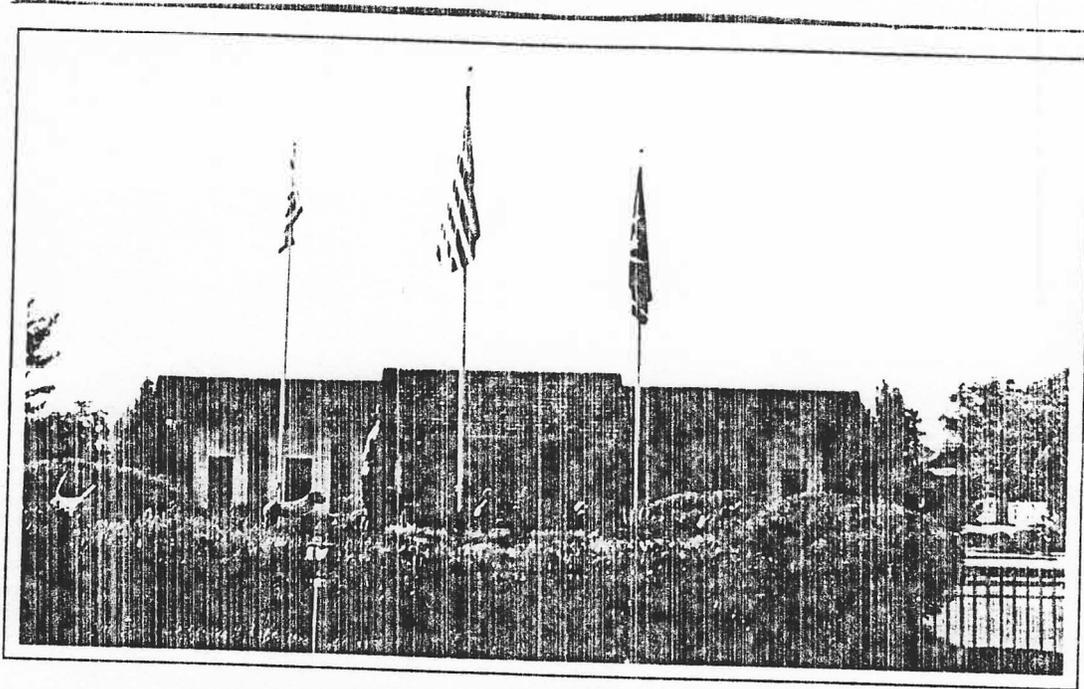
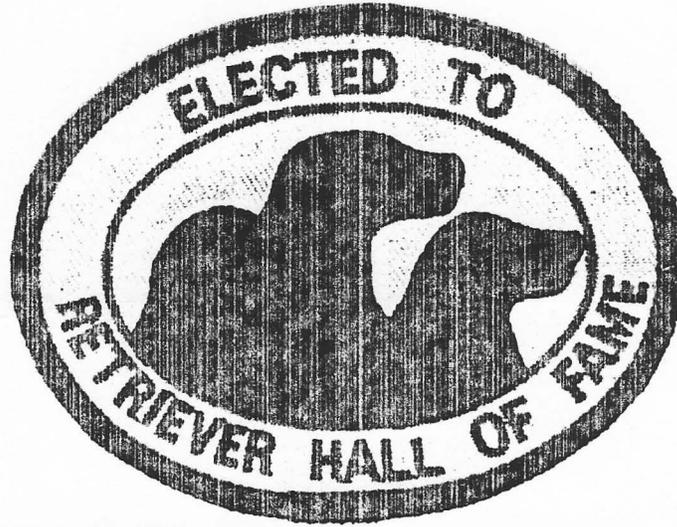


ORIN BENSON'S

EAGLEWOOD KENNELS



NATIONAL BIRD DOG MUSEUM

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***Orin Benson, pioneer trainer of field trial retrievers,
innovator, showman, super salesman for all gun dog breeds***

During the first twenty years of the National Retriever Championship Trials, the 1949 National Champion, Marvedel Black Gum, started in eight of those contests.

From 1941 through 1960, only four other dogs started in seven national trials. One of those was Black Panther, now being inducted into the Retriever Field Hall of Fame. His trainer, Orin Benson, handled Panther in the first four of the seven Nationals for which he qualified, including the 1947 National with twenty-one starters December 5-7 at Crab Orchard Lake, Illinois when the flashy black Labrador completed all twelve series. While few are today alive to recall it, after qualifying in seven consecutive Nationals and finishing all the series three times, Panther was the only dog of the four to run in seven Nationals (Bracken's Sweep, King Buck and Major VI were the others), which did not win the national title.

Handling dogs in eight National Championship trials at a time when retriever trials were a novelty and were reported in the society pages of middle western newspapers, alone would be enough to put Orin Benson into anyone's Retriever Hall of Fame. But of at least equal importance are his many faceted contributions to the world of trained gun dogs.

An uncannily perceptive and innovative trainer, his instinctive feel for not only dogs of all breeds but animals in general (he trained timber wolves, foxes, skunks, porcupines, hawks and pheasants for movies and seminar performances), permitted him to indulge in his flair for showmanship on stages from coast to coast. Gratis performances at local ball parks, for fish and game club benefits or before thousands of paying spectators during Sport Shows held in major cities from Boston to Los Angeles acquainted more potential sportsmen with hunting dogs and sold more hunters on having their dogs properly trained than can be imagined.

2. Orin Benson, Hall of Fame

The dogs Benson used for his stage demonstrations were not specially trained troupes of canine actors. By the 1950's his reputation was such that he had clients from all over the country. Always an independent operator, sponsored by no one, Benson drew on his clients' dogs when a performance was scheduled. At his training kennel in Wisconsin's southern Kettle Moraine near the village of Eagle (which was a mecca for pro-trainers and retriever-owners when the Wisconsin Amateur Field Trial Club staged major field trials on nearby state lands), Benson set up a dummy stage, spending a little extra time getting some dogs accustomed to the slippery footing and the artificiality and distractions posed by the Sports Show settings.

Then, when a performance was scheduled in Detroit, for example, he could contact owners in that city and request the use of their hunting and field trial trained dogs for a Sport Show performance. Most proud owners willingly cooperated. Benson saved on the cost and hassle of transporting some dogs and spectators got to see genuine sporting dogs display their ability even in an artificial setting.

Lest purists scoff at the importance indoor stage shows might have on public awareness and desire to own trained gun dogs, consider that the general public got its first look at retriever contests just prior to World War II at "indoor field trials", not at the early actual field trials; which because of their wealthy patrons, eastern establishment influence and British Isles heritage were treated as society events, not sports, by editors and publishers, some of whom were owners of field trial dogs.

In 1939, the Chicago Daily News sponsored a "sporting dog field trial" held in Chicago's National Amphitheater. There was a water tank and artificial cover. There were also ten-thousand spectators witnessing this performance. Also present, with dogs belonging to a newly formed Wisconsin consortium, Dogs Unlimited, were Orin Benson and Charles "Chuck" Morgan, who is also a member of the Retriever Hall of Fame. Benson's trained and handled dogs won both the retriever and spaniel divisions when the Daily News made indoor field trials part of its International Sportsman's Show.

3. Orin Benson, Hall of Fame

Born in 1914, Benson grew up working on his dad's farm near White Bear Lake, Minnesota and in that rural setting got his grounding in animal behavior and how to devise means of coping with problems. "If I'd tried to make a living in mathematics, I'd have starved to death," Benson avers. "But the cow didn't have to kick me twice before I tied her feet."

Farm shepherd dogs made up Benson's youthful experience with dogs until he got his first purebred, a "gift" of a gun-shy Springer Spaniel. His success in making a hunting dog out of the ruined spaniel prompted others to turn over hunting dogs for Benson to train at \$5.00 per month, which for a farm boy in the late 1920's was substantial supplemental income.

Benson's fascination with training gun dogs aroused the ire of his brothers who thought he ought to be spending more time plowing, planting and harvesting. But what drove him off the farm was his novel method of assuring that he wouldn't have to deal with any more gun shy dogs.

"I'd have four or five dogs following the tractor when I was in the field," he related, "and when I was mowing and got down to the last row or two, a few birds and lots of rabbits would flush out ahead of the mower. Of course, the dogs were wild about chasing game. I didn't have any extra money for shotgun shells, so when the dogs took out after a rabbit or a bird, I'd retard the spark on that old tractor and she'd backfire. Dogs either ignored the noise or connected it with game and I even broke some gun-shys that way. But my dad got sick and tired of paying for the manifold gaskets I blew out when I was 'shooting birds' for the dogs.

The rest is history. Probably no one alive and very few ever have had the breadth of experience with dogs acquired by Orin Benson. From the farm he took a job with an Ohio show kennel. He not only learned grooming, conformation and breeding techniques, he actually handled dogs to wins in the show ring. Trying to get by on Great Depression era wages of \$5.00 a month and dismay about "hunting dogs" that didn't hunt, prompted Benson to do some moonlighting, gaining even more experience and building a reputation.

4. Orin Benson, Hall of Fame

His sideline of making hunting dogs out of show ring rejects led to a job back home in Minnesota with a kennel that's still in operation today, Goldwood Kennels founded by the Hank Christian family. But before abandoning the bench for the field, Benson, in 1936, handled Toby of Willowlock, a Golden Retriever, to an all-breed Best of Show.

When Dogs Unlimited was formed in 1936 by three prominent sportsmen from the Milwaukee Wisconsin area, A. M. Schlesinger, Robert Pabst and B. L. Boalt, the consortium hired Orin Benson to establish and run their sporting dog kennel, with an emphasis on retrievers, at River Hills. (At that time, the Field & Stream Award was a most prestigious honor and, after going to Labradors and Chesapeakes, for the first time it went to a Golden Retriever, Rip, owned and handled by Paul Bakewell, III, first amateur to win with his dog.)

Benson became one of, if not the first, "native American" retriever trainer in the mid-west, where Labrador and Golden Retrievers were just beginning to attract attention following their importation from the British Isles by wealthy Anglophile sportsmen, but most hunters thought their rat-tailed Irish Water Spaniels, compact American Brown Water Spaniels and rugged Chesapeake Bay Retrievers were the only "duck dogs" worth having. Along with the dogs, eastern establishment sportsmen brought over trainers who were to become famous in the U.S., including Dave Elliot, who originated "handling on blind retrieves", based on his experience with sheep dogs in Scotland, and the Hogans, Martin, out of Ireland and his sons, Frank and Jim, who wound up based in Illinois and who piqued Benson's interest in putting on gun dog exhibitions with a traveling troupe of dogs.

The first retriever field trial held in Wisconsin was near Oshkosh in 1936 and, appropriately, Benson was there as a "bird boy", learning the trade from the bottom up to gain knowledge and proficiency. For in that year he had established Wisconsin's first retriever kennels. Shortly he became actively influential in establishing the Wisconsin Amateur Field Trial Clubs, whose officers founded "Field Trial News" which evolved into the current "RETRIEVER Field Trial NEWS".

5. Orin Benson, Hall of Fame

In 1940, Benson left River Hills Kennel. At his suggestion, Dogs Unlimited had brought in Missourian Charley Morgan who was best known for his work with Chesapeakes. That was another history making event. Morgan spent the rest of his life training in Wisconsin and is also a retriever Hall of Famer.

As an independent operator, Benson was able to locate and establish his own kennel near Eagle, Wisconsin and train for the public. As a public trainer Benson was most influential. He had a loyal clientele. But he had no blank checks from wealthy and competitive owners to pick up talent that caught his eye. He trained what was brought to the kennel. He was able to make time to tour with his dogs and the demonstrations he put on across the nation not only familiarized sportsmen with gun dog work but gave him a broad and varied customer base.

The very first public dog act he put on at the Eagles Club in Milwaukee might have been a disaster and discouraged a budding stage career. The club floor was as slippery as an ice rink. But with farm-smart ingenuity (like backfiring a tractor to simulate gunfire), Benson sprinkled the floor with sugar-water. When the dogs weren't licking the floor, they had good traction. Also, when at home base, Benson turned out both field trial champions and hunting dogs, with the same ingenuity, well into the 1960's. He pioneered the use of sanitary, concrete floored kennel runs. He custom trained dogs to match owner-personalities and handicaps, rather than dropping each dog into a personal training mold and imposing the result on the owner. One of many such examples was another Labrador among the fourteen starters handled by Benson in eight National Championship trials, Mully Gully Goo, owned by John Sturtevant, publisher of the Wausau, Wisconsin daily newspaper. Ravages of throat cancer had Sturtevant unable to speak or blow a whistle. The Benson improvisation of inserting a whistle into a medical syringe bulb that could be squeezed and some extra training time permitted the handicapped amateur owner to handle his own dog in trials with whistle and hand signals. Another, Henry de Roulet of California, ran his dog, Rip, from a wheelchair and delivered the birds to his lap.

6. Orin Benson, Hall of Fame

Benson was also a breeder of some prominence. His eye for a dog ensured sound, practical physical qualities and his training of client dogs gave him insights into those with stable temperament and cooperative instincts. His litters were usually pre-sold. Hunters who did their own training knew that with any effort on their part they'd be able to turn out good gun dogs and, if problems arose, they could take the pup back for training and Benson would wipe out the glitches.

A consummate showman and quick-witted before a crowd, Benson could convince spectators that even when a dog was messing up the act, he was behaving just as he ought to. Some truths that Benson tells and some tales that others relate of his accomplishments and antics aren't worth repeating because, probably, they wouldn't be believed. But for almost half-a-century I was there as a witness, which is why I'm writing this comparatively brief (in terms of contributory activities that led to Benson's Retriever Hall of Fame induction) account of a genuine "animal man" whose broad background and innovative way with both domestic and wild animals may never be equaled.

I don't know Orin Benson better than anyone, but I surely know him better than most. I was still finishing college under the GI Bill after World War II when training my first Labrador retriever, Clinker Dhu. Back then there were "fun trials" for hunters, as well as American Kennel Club sanctioned and licensed events. At an event in western Wisconsin, Benson was one of the judges who gave my dog a placement. He took the time, after the announcements, to seek me out and hand out advice that, fortunately, has never been forgotten when training any dog.

7. Orin Benson, Hall of Fame

"You've got a nice young pup there, Dave," he said, "and she's just the kind that suits you. You're big and you're rough and you're loud and you probably don't have a whole lot of patience. But, if you're going to do much more dog training, don't forget that all the dogs you run into aren't going to be like this one. To train them right, you have to throttle back some."

That first meeting led to a great deal of shared time, travel and experiences, judging trials, shooting, sport shows, books, articles, escapades and conducting training seminars. Benson shows were as much seminars as entertainment. One that we often did involved using a series of dogs, from eight-week old pups to finished gun dogs, pointing out what might be expected from dogs at various stages in their lives. Thousands of dogs, and their owners, benefited from this sort of information.

Some things were mostly for money and entertainment. But they were fun too. Like the show we did in Milwaukee County Stadium between games of a Braves-Mets double-header, which featured not only the trained retrievers and pointers and live birds, but Benson's trained timber wolf, Kepa, who became nationally known. We were told later that the ball players stayed in the dugout to watch rather than go into the locker room between games and the concession operators complained to management that the sale of beer and brats was virtually nil because so few people left their seats between games.

But it was good business for dog trainers. Milwaukee baseball players, as well as luminaries from the stage and screen world Benson encountered on his travels, were some of his best customers. During the "Lombardi Years" when I was training for the public, a number of Green Bay Packer Super Bowl I & II players were my gun dog training customers and hunting companions.

My son spent three periods of his life absorbing dog knowledge from a masterful animal trainer, starting as a pair of junior-high-school-age legs, when a trio of romping Labradors blind-sided Benson going down a hill and he spent a summer simultaneously training dogs and coaching a budding trainer while seated on a golf cart.

8. Orin Benson, Hall of Fame

Orin Benson had no predecessors in the U. S. as a trainer of retrievers and unlike most of his contemporaries he remains a living legend whenever veteran sportsmen reminisce about old times. He has been there and done it all, many times over and this summary is offered as an oft-witnessed testimony to his canniness and ability in solving training problems, developing champion retrievers and effecting happy matches between gun dogs and gunners.

Coming eighty-four years of age, if Benson's state of mind and body are, (as they were a few weeks before this was being written, when we spent a couple of days strolling back through the years) is any indication, some things never change.....much.

The following description of Orin Benson (by Charley Morgan) dates back about sixty years when Orin was in the beginning of his training then. " He was a wonderful physical specimen, a fine looking man, a wonderful outdoorsman and hunter and a fine shot, but he was a little wild and liked to have his fun. He was rugged and could take it, and I imagine a lot of trainers who have tried to follow him have fallen by the wayside. He set a fast pace. But now he has settled down and is a wonderful trainer." Long live this legend.

David Michael Duffey

Bowler, Wisconsin August 1997