

As printed in the

The Franklin News-Post

Friday, November 9, 2007

On the Wings of Angels, Hawks

By MORRIS STEPHENSON - Staff Writer

Ever since Torri Smith Lambert's grandfather died 11 years ago, she has believed there is a spiritual connection between him and hawks.

Joel Smith died in the early morning hours of Nov. 5, 1996, but his granddaughter had her last conversation with him the day before.

"He was telling me to take care of grandma and told me some things he wanted me to do," Lambert said.

After her grandfather's death, Lambert said she spent a lot of time alone at his farm.

"I would go there and spend two or three nights a week in a travel trailer," she said.

Her mother and grandmother worried about her going to the farm alone. "But I told them not to worry, my granddad was watching after me," Lambert said.

One day when she retreated to the farm, she was thinking of her grandfather when a Red-Tailed Hawk appeared from nowhere, soaring in the sky overhead.

Returning home, she told her mother about the incident. "That's your grandfather looking after you," her mother said.

Lambert's belief grew stronger the day her grandmother died, June 10, 2000. Lambert said she will never forget that day because it's also the day she was married.

"I had visited my grandmother in an assisted living home the day before. She told me she really wanted to be at the wedding, but knew she wouldn't be able to make it," Lambert said.

Her grandmother died that morning before the wedding. The family agreed that her grandmother would not want the wedding postponed, so the ceremony was held.

After exchanging vows, the newlyweds and two friends decided to go out and ride horses. As they were passing through a field, all four horses suddenly came to a stop.

"Just then, a hawk flew out of the woods and soared high into the sky. Then another one appeared, and they were sailing together over our heads," Lambert said.

"When the two hawks appeared at that time, I immediately thought of them as my grandfather and grandmother in a spiritual form and celebrating our wedding with us," she added.

Last week, Lambert was driving to the office at Bernard's Realty and thinking about her grandfather.



Mike Dupuy, a master falconer who lives in Middleberg, Pa., is shown with his Saker falcon Hollywood. Dupuy was flying the bird when it left the area on Oct. 31. Five days later, the female bird of prey was found at Moneta near Smith Mountain Lake.

It was the 11th anniversary of his death.

"I had him on my mind all the way to work," she said.

Shortly after arriving, Gordon Anderson, who lives nearby, stopped in to say "good morning."

"A few minutes later, a woman pulls in the parking lot and comes into the office. She's all excited and told us there was a tame hawk just standing in the road and wouldn't get out of the way," Lambert said.

"She also told us it had tags on its legs, along with a small bell. She was worried it was going to be hit by a car," Lambert continued.

When she called a wildlife man-

agement specialist, Lambert was told to put a blanket over the bird before trying to pick it up. However, Anderson, wearing a leather coat, lifted and placed the bird on his arm, where it was content to perch.

Anderson checked the bird and discovered there was a tracking transponder attached to one leg. There was also a tag containing the telephone number of the bird's owner.

Armed with this information, Lambert made a telephone call. The person who answered was Mike Dupuy of Middleberg, Pa.

An anxious Dupuy told them he had been anticipating a call about his missing bird of prey but feared the caller would have bad news for him.

He was relieved to know that the bird was alive and apparently well. They learned from him that the bird was not a hawk but a Saker Falcon.

It turns out, Dupuy is a master falconer and had last seen the young female falcon he nicknamed "Hollywood" while he was "flying" the bird on Oct. 31.

Lambert informed Dupuy that she was calling from Moneta at Smith Mountain Lake, "and he had no idea where I was or how the bird had flown that far."

After looking up the location on a map, Dupuy estimated the bird had flown around 365 miles from the point he was last seen to Moneta. "Apparently he flew almost straight down Interstate 81. The interstate is only about 40 miles from me," he said.

Dupuy, who is a public speaker, teacher of the 4,000-year-old art of falconry, related what happened the day the falcon disappeared.

"I was doing a photo shoot for an ad with Hollywood. After I finished, I decided to fly the bird for my of-

fice assistant Thelma," he said.

"I fly her in the fields around the house almost every day and cannot explain what happened. But I suspect a resident wild Red-Tailed Hawk chased her and drove her high into the sky. I've seen her catch a thermal and climb well over 3,000 feet," he said.

"Maybe this time, she headed south and joined the thousands of hawks which are on their fall migration south," Dupuy continued.

He explained that Hollywood was hatched in May, "so in human time, she's like a teenager with a Mustang."

Dupuy said he drove hundreds of miles hoping to pick up a signal from the transmitter. "I spent over \$150 in gas driving around and traveled more than 600 miles."

On Saturday, he had to go to a wedding in the D.C. metro area and then to a birthday party for a friend in Northern Virginia. "I continued to keep the radio receiver turned on to the falcon's specific channel the entire trip. I really didn't think I would pick up the signal in Northern Virginia, much less Southern Virginia. I've known falcons to go astray and fly for as far as 160 miles, but this is perhaps a new record."

"When I got the call, Torri said, 'I think we have your bird.' That's how calls usually begin, but I was expecting to hear bad news, not good news," Dupuy said.

So Dupuy and Lambert made arrangements. He guessed it would be a six-to-seven-hour drive for him to come to Moneta, so they agreed to meet in Winchester.

"He bought raw chicken to feed the bird, and you could tell it hadn't eaten since it left," Lambert said. "He also had scales and weighed the bird and said it had lost a lot of muscle tone. You could tell from how

the bird interacted with him that the bird was glad to see its owner."

"He (Dupuy) filled up the vehicle with gas and gave me one of Hollywood's hoods, the bell she was wearing on her leg and a miniature falconer's glove key chain. I shared with Gordon and gave him the hood," Lambert added.

Dupuy said he is a professional public speaker who teaches people about falconry and birds of prey. His website is www.mikedupuyfalconry.com.

In July, he was a speaker at the Falconry Festival held in Reading, England, which was attended by falconers from more than 30 countries. He leaves for Colorado to attend a national field meet the week of Thanksgiving. There will be more than 300 falconers at this event.

He also said he is working on a show for two major "nature" TV networks. It will be a show centered on his life in falconry and "the crazy things that happen when you fly hawks and falcons."

"In fact, we filmed much of the search and recovery effort on getting Holly back home, including interviews with Torri and Gordon on how they found the bird and contacted me," he said.

As for Torri, she's happy Hollywood's story had a happy ending, but she is even more fascinated by the spiritual connection between her grandparents and birds of prey, which in this case happened to be a falcon instead of a hawk.