

Airguns, The Man Behind the Book

Eldon Wolff: The Man Behind The Book By John Groenewold

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Eldon Wolff was employed at the Milwaukee Public Museum for over 40 years. In 1929, he started at the museum as an apprentice taxidermist in the Department of Anthropology. This Department was later divided into two departments (Anthropology and History). Wolff was assigned to the History Department. As an apprentice, he worked under the guidance of Dr. Paul Jenkins, Advisor on Arms to the Museum. He was ultimately promoted through the positions of Assistant, Curator I, II, and III. At retirement he was head of the History and Weapons Department. This was no small achievement for a person who did not have a college education. Eldon Wolff was truly a self-made man. He recognized that because at the time of his retirement, the requirements to fill the position he was vacating included a Doctorate Degree. Prior to working at the museum he worked in a taxidermy shop and learned the trade.

Eldon was a devout family man. His family must have been very dear to him, as his memory is still very dear to his children. Eldon taught his two oldest children, Roland and Sonia, to shoot at a home made range in the basement using air guns. Most of the targets were glass bottles or breakable targets of some type. Eldon had even made a backstop of metal to collect the spent lead. This simple range had provided many years of shooting enjoyment for the three of them. The Wolff's also enjoyed camping and grouse hunting in the Nicolet National Forest. It was quite common for Eldon to combine his many interests into family activities. Therefore, it was no surprise to learn that as was common in the post war years, on camping trips Eldon often brought firearms and ammunition for practice and entertainment. On one such camping trip in a borrowed car, with the camping supplies in and on the trunk, they were surprised to see a passing motorist waving at them. When this failed to get the appropriate response the motorist started honking his horn and waving frantically. Finally, the Wolff's had to stop to investigate and found the camping supplies (which contained the ammunition) on fire. Having removed the smoldering luggage from the rear of the car, the family spent a few precious minutes unwinding from the excitement by watching the nearby cows watching the smoldering luggage. Needless to say, it was a short vacation.

Eldon enjoyed public speaking and spoke at meetings of numerous societies, schools, and universities. He spoke on air guns, coins, pottery restoration, burial rituals, Americana, Wisconsin and Milwaukee history, ballistics, ammunition, typewriters, Indian beadwork, and numerous other subjects. He appeared on numerous television shows discussing many of these topics. He appeared on one of the first color broadcast of the Milwaukee PBS and took his children out of school so they could see this special event. As it turned out the color was not what it is today. Everything had a terrible orange hue to it and it was so bad that much of the broadcast was indistinguishable. However, it was quite an experience for the entire family.

He enjoyed writing so much that for many years he was on the museum's publication committee. In fact, for the last ten years he was at the museum he was editor of "Lore", the museum's official magazine. Many of his articles appeared in this and other museum publications. His articles were also published in many national periodicals. In all, he authored sixty-six books and articles on various subjects. This book is a reprint of the book he is most remembered for. It was the largest piece he ever did. Some of the others include: "Air Gun Batteries", "Air Canes", "The Scheiffel and Kunitomo Air Guns", "Ballard Rifles".

He did extensive field research and was responsible for numerous exhibits at the museum including "The Streets of Old Milwaukee" and the Hall of Religion. He was an archeological assistant at a Hopewell Indian Mound excavation. Wolff's field research on Kentucky rifles and Wyatt Atkinson resulted in numerous publications, enhanced exhibits, a film and several television shows. He was

also responsible for films or television shows on Airguns, restoring a Gatling Gun, pottery restoration, and the Fox River. Some of his research included trips to a friends farm with his friend and assistant Bob Lietz where they shot many old air guns and compared their power to the power of black powder and modern firearms.

Eldon tried to experience everything he wrote about or was researching and encouraged others to do the same. He commonly said "that the best way to understand what it was like to do something in years past was to do it yourself, now". He even made his own buckskin hunting clothes. Indian lore and beadwork was a favorite subject of his. So much so that it became a hobby or past time. He even made Kachina dolls for each of his grandchildren.

Eldon Wolff was a flamboyant, yet dignified-looking individual who projected a powerful image. Though he is no longer with us he is still part of the museum. He is remembered by the staff personnel who knew him. He is not easily forgotten since a likeness of him appears as a Mountain Man in a Kentucky Rifle Mural and in a row boat in the Felicity Diorama.

He seems to have been very set in his ways, as he resisted moving his department to the new museum building in 1963. In fact his was the last department to make the move. Previously the museum was located on Wisconsin Street several blocks from its' present location. When it came time for the History Department to move, he did so reluctantly. In fact it has been said that the relocation of the History Department was nothing short of a forced march. He also refused to pack anything. Since the move occurred on a very windy day in winter, the net result was that most of the cards from the Card Catalog blew down Wells Street. Reconstructing the Card Catalog was a project which employed numerous volunteers for several years.

Eldon had very high morals and ethics. He refused to do anything in his personal life which could be construed as a conflict of interest with the museum. For example, he did not collect guns or anything related to his work. He also would not value a gun for a patron of the museum or collector. Instead he referred anyone looking for price information to experienced collectors of the material in question. It appears that he divorced himself so much from price and value that he left much of the price negotiating for museum acquisitions to experienced collectors including G. Charter (Nick) Harrison as can be seen from this quotation from a letter from Eldon to Nick. "Inasmuch as you are so splendid a dickerer I hope you can help us in persuading to let us have the piece and at a reasonable price." Even though Nick was a major contributor to this book, as a result of a "falling-out" he did not want his name to appear in the book. But as he was a major contributor Eldon felt compelled to give him credit where ever it was deserved. Hence his name appears through the book.

Additionally, although he was a hunter and shooter, he did not participate in competition or shoot at organized ranges. Eldon was primarily a small game hunter, however, he occasionally hunted deer and once hunted bear in Canada. The hide of the trophy was tanned and rugged by Eldon and his son.

Eldon was a life member of the American Society of Arms Collectors and the National Muzzle Loading Rifle Association. He was also a member of the Outdoor Writers Association of America and the National Rifle Association. He was a founder of the Wisconsin Gun Collectors Association and was also quite active in it. He held many official positions with the Wisconsin Gun Collectors Association. The museums files contains numerous pieces of correspondence with members of the Association. These confirm that many of the air guns in this book were not in the museums collection, but were borrowed from Association members.

There is not a lot of data in the files of the museum on Eldon Wolff as a person. The results of his work are evident in the Museums collections. In collecting material for this biography numerous family members, acquaintances and co-workers were interviewed. I would like to recognize the contributions of Fred Benkovic, Ed Green, Bob Lietz, John Lundstrum, Howard Madus, Sandra Marfy, Ted Meyers,

Pete Schmidt, Judy Turner, Sonia Vogl, Roland Wolff, and all the others associated with Eldon Wolff or the museum who were always helpful and cooperative. I also re-read all the books and articles I could locate, all my notes from numerous visits to the museum, museum's research library, and stored collection of weapons over the past 17 years. Writing this has been a very enjoyable experience for me and it is hoped that it has added to your enjoyment of this book.