

LOOK WHO'S TALKING

by Connie Mako Miller

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The year is 1954. As the considerable crowd of eager spectators looks on, an 11-year-old boy in a shirt of Winchester red and black mounts a 20-gauge Model 12 to his shoulder while his father hand-throws three clay birds, then four into the air. Pointing the shotgun, the little fellow shoots, pumps faster than lightning and smokes every target before any can hit the ground. Crush, crush, crush! The audience applauds loudly and laughs with pleasure. His father playfully jokes, "Wow. That was pretty good! But after all, whose show is this?"

The "show" was a Winchester shooting exhibition, and it belonged to the boy's father, the one and only Herb Parsons. Wielding the 20 gauge with happy precision for the approving audience and cameras was Herbert Lynn Parsons. By 1954, Lynn, as his daddy called him, was an old pro on his dad's exhibition circuit. He'd been crisscrossing the country with his father during the summer months for two years and had a gun in his hands from the time he was in a stroller.

Bringing you back to today, 50+ years later, that boy is nearing retirement age. Dr. H. Lynn Parsons has spent his working career as a surgeon, while his life's work has been preserving the history of his father's exhibition shooting.

If you are not familiar with Lynn's dad and the film *Showman Shooter*, you have missed out on one of the most spectacular exhibition shooters of all time. Joel Herbert Parsons (1908-1959) was the Winchester-Western "Showman Shooter," living up to his title by performing feats of rifle and shotgun skill, along with brilliantly entertaining chatter few others before him displayed and none that have come after him could surpass. Herb's appeal and charismatic personality have never been equaled. A *True* magazine article that chronicled Herb's accomplishments tagged him as the "Showman Shooter" and the moniker stuck, to endure across decades as testimony

MEET:

Herb & Lynn Parsons

Photo courtesy Dr. H. Lynn Parsons



to Herb's extreme talent and popularity. If there is an "it" factor, Herb Parsons had "it."

Happily, some of Herb's master strokes with long guns are preserved in DVD or VHS format. If it were not for Lynn and his family, the *Showman Shooter* film would have disappeared into extinction as the 16mm film decayed. The originals were lost, but Lynn had two copies of the 16mm film he kept in a closet. Those were pieced together to create one final copy that has been restored and is available at www.shotgunsportsmagazine.com/store. If you visit www.showmanshooter.com, you can click your way into some fascinating history about Herb Parsons and photographs of him and his family.

Showman Shooter was filmed in segments at several locations. Herb and Lynn's shooting exhibition mentioned at the start of this interview was at Williamsport, Pennsylvania. The "den" scenes were actually captured at a studio in New York City, while the hunting sequences were caught across the river in New Jersey. Ted Husing, a famous sportscaster with a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame and American Sportscasters Association Hall-of-Fame inductee, narrated the

action and interviewed Herb.

Lynn told me the filming took about two weeks. He recalled the excitement, beginning with his first flight on an airplane into New York City. He still has the ticket! In those days, flying was not the everyday occurrence it is today. The flight attendants took special care of Lynn, delivering him safely to his father at the airport. During the time spent at the studio, pictures were taken of Lynn sitting behind the camera and posing in the other areas of the set.

Capturing the rifle and shotgun exhibition was a challenge to the cameramen of the 1950s. There were no ready solutions to many of their filming problems, so responses had to be invented on the spot. One dilemma the production people had to solve was the low visibility of the clay targets being thrown by Herb. With the concave black side of the target facing the camera, they were hard to see. They brainstormed ideas and found a solution was to paint the black side of the target a brighter color. The production crew and their volunteered assistant, Lynn, spent hour upon tiring hour with paint brush in hand, coloring the hundreds of targets needed for the filming. Lynn didn't mind the job, as it was a

release from the interminable waiting during the filming process.

There are a couple head-on, slow-motion sequences in *Showman Shooter* taken of Herb blasting an orange and an egg with my all-time favorite gun, a Model 42 Winchester. The impasse of those shots was how to get a picture of Herb shooting towards the camera, with the orange and egg exploding, without also getting the cameraman! What they came up with was a way to station the brave cameraman high atop a flatbed truck, placing a door with a glass window in front of him. The camera caught the picture through the glass. You have to think that camera operator was probably wondering what the heck

next to his dad facing the lens. The reason for that look is the director told him to look directly at the blinding sun-reflective tin. Smiling for the camera was sometimes a painful process, he discovered!

Herb traveled throughout the United States and parts of Canada as a Winchester salesman and their sole exhibition shooter. One year he would make appearances in the East and the next in the western portions of the country. His shows were booked well in advance, as he was highly popular and in great demand.

When school was out, Lynn traveled and shot in the show. At just nine years old, he made his premier. In the home-

entertain 5,000 appreciative fans. (Can you imagine 5,000 women, children and men coming out to watch a shooting exhibition today?) From North Carolina, the Parsons headed to the East Coast, Groton, New York, Winchester's home in New Haven, Connecticut, Manchester, New Hampshire, Hallowell, Maine, and back to New Haven. Warily driving home to Somerville, Tennessee, Herb and Lynn had traveled over 5,000 miles in that one summer! Remember, there weren't all the interstate highways crisscrossing the country in those days, just secondary roads. What a schedule! But, for a boy, it was a grand adventure with his dad.

As Lynn's strength and stature grew, he graduated from shooting six single targets thrown by his dad to two more, then three, totaling 11 birds shot in his dad's show. Breaking four hand-thrown clay targets and expertly hitting 15 birds was accomplished when he was 11 years old. Somewhere along the line, Lynn thought it would be splendid fun to purposely miss the single target his dad threw for him as the first shot then pump the gun quickly and break the bird with his second shell. Lynn recalled, "Needless to say, that didn't go on for very long!"

A year later, in 1955, Lynn's younger brother, Jerry, age 9, was big enough to join the team, shooting a 20-gauge newly released Winchester Model 50 autoloader. Jerry is now Dr. Jerry Parsons, a Professor at Texas A&M and a Texas Cooperative Horticulturist living in the San Antonio area.

Around 1956, with Lynn and Jerry both shooting in their father's exhibition, the lawyers at Winchester became concerned about child labor laws and liability. When the attorneys demanded the boys no longer participate because of liability issues, it greatly upset Herb. Lynn has copies of correspondence between the Winchester legal department and his father that contain some intense words on the matter. In 1957, at the International Scout-A-Rama held at the Los Angeles Coliseum, Lynn was paid \$25 for an appearance and, therefore, was allowed to shoot. By then, 14-year-old Lynn's pump gun was smoking six clay targets thrown simultaneously by his father.

Herb had a Winchester-red Pontiac station wagon in the latter 1950s. Loaded in it were all his guns in a



Photo by David B. Eisendrath, Jr., Brooklyn, NY; Photo courtesy Dr. H. Lynn Parsons

This photo was taken by a True magazine photographer for an article which appeared in the July 1954 issue (the photo was not used). The first target had been broken and the second was in the air. Notice Herb is talking and focused on Lynn, who said, "I'm not sure whether he was concerned about me or his beloved Model 12 — 'Mae West' — which was airborne!"

he was getting himself into. Did he call home to ask his wife if she'd paid his life insurance premium that month, or did he wonder if *she* was the one who came up with the idea of the head-on shot in the first place? *Showman Shooter* later received production awards for the filming techniques, which were advanced for the times.

When the director called "Lights, camera, action!" the lighting was accomplished by setting up a large sheet of tin or glass to reflect the sun onto the scene. In one shot, it appears as if Lynn's face is contorted with pain or acute displeasure as he is standing

town of another legend of shooting, Annie Oakley in Greenville, Ohio, Lynn was introduced to an audience of Boy Scouts and others totaling over 3,300 people. You might think a youngster of nine could be intimidated. Not Lynn! He said, "I was a kid. It was great fun!"

That same year, 1952, Herb and his son motored to Canton and Columbus, Ohio, eastward to Erie, Pennsylvania, into Pittsburgh and on to Altoona and Lewisburg. From there, it was south to West Virginia and down to North Carolina. They were booked at Pisgah National Forest in North Carolina to



Lynn's first performance in Annie Oakley's hometown of Greenville, Ohio, at nine years old. His dad would throw six clay targets up one at a time, then two and then three, totaling 11.

specially-made box, clothes, bags and everything else needed for visiting customers and putting on an exhibition. This car grabbed my imagination as I viewed it at showman shooter.com. I formed a mental picture of it totting happy, laughing Herb, Lynn, Jerry and their mother Oneita around the country. The two gigantic Winchester shotgun shells on top were an obvious advertisement, but they also hid the big speaker system Herb used to call out and capture a town's attention.

When Jerry and Lynn returned to school, Herb continued with his job. He was hired in 1929 as a salesman for the Mississippi territory. Upon Herb's early passing in 1959 at age 51, he had been a Winchester man for 30 years.

Imagine how thrilled the 21-year-old Herb must have been upon receiving word he had gotten the job at Winchester. Since he was a small boy of seven wielding a Winchester 22-caliber single-shot rifle, his love of hunting and shooting was only surpassed by his devotion to family and church. The Parsons were outdoorsmen and hunters, and Herb's father taught him how to shoot. It quickly became apparent Herb was gifted, as the young boy took down quicker-than-quick quail not with a scattering

pellet-filled shotgun but with his little Winchester rifle!

When Herb was in high school, shooting legend and Winchester representative Adolph "Ad" Topperwein came to town. At the high-school football field in Somerville, Tennessee, the teenager was awestruck as Topperwein performed shot after miraculous shot. Right then and there, Herb knew he wanted to follow in Topperwein's footsteps as an exhibition shooter. In correspondence, Topperwein suggested to

Herb shooting coal picked up at the railroad yard would be an excellent way to practice and broaden his skills. Lynn still has that letter from Topperwein.

As a salesman for Winchester, Herb was expected to not only visit every little town, hardware store and minuscule gun club in the territory but also repair guns, fix trap machines and shoot competitively. Of course, to demonstrate the Winchester product line, he performed behind the store, in a field or wherever the merchant gathered his customers to watch. I imagine Herb used lines like the ones he volleys off in *Showman Shooter*. The wonderful patter displayed Herb's salesmanship, humor and love of hunting. While demonstrating the Winchester 351 semiautomatic rifle with a clip, Herb said, "S'pose you were to see a nice big buck in a real close place. You just drop the ole rifle to the side and..." whereupon he grabbed the gun tightly in his hands, shot from the hip (left-handed, nonetheless) and, with a rapid burst of tat-a-tat-tat, rolled a large can across the ground. As the crowd applauded, he joked, "Well, if you don't get him [the deer], you'll cut down a tree and hold 'im till you get there!" By the way, Herb claimed exhibition shots with the 351 were the most difficult,



Here is Lynn in his stroller in the backyard with his father. Lynn was not quite a year old and already getting used to the feel of a gun in his hands.

as he started with a large piece of fruit and worked down to a marble. Lynn's father told him the recoil on the high-powered rifle made it difficult to control when shooting such small objects.

What occurred to me the very first time I watched *Showman Shooter* and still keeps me in absolute awe is how incredibly difficult it is to throw an armful of clay targets into the air and have them separate well enough to shoot individually. Those rascally birds always seem to want to flock together just when you don't want them to. Herb threw the clays up so deftly they didn't group. That is a skilled feat in itself, just as difficult as shooting the birds. Added to all that, Herb also chatted up the crowd while tossing the targets and shooting them. Talk about multi-tasking...that is the ultimate!

As Herb's skills progressed and his reputation grew, Topperwein's vision started to fail. He had slated Herb as his heir apparent to the Winchester exhibition circuit and mentored him for that role. In part, Herb's showmanship grew out of his days with Topperwein.

Some 238 military installations and bases welcomed Herb as he toured, giving out his special brand of Tennessee wit to the boys in uniform. When war broke out, Herb entered the U.S. Army Air Forces and became a Staff Sergeant and Gunnery Instructor at Williams Field in Chandler, Arizona. Sometime after the war, Herb developed an effective technique for accurately shooting an automatic rifle when confronted with a combat situation. The method helped eliminate the problem of the automatic rifle rising upward as it was shot in rapid succession. Herb told a reporter for the *Milwaukee Sentinel* in the Sunday, September 14, 1952, edition, "It's simply a new way to hold the rifle, something that could be adopted without spending a single government dollar." According to the article, Herb said, "You push with the left arm and pull with the right, just as though you were trying to stretch the barrel. This acts as a brake and cushions the recoil, eliminating the 'climb.' No re-aiming necessary." To demonstrate, Herb asked a sailor to fire the rifle the way he was trained to shoot it in boot camp. The soldier was a good shot and did quite well. Then Herb explained to the sailor his push/pull technique, with results

Photo courtesy Dr. H. Lynn Parsons



A photo of Lynn and his dad that has never been seen before. They were in the Los Angeles Coliseum in 1957 at the International "Scout-a-rama." Herb had snuck in a sixth target when he hand-threw them for Lynn, who broke them all with room to spare. For this performance, Lynn was paid \$25 because of an edict from the Winchester legal department.

the reporter called "amazing," an incredible improvement in accuracy.

Clair Jordon of the Denver, Colorado, *Rocky Mountain News*, on March 29, 1953, was among other correspondents who also reported on Herb's technique. Mr. Jordon's article in the Saturday edition was heartbreaking as he relayed he was fearful that, as a WWII cavalry trainer, he had taught his rookies wrong. You could sense his horror and heartbreak as Jordon told how he felt he had sent men to their deaths because of the inferior training he had given them. Jordon believed if he could have taught Herb's weapon-handling methods, lives would have been saved. Herb presented the Pentagon with his findings in hopes they would act to see changes were made to the armed forces training manuals. He was completely ignored. That was always a frustration to Herb and

Lynn, even all these years later.

Winchester advertisements from the era called Herb the "Winchester Wizard." Certainly, he was a wizard, using up to 16 guns in his shooting exhibitions. Of all the shotguns and rifles Herb used in his shows, only one did he actually own. It was a nickel-plated, 12-gauge Model 12 with light-colored, bird's-eye maple stock and forend presented to him by Winchester. It had a Full-choked barrel, along with another Modified-choked barrel Herb primarily used in the show. Herb named it "Mae West" because, he said, the gun was "blonde and had such beautiful features." You can see him loading it with seven Western shotshells in the *Showman Shooter* video.

My favorite picture of Mae West is one Lynn sent us. It was taken by a *True* magazine photographer during an

Dr. Lynn Parsons

Trapshooting Family Tradition

Place of birth: Somerville, Tennessee

Home: Bellefontaine, Ohio

Age: 64

Occupation: Surgeon

First job: Soda jerk in our hometown drugstore, where I made 25¢ per hour

First gun: A Model 12 20 gauge for exhibitions and .410 for hunting

Favorite:

TV Show: *Sunday Morning* on CBS

Candy bar: Almond Joy®

Fast food: KFC®

Italian dish: Good spaghetti

Car: Acura

Number: 12

Gun: Model 12

Hobbies: Trapshooting, hunting and tennis

Shotgun shells: Winchester

Movie: *Collateral*

Shotgun game: Trap and hunting quail

Adult beverage: Gin and tonic

Pet: I had great bird dogs over the years, but none right now.

Quality you possess: My diagnostic and technical skills in the performance of surgery.

Who you most admire: My father and his mentor, Adolph Topperwein, are, of course, at the top of my list. I have also become close with Kay Ohye, John Satterwhite and Tom Knapp.

The smartest thing you've done: Becoming the father of two wonderful daughters.

The dumbest thing you've done: After my father's death, not continuing to shoot for 30 years.

Your personal motto: My father used to tell me and other kids to strive to be the best in whatever you do in life. My philosophy is to follow your bliss and strive to be the best you can be.

Your greatest extravagance: The Rolex® watch I purchased 35 years ago and still wear.

If you won the lottery: I'd spend it on my daughters, Diana Lynn Parsons and Melissa Ann Parsons-Healy, and my year-old twin grandsons.

The best advice anyone has given you: Gun safety, gun handling and sportsmanship.

Your utter misery: Shooting trap on a squad between two women who are new shooters...shooting semiautomatic shotguns...shooting reloads.

Your biggest regret: My father's untimely death.

Your greatest fear:

Liberal Democrats!

exhibition at Ames Plantation, where the National Bird Dog Trials were being held in Grand Junction, Tennessee. The photo vividly shows Herb talking to the crowd after he's already tossed two targets into the air, shot one and is throwing Mae West for Lynn to catch so he can pick up the next shotgun to finish his demonstration. Even though Herb is doing all this at once, you can almost see in daddy Herb's eyes a silent message of concern. Now, whether that message was concern Lynn might drop Mae West or concern Lynn might be knocked on the noggin by the stock, I'm not sure! It's a picture that portrays the showman, father and shooter all rolled into one.

The other guns used by Herb in his exhibitions were given to the Parsons family upon Herb's death. Since then, the family has lent them to the Buffalo Bill Historical Museum (see the May 2006 issue of *Shotgun Sports*). I visited the exhibit when I was in Cody last year. It's a wonderful display with Herb's maroon shooting sweater, photos, guns and other memorabilia. There is also a monitor that runs the *Showman Shooter* video nonstop. While I was there, in front of the screen, sitting on a stool, was a skinny boy of about 13

wearing a striped polo shirt. He was leaning forward so drastically his nose was only about 10" from the monitor, blissfully watching Herb perform his magic. I said something or other to the young man, and he never took his eyes off the screen, just moved his shoulders to politely reply. At that moment I thought surely Herb, a man who loved nothing better than spending time with kids and teaching them about gun safety and sportsmanship, would have enjoyed it. Fifty years after his death, he is still entertaining and teaching!

Lynn hunted and shot very little after his dad's premature death in 1959. Needing a distraction from the medical profession in 1988, Lynn felt a hobby would help, and that returned him to his roots. That year he became a life member of the Amateur Trapshooting Association (ATA) and is now on the Trapshooting Hall of Fame Board.

A 30" Diamond Grade Winchester (of course, a Winchester) over & under was Lynn's first gun. About six years ago, after taking lessons with his friend Kay Ohye, Lynn bought a Krieghoff K-80 Combo. The single is 34" and the over & under barrel is 32". Most assuredly, he runs Winchester shells down those barrels.

Photo by Soundmasters, Inc., New York, NY; Photo courtesy Dr. H. Lynn Parsons



A shot of Lynn's father performing "The Egg Shot" during the filming of Showman Shooter. Notice the many reflectors and protective camera cover. Those reflectors worked very well.

MEET: Herb & Lynn Parsons

Lynn told me, with his professional obligations, he has not had the opportunity to shoot as much as he would like. Yet, he has had numerous wins on the trap field and been promoted to the 27-yard line. His dad would be proud! Perhaps the belt buckle Lynn wears helps guide his gun to the target. It contains two coins with holes shot through them, one shot by his father Herb and one by Ad Topperwein. If ever there were two guys who could bring you good luck on the shooting range, it would be Herb and Topperwein.

I'm sure you are wondering what types of shots Herb and Lynn made when performing the shooting show. I did not try to describe them because there simply are not enough words to portray the look, feel, joy and action of the Showman Shooter.

There is so much more to say about Herb and his sons, Jerry and Lynn, I feel remiss. I didn't even mention Lynn's 14th birthday when he appeared on NBC's "Wide, Wide World with Dave Garroway." The program featured a duck-hunting segment in Arkansas. I also failed to tell you Herb



Photo by Clarence Roberson Photography, Enid, OK. Photo courtesy Dr. H. Lynn Parsons

The belt buckle Lynn is wearing is the only one he wears when shooting. It is a one-of-a-kind buckle with two silver coins with holes shot by Herb Parsons and Ad Topperwein.

was a multi-time international and national duck-calling champion, an ATA All-American (1949-1958) and, in 1955 when the ATA changed the maximum handicap yardage mark from 25 to 27 yards, Herb was the first industry person to earn a yard with a 99, putting him on the 26-yard line.

Attempting to ease my aching conscience, I will leave you with Herb's widely quoted and superb wisdom: "If you hunt with your boy today, you'll avoid hunting for him tomorrow. It's nice if you hunt with him; it's a heartache if you hunt for him." Why not take your kid to Cody, Wyoming, to see the Herb Parsons display at the Buffalo Bill Historical Center, or get a copy of *Showman Shooter* and watch it with your kid. Then go out and enjoy a day of shooting together! **SS**

Connie Mako Miller's shooting career began in 1969 with trapshooting lessons at the Winchester Club in Cleveland, Ohio. In 1988, she attained ATA Lady High Handicap Average in Ohio, 8th in the U.S. She was chosen for the NSCA All-American Team two times, four times Michigan State Lady Champ, five times Ohio State Lady Champ and Runner-Up in the NSCA National Champion of Champions in 1993. She began writing for *Shotgun Sports* in March, 1997.

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