

# Memories of John Heller

Jan. 1, 1933 - Dec. 19, 2023

by Helen M. Swingle



One of John's favorite stories was when he was young and happened to be sitting in an eating place on Main St in Franklin with Herbert Irons the Chief of Police. As they ate and talked Chief Irons was taking apart and cleaning his gun. When they finished eating Chief Irons said "Well, let's see how this works now" apparently he loaded the gun, and as he squeezed the trigger blew a hole through the wooden floor of the luncheonette. To which he said "Now there, that's better!"

Another story he liked to tell was of him and John Ocet who owned the business next to John's. He said one day they were outside in the back and got talking about marksmanship. One thing led to another and John Ocet flipped a quarter in the air and John Heller shot at it. The quarter was nowhere to be found until years later when John Ocet found the quarter on his property and gave it to John Heller. It looked like a little soup bowl from being hit with the bullet from Heller's gun! John carried this quarter in his pocket every day and would show it to me whenever I asked to see it again.

Over the years it was quite worn from John fiddling with it in his pocket.

One day around 2008-2009 John called me and asked me to come to his house as he had "something to show me". He opened a cabinet and took out many small rubber-banded packs of competition match patches. We began to spread them out on his pool table as I noticed they were quite curled and there was still stitches and threads hanging from them! As he looked at each patch he could remember where the match was, the weather and what had happened that day; a little story behind each patch! I was amazed at the history in those patches and the accomplishments of this humble man I had known for years who never once bragged about his past. He had often said to me and others "Your target will do your talking" and he was living proof of that. As he put it to me "I won everything there is to win - now I just sit around and tell stories". I then began a labor of love arranging his shooting history on two large banners. Over the next two years I made several trips back to his home for him and his wife, Vi's, approval before they were finally finished. They proudly hang today in the Franklin R&R clubhouse as a tribute to this man who was the driving force of the Franklin Revolver & Rifle Association for over 65 years.

It was important to Heller that we knew the history of this club which he printed out on a large yellow legal pad in pencil in 2011. Much of the information of our beginning as "The Boro Boys" was taken from a meeting Heller had with John Rousset in 2005. Harvey Irons, son of Police Chief Herb Irons, donated several photos of Franklin R&R members from the 1930s which hang in our clubhouse. John wanted to make sure that problems we had in the past were not repeated and when such situations arose he would say "Don't let the tail wag the dog!!"

Heller would often teach the safety class at our Girls, Guys & Guns events. I would register the students, give a brief history of our club and then introduce our "Chief Instructor, John Heller". I got upset one day when a student raised her hand and asked "I would like to know what qualifications you have to teach us about firearms?" Heller calmly responded that he was a Certified NRA Pistol Instructor and the class continued. I was determined not to let that happen again. So I edited my introduction of him to include some statistics from his shooting career:

- In 1974 he shot 2600 out of 2700, a goal of all shooters
- He received the Distinguished Award in 1981
- He made the President's 100 - 3 times - in 1987, 1988 and 1989
- He is in the Sussex County Sports Hall of Fame
- He is classified by the NRA as a Master Shooter
- He is a National Pistol Champion
- He is a local legend and a priceless asset to this club
- Back in the day the NRA selected the top 10 slow fire competitors at Camp Perry to compete as "Team USA" in the International Mayleigh Cup Competition . John Heller was on our "Team USA" that won the Mayleigh Cup Trophy in 1988.

"It isn't often you get to learn something at the hand of a Master, - today YOU will have that privilege. This is our Chief Instructor John Heller."

No one ever questioned his qualifications again!

After a few years of that introduction I asked him if I should trim that intro down a bit . . . .He said "No, . . no, . . I, . . uh . . LIKE it!"