

If you hunt with your boy today, you won't have to hunt for him tomorrow." That was one of the trademark, but heartfelt, lines delivered at the hundreds of shows put on by the legendary Winchester exhibition shooter Herb Parsons of Somerville, Tenn. Intended to help with the "juvenile delinquency" problem during the era in which Parsons performed, it's still sound advice today a half-century or more later.

Many years ago my late friend Col. Rex Applegate introduced me to the remarkable shooting ability and showmanship of Herb Parsons. He gave me a copy of

"Fast & Fancy Shooters," a video he produced of legendary shooting greats Ed McGivern, Bill Jordan and Herb Parsons, plus lesser-known Remington exhibition shooters such as Wilber Cox, Bill Adkins, Bill Johnson, Jack Chisnell and Cliff Baldwin. I had seen ads and articles about Parsons, but his remarkable performance and the footage of Bill Jordan, whom I met a few times, and Ed McGivern, whose Smith & Wesson and Colt Single Action Armys I'd handled during my time at the National Firearms Museum, captivated me. Sadly, the tape wore out because we watched it so often.

One year ago this month, I received a review copy of a new

book titled, *Showman Shooter: The Life And Times Of Herb Parsons*, from an NRA Life member in Ohio. The book came with a note: "I am proud of the book and hope you will find it of interest." It was signed by Herbert Lynn Parsons M.D., FACS. The book was done by Lynn and his brother, Jerry M. Parsons, Ph. D., as a tribute to the life and legacy of their father Herb, who died in 1959.

Included with the book was a DVD copy of the 1954 film "Showman Shooter," produced in color. In it, Herb Parsons works his magic as the "Wizard with a Winchester," putting on his exhibition for the camera ... and for posterity. In the film, a young, enthusiastic boy steps up from the crowd to join the show, knocking target after target out of the sky. That boy was Herbert Lynn Parsons.

Shortly after receiving the book *Showman Shooter*, I called Dr. Parsons, and we arranged to interview him at Camp Perry, Ohio—a yearly stop on his father's itinerary, but a place Dr. Parsons had never visited. Based on the book, the DVD "Showman Shooter" and the interviews, we created two episodes for "American Rifleman Television." In searching NRA's archives for "American Rifleman Television," we found color footage from Camp Perry in the 1940s, including a brief clip of Parsons entertaining thousands during the National Matches. We also discovered an original copy of Bill Jordan's revolver exhibition done while the legendary handgunner served on NRA's Board of Directors, and we hope to do a show or two on Jordan next year.

The 480-page *Showman Shooter* is a fascinating read. Scott T. Weber—Parsons family friend and author of the article starting on

Legendary exhibition shooter Herb Parsons not only entertained the troops, he also taught them skills that carried over to the battlefield.



Photo by NRA Staff

p. 54—wrote the introduction to the book, which is a chronicle of photos and documents, letters and newspaper clippings that give a firsthand account of the remarkable American and legendary shooter Herb Parsons. The book, the DVD "The Showman Shooter" and Rex Applegate's "Fast and Fancy Shooters" are all available through www.showmanshooter.com. I've already replaced my copy of the latter.

On April 18, Dr. Parsons visited NRA Headquarters and donated two handguns, which belonged to the "Showman Shooter," to the National Firearms Museum. If you're in Fairfax, you can see some of Herb Parsons' guns, as well as the guns, holsters and timer used by Ed McGivern. The handguns were a generous gift from the Parsons family. They were a gift that will help us remember one of the great—if not the greatest—exhibition shooters of all time.

Sincerely,

Mark A. Keefe, IV



Photos courtesy of Dr. Herbert Lynn Parsons

Showman Shooter

The Legendary Herb Parsons

Herb Parsons was one of the great—if not *the* greatest—exhibition shooters of all time. But he was much more than just a gifted shooter. Parsons was an entertainer without equal and the best salesman Winchester ever had. And he was a proud patriot.

BY SCOTT T. WEBER

Shortly after noon, a bright red station wagon with loudspeakers shaped like huge shotgun shells cruised the streets blaring that there would be a demonstration of firearms—good Winchester firearms—outside the little town. Everyone was welcome ... and it was free. Later, the strange red station wagon pulled to the center of town, and a man emerged. He appeared to be Southern in his speech and mannerisms, and he casually set up a mortar stand, dropped a round into the tube and calmly stood back while it exploded with a terrific boom.

Later, two boys emerged from the car and “dumpster dove,” asking for old cans and containers, then filling them with water. A lady went into the grocery and purchased cabbages, oranges, plums, watermelons and grapefruit, and emptied the store of eggs. Then the vehicle pulled out of town with the speakers promoting Winchester. In a frenzied rush, the townspeople dove into cars and pick-ups and followed in the dust of the “Winchester Red” station wagon.

The year was 1954, and the townspeople were about to witness one of the greatest shooting exhibitions of all time—a combination of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show, Annie Oakley, Doc Carver, P.T. Barnum and a Vaudeville comedy routine. A table of a dozen or more guns, ranging from a common Model 12 to a nickel-plated

Tommy Gun were laid before them. The name “Winchester” was embroidered in bright letters on the table skirt, which was laid across a table stacked high with all manner of clay targets, balls, produce, water cans and several wood cases of ammunition.

The first sound heard was not gunfire, but the roar of laughter. Thousands of people slapped their knees, elbowed their neighbors and reared their heads back in laughter. The man was funny. But with the laughter came a message. He told the crowd, “An armed America is a strong America,” and, “To be a good American you need to shoot well, observe the game laws and take your family shooting and hunting ... Guns are the American way,” he told them between jokes. Gun safety and hunter responsibility were paramount. Between rapid-fire shots, the man unleashed blasts from duck calls that sounded better than the real thing.

The Southern gentleman who so delighted the crowd was Winchester Firearms representative and salesman Herb Parsons of Somerville, Tenn. And he was touring the heartland of America to demonstrate the “best” firearms, which were, of course, Winchesters, along with the best ammunition, Winchester-Western. From 1930 to 1959, Parsons earned the nicknames “The Showman Shooter” and “Wizard With A Winchester.”



HERB PARSONS

In 55 frenzied minutes, Parsons typically shot, non-stop, more than 15 Winchester firearms 52 different ways at more than 800 targets, scoring 99 percent on them. The ones he missed, he said, were “hens.” Typically he started off shooting oranges and cabbages that sprayed juice and fiber over himself and the audience, all the while keeping a running commentary that delighted his admirers. Movie footage of his feats taken during this period shows the audience—civilians and soldiers—with their eyes wide open, huge smiles on their faces and hands to their mouths. Just when the spectators were at rapt attention, he changed up the shoots by setting his gun down on the ground, throwing three eggs between his legs, grabbing the gun and scrambling all three while they were airborne.

With a Model 61 pump, he ejected the cartridge cases hard up into the air, then shot them. In the tradition of Annie Oakley, he used a mirror to shoot behind his back. He heaved multiple targets into the air, emptied a gun, threw it to an assistant, grabbed another loaded one and splattered the trailing targets before they fell to the ground. He shot coins



and washers that whirled through the sky and fell to his feet. When some members of the crowd cat-called him, he simply put a stamp over the washer hole, drilled it dead center, then handed it to the nearest bigmouth.

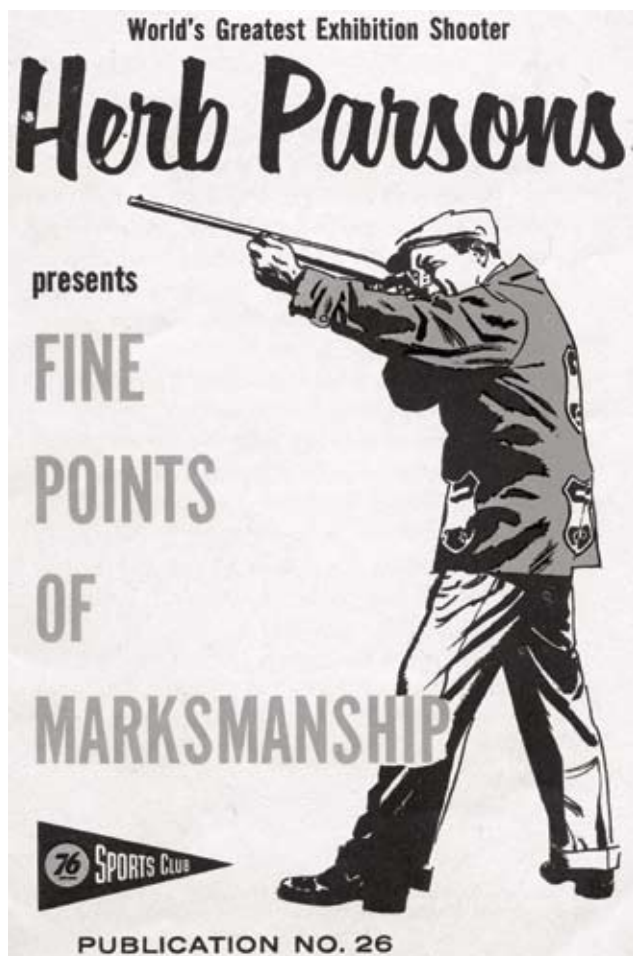
With the audience “juiced up,” he selected a grapefruit loaded with explosives and shot it (don’t try this at home). He exploded watermelons with a Model 71 in .348 Win., and stoked the last one with dynamite (don’t try this at home, either). One of his favorite presentations, performed at dusk, was to fire a parachute up in a mortar round and hit it numerous times, while it floated down, with a Winchester M1 Garand or M1 carbine loaded with tracers. He shot gasoline-filled watermelons, making the entire grounds a raging inferno. To shake things up, he often used a nickel-plated Thompson submachine gun to blow produce to pieces or shoot the head off a paper silhouette.

The crowd loved it! Never had they seen their favorite bird guns, like the Model 12, or their deer rifles, like the Model 70 or Model 94, perform in such a manner. One of the most famous shots Parsons made during a shooting exhibition was on a flying crow at the end of a parade grounds with a .270 Win. The paced distance? Twelve hundred yds.

During the 1950s shows, perhaps the crowd’s favorite part was when Parsons stopped, laid all of his guns on the table and casually beckoned two young boys from the crowd. They had the slicked-back hair of their generation, rolled-up jeans, Buster Brown shoes and plaid shirts. They politely flanked Parsons, and he introduced them as his sons. Then he said perhaps his most famous phrase, “If you hunt with your son today, you won’t have to hunt for him tomorrow.” Then he said, “It’s a pleasure when you hunt with your son, it’s a heartbreak if you hunt for him. So let’s keep America strong! Let’s keep America shooting!”

And with that he asked the boys if they wanted to “try” shooting, and they politely hollered out, “Yes sir!” With a nod from Parsons, the small boys each selected a Model 12 pump from the table, loaded them and waited their turn. With Parsons throwing, the boys started out

Parsons was also featured on a 76 Sports Club pamphlet as an expert marksman (l.), and justifiably so—he once shot a flying crow from 1,200 yds. with a .270-cal. Winchester.





Holding the record for the most hits on one rise from a factory pump gun—seven—Parsons made the Model 12 pump sound like a full-automatic as he dusted each one, with the last bird only two feet from the ground.

shooting one clay target at a time with their 20 gauges, then built up to five clay targets thrown at once. They smoked all the targets and broke them all before they hit the ground. After each boy broke five on one toss, Parsons threw his hands up and said loudly, “OK, whose show is this anyway? Get on out of here!” The boys, having posed as mere spectators, drew some of the loudest applause as they melted back into the crowd.

Parsons kept up a running commentary about being a good American. He fired at and ignited a watermelon full of gasoline, then turned his Model 12 toward a hanging clay target suspended by wires from two poles. When he exploded the clay target, an American flag unfurled. It never failed to bring a standing ovation from any crowd—especially when he performed for the military.

Unlike other exhibition shooters, past or present, Parsons allowed the crowd to come around his shooting table and freely handle his exhibition guns. There are many photos of him helping children and women shoulder the Winchester rifles and shotguns after exhibitions. The nickel-plated Thompson was a special treat, as soldiers had never seen their service arms perform such feats. They later used



these lessons and inspiration from the “Showman Shooter” on the battlefields.

In those summer days of the 1950s, the family of Herbert Lynn Parsons traveled like a moving arsenal while promoting Winchester firearms from town to town, at major shoots like the Grand American and Camp Perry, and at military installations. Inside that “Winchester Red” station wagon were not only special wood compartments for each example of the Winchester rifle and shotgun lines,

but the Thompson, mortar and mortar rounds, cases of dynamite, other explosives and thousands of rounds of ammunition were also packed inside. Lynn Parsons, Herb’s son, said of that experience, “Daddy shot off mortar rounds in hundreds of town squares, exploded tons of explosives outside of town and shot a Thompson Submachine Gun all over the country and, for the life of me, I can’t remember him ever having a permit or license to do so!”

Although the “Wizard With A Winchester” shows perhaps looked like a free-wheeling shooting circus, there was actually a rigid behind-the-scenes protocol, as well as detailed organization of the firearms, ammunition and targets to help the shooting exhibitions run smoothly. Jerry, another one of Herb’s sons, one day decided in his infinite 9-year old wisdom to deviate from shooting the five clay targets the way his father demanded—bottom to top—and instead reverse the order. “It sounded exciting to me to do it that way; however, I got a look that would melt stone from my no-foolishness-allowed-during-an-exhibition dad!” remembered Jerry. “Plus my deviation would always result in a reduction in swimming pool privileges at the end of the day, and he knew that would punish us boys in the worst way!”

Herb Parsons also made people of all ages feel good about being an American, and this was a key part of his persona as well: “Love your country, love your family, love your gun.” It’s one thing to shoot well and be safe doing it, but Parsons took it a step further and urged his audiences to love America as well, and to serve her when called.

And he did as he encouraged. During World War II, he was in uniform, showing fighter pilots and aerial gunners how to lead aerial targets via shooting skeet, and teaching infantrymen target acquisition and how to carefully squeeze the trigger to achieve hits. It’s hard to imagine how much confidence he instilled in those soldiers. Parsons

During WWII, thousands of soldiers witnessed the performance potential of their service arms before shipping out overseas (l).

HERB PARSONS



A unique showman, Parsons often brought volunteers to the demonstration table for a hands-on approach to sales promotion (above).

demonstrated his skills in front of as many as 7,000 soldiers at one time during World War II.

Remember, too, just what Parsons did out there before and after the show: he sold guns. He wanted to entertain, but like all firearm representatives he had to produce sales. His goal was for the local gun shops in the area of his performance to order more Winchester guns and ammunition. Parsons had a rigorous sales quota, and a 1930s memo from Winchester—sent during the middle of the Great Depression—demanded he sell seven Model 42 .410-bore pump guns per day.

The era of Herb Parsons' exhibition shooting, firearms promotion and sales from 1930 to 1960 was the golden era for Winchester firearms. Premier gun craftsmen were making superbly over-engineered rifles and shotguns that are classics today, including the Model 12, Model 21, Model 42, Model 52, Model 61, Model 70, Model 71 and Model 94. Herb shot these classic firearms—the Black Diamonds, the Super Grades, the Pigeon Grades, the Grand Americans, etc.—and promoted them as the “best of the best.”

From the news stories and the “buzz” came the calls from Hollywood, and Parsons used his shooting exper-

tise to train some of Tinseltown's most famous movie stars. “Winchester '73” with Jimmy Stewart features a famous Winchester lever-action, and Winchester was only too glad to produce a pair of “1 of 100” 1873s and lend their greatest shooter to the project. In the film, Parsons stood in for Jimmy Stewart and shot his Model 71 through a thrown washer for the cowboy crowd.

Herb Parsons will long rein as the “Showman Shooter,” not just for his great shooting—much of which has been equaled or bettered by today's shooters using highly modified guns—but for his legacy of promoting a man and his son together in the fields, the mountains and the woods. His efforts during the war to prepare men who went into danger, his love of the outdoors and his belief that a good man with a good gun was a good American, were paramount to his very being. Parsons came to epitomize the idea that being good with a gun was a way to become a better man, and nothing could better illustrate just how valuable our Second Amendment really is to all Americans. ★

Herb Parsons stood in for Jimmy Stewart in the 1950 film, “Winchester '73,” shooting through a thrown washer with his Winchester Model 71 (below).

Calling All Boys And Girls
Between the Ages of 7 and 14

Big Shooting Contest

— BOYS —
Win a Daisy Air Rifle

— GIRLS —
Win a \$5.00 Book of Theatre Passes

REGISTER AT THE FAIR THEATRE
SAT., AUGUST 5 AT 9 A.M.
(Shooting time will be 10 a.m.)

The contestants will be divided into 2 groups—the boys in one and the girls in the other.

Air Rifles and B.B.'s will be furnished or you may use your own.

The above prizes and many more will be given by your local Winchester and Daisy dealers who are sponsoring this contest and this ad. Be sure and register so you can win one of these prizes.

James STEWART
Shelley WINTERS
Dan DURYEA
Stephen McNALLY

WINCHESTER '73

THURSDAY AND FRIDAY, AUGUST 10-11

FAIR THEATRE

SOMERVILLE TENN.

We would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to

HERB PARSONS
("Somerville's Ambassador of Good Will")

Who did the actual shooting for Jimmy Stewart in "Winchester '73." He also served as Technical Director for this picture.

WELCOME HOME HERB

This ad and contest is sponsored by these Winchester Dealers in Somerville...

SHINAULT'S HARDWARE CO.
WINCHESTER DEALER
AND
ZERAN'S SALES AND SERVICE
WINCHESTER AMMUNITION and DAISY (RED RYDER) RIFLE





Parsons' marksmanship feats were unrivaled, and his performances always impressed his audiences.
