

Be Worthy of Your Game: *The Legacy of George Bird Evans and Kay Harris Evans*

Written by: **Mary Reisinger**

*Photography courtesy Old Hemlock Foundation
Unless otherwise noted*



George Bird Evans and his wife Kay with two of their beloved Old Hemlock setters

Near Bruceton Mills in West Virginia, on over 200 acres of undeveloped Appalachian land, lies Old Hemlock. The property contains the oldest habitable house in Preston County and a rare stand of virgin hemlock trees. This was the home of George Bird Evans and Kay Evans, a couple not well-known in the area, but famous in hunting circles around the world.

George, born December 26, 1906, grew up in Uniontown, Pennsylvania, the son of a haberdasher. Kay (Kathryn) was from a family with roots in Harrisonburg, Virginia. George's father hunted and kept setters, so it came naturally to George to hunt with dogs. Kay's father, a doctor who

worked with the founders of the Mayo Clinic, had previously practiced in Spruce, West Virginia, with poor timber workers as patients, so Kay was keenly interested in matters of health. George and Kay both loved the Appalachians.

Their paths first crossed when they were students at the Pittsburgh Institute of Technology (later, the Carnegie Institute). George played saxophone in a dance band, the College Imps; Kay, a fellow student, noticed the young musician—obviously, he noticed her too because she said when he winked at her, her heart fluttered—but they only knew each other casually. Kay left art school to attend



Some of the virgin hemlocks for which George and Kay named the property.



Harrisonburg Teachers College in Virginia. Their paths crossed again when Kay, driving with her father in a convertible in Wheeling, West Virginia, saw George in an oncoming convertible. He and a friend were on their way to Chicago to check out the Chicago Institute of Art, but this chance glimpse of each other sparked a correspondence that led to a 1931 elopement and a dedicated partnership of nearly seven decades.

George and Kay set ambitious goals for themselves. Kay made the varsity swim team in college. George, who had skipped two grades in school, aspired to be an artist, so he went to two excellent schools, but only until he had absorbed all the teachers could give him. He never completed a degree. Early in their life together, they agreed that their mutual goal was to return to the mountains. Meanwhile, they moved to New York City where George had been living.

Kay worked in a library and then taught school. George continued freelance work as he aimed to be hired as an illustrator for the best publication possible, which everyone seemed to agree was *Cosmopolitan* magazine. He spent three years developing a portfolio that he thought would be strong enough to earn him a job at the magazine. In 1938, he presented his collection and was offered a job on the spot at the then impressive salary of \$12,000. As he told Kay, "We're in the money now!" They lived thriftily, saving as much as possible, and investing wisely.

George hunted whenever he could; however, the couple remained intent on living the life they envisioned in the mountains. The first step was to find a suitable property. They looked in Ohio, Pennsylvania, and then around Bruceton Mills, West Virginia. On the last day of one of



Left: The dilapidated house at Old Hemlock when George and Kay bought the property

Above: The restored house today PHOTO BY MIKE CALHOUN

their trips, they found their future home. It was going to be auctioned at a sheriff's sale, and George and Kay bought the farm as well as the timber that had been sold to be cut, thus saving a large stand of virgin hemlock.

The house on the property, a log structure built in 1815, was in very poor condition with squatters living inside. Kay later recalled that George knew immediately what the place could be, and the drawings he made are evidence of this. They talked to the squatters, who were thinking of cutting a hole in the original front door to make a window. George was haunted by this thought until the sale was complete in June of 1938. Fortunately, the door remained intact. George and Kay visited the house and restored it gradually. They cleared some areas around the house,

but most of the fields were allowed to return to their natural state.

As World War II began, Kay's brother, an employee at Hughes Aviation, suggested to George that he could serve as a military artist. In typical fashion, George took a job with Fairchild Industries in Hagerstown, Maryland, and learned to make skilled cutaway drawings from blueprints of aircraft. Then, with impressive work samples in hand, he went to the Pentagon in 1943 and, on successful completion of basic training, became a lieutenant in the Navy. George and Kay lived in the capital until he returned to civilian life at the end of the war.

After the war, they lived at Old Hemlock. For some years they did not have electricity, so they used the stone trough in the springhouse to cool milk and butter, just as early settlers had done. George resumed illustrating for *Cosmopolitan*, working a week or two each month and painting two copies in case one was lost in the mail.

The rest of his time was devoted largely to hunting, and to developing a breed of setter that had the characteristics



he sought—strong hunting instincts and excellent qualities as a companion. This flew in the face of conventional wisdom at the time—that hunting dogs who were kept in homes (rather than kennels) lost their “nose” and their ability to hunt. The bird dogs that resulted from George’s and Kay’s care are called Old Hemlock setters. They are belton setters; they have white coats flecked with orange (buff) or blue (black) or a tri-color combination of orange and blue. Old Hemlock setters are highly-regarded. They are only placed in homes where they will participate in hunting that conforms to George’s philosophy and live with their humans.



The publishing world changed after the war. Photographs were replacing illustrations, and George grew restive. One day he told Kay that they would write mysteries instead. Both George and Kay were accomplished writers. She was published already with a short story in *Today’s Woman*. He had begun keeping a hand-written and illustrated shooting journal in 1932. George and Kay wrote a series of five mystery novels featuring a couple like themselves, a dog, and familiar settings such as an art school, the publishing world, and a hunting party. For these books, they first used the pen name of Brandon Bird and then Harris Evans.



In the 1950s, George began writing articles about shooting, hunting, and bird dogs for publications such as *Field and Stream*. Drawing from his hunting journals and articles, George turned to longer form writing, with the first title, *The Upland Shooting Life*, appearing in 1971. Always a perfectionist, he was not satisfied with the way his early publishers handled his artwork and text, so he formed his own publishing house—Old Hemlock—and the first book on upland hunting from this new imprint was published in 1983. George’s writing on upland hunting is prized around the world, even today.

George and Kay were partners in nearly everything they did. When they went hunting, they were both shooting, George with firearms and Kay with a camera. When they wrote mystery novels, they collaborated. When he wrote about hunting, she edited, and they discussed the work as it progressed. When he undertook breeding Old Hemlock setters, she cared for the puppies and kept records of the people who bought

Top: The shelves at Old Hemlock hold George’s famous books about upland hunting.

Middle: All of their writing was done at this small table on their manual Remington typewriter

Bottom: George, an accomplished musician, had this square, knotty pine piano made to his specifications.

PHOTOS BY MIKE CALHOUN



**Above: George frequently took his dogs on bird hunting expeditions.
Below: George illustrated his hunting journals and his books.**



Kay documented their hunting life with her camera.

them. Kay described the couple's satisfaction with their life of reading, writing, music, art, and hunting. She shielded George from interruptions and distractions. He found her the best possible hunting companion and frequently invoked her name in his conversation and writing. As they rambled around their property, she found a tree that leaned a bit (like her husband whose legs were not the same length) and named it George. He selected a straight tree and named it Kay.

Though some people in the rural community were suspicious of this couple who had arrived from New York City and had such a different lifestyle, Kay and George did develop a social circle. Ruth DeBerry remembers meeting George and Kay when she was four.

She had gone to the dairy barn with her parents when this couple and their dog walked in. Kay and George frequently roamed the countryside on foot. Ruth's family and the Evans' shared many meals and visits, and George hunted on Ruth's family farm. Ruth and her family became life-long friends with George and Kay.

George and Kay were out walking with their dogs many years later when they met neighbors LeJay and Helen Ann

Graffious. LeJay taught at a local school; his principal had suggested that he ask George to speak to his students, but LeJay had not felt he could approach such a famous published author.

After they met, the two couples developed a bond for the rest of Kay and George's lives. LeJay shared his expertise on birds and enjoyed exploring their property. When an antique table George and Kay owned developed a habit of folding and dumping everything on it, LeJay inserted a dowel.

Only after doing this did he learn that the table was thought to have belonged to Stonewall Jackson. The relationship between the two couples led to LeJay and Helen

Ann managing Old Hemlock. Today, they live in a building constructed on the property to house the Old Hemlock Foundation.

George and Kay made provision for their legacy to be maintained. In *Troubles with Bird Dogs*, George expresses his hope that when he and Kay "are no longer gunning, Old Hemlock setters will keep our ideals alive." Responsibility for the Old Hemlock setter line was given to Roger Brown in 1998. He and Jeff Kauffman continued the line until it





Above: Ruth DeBerry met George and Kay when she was four and enjoyed their friendship for the rest of their lives.

PHOTO BY MARY REISINGER

Top right: Helen Ann and LeJay Graffious with their Old Hemlock setters, oversee Old Hemlock and the work of the Foundation.



passed to Hall Carter in 2018. Today there are about 120 Old Hemlock setters carrying on the qualities that George sought in hunting dogs.

In the video titled “A Moment with George and Kay,” George describes the resting places of each of the dogs they loved and says, “Eventually our ashes—Kay’s and mine—will be buried here under these hemlocks where we’ll be at home.” After George’s death in 1998 and Kay’s in 2007, their ashes were interred on the grounds. To keep Old Hemlock as it is, George and Kay arranged for the Old Hemlock Foundation to preserve and promote their writings, art, and philanthropy.

The Foundation funds medical scholarships at West Virginia University Medical School, arts and literature education and college tuition for local students, and animal welfare at a local humane society. LeJay has been using discretionary funds to build an archive at WVU and to do grouse and woodcock research. Many students and interns continue to benefit from the generosity of George and Kay.

Their home is open twice a year for visitors, free of charge, in July and September, and at other times by arrangement.

People who want to experience the ancient hemlocks should contact the foundation for permission to use the miles of trail on the property.

Tom Davis (in 2019) counts George as a top writer on grouse and woodcock hunting, saying that “no one preached the gospel of *quality*...more passionately or eloquently than George Bird Evans. In this respect, his work serves as our moral compass. Ultimately, Evans says, it’s futile to look for quality elsewhere if it isn’t in ourselves.” In contrast, Catherine Harper, who wrote a 1999 biography of George, points to his zeal for living: “Never a moralist, George...demonstrated that shooting days and non-shooting days alike are meant to be lived for the sheer, thumping joy of it. And he generously showed not only that his life was special, but he reminded readers that theirs could be as well.” Perhaps the best way to capture the philosophy that both George and Kay lived is in his suggestion that we should be “worthy of our game,” not only in hunting, but in all our pursuits.