

OUTSTANDING IN HIS FIELD

Sport shows, animal training put Benson in limelight

By BRIAN HUBER
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TOWN OF OTTAWA — Orin Benson is always game for a good hunt.

Benson, 90, gained international fame for his ability to handle animals. He crisscrossed the nation on the sport show circuit, and was one of the organizers of the Milwaukee sport show. He is in the Retriever Trial and Sport Show Hall of Fame.

He's hunted with England's Prince Phillip and hobnobbed with gangsters, taking them eggs and butter when they stayed in area cabins, never referring to anyone by name. He's trained pooches for the Pabst family and Joan Crawford and had professional baseball players out to his town of Ottawa home for a get-away. He even had Roy Rogers at the late Mike Sasso's Kettle Moraine Inn, and was able to pull it off without anyone knowing whose company they kept.

"I used to take him to Sasso's bar and never tell Mike," Benson said. "Mike would give me hell for that."

Rogers and his famous wife, Dale Evans, visited Benson and his wife, Lucille, at the Bensons' home in the town of Ottawa, when Evans turned to Lucille Benson and described the two men as "two of a kind," Benson recalled.

Benson's story begins in White Bear, Minn., on his father's farm, where Benson began hunting with dogs at age 12. "I had to match up what sires and dams were smart enough, better than my dad," he said.

In Minnesota, Benson went to school with future professional wrestler Verne Gagne. He graduated White Bear High School in 1931, saying, "I did get a diploma though, because if they flunk me, they're short one football player."

But Benson moved to Wisconsin in 1936 and set up his first kennel in River Hills before moving to the area a few years later. By then, he was already a regular on the sports show circuit, starting in Boston in January and doing two shows a month all the way to California by May.

Benson traveled the country in a custom motor home, fitted with dog kennels in addition to living quarters. Benson was famous for his ability to get dogs to do the darnedest things, which resulted in his dogs being featured in a 20th Century Fox



Brian Huber/Freeman Staff

Orin Benson amazed audiences around the world with his ability to train many types of animals, especially dogs on the sport show circuit. Benson could train a pheasant to sit on the barrel of his gun while he shot the gun. He is seen holding a photo with a pheasant perched on his gun, as he reads a sign that says, "No hunting allowed."

short, "Dog Sense."

"The producer said he'd never seen dogs do what I made them," Benson said. "He says, 'Can you make them do this or that?' I said, 'Tell me what you want and give me a couple of days.'"

Benson said the secret to training an animal is knowing what it likes and what its habits are. He added that animals are driven by scent and taste, so he used his own saliva to train animals — something he calls "the spit method."

"I've trained more wild animals to be my friend by spit. That's faster than any sugar, carrots or anything," he said. "That's been my life. As a farm boy, I trained bull snakes to catch mice and everything else. I trained homing pigeons, you name it."

Benson trained ducks to become "live decoys" by calling other ducks at his command before the practice was outlawed. He also trained pheasants to sit on the barrel of his gun and keep still while he shot the gun. One time, the day before pheasant season in Wyoming, Benson walked down the streets of Sheraton, Wyo., with a pheasant perched on his shoulder.

"The drinks were free that day," he said.

Benson drew international fame when his pet wolf Kepa — Benson was one of the first to raise wolf litters — got loose and stayed on the lam for three weeks. The story went around the world, and ended when a family near New Berlin reported seeing a "big dog with a limp," Benson recalled.

Benson's wife Lucille went out to fetch Kepa, and all it took was a whiff of her scent to travel downwind for the wolf to return to its masters, a tale chronicled in a book, "Flight of the White Wolf."

"I told her never go after him, go so the wind takes your scent because his nose is better than his eyes," Benson said. "She called him and he came limping, she saw a big trap on his foot, she petted him and then had a leash on him."

Benson remarried after his wife died, and outlived his second wife, Vivian, whom he married in 1983.

He still enjoys hunting, and keeps two dogs for that purpose in addition to a third dog. He also enjoys cooking game of all types in his crock pot, staying in his home of more than 50 years with the help of caregivers like Carrie Steiner.

"I've had an interesting life," he said.