

"Our Life with Birds"

Very first draft
sub

BIRDS

It's all probably Freudian, of course. Whatever the reasons, my twin brother Scott and I have been fascinated by flight for as long and perhaps even longer than we can remember. But it was not the flight of birds or butterflies that captivated our imaginations at first. It was airplanes.

Rochester, Minnesota where we were born on New Year's Eve 1942 was a smaller world then, especially for children. It was wartime. No television. No internet or high tech toys to stimulate or distract our imaginations. And no money either. With Dad away at war in the Pacific our amusements were simple. In our yard there was a sandpile with shovels, tin dump trucks and buckets. I remember with pleasure those trips with mom, grandmothers and aunts to uncle Ted's farm out in the country or to nearby parks, to Silver Lake, and to Mayowood, the forested estate of one of the Mayo brothers of Mayo Clinic fame. And it was always a special treat to go to the Rochester Municipal Airport to watch the planes land and take off. Powered flight was less than forty years old, so I imagine our elders were as impressed with the spectacle as we were.

Our hometown's location in the midwest made it a frequent re-fueling stop for military aircraft criss-crossing the country on war missions. I don't know if it's a genuine memory or simply based on Mom's oft-repeated stories, but I think I can recall being held and petted by Russian Pilots on their long way home with lend-lease aircraft. All these Russians and many of the American pilots as well were women.

Back at our house and with scissors, paper and paste Scott and I would make model airplanes which sooner or later would all be launched from our front yard on windy days. When they vanished into the crisp northern air we were convinced that they had flown to the Rochester airport.

Even at this early time in our lives it was Scott who was the primary model maker. I remember a ship model kit which Mother bought at the nearby model shop of Mr. Westfall. It was an aircraft carrier, all made of cardboard that could be put together without glue from what looked like a thousand pieces punched out from large sheets. Once assembled by Scott, no mean feat for a boy of four, the deck of the vessel had scores of little cardboard airplanes. One of our favorite slogans at this time was "Bombs over Tokyo!"

By the time he finished with the carrier model Scott

was already making cardboard facsimiles of houses and farm buildings. He would years later refine these skills with exquisite models of mining camp buildings for his HO gauge railroad. He never lost his love of ship model building though. Eventually he turned his attention to wooden model kits of historic ships, and both of us would immerse ourselves in the study of the eras in which they sailed. I remember fondly a beautiful little pirate ship, the fictional Hispaniola from Robert Louis Stevenson's "Treasure Island." Eventually Scott would research, design and build his own models of Historic ships.

In keeping us supplied with various materials for our indoor art activities, Mother bravely brought home a few packages of plasticene modelling clay inspite of knowing that the stuff could pose a real threat to seat covers and furniture. Most of our first sculptures were predictably fighter planes and bombers, but often in my hands - and almost subconsciously - the planes' fuselages and wings began morphing into the bodies and wings of birds.

I cannot remember any time in Scott's or my life when we were not interested in natural history generally, and birds in particular. We were encouraged in no small measure by our big brother Peter who was of a more scientific bent. Pete being four years older knew the names of many of the birds which passed outside our windows or came and went in great flocks out at Silver Lake. Much of his knowledge came from a small book he owned. It must have been Roger Tory Peterson's guide, but that would have meant nothing to Scott and me at the time. Even though we could not yet read, the book proved a source of great excitement when we spotted a familiar bird among its many illustrations.

Blue Jays, robins, and cardinals were of course well known to us but still exciting to see on a published page. And the little book promised local treasures as yet unseen. Brilliant summer goldfinches, scarlet tanagers, and perhaps even - my holy grail at the time - a baltimore oriole. Silver lake produced snow geese, goldeneye ducks and scaups in winter and nesting Canada Geese and Mallards in summer - all duly noted in the pages of Pete's bird book.

Scott and I will never forget those special times when our great aunt Gertrude, like Lady Bountiful, took us for drives in the countryside to our uncle Ted's farm. She always drove a huge new Cadillac given yearly by General Motors to her husband whom we called "Uncle Tac" because he had been an All American tackle on a famous University of Pennsylvania football team. He was a pioneer heart surgeon, the Chief of Surgery at the Mayo clinic and had operated on several top GM executives with, I assume, good results. Every year somebody arrived at their front door with a new Cadillac and took the old one away.

Aunt Gert was the spitting image of Clemintine Churchill.

She had a natural elegance about her but absolutely no pretense. She was through and through a Minnesota farm girl and later a nurse when she met and married Uncle Tac. Although she literally lived in a big house up on a hill she had married no better than two of her three sisters. Our aunt Bess was the wife of one of Rochester's major bankers. Aunt Edith had married a successful executive in New Jersey. Only sister Katherine, our maternal grandmother, had wrecked her ship on the shoals of matrimony having married a socialist intellectual whom she divorced in 1914, one year after our mom as born. She never re-married. She became an X-ray machine operator at the clinic and bought a rather large house where she and mother lived with several tenants whose rent helped augment her income. It was a comfortable life, but not luxurious.

Katherine Johnson was Grandma J. to us. She was a first class seamstress, tailor really, whose work was praised everywhere and also brought in helpful revenue, though it was truly a labor of love. I remember with awe how she would quietly take apart a beautiful garment she had labored on for weeks because of some minor imperfection. I would see that again when Scott would do the same thing on one of his models, undoing countless hours of work. Grandma J's frugality made her entirely self-supporting. She was eventually able to put enough money away to pay for Mom's college education at the University of Minnesota and her sewing skills insured that her daughter was beautifully dressed even in those Depression years.

There were three brothers as well. Bill, John and Ted. Our uncle Bill was Grandma J's twin brother and by far the most successful of the male siblings. He owned a huge ranch in Montana at which mom spent many summers as a girl. (Mother shot and killed a marauding bear at the ranch when she was just eight years old!) When Grandma J. made her debut with twin brother Bill into this life she was the first born. In fact she was stillborn. There was no time to mourn as Uncle Bill was on his way and so baby Katherina was wrapped up in newspapers and placed under the bed near a warm stove. Uncle Bill soon made his appearance screaming for all he was worth. He only stopped crying after he was cleaned up and wrapped in a blanket. By that time everyone had forgotten the little bundle of newspapers under the bed. With baby Bill now silent, suddenly a quiet whimpering and the rustle of paper could be heard from below. Our grandmother literally made her conscious appearance into this world by being unwrapped like a Christmas present.

I have little to say about Uncle John. He was a shadowy figure we never met and who was only spoken of in whispers. Apparently he had been some kind of ne'er-do-well who had shot somebody dead in a card game shortly after the end of the Great War and had escaped the law only because of family influence. He never was part of our family anecdotes or history as were Uncle Bill and Uncle Ted.

Uncle Ted was the supreme hero of our early boyhood. He remained the only dirt farmer in my mother's immediate family. And he was the only adult relative who knew anything about birds or seemed to care. To our young minds he was an endless reservoir of knowledge about the natural world, much of which seemed to literally live outside his back door or at the nearby pond. This lore did not apparently translate into agricultural success, for as Scott and I grew up, we learned sadly that wonderful uncle Ted was not very able to deal with the harsher realities of the agribusiness world and that he was in fact the perfect example of a hardluck farmer.

Still, he opened wide the doors to nature's wonders for two big-eyed city boys. Trips to uncle Ted's meant gathering eggs in the chicken hutch next to the barn, a wonderful adventure, better than treasure hunting. I can rememeber vividly the dust and the pungent odors of chicken doodoo when the birds flushed at our arrival. One nesting box might be empty. Another might have two or three eggs, some white, some brown. Most of the eggs were pleasingly cool to the touch, but now and then we would pick up a warm one recently abandoned, offering a suddenly intimate connection with its former owner.

The barn and silo were another adventure. I can remember uncle Ted showing Scott and me the contents of his silo which consisted of a mountain of oats. He took a handful and ate them. One time in the barn we climbed high into the lofts to see a half a dozen fluff-covered baby barn owls blinking at our intrusion, snapping their bills and hissing. And one of my favorite memories is of uncle Ted lifting Scott and me up high enough to see a barn swallow nest wonderfully made of grass and leaves and mud and stuffed with eager mouthed babies.

Outside the barn were apple trees and a kitchen garden with ripening squashes, melons and sun warmed tomatoes that we could pick and eat if we wanted to. The nearby flowers were havens for butterflies and caterpillars and other insects, creatures new and strange and about which uncle Ted always had a story or two.

Down at the pond we sometimes saw a great gray bird which flew away at our coming. Yellow and white butterflies gathered there in groups to drink by the water's edge and all about us darted red and blue dragonflies. They looked menacing, as if they might have stingers. It was here that our uncle displayed to us his supreme wizardry, for close by grew some willow trees whose thin branches he transformed with his pen knife into flutes which only he could play.

Our journeys home in the wide and cushioned back seat of Aunt Gert's black cadillac are a vivid memory for Scott and me. The luxurious soft gray upholstery, the leather pull along the back of the front seat and the arm rest that Scott and I could put down between us made us feel like chauffeured royalty. Those cars had a wonderful velvety smell to them, not at all

like the plastic of new cars today, but something redolent with comfort and class like Aunt Gertrude's big house on the hill. But on summer trips back from the farm we were always surrounded by the sweet smell of bushel baskets full of ripe corn just picked. The aroma drifted forward from the trunk filling the entire car. In Autumn the baskets would be full of Apples for eating and baking. As far as I am concerned, there are no fresh apples in Texas. Even today, when on those rare occasions I'm around very fresh apples (as I was last year in Normandy), I'm instantly transported in Proustian fashion back to the back seat of Aunt Gertrude's big black cadillac.

During the early Christmas season of 1947 I contracted Scarlet Fever. In those days it was nothing to fool around with. I got it on a Saturday afternoon. I felt so bad that mother would not let me go with Scott and Pete to the Saturday afternoon Red Ryder movie. Thank heaven father had been home from the war for more than a year, having capped off his medical service with a long occupation at Okinawa. Mom, sensing that my fever might be something more than just a winter cold called dad home from the hospital. He was to become well-known for his powers as a diagnostician, and those skills were serving him well as he gave me only the most cursory examination, then went to the telephone.

I don't remember how I got to Saint Mary's hospital which was only a couple of blocks from our house, but I'll never forget the room they put me in. I later learned that it was Charlie Mayo's old operating room. Uncle Tac had also used it in the early days when he operated experimentally often on twenty ~~heart~~ patients a day with a predictable ninety percent mortality rate.

The room seemed huge to me at the time. It was virtually empty of furniture. Only the old operating lights suspended from the ceiling hinted at what the room had been. My bed was a little island not quite in the center as if consciously avoiding the spot where the operating table had been. The floor was completely covered in small hexagonal white tiles like old fashioned bathrooms. Here and there were ominous drains for washing away the runoff, I suppose, from the now absent operating table. In the weeks that lay ahead that floor was to become my absolute enemy.

My nurses were nuns. They were all starched and uniformed and ominous at first. Almost all of them became gentle and friendly with time. And I can remember that they often acted differently when my mother and father came to visit. In that small town my parents knew many of the nun's before they had taken the veil. They had gone to high school together. They knew their families and had mutual friends. Even some of my nurses with the most professional decorum would giggle and gossip, especially when mom was allowed to see me.

Many years later Mother told Scott and me that long before I had Scarlet Fever the Gentling twins were already famous or

infamous at St. Mary's Hospital. By the time we were two and a half years old and walking we must have been a handful for mom, even with Grandma J's help. Money was short at the time, but Mom decided to invest in a new picket fence for the side yard. And just beneath the kitchen window where we could be watched closely over a cup of coffee a sand box was installed. When everything was finished we were placed in the yard and Mom and Grandma J. at last settled down at the kitchen table for their first quiet cup of morning coffee since we were born. A quick glance out the window showed that all was well as we sang and banged away with our toys.

Mom said that only a few minutes passed as she and her mother became lost in conversation. Suddenly Grandma J. perked up her ears.

"Do you hear anything, Barbara?" she said.

Mom smiled gratefully and said "no". But that was the problem. They didn't hear anything. They both stood up and looked out the window. To their mutual horror they saw that one of the fence boards had been loosened and pushed aside. On the ground lay two sets of clothes - shirts, overalls, socks and shoes and two sets of underpants!

They ran out the front door and searched the entire yard, the garage and the alley. They hurried around the block but saw nothing. As they returned home to call the police, breathless and with images of the Lindbergh baby in their heads, the telephone was ringing. Mom grabbed the phone.

"Barbara?" I suppose you would like to know where your twins are."

"Yes! Who is this?" *Mary Brigh*

"This is sister *Alethea* at St Mary's Hospital. Don't worry, Barbara, the boys are OK. They just dropped by for a visit. We found them on the fire escape. You'd better bring some clothes though. They are in their birthday suits."

Rochester, Minnesota was such a small town that the Gentling twins were already known to many people at St. Mary's Hospital. Neither Scott nor I can remember the incident, but since we were born at St. Mary's on New Year's Eve we have laughed at the prospect that like salmon we were simply returning to our spawning grounds. How we managed to walk naked two blocks and cross a busy main street and then climb a formidable hill to reach the hospital is a mystery. One thing is certain, however. Scott's and my New Year's birthday debut at Saint Mary's, our unscheduled visit two and a half years later as well as our family's long medical connections to the hospital had prepared the way for a warm and sympathetic reception when I became ill.

No matter how agreeable they might want to be to a lonely four-year-old who was facing both Christmas and his fifth birthday in a hospital, all my nun nurses were stern and unyielding about one thing. If any of my toys or books whatsoever dropped off my bed or fell from my side table, they were taken

from my room to be aired out and disinfected on a screened-in porch not far away. It didn't make much sense to me why I couldn't keep and use them since I was already sick, but there were no exceptions. Some of my favorite possessions disappeared forever, especially in the early days before I learned to be more careful. One of my most regrettable eventual losses was Pete's bird book which dad had brought to the hospital. I don't remember asking for it but big brother thought it might in some small way keep me in touch with the world outside my sick room windows. I spent hours with that bird book looking at species familiar and strange, birds whose names I could not yet spell or read. Occasionally one of the nurses would read their names for me. I tried drawing some of the more familiar ones with little success, but it was really hard to concentrate when I was not feeling well.

Time passes so slowly when you are a small child. It seemed that I was in that hospital for months though a little more than three weeks was the actual time. Christmas came. I remember that a marvelous little Christmas tree with tiny lights was placed in the room. There were a couple of brightly wrapped presents on my bed but a bigger Christmas was promised later back at home. For my birthday I was brought a small cake with five candles. Though it made me realize even more how deeply I missed Scott, I relished having the cake all to myself..

I had been ~~quite~~ feeling well for several days before before mom and dad finally came to take me home. Though I ~~had been~~ *WLP* anxious to leave, when the time finally arrived I was strangely sad to say goodbye. I would never have thought that my cavernous and gloomy chamber could become a home or that I would ever comfortably adjust to the comings and goings of hospital personnel. But I had, and I knew that I would miss them.

It seems that I was to have two Christmas's in 1948. I enjoyed the delayed celebration on my homecoming in the first week in January. Scott eagerly, perhaps too eagerly, helped me to open all my presents so perhaps he had two Christmas's that year as well. I should also mention that our family had already received a very special present in 1947, a baby sister. Suzanne had been born the previous July. In so many ways she made our young family complete.

In the next couple of months a strange place called Texas was increasingly part of our parents' conversation. In the Spring Dad took a trip to this Texas and was gone a long time. When he returned everything began to change. Packing boxes appeared. A sign was placed in our front yard. As events seemed to move faster and faster around us Scott and I had little idea that our next Christmas would be celebrated in a far away land of indians and cowboys and some places called "kettle ranches."

We had little time to think about what we were leaving behind - our neighborhood friends, our cousins on my father's

side of the family, our dad's mother Grandma G., trips to KROC the Gentling owned local radio station, and of course Grandma J., Aunt Gert and Uncle Tac and those wonderful trips out to Uncle Ted's farm. I don't remember if Scott or I ever got a chance to say goodbye to Uncle Ted or to his wife Leona.

I do remember our visit to the big house on the hill to say goodbye to Aunt Gert and Uncle Tac. As mother and we got out of the car we were greeted on the front lawn by Aunt Gertrude and Tazz their magnificent collee, a gift from the grateful author of the Lassie books. The Harrington house was a noble Tudor pile filled with treasures acquired as gifts or on countless trips abroad including an annual invitation to dine privately with the King and Queen of England. It seems that Uncle Tac had trained the royal surgeons, and that the royals were among Uncle Tac's legions of the grateful.

Tac was at his desk in his dark, wood panelled study with polished dark furniture and a great oriental carpet from wall to wall. The room, however, was anything but a quiet retreat, for on the walls and on nearby tables were countless clocks, a collecting passion. I remember he prided himself on seeing that they kept exact time together so that all chimed in unison. Many were gifts from famous people around the world including English royalty, people whose names meant nothing to Scott or me. On the desk in front of him were two trays covered in royal blue velvet. The trays had little compartments which held diamonds of various sizes which sparkled and dazzled under the desk lamp. Clocks, oriental rugs, and diamonds were his main interests as a collector.

Scott and I were always a little afraid of Uncle Tac though he gave us no reason to feel that way. Though genuinely friendly he seemed to have such an aura of authority about him like a victorian or even a biblical patriarch. We always watched our behavior at the Harrington house when we knew he was there. I think I remember that he didn't get up when Aunt Gert brought us into the study to say good-by. Unlike our father's three brothers who often picked us up and swung us over their heads laughing loudly, Uncle Tac always formally shook Scott's and my hand. But it only took one question about a clock or a diamond or some other object in the study and his face would light up and he would instantly turn into an enthusiastic tour guide.

When I look back through my hazy memories to that distant time I can't help but think about what our leaving for Texas would mean for my great Aunt Gertrude. She had never been able to have children of her own and for some reason had never adopted any. I always joked with mom in later years that I was named after Uncle Tac whose name was Stuart William Harrington so that we would be mentioned in the Will. But a more poignant gesture seems to have been Mom's reason, and that was to connect our great aunt and uncle in some meaningful way to a surrogate

family of their own. Mother told me that when Aunt Gert gave Scott and me her farewell hugs and kisses that last day there were tears in her eyes. It was something mom had never seen before. Aunt Gert was such a stiff upper lip kind of person. Mom also told me that our uncle was especially sad to see brother Peter go. For more than nine years Tac had taken a quiet pride in older brother Peter. He would be there to help when Pete embarked on a Mayo Clinic medical career of his own.

I only wish that on one of our many visits to Uncle Tac's study Scott or I had mentioned our interest in birds. For at that time stashed away in his ^{attic} and unknown to us was a book that he surely would have ^{shared with} shown us. Probably another gift from a grateful patient, it was one of the four folios of John James Audubon's original Havell edition of Birds of America.

Caladerns
Elephant Ears
3 big pots
1 big pot

