

THE HEART OF A NATURALIST



Wally poses for this photo at LBL in the 1980s wearing his buckskin pants, calico shirt, rattlesnake skin hat and 1820s muzzleloader.

By Sarah Holloway

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"I felt like that was what I was put on earth to do -- sharing the natural history of animals and talking about what we did to manage animals and wildlife there -- that's what I really love," Wally Brines tells me.

A fish and wildlife biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Cookeville, Wally is speaking of the 17 plus years he spent working as a naturalist at Woodlands Nature Center at TVA's Land Between The Lakes, a huge outdoor recreation area covering 170,000 acres between Kentucky Lake and Lake Barkley in Tennessee and Kentucky.

"I lost that job when they had a reduction in force, but sharing in the outreach programs here is similar to what I did there, but it's not with live animals anymore," Wally says. "I do programs in the area on threatened and endangered species.

"Our office is responsible for the whole state. I take a kit with me that has some native animal skins and some exotic pieces that were confiscated in court cases where people try to bring illegal things into the U.S. I go to schools and other groups and talk to them about threatened and endangered species. The outreach programs I do now are a lot fewer than I used to do at the Nature Center, but it's a real important part of my job -- educating people about what's out there and what to do and not to do. If you're in a foreign country and see something made out of an animal or plant part that you may want to bring back to the U.S., you need to be sure it's not going to be taken away from you if you bring it home or you're not going to be fined or put in jail.

"You can get in a lot of trouble for doing things like that. The things in my kits are from items that people tried to bring into the U.S. or sometimes crossed state lines with something that was illegally taken."

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has three trust resources: One is federally threatened and endangered species -- plants and animals; the others are wetlands and migratory birds.

Wally says, "I look at projects like water lines, sewer lines, a new school or any type of commercial development -- anything that's funded by federal money or is proposed on federal land -- when they're submitted to us. We let them know whether it's going to affect one of these three trust resources. We try to work out something that will lesson the impact on endangered species or a wetlands or migratory birds."

Wally met his soul mate and wife, Sharon, when she was a volunteer at the Nature Center at Land Between The Lakes in 1986, but it wasn't until some years later that they began dating. They were married January 3, 1998, in Waverly.

"I had worked with her at LBL, and she always had a compassionate heart about the animals," Wally says. "One of the things I made sure of when I was there was that the animals were taken care of -- that was my number one priority, and she felt the same.

"When she worked there, she was in charge of a 600-individual mouse colony that we took care of to feed our animals, birds of prey and snakes. She wasn't afraid to get her hands dirty or to tackle anything. She did it all -- she even did some of the programs up there."

Sharon says, "It was a wonderful experience volunteering there. We worked with owls, eagles and deer; amphibians and reptiles. Wally taught me a lot about caring for them and facts about them."

Wally also taught outdoor photography while working at LBL and has shown his photos in two galleries in Kentucky and has sold several prints. When I visited with him and Sharon recently at their home, I sampled his cooking (delicious beef stew and salad) and received a warm and noisy welcome from their dogs, Chance, a black lab and beagle mix, and Tessie, part chow and border collie. Their home is filled with photographs of owls and eagles and other wildlife taken at LBL.

"Wally's experiences from childhood -- all these different things that he got from nature and his vast knowledge of the history and facts of wildlife and natural resources, plus a really good sense of humor, made his programs really wonderful," Sharon says. "He was a big favorite at LBL."

Wally says, "At LBL I did programs where I talked about the natural history of an animal -- whether it came from an egg or was born alive and what features helped it get along in the wild. Hawks and owls do the same thing but one has the night shift (owls) and one the day shift (hawks).

"Owls have great adaptability. With human beings, we have to have daylight to see what we're doing. Owls do the same thing a lot of birds of prey do, but they can maneuver and hunt and eat in almost total darkness.

"We had a little orphaned barred owl that was born at WNC in the summer of 1982, and I took him to the World's Fair in Knoxville. I stayed there several days and did programs, and that bird is still alive.

"I've always had a fascination for snakes, and we had several snakes there that we worked with. I never handled any poisonous snakes because I was never taught how to handle them, but we had a couple of snakes that we took out and let people touch and feel and did constant programs with them. We had coyotes and white tailed and fallow deer and bald and golden eagles. I guess the only red wolf pups we had were raised when I was there -- a female had four pups."

Wally was born in Princeton, Ind., the only child of Frank and Bernice Brines, and says, "I grew up with a father and grandfather and uncles who liked to hunt and fish so I fell into that routine very easily. I credit a lot of what I know to my grandfather as far as the out-of-doors. I had a self-taught love of nature and animals and identification of bird songs and things like that."

He served in the army in Vietnam as a company clerk and mail clerk from October 1968 to October 1969 and decided while there that he wanted to become a wildlife biologist. "I came back and went to junior college in Mt. Carmel, Ill., and then transferred to Murray State University in Murray, Ky. I graduated in 1975 and ended up at LBL. It was a wonderful place to work."

Wally may have lost his job at LBL, but he remains a naturalist at heart, and on a smaller scale is still doing "what I was put on earth to do." As I followed him and Sharon for a tour of their six beautiful acres south of Cookeville and met Skeeter, their cat and Freckles and Nugget, their horses, I felt the happy excitement of being with people who are doing what they love most.

This month marks their sixth year at their present home, and Sharon says, "We had a log home on Buck Mountain when we got Freckles and Sadie (now deceased) that were rescued horses, but we had to board them somewhere else and we were constantly looking for a place where we could have our horses with us.

"We found this place, which is just ideal; we loved the house and the wetlands and the pond and pasture. The barn was here and we had had water and electricity supplied to it. A friend helped us make stalls for the horses and we brought Sadie and Freckles here."

Sadie and Freckles had been abused and came to them through Horse Haven of Tennessee, Equine Advocates, Rescue & Investigations in Knoxville (www.horsehaven.net). Freckles is part Arabian and part quarter horse, and after Sadie's death (Wally and Sharon still find it hard to talk about her), they got

Nugget, a pony.

"Nugget wasn't a rescued pony," Sharon says. "He just needed a home and Freckles needed a companion. He and Freckles hit it off right away." When he first arrived, Sharon would sit in a corner of his stall for a period each day until he became comfortable with her and his new surroundings.

Their place is recognized by the National Wildlife Federation as a certified wildlife habitat and Wally and Sharon take nature walks on their property and on trails at Burgess Falls Natural Area and other state parks. They have participated in the Christmas Bird Count for 11 years and in the Great Backyard Bird Count for the past 10. They both like to garden and Wally builds birdhouses and other woodworking projects in their workshop.

Taking care of animals and keeping a place as beautiful as theirs is hard work, and I wondered what they did for recreation.

"Sharon and I are big Andy Griffith fans and we enjoy some of the old classic science fiction movies," Wally says. "Both of us like old westerns, especially those with Roy Rogers, John Wayne and Clint Eastwood. We also enjoy Disney movies. They like going to antique stores and flea markets and Wally still likes to fish and hunt."

When I ask about music, Wally says, "I like the 60s rock music I grew up with and some of the older country music stars like Reba McEntire -- and I love the Andrews Sisters! I have several singers that I like, but my favorite singer is my wife."

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