

THE BEGINNING OF NAHRA

By G. Ray Arnett

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Essentially, through Richard A. Wolter's columns in *Gun Dog*, "public demand" led to the formation of The North American Hunting Retriever Association, founded in 1983. When appropriate, Wolters was quick to say that I was the catalyst for NAHRA becoming a reality. The situation came about shortly after a Colt Firearms reception at the Omni Hotel in Atlanta, GA, the host city for the 1982 Shooting, Hunting and Outdoor Trade (SHOT) Show.

The winter of '82 was unkind to Atlanta as the cold, icy weather conditions were unusually bitter. Traveling over ice-covered highways and walkways had put into slow motion any moving thing. I arrived late at the Colt Firearm's reception with a mutual friend, Tom Bass, retired Air Force colonel and Washington Representative for Colt. Entering the hotel reception hall through a back entrance off the parking lot, we met Wolters leaving with Tar, at side. Jet, the featured star of *Gun Dog*, had tragically, unexpectedly, and quickly, died from cancer several years before.

After paying my respects to Tar and receiving a "kiss" in return, I greeted Richard. "It's too early for you to be leaving a reception, Richard. The free booze and food have not been cut off!. What's your hurry?" Richard said, "If Tar isn't welcomed, I'm not staying!" Dick went on to explain that the Omni's *maitre d'hôtel* overseeing the reception had told him dogs are not allowed where food is served. As far as Richard was concerned, where Tar wasn't welcome, Wolters wasn't welcome.

The unfortunate incident and Dick's disappointment started my juices flowing! With Tom Bass flying cover off my right wing, I took Dick and Tar in tow, leading them back into the noisy, smoke-filled reception hall. Stopping the first waiter in sight, I asked, "Who's in charge of running this show?" The *maitre d'* was pointed out standing against a wall beside one of the busy bars. With unusual bravado, I homed in on my target with Bass, Wolters, and Tar seeking refuge behind me.

To be heard over the din of loud conversation and laughter from 150 to 200 guests who were enjoying Colt's hospitality, I loudly stated to the confused *maitre d'*, "The party's over, fella!. Lock the doors! Close the bar! Stop serving food!" The *maitre d'*, was stunned. The reception, scheduled to run for three hours was just getting under way. My 'victim' shuffled away from the wall, his mouth fashioned an O, his jaw dropped, and his wide eyes bugged out like a crab's. What seemed like

minutes passed before he regained composure enough to stammer, “I beg your pardon, sir. What did you say?”

Remember now, I, too, was only a guest without authority, but apparently it never occurred to the bewildered *maitre d'* to question my credentials. My broadside barrage and gung ho attack delivered with the enthusiasm and determination of a banzai assault made an impression.

“How dare you insult two of my privileged guest by refusing them service! I won’t stand for it! You, sir, insulted ‘Doctor’ Wolters by insisting he and his guest leave the hall. If my friend and his companion are not welcome here, the party is over. Period!”

I looked around for support from my accomplices, but Col. Bass, Richard, and Tar were nowhere to be seen. They had quickly melted into the joyful crowd of merrymakers after my first salvo.

Moistening his lips, my tortured victim’s tongue darted in and out and tiny bubbles of saliva formed at the corners of his mouth. The episode was so comical it was all I could do to keep from breaking up. I was afraid that the force of my command and steely-eye stare would fade with the crack of a smile. Trying his best to counter, the poor soul began mumbling hotel rules, citing public health laws, explaining the city ordinance about animals on premises where food is served, etc., etc.

I bent down and repeated, in measured, no uncertain terms, “I-don’t-want-to-hear-about-it! Close the bar! Return the food! Shut down the kitchen! Clear the tables! Empty the hall! The party’s over, finished, kaput! Now, my good man,” I concluded, “what part of that don’t you understand?”

This 5’4” quivering mass of human protoplasm seemed to dissolve inside of his tuxedo. He looked like a kid slapped away from the table for uttering an expletive, but was thoroughly convinced I meant business. With the wind out of his sails and fearful his job was on the line to question my authority further, the unfortunate fellow relented.

Locating my AWOL companions, Richard, Tar, and Tom, the conquered adversary led us to a table adjacent to the main bar where we greeted and chatted with friends, enjoy adult beverages, and nibble

hors d'oeuvres. Tar languished quietly at Richard feet, accepting bacon-wrapped chicken livers and cheese snacks from adoring ladies and admiring gentlemen. Tar was the perfect guest, as you might expect. When the reception was over as scheduled we were the last to leave. The *maître d'* was nowhere in sight to accept my grateful thanks for his thoughtful consideration of my request.

Dick and I laughed about this many, many times, and he refers to the incident in the pages preceding the forward in *Game Dog*. For the record, he wrongly titled me “Undersecretary of the Interior of the United States,” when in fact I was Assistant Secretary of Interior for Fish and Wildlife and Parks. Richard didn’t care, nor do I.

I believe it was the day following the Colt reception that a crippling ice storm brought Atlanta to its knees. Roadways were impassable; cars slid off highways, and slithered sideways and stalled on freeway off ramps. Traffic was at a standstill. Streets everywhere were littered with stalled vehicles. Drivers walked away, leaving their cars abandoned where the vehicle had stopped running. The area looked like a bombed-out war zone.

To keep from freezing, drivers idled their engines to keep heaters going but when the gas tank emptied the drivers and passengers abandoned their disabled cars. Desperate motorists and pedestrians crowded into doorways, restaurants, hotel lobbies, public buildings, or private residences for survival. Stranded visitors and local commuters needed to find shelter when they were unable to reach their destinations.

Wolters had planned to fly out of Atlanta that day so he had checked out of his hotel earlier. At this late hour, now there were no hotel/motel vacancies available in Atlanta, GA. During the day, as the weather continued to deteriorate, many hotel guests who were scheduled to check out refused to leave, and earlier arriving guests with reservations were out of luck. There was no place at the inn. The lobby of the Atlanta Omni, where I had a room, was overflowing with motorists, pedestrians, and new arrivals seeking shelter. To make matter worse, with the onslaught of people and everyone wanting food, the hotel kitchen was caught off guard. Rations were slim and service maddeningly slow. Fortunately, I had not checked out of my room so I invited Dick and Tar to share it with me for the evening.

Confusion in the hotel lobby was such that no one questioned the presence of Tar as Dick led him onto the elevator jammed with registered Omni guests. Our entourage did not receive a second glance

The hotel did its best catering to registered guests, but room service was at a snail's pace. Eventually, four prime rib dinners, with all the trimmings, a quart of milk, and a couple bottles of excellent California Pinot Noir arrived for our threesome. The extra prime ribs and milk were for Tar, and the wine for Dick and me was superb. Neither Dick nor I were "serious drinkers," however, on occasion we had been known to "toast a friend." On this occasion, Tar was the friend we toasted. It truly was a memorable evening, and during the last dozen years of Richard's life I was privileged to enjoy many noteworthy and happy times with him. The founding of NAHRA stands out as one of those memorable events.

For years, Dick had been kicking around ideas to modify and improve the American Kennel Club licensed retriever trials. Also, he wanted a Stud Book of hunting retrievers -- the Labrador in particular -- with proven hunting abilities. The Labrador was and is at the top of the most popular dog list. The breed is too popular for its own good. Because the demand was there, many kennels began breeding Labs for owners whose only interest in the dog was for show or as pets.

Richard used to say, "The Lab is a breed that will be on the Endangered Species list before we know it. All other endangered species are on the list because there are too few of them. The problem with Labs is there are too many of them, and they are losing their ability to do what they were intended to do -- hunt and retrieve."

To prevent the breed from eventually losing its hunting ability, or having its special hunting and retrieving traits diminished, Dick envisioned a Retrievers Stud Book for dogs qualified in the field, not on a show bench.

Wolters was familiar with AKC's licensed trials and he did not like the method of judging dogs against dogs. Too often, a trial's top dog is selected more on "politics" than its ability to perform. Richard wanted every dog rated on its individual performance when running the same set of standards that challenged other dogs in the same class.

With AKC trials, there is a tendency to keep one's fingers crossed hoping that "that" dog doesn't do as well or better than "your" dog. It is human nature and expected that trainers, owners, and spectators will acquire personal preferences that favor one dog over another. Those prejudices do not necessarily develop because of a dog's exceptional hunting and retrieving abilities. They might come about because you are the dog's owner and a friend of the judges, or the dog is owned by a friend, or maybe owned by a popular celebrity.

In NAHRA trials, trainers, owners, and spectators alike encourage and cheer every dog to success. Each dog is rated by its ability to perform in a standard test rather than competing against your dog or one belonging to a friend. Politics, favoritism, and jealousy have no place in field trials, and there is no reason for them ever to exist in NAHRA trials.

Over the years, Richard had talked with me and many others about how he thought retriever field trials should be run if we are to retain the hunting instincts of retrievers. Wolters was quick to say that I lit his fuse with my goading and challenge in the parking lot following that eventful evening in 1982 when Colt hosted the reception at the Atlanta Omni Hotel. I don't recall my exact words at the time, but I said something such as, "Wolters, you are no different from others with delusions of grandeur. You come up with these grandiose designs but never follow through. If AKC trials are to be changed, you are the man to do it. Don't cop out now, old friend. It's up to you to do the needful."

Dick was stunned by my statement, and did his best to beg off. "Are you nuts or what? I don't know anything about putting together a national organization. And if I did, I simply haven't got the time." I countered with, "You prove my point. You dreamers really are all blow and no show. All you have to do is put together a board of directors to set the standards and then let the dedicated members make those standards work."

My challenge took root. Wolters called Ned Spear, a duck-hunting zealot and Lab-loving attorney in Swanton, Vermont. When Ned answered his phone, Richard said, in effect, "Ned, you are President of the hunting retriever organization we are forming." Dick was prepared for Ned's excuse and argument to defend why he could not accept the offer, but in Spear's true form, Ned said, "Fine. Let's go!" At that point NAHRA was on its way.