



WILD TURKEYS BY BILLY RHETT

# Horizons

By Roger Pinckney

*Hunter, artist, philosopher, Billy Rhett is a man of considerable talent and strong opinions.*

I've known Billy Rhett since Day One. We were boys together in a magic of salt marsh and murmuring river, down in the South Carolina Lowcountry where a man fairly stumbles over beauty, history and magic and grief. He's Bill Rhett these days, nationally acclaimed painter, popular historian, woodworker, purveyor of antiques, guns and fine art. More correctly, William Means Rhett Jr., but I called him Billy then and I'll call him Billy now.

Both of us got a bit of boy left in us yet.

Billy's fifth great-great-granddaddy captured and presided over the execution of Stede Bonnet, the "gentlemen pirate driven from

the Barbados by a nagging wife." Billy's great-grand-daddy drafted the Ordinance of Secession, which my great granddaddy signed. We got killed and burnt out, but we ain't gonna apologize, no sir, no ma'am. And if you ever puzzle over why those old Confederates laid it down the way they did, just read tomorrow's headlines. You'll figure it out by and by.

But I digress.

Century and a half later we stand in his gallery on Bay, Beaufort, South Carolina, our hometown. It's an eclectic and impressive venue in a Victorian storefront on an historic street, wildlife carvings, wildlife art,

*Billy Rhett fine-tunes a wood duck carving at his studio in Beaufort, South Carolina.*



landscapes, antique firearms, Civil War maps, original Audubon prints.

We have not spoken in 20 years, since he got tangled up in a thicket, a hank of grass beneath the hammer of his .44 and a wild boar bearing down. He bought my little Swede Mauser right after that scramble. It had a short barrel for heavy cover and a hammer fall a hay bale could not impede. It must have worked out fine, as he kept hunting pigs and still claims all his nubbins.

He got married and I got married and we both raised up children who love the same things we do. He'd been to Africa and I'd been to Africa. He took up art and I took up writing.

Lots of catching up to do.

**B**ut first, the back-story: Billy Rhett is the grandson of the artist, James Moore Rhett, whose pencil, ink and charcoal sketches of Lowcountry scenes once fetched 75 cents to a dollar apiece, kept Grandpa clothed and fed during the Great Depression. Big money today, if you can even find an original!

Artistic lightning often skips a generation. It jumped clean over Billy's daddy and landed square on top of him. On his way home one college weekend, Billy happened to stop at a bird-carving exhibit at Savannah's Telfair Museum. And there he saw the work of Gilbert Maggioni.

Gilbert Maggioni (say Mah-joney) was a Lowcountry icon, raconteur, artist, duck hunter and third generation oysterman. His family pioneered techniques for canning shellfish and Maggioni oysters went all the way to Russia, prized fare in the St. Petersburg Winter Palace, gracing the table of Czar Nicolas II in the old days.

Three generations later Gilbert was still cussing wind, tide and a lackadaisical crew of pickers and



*Flight of Doves is a spectacular, six-foot-tall carving of life-sized birds. On page 51: Wild Turkeys is an eye-catching example of his versatility as an artist.*



*Four years in the making, Gamecocks depicts a Bumblefoot Grey (top) battling a Khan Aseel, a 3,500-year-old breed that always fights to the death.*

shuckers. But he had a sideline – therapy you might call it. He carved his own gunning decoys, hollow-bodied little beauties that would suck in black ducks like plastic never could.

Friends who were lucky enough to talk him out of a few blocks thought them too pretty to get wet. Long about 1960, when Maggioni realized more of his decoys were on mantles and end tables than in boats or blinds, he began carving for art rather than utility, eventually even whittling individual feathers and inserting them into the body of the bird. The results were so dramatic, many mistook his work for taxidermy.

Billy Rhett was smitten. Their daddies were friends. Would Gilbert Maggioni take him on as an apprentice?

Hell no!

But Maggioni needed an extra hand at the oyster house. He'd be happy to teach Billy a thing or two after work . . . if he was not too tired to learn. There was another aspiring carver on the oyster docks, Grainger McCoy. And the master and his two young students took bird-carving from folk art to fine art.

It was a sea change, birds in their natural habitat, apparently suspended in midair, carefully engineered, strung together wing to foot, wing to wing by artfully camouflaged high-tensile steel wires.

Billy began showing his carvings locally, then further afield in galleries and museums. His first major piece, two wood ducks feeding on wild grapes, was a year in the making and nearly seven feet high. Hesitant to quit his day job even once the piece sold, it took him another two years to bite the bullet. But he bit it and took a generous thoothhold. And so began a long career as a bird carver.

**I**n 1978, Billy married Nancy Ricker, a self-taught watercolorist who excelled at capturing the fleeting beauty of the marshes, seascapes of their Lowcountry home. Billy, by then, was beating

**FLYING BRANCH**

**NORTH AMERICA'S MOST VERSATILE OUTFITTER**

**ORVIS**  
ENDORSED  
WINGSHOOTING  
&  
FISHING

**WORLD CLASS WINGSHOOTING**  
PHEASANT, CHUKAR, GREY PARTRIDGE  
QUAIL, BLUE & RUFFED GROUSE  
CAST-&-BLAST TRIPS

**TROPHY BIG GAME HUNTING**  
WHITETAIL & MULE DEER  
HORSEBACK ROCKY MTN ELK  
COLOR-PHASED BLACK BEAR  
MOUNTAIN LION  
MERRIAM TURKEY  
GREY WOLF

**DESTINATION FLY-FISHING**  
DRIFTBOAT RIVER FISHING  
BACKCOUNTRY TROUT FISHING

**2012 Sporting Classics**  
Award of Excellence

**(800) 472 1945**  
**INFO@FLYINGBRANCH.COM**  
**WWW.FLYINGBRANCH.COM**

up the road, toting his fragile and increasingly valuable carvings up and down the East Coast. Confederate to the bone, Billy never cared much for New York City, even though Crossroads of Sport sold his work. Maryland was closer and a little better, where his spectacular dance of death, *Peregrine Falcon and Sora Rails*, won honors at the Easton show. But the road was still the road – expensive, time-consuming, sometimes dangerous and always wearisome. Nancy was hauling her art all over as well and the newlyweds longed to roost.

But how? If they worked out of their home, there would be an endless stream of customers and the curious interrupting the artistic process. Downtown Beaufort in those days was enduring a transition. Working waterfront or tourist destination? Billy and Nancy took a chance. There was an old shoe store that might just work for a gallery.

It did and today, going on 30 years, the Rhett Gallery is the second oldest continuously operating business downtown.

**I**n 2000, Africa called. And it would change Billy Rhett like it has changed so many writers and artists before. Deep in the bush in Zimbabwe, he got his first bedtime instructions from his PH.

“If you hear something outside your tent, holler ‘who’s there?’ If nobody answers, fire a round straight up.”

It was just a joke until he saw all the holes in the canvas, each expertly stitched shut. And then there was the hyena alarm clock, the black mamba tracks all around his tent in the morning, the black rhino that put him up a tree.

Billy took a buff in the three-million-acre Omay district, a grizzled old Dagga Boy with his Winchester .375. There were impala, zebra, kudu and lots of birds, guinea fowl, francolin, Cape doves. Back in Bulawayo, over a round of drinks, Billy casually remarked he’d like

to take a buff with an old double rifle one day. The next evening, a veritable stream of elderly gents showed up at the hotel toting vintage double rifles, each of them desperate to raise enough cash to get the hell out of town.

“We saw pretty quick we would run out of money long before we ran out of guns,” Billy remembers. “Fitted leather cases, ivory sights, the choice was excruciating.”

Final cut was a pristine 1958 “White Hunter” Westley Richards .500/.465.

“How in the world did you get that thing into the country?”

“Hell,” Billy snorts, “I had to come home, fill out the paperwork, then go back and get it!”

Hunt buffalo with a vintage gun? Be careful what you wish for. Back in the Omay in 2002, another Dagga Boy was intent on extracting revenge when Billy’s seventh shot dropped it, not 15 steps away.

“Faithful safari hands standing by Bwana in the face of death?” Billy laughs. “Forget it! They just evaporated!”

But it wasn’t the buffalo, the kudu, the impala, the campfire stories or even the Westley Richards double – the African light was the greatest trophy. When Billy Rhett first saw Africa, he was a woodcarver just beginning to fool around with oils. After his second safari, he had a whole new career as a painter.

Want a carving or a painting? The Rhett Gallery is open seven days. Want to commission a work? Forget it. Billy Rhett carves and paints only what he wants. He’ll give you right of first refusal on his next work. For a fee, of course.

The boy’s done good. ♪

*Note:* The author invites you to read his essay about Grainger McCoy, another artist influenced by Gilbert Maggioni, “Through these Hands,” in the Nov./Dec. 2006 issue of *Sporting Classics*. Copies are available at [www.sportingclassics.com](http://www.sportingclassics.com).