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WOOD CARVINGS.
Right- a Chinese Hawk Waterer by Ben Stilwell.



BEN STILWELL, a Remembrance

By S. K. Carnie

Benjamin Watson Stilwell was born in China, son of Joseph Warren Stilwell, then a U.S. Army officer language/area student. Joe Stilwell later earned fame commanding U.S. forces in the China-Burma-India Theatre during World War II when he was known admiringly by his troops as “Vinegar Joe.”

Reflecting Ben’s character, while the war-time draft was still in effect, he volunteered for military service—despite knowing his severe asthma would have exempted him. To avoid any hint of favoritism (being the son of so famous a general and with his older brother already a general and three sisters married to two colonels and a lieutenant colonel), he enlisted in the U.S. Navy, Seaman 3rd Class.

Ben had shown an interest in birds at an early age, exemplified when his parents felt it appropriate to give him a Chinese falconer’s “hawk-waterer,” even before his teens. By the time I first met him in 1945, when he had begun studies at nearby Stanford University, his fascination with falconry was obvious. His first bird, however, was a haggard female Great Horned Owl, followed by an eyess peregrine most notable for his vocal powers. Still, we persevered, enchanted by references to the sport in the popular press of the day; “starry-eyed kids” as Ben later put it.

Our fortunes drastically changed when we made contact with Minard Stevens, an experienced falconer living just 50 miles away. Ben by then had acquired a war-surplus Jeep and, with fellow “starry-eyed kid” Bill Kurtz, we three began a series of weekend pilgrimages. Arriving before lunch on Saturdays, we ate “Steve” and his wife “Dirk” out of house and home, slept overnight on their living room floor, and dominated their weekends with hawk talk! Steve had a magnificent falconry library which he generously shared with us. The walls of their tiny house were covered by paintings sent to Steve from India by his friend Bob Widmeier who was serving there during World War II. Steve imparted to us not only a wealth of falconry experience but an appreciation for the sport’s associated art, literature, and history. Perhaps more important, Steve instilled in us an ethical standard lasting the rest of our lives.

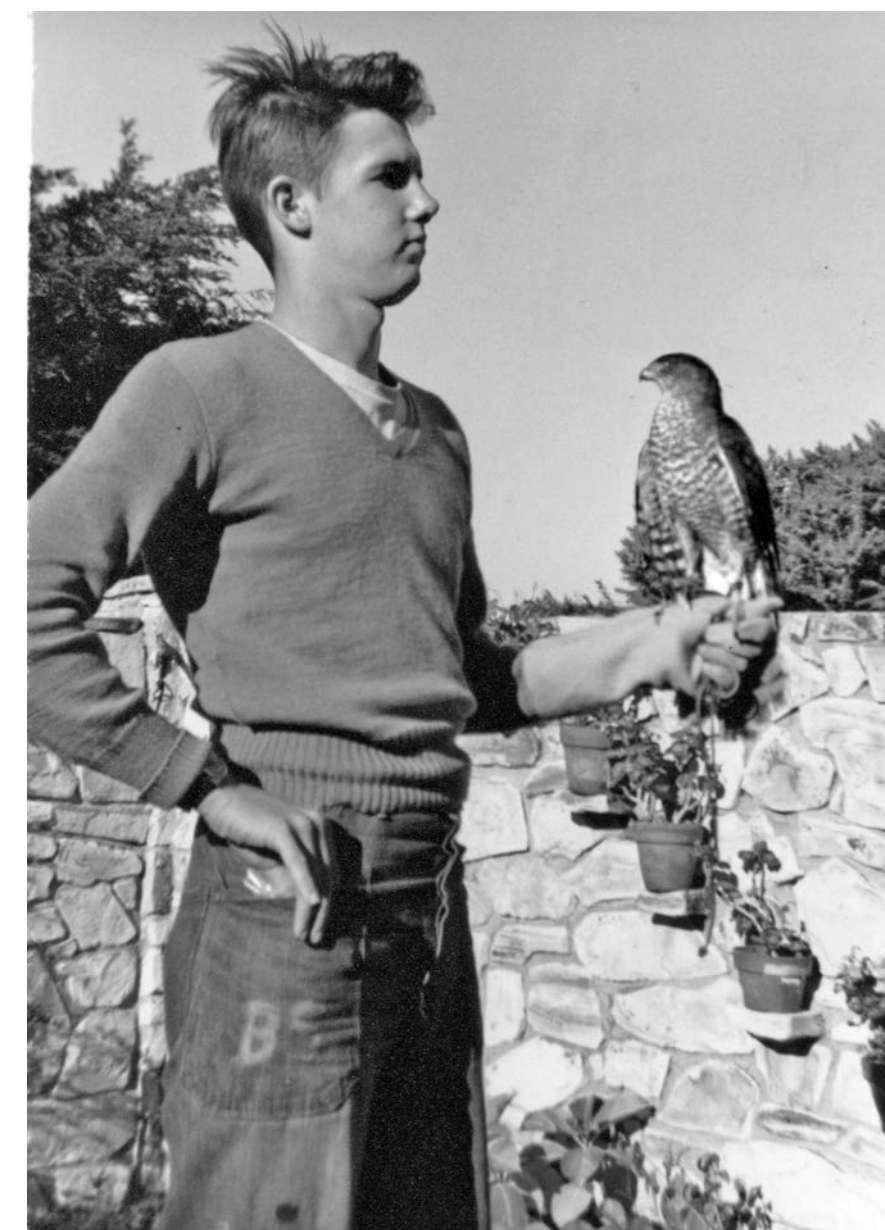
Beyond the “hawk talk,” our adventures were wide. There were jaunts afield, looking for eyries and trapping, all with Steve’s imparted wisdom. On one weekend trapping trip we found we had forgotten our silverware. “No problem” said Ben. With his upbringing in China, he cut a couple of willow branches and showed us how use them as chopsticks. But the rest of us still found it hard to eat canned fruit cocktail with a couple of sticks. Eventually, together we published a reprinting of Bert’s famed treatise on shortwings, for the occasion deeming ourselves (with tongue in cheek) “The Bate and Slice Society.” Ben, thus, became one of the original five “charter” members of this five-member, unchartered club.

When Ben left Stanford he went on to medical school at Canada’s



McGill University. His eventual medical specialty was pathology, a reflection of his non-extroverted personality. I always thought he should have become a surgeon, however, since he was incredibly capable with his hands. **Early on he undertook to carve a stooping falcon, using observations on our weekend eyrie trips to ensure its accuracy. That he carved in maple (an exceptionally hard wood) only added credit to the beauty of his finished product. He later carved a soaring falcon with similar results, both carvings now in the collections of The Archives of Falconry.**

In undertaking his medical career he left behind active participation in falconry, but not before putting his hand to a haggard peregrine (they were legal then), two Cooper’s Hawks (one a haggard, the other an eyess hacked with my own in 1948) and a lovely big eyess German goshawk. Career or no, Ben retained at least a keen, if inactive, interest in falconry until his passing. **If the number of his birds was small, the fascination and devotion he displayed with them was a true credit, not only to himself but to the sport. R.I.P.**



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