

Wauk. Freeman

# Famed animal handler Benson dies at age 91

Town of Ottawa man shared company with famous clients and friends

By **MELISSA RIGNEY BAXTER**  
Special to The Freeman

TOWN OF OTTAWA – Orin Benson's life was the stuff of legends. He could talk, they say, the language of animals. He was a renowned dog trainer, raised wolves, outlived two wives and rubbed shoulders with some of the area's, and the world's, most famous people.

Benson died at his home Saturday, at the age of 91. He was born in White Bear, Minn., and moved to southeastern Wisconsin after coming here to train dogs for a family who lived north of Milwaukee.

Jim Piala was a friend of Benson's for the last 15 to 20 years



Benson

and said Benson originally came into Piala Nursery and Garden Shop in the town of Waukesha to purchase roses with his wife. Piala's son, Roy, became one of Benson's protégés.

"He knew anyone who was anyone," said Piala.

At his peak, Benson was training up to 150 dogs from 31 states, Piala said. His interest in dog training continued right up until the end of his life when a family friend brought a black Labrador retriever to Benson about three months ago. She'd had it at two previous dog trainers with no luck.

"I came back there two to three weeks later, and it just took a nod from him and the dog would lay down or sit," said Piala.

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Benson was known for his pranks and has picture albums full of himself dressed up as a character he called "the goof." He especially liked to play tricks on his fellow patrons at Sasso's Tavern in Eagle. Piala said that he would use his connections to others with animals to arrange some interesting visitors to Sasso's. A bear, a chimpanzee and even a de-scented skunk were his partners in pranks there.

"He had friends and clients all over the world," said Piala. "I was looking through a pile of correspondence and every envelope I picked up came from a different state. He was a good friend of Roy Rogers, Howard Hill, Gene Autry, Clayton Moore, Clark Gable, Joan Crawford and Prince Phillip. They were all good personal friends and clients of his. Roy Rogers spent quite a few evenings at his place."

Piala said that Benson was diagnosed with colon cancer 25 years ago and told that he had six months to live. He and his wife traveled to China and Alaska, choosing adventure in what he thought were the last months of his life. However, he outlived the grim diagnosis to inspire another generation of animal lovers and dog trainers.

Benson's home and kennels were located in the Kettle Moraine State Forest and eventually sold to the state as part of protected land. He negotiated a deal to rent back the place at a reasonable rate and continued to live there for the rest of his life, Piala said.

Benson was instrumental in bringing the Sports and Travel Show to Milwaukee and the event has continued from that first show, in 1940, to today.

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