block perch strapped to his suitcase. During the next ten days, he participated in entering and hawking crows with eyass peregrines. The hawking party consisted of Hugh Knight, Phillip Glasier, Norman B. Knight, Sir Phillip Manson-Bahr and his brother Hugh, Jack G. Mavrogordato, J. Harry Savory, George Edward Lodge (age 60 at the time) and several ladies of the Knight family. There were other falconers present as well, but by the time Russell started writing his memoirs, he had forgotten some of their names. Although there were young goshawks for rabbits, Merlins for larks, and Sparrowhawks for small passerines, young Russell's goal was to participate in crow hawking

Dr. Russell's inscription in a copy for his good friend Doc Stabler



with the young peregrines. Some of the young falcons were hacked and some were hard-pinned on their blocks. Because the young peregrines were taken from Lundy Island, Scotland, Ireland and as far away as Finland, the falcons were a couple of weeks apart in age. While the hacked peregrines that just arrived from Finland were still in training, the falcons from Ireland and Lundy Island had been flown to the lure, entered on crows and were hunting crows.

By 1932, the British had abandoned their horse-drawn enclosed hawk vans. The Knight hawking party hawked from the Captain's small Austin roadster with a rumble seat. Three falcons rode hooded and tethered to the back of the rumble seat.

The following is a quote from Russell's unfinished manuscript:

"In the meantime, the Captain and Phillip were actively hunting crows with their three falcons. During the time that Big Bill (Knight's nick name for Russell) was with them, the Captain and Phillip caught almost three crows with each falcon each day, but not all of these fights were good enough to remember. This meant that they were finding at least nine fairly good chances at crows each day----- no mean achievement."

These three lonely chapters of Russell's wonderful manuscript, written in the third person, like his book, were gathered from his early diaries. Possibly, Russell was working on it at the time of his death. This three chapter manuscript can be read in the Archives of Falconry at the World Center for Birds of Prey, Boise, Idaho.

Russell flew a hacked female "Duck Hawk" in 1939 and probably lost the bird in Colorado. He stated he trapped a passage prairie tiercel one week after he lost the hacked peregrine. Since so few Peregrines were taken out of the wild in Colorado, it is likely he acquired the bird east of the Mississippi River where he had many experiences finding peregrine eyries in New York and in New Hampshire. Russell stated, to his knowledge, this was the first peregrine hacked and flown in the U.S.

Russell is most remembered for writing the first new world falconry book while he was hospitalized for severe asthma when he was living in Denver, Colorado. His book *Falconry, a Hand Book for Hunters*, published in 1940, was a wonderful resource then and it is still a good general falconry book today. Russell had wonderful experiences to draw upon and he was a student of the sport.

Chapter VIII, entitled Crow Hawking, based on his experiences hawking crows on the Wiltshire Downs in 1932, is a valuable resource to anyone interested. In his discussion of Merlins, he stated there were no starlings in the western U.S. and when the starling population expanded to the western states, they would be the perfect quarry for Merlins.

In late fall of 1940, while he was attending Columbia, he and Knight decided to take a crow-hawking trip to Florida over the holidays. They reclaimed two passage peregrines that were housed and weathered on the roof of Russell's apartment building. Russell wrote the first article, in the first American Falconers' Club Journal, which was published in 1941. The article, "Misery in Florida," is a condensed overview of a crow hawking trip Knight and Russell took to Florida with those two peregrines. "Misery," was the name of the passage peregrine on loan from Luff Meredith. Misery successfully caught two crows in three days of crow hawking on their trip. It is likely these were the first crows intentionally caught by a trained falcon in the North America. A more detailed report of their efforts to reclaim the falcons and the first hawking trip in the U.S. comes from a forty-nine page report Russell sent his friend William D. Sargent entitled Odeechobee Crows, Caught With A Hunting Falcon authored by Capt. C.W.R. Knight & Wm. F. Russell Jr.

John E. Russell reported that he accompanied his father when he gave a lecture on C.U. campus in April 1971. Doctor Russell had an intermewed passage goshawk named "Anksa" (he trapped in his yard in Conifer) and an intermewed passage prairie falcon named "Desba" at the time of his death due to a heart attack on April 27, 1972.

Anksa

— by John E. Russell

In October of 1969, an immature Goshawk started taking our pigeons in Conifer. There was a very heavy early winter snow and Dad decided to trap her. I think we began with the little pigeon harness that did not work. Finally we caught her in an automatic stationary trap my father had just finished making. Dad almost always used Native American names for his birds. He named this one "Anksa". We released Anksa in at our home in Conifer after dad passed away. The hawk had never had lived as an adult in the wild. She flew off and returned every year. When we saw her we'd thaw out a frozen kosher chicken head and put it on our porch rail. She'd sweep in fast and take it. She came back every summer for many years! For a couple of those years she showed up with a male, and nested not far from our house. After the pair hatched out a chick or two, the family of Goshawks all took food from our porch railing. In the proceeding years they killed all of our pigeons when they were flying free out of the pigeon loft.

While we have no way to evaluate how many falconers Russell directly coached, it is clear that he made considerable contributions to the sport of falconry and to the treatment of the most fatal human disease of his generation.



Photo by Pat Coffey-Wilshire in an article by Glenn Siemiller, "A Hawk in the Hand", in *Rocky Mountain Life*, March 1948



Bill Russell with Eagle. Late 1950s.

Bill Russell. Early 1930s



Bill Russell with Prairie Falcon. Late 1940s

