

## DUST

### BLUE THE ELEVENTH PUP



In early spring 1943, the hotbeds already had small two leafed seedlings tomato plants pushing up through the blow sand soil, a time for Dad to plow the river bottom land for our summer tomato field. Early Saturday morning Dad had R.E. and I go with him in the pickup out to Pa's farm where he borrowed the Ford tractor and plow.

After Uncle J.E. serviced the tractor and instructed R.E. about operating it safely, Dad and I followed behind in the pickup while R.E. drove the tractor to the field in the South Canadian River bottom, which Dad had rented from Fancher Green for the tomatoes patch.

R.E. was to drive the tractor over "Indian Hill" on the East side of town. When he started up the hill I could hear the governor on the old Ford tractor pick up the extra load against the flathead engine in the cold morning air of March on the prairie.

(For once I'm glad that R.E. is seven and old enough to do something that the "Big People" won't allow me to do, because it's even cold here in this pickup with a cab. At least that breaks the wind, but I know it's colder out there where R.E. is setting on an iron seat and facing the North wind.)

Driving North past the Combs and Lancet farms, R.E. stopped the tractor on the hill just before reaching Twin Bridges. Dad stepped out of the pickup truck to ask why.

Son, what's the matter? Don't you want to drive across the bridges?

No, that isn't it. My hands are so cold I can't hold onto the steering wheel. I just need to warm them up next to the heater for a minute.

## DUST

(Boy! And I thought all of this tomato farming was something that we were going to do in hot weather, however it was just this cold last fall when we went over to our tomato field on the Grimes farm to strip all of the plants of their tomatoes the day of last year's first freeze.)

After R.E. had his hands warmed up enough that he could hold onto the steering wheel and Dad had given him a pair of old socks that he found under the truck seat to put on his hands, R.E. drove the rest of the way to the new field. Down in the river on the South side, it seemed to be much warmer with the North winter sun coming in and no wind.

By the time Dad and R.E. had the tomato field plowed later in the day the evening cold came back and it was just as cold as the morning had been.

About two weeks later time enough for the cold to have killed most of the insect larva that had been plowed up, Dad went back to the tomato patch to disk and harrow the ground flat for the transplanting of the tomato plants which would be done on Dad's birthday (the eleventh day of May). Later that evening while driving out of the river bottom on the way home he pulled into Mr. Green's farm to ask for some water to pour into his overheating radiator.

Mr. Green was running around a sedan car kicking the tires and hollering at the top of his voice.

Fancher, is there something wrong with your tires?

Yes. There's something wrong with this entire car and if it wasn't for that war going on I would buy a different car then I would fill a wash in the field with this thing, but there isn't a decent car in this whole country that's for sale!

Well Fancher, what's wrong with it? Maybe we can fix it.

No, it can't be fixed! I've been working on it for two days and now it has three gears backward and one gear forward!

That isn't much of a problem to fix with that particular Eaton transmission, all you have to do is turn the shifting fork around, it's a real nice looking car.

Well, if you think it's such a "Nice Looking Car" I'll trade it to you for that pickup of yours and you can fix this "Nice Looking Car."

Mr. Green and Dad traded, car for pickup, then Dad drove the backward car twelve miles home, backing all the way.

Mother was looking out the kitchen window when the old black car came backing over Stubbs Hill North of the house.

Well! That looks like Fancher Green's car coming down the hill, but what's he doing driving it backward? And a way out her no less.

## DUST

Dad backed into the yard as we all ran out of the house to see what was going on. He smiled and waved his arm out the window as he backed right past us and down the slope toward the Mulberry tree next to the old carriage barn.

Gary. Go into the house and bring my jacket I may be out her listening to this explanation for a long time.

(Boy! As long as it took for Dad to explain that last Coonhound this may take all night.)

Frank, why did you drive Fancher Green's car home backward? I thought you went to the river to disk the tomato field.

Marvell this was such a good deal that I just couldn't pass it up.

I'll bet Fancher Green thought it was a good deal too. At least he has a pickup that will go forward!

Now Marvell. There isn't anything wrong with this car.

Oh no! I could tell there was nothing wrong with it from watching you drive that thing down the road backward for the last half a mile and the fact that you backed it straight up under this tree limb where the chain hoist is hanging.

It will only take me about two hours to fix it.

Plus how much cream and egg money?

It won't cost a penny, besides I thought you wanted a car?

I do want a car, but I would prefer that it would go forward and I never did like those cars with the doors that open to the front. A woman can't even wear a dress to town and get out of the car until she's out on the ground and standing up.

Dad started laughing. Then Mother started laughing.

(Heck! They always start doing that just about the time I think I'm going to see a real good fight.)

(Dad did fix the backward car and he did open the car door for Mother for the next five years.)

The next morning after all the chores were finished, Dad started working on the backward car when Toots crawled under the car with him and started to whimper.

Gary. Go up to the house and tell your Mother that this hound is ready to whelp her pups, and we'll need some help down here.

## DUST

While R.E. and Dad took the side boards from an old grain box to make a litter box and using some old tin for a top at one end he put Toots inside while I went to the house after Mother.

HEY! Come quick! Toots is whelping her puppies.

Mother went to the porch and took some old towels from the cupboard where she kept the separator and veterinarian supplies then started down the slope to the Mulberry tree where Dad and R.E. had built the makeshift whelping pen for Toots to whelp her pups.

Dad went back to work on the backward car satisfied that his prized Coonhound gyp was in the best of hands.

Mother how many pups will Toots have?

Well Gary, that's something you can't tell until she has had them, but the younger and healthier she is the more she is likely to have and be able to take care of.

"She better not have more than ten." Dad said.

Why shouldn't she have more than ten?

Because that's all she's able to feed and if she has any more than that the runt will starve.

After about ten minutes, Mother said, "Frank. I think she's about ready to start delivering."

After another thirty minutes at the whelping pen, Mother reported, "Frank, that's already ten pups."

Then that's it.

I don't think so. She is contracting again, yes there it is and it's a white one.

"It better not be a white one! Not from that black-n-tan." Dad shouted, raising up under the car and bumping his head on the drive shaft.

Well it is. It's a blue-tick.

Dad rolled out from under the car and jumped to his feet running over to the whelping pen.

Well, I'll be damn! Dad's face was as red as Mother's Saturday night lipstick.

Everyone knows that I won't have anything on the place that isn't black-n-tan!

Dad it's a real pretty one.

## DUST

Gary, it's a blue-tick, and besides it's the eleventh pup. Toots can't feed it. I'll have to knock it in the head.

Dad turned around walking over to the car picking up a ball-peen hammer from the ground.

I grabbed the blue-tick pup from under Toots and started running for the house as fast as my short legs would carry me with Mother right behind me and Dad right behind her.

"NO! NO! NO!" I cried, as I ran into the house crouching in the corner of the kitchen with the still wet pup held tight in my hands.

Mother came into the kitchen seeing me hiding in the corner crying, she said, "Gary. Don't do this. That's the eleventh pup and Toots can't feed it. It will starve."

I'll put it to an apple crate in the corner of the kitchen and feed it with a baby bottle like we did the mean old sow's pigs when she tried to kill all of them last winter.

Mother looked at me with a long thoughtful look then turned around placing both hands on the kitchen door jamb blocking Dad's way into the kitchen.

Frank, NO!

"Marvell, it will starve to death." Dad said real quiet.

But you've already allowed him to see it! And that litter of pups down there makes you fourteen hounds on this place. Now you'll let him have just one that you don't even want.

Dad turned around and started walking back down the slope toward the Mulberry tree muttering, "Well it will starve, and if it doesn't he better keep it behind the barn because I don't want anyone to see a blue-tick around here with my true-to-the-blood black-n-tans."

Mother turned around and looked at me crouching in the corner.

I'm afraid you are going to be just like your Daddy and Lord help some poor young lady one of these days if you are.

Mother walked out onto the cistern porch to get an apple crate and an old feeding bottle where I could hear her mutter, "On second thought, she can take care of herself, Lord help me right now."

I had me a hound. Now I was a real hound man even if the pup didn't even have his eyes open yet and looked sort of strange being white and blue among all of his black-n-tan litter mates.

Mother brought the apple crate into the kitchen and set it in the corner of the room placing an old gunny sack in the bottom, then she dried the pup off and placed Blue on top of the sack where I could set there watching him while she took an old pig feeding bottle over to the dish pan to

## DUST

wash it up and fill it with cow's milk. (When Dad wasn't around the bottle was accidentally filled with a mixture of milk and cow's cream which made Blue very happy, as well as, causing him to outgrow the apple crate very fast because he was getting more butterfat than all the other ten pups put together. Most of the mixture given to him by tender loving hands (while I was busy riding the range on a broom stick horse). Mother and I were a pretty good team. Anything I could think up to do, Mother could somehow manage to finish.

Sometimes that worked out very well and sometimes it didn't.

Dad managed to repair the backward car so it would run forward like it was supposed to and we could ride to town on Saturday night with everyone inside "just like white folks."

Frank that isn't very nice.

Well look around Marvell we do! We look just like white folks.

One Saturday evening everyone readied themselves for the weekly trip to town and the big night, soda pop, candy, picture show, and of course, that sneaky sack of Bull Durum, then out to Pa and Ma's for the night. On Sunday morning Uncle J.E. would take us to church where Dad and Mother would pick us up (after a long sermon) for the ride back home.

Dad placed the egg crates into the small trunk of the backward car and the cans of cream on the back floorboards. Then we were off to town with a cloud of dust chasing us all of the way.

Going over Frymire Hill, R.E. said, "I'll bet Ma has made me a birthday cake."

"I'll bet Mary did make you a birthday cake." I said.

"Gary, don't call your Grandmother Mary". R.E. said with a look of horror on his face as if he expected lightning to strike me for such impertinence.

I could see that I had really upset him beyond tolerance.

Mar-ry. Mar-ry. Marrry. A quite contrary Grandma.

That did it! R.E.'s face turned red and the fists started flying. Retaliation came quick. Elbows, fists, kicking, whatever it took. Then kick, slosh, and five gallons of cow's cream spilled all over the floor of the backward car.

(That is the only time I ever remember of Dad giving me a spanking. Mother gave me a spanking every day whether I needed one or not but Dad never lost control, maybe a half weeks work spilled in the floor of the car was more than he could take, but it was worth it. R.E. finally got one too.)

After a week of warm spring weather the backward car started stinking so bad that Dad and Uncle J.E. had to take the back seat and all of the floor covering out and build some racks into

## DUST

the back so they could haul tomatoes with it during the summer. R.E. and I were back to riding on a wooden floor with plenty of fresh air of course.

(R.E. will have to learn how to control his temper if he wants to get along with me.)

"Gary, you're going to have to take "That Tick-Dog" out onto the cistern porch and build a pen around him because he's getting so big we can't keep him in the apple crate any longer, besides he's chewing on the chair legs." I knew the way Dad said, "That Tick-Dog" instead of calling him a hound pup, that Blue hadn't endeared himself with Dad, so I had better keep Blue out of the way. However when I took Blue out onto the porch Toots came up to the screen door to look in when she heard Blue yapping. Then Blue seeing his Mother ran to the door hitting it with his front feet he pushed his way outside where Toots quickly took him into the litter.

When Dad saw the tick-dog with his black-n-tans he only said, "Well, I guess a mother's love is as blind as it is strong if Toots will take that tick-dog back."

(I suppose he was right because he never challenged Mother over "My Blue" being with his black-n-tan hounds.)

With the exception of Blue looking like a speckled birds egg in a pile of charcoal, he was just like the other Coonhound pups, this included the ability to irritate people who just didn't like pesky pups yapping at them all of the time. One day when a neighbor drove into the yard he often stopped by just for a chat or to borrow something, all of the pups in the litter ran out yapping at him when the neighbor stepped out of his truck. Blue was the closest pup to him when the neighbor kicked, lifting Blue high off of the ground, and rolling him across the yard. When Blue was able to gain his feet again, he turned and ran away toward the barn yelping all the way.

"That'll teach that damn dog better than to bark at me!" And, "He'll never forget that either." The neighbor said.

As I was running to the barn to see if Blue was hurt very bad I heard Dad saying, "I'll bet he won't ever forget that either, a pup seldom ever does forget something like that."

I found Blue hiding under a manger curled up and whining from the pain, so I laid down with him and petted him for a long time until the neighbor had left.

I was hoping he would never come back, but he kept coming back just as he always had, especially when he wanted to borrow something. Each time his truck would drive into the yard Blue would tuck his tail between his legs and run to the barn to hide under the manger until the neighbor left.

"That dog sure remembers me." The neighbor would always say, boastfully with a smug look on his face and an "I'm proud of myself" tone of voice.

Late in the fall it was time for "thinning the litter".

## DUST

That's when you take two to four pups with their GYP out to the canyons to see if they show any promise of making a good trail hound (if they run true-to-the-blood). The young hound that doesn't lag behind, cower at the tree, or run when a coon fight starts, is allowed to stay for training, but if he does lag, cower, or run, he's weeded out of the training and marked as a trading dog or selling dog.

A trading dog can be FORCED to hunt and will often make a good trail hound, but only as a "one man hound" and that one man is the person who forced the dog to hunt. Dad always said, "I won't sell a hound as having been trained if he has been forced, because as likely as not he won't hunt for his new owner. Then you've ruined your reputation as a hound trainer, as well as, ruining the reputation of your pack sire. If a hound doesn't have it in him to want the chase, to stand on the tree, and to enter the fight, then he just isn't "true-to-the-blood," however if a hound has the desire to chase, to tree, and to enter the fight, he will hunt for anyone who will take him to the woods once he's properly trained.

By the time thinning the litter came around there were only nine black-n-tan pups, and one tick-dog, to "test their blood" (one of the pups had been ran over by a car and killed).

The first night out for Toots and three of her pups, I ask, "Dad are you going to take Blue with you and Lee Welchel?"

No!

Why?

You and your Mother has made a pet out of that tick-dog and he would only stand around wanting to be petted.

When Dad and Lee came back later in the night I could hear them talking in the kitchen over a cup of coffee, so I slipped out of bed and ran into the kitchen.

How many ran true-to-the-blood?

One.

Which one?

"The dew clawed." Lee said.

Does that mean that Claws is in the pack?

"That means he gets a chance to be, now go back to bed." Dad said.

The next night, Dad and Lee loaded Toots and three more of her pups into Lee's old Ford car for another thinning of the litter. When they returned later that night I ran out to meet them at the car door.



## DUST

How many?

None.

Can Blue go tomorrow?

Maybe. We'll see.

Dad fed Toots and the pups then went into the house for a hot cup of coffee.

Lee I just knew when I saw that tick-dog, that there was some stray blood was in that litter. I've never had a litter out of Bob and Toots with that many trading dogs in it.

Well Frank, maybe the other three will run true.

Blue makes four!

Son, I said we would have to see about that tick-dog, now it's time for you to be in bed.

As I was walking into the bedroom Mother raised up out of her bed put her house coat on and went into the kitchen.

Frank! Are you and Lee going to try the other pups out tomorrow night?

We thought we would. Why?

Then you're taking four pups and a boy!

Yes. I was just going to tell Lee that tomorrow night we are taking three pups, the tick-dog and a boy.

Mother walked back into her bedroom.

I laid down with R.E. on my bed dreaming of a great coon hunt.

The next evening Lee's old Ford pulled out of the drive with Lee and Dad in the front seat. In the back seat was Toots, three black-n-tan pups, a tick-dog, and myself. Riding down the road the pups kept nervously milling around in the back of the old car not knowing what they were doing there when the car started nearing Lloyd Grimes farm on Deer Creek. Toots stood up in the seat with intense eyes and muscles drawing taught under her sleek coat of black hair, she whined an almost silent whine, which only her pups were able to hear. Each of the pups sensed that something was about to happen and moved in closer to the wise old veteran of the night, even Blue, for the first time pulled himself from my side to crowd in next to Toots while I reached up and took hold of Toots' collar.

## DUST

Son, what are you doing?

Loosening Toots' collar so it will slip off in a fight instead of allowing a coon to take hold of it and choke her down or pull her into a drowning pool.

Lee looked at Dad. "I thought you said we had five green pups in the back seat?"

Lee cut the engine at the top of the hill, turned off the headlights, coasting to a slow stop at the bottom of the hill, where Dad said, "Open the door and let her hunt."

The hunt was on. Toots jumped out onto the ground with an almost silent whine signaling the pups to follow and quickly disappeared into the underbrush of the creek bottom with four pups under her feet.

Well Frank, they all unloaded at least that's a good start.

We'll see if they're all there "at the fight."

I could hear Toots working through the undergrowth in the canyon bottom, running across the leaves, and through the water, to check the other side of the stream for a scent of fresh tracks.

Down in the creek bottom with a heavy coat, gloves, and cap, it was a lot warmer than it had been up on the flat ground of the prairie.

Son stay close to me, if she strikes you'll have to keep up.

Frank, if she hits a hard track you'll have to go with Toots. Gary will come with me in the car, because Gary and I can't stay up with you and that hound.

Toots was working back and forth across the creek checking every possibility for a scented track with the four pups right behind her trying to figure out what she was doing.

Lee, I don't think there has been anything through here all evening. She's already worked from watermark to watermark.

I don't think so either. Do you want to load up and try another crossing?

I could feel my anxiety fall into disappointment as Dad started to go over and collar Toots for the load up.

Just then Toots' head came up high in the air and I could see in the yellow lantern light that her nostrils were flaring then closing to detect the scent, her long black ears hanging down her neck past the collar she stood motionless for a long moment, then with a loud bawl she started down the creek and disappeared into the night with the four bewildered pups right behind her.

Lee, she winded one!

## DUST

Did all the pups start?

Yes.

Dad started down creek disappearing almost as quick as Toots and her pups had while Lee hollered after him, "Frank, that could be a long boar wind. Gary and I will drive around and meet you at the next bridge crossing."

Dad didn't answer. He was already into the chase, shouting encouragement at the hounds every time his foot hit the ground.

Yow! Yow! Yooooow!

Lee, I could go with Dad and Blue.

No Gary, you can't. When Frank's hounds are on track he becomes "one of the pack" and I know very few grown men who can stay with your Dad in the chase, especially if the run is for a mile or two, because Frank seems to have a sixth sense about running in the dark of the night and he doesn't wait for man, or beast, that lags behind.

Lee and I loaded up in the Model "A" Ford and started around the mile to the next creek crossing.

Gary, roll down your window so we can hear the chase.

I rolled down my window and in the cool crisp air you could hear Toots running, barking her choppy track voice, encouraging her pups to stay with her to the tree.

Gary, that's a long track for first blood pups.

Sticking my head out the window so I could hear better over the putter of the old flathead engine, I soon heard another, younger, voice of a hound come into the chase of the old ring tailed chicken thief.

"There's a trainer in that bunch of pups if he stays to the tree!" Lee said excitedly.

How do you know?

A first blood pup and he's already putting in a voice.

"Do you think it's Blue?" I ask, as a chill spread through my bones at the thought of my Blue being in the chase.

"I hope so." Lee said, with a big smile that reflected in the flat windshield of his car. "But don't you tell your Dad I said that."

## DUST

Why?

Because his black-n-tan blood would run cold if he thought I could enjoy seeing your "tick-dog" the first one to be on the tree with his gyp.

Lee slid the tires of his old Ford car to a stop on the bridge crossing.

How far away are they Lee?

Sssshhh.

Toots chop voice was coming closer but now there were two voices in the chase with her.

"Two trainers!" Lee said, quickly.

About then we could hear something running over the leaves in the bottom of the creek, then we could hear paws running in the water.

There comes the coon Gary. Now he's hit the water to try and throw her off of the track but he won't shake that old gyp. She knows all of his tricks.

"Whoowe! Whoowe!" I could hear Dad coming down the creek encouraging Toots on the track.

Frank can't be more than three hundred yards back of the lead. Not many men can stay that close to the hounds for over a mile and voice every time the lead does.

Are you going to drive again Lee?

No. That bandit's slowing down. Get out of the car. We'll join the chase here.

Oooooow. Oooooow.

"She's on the tree! Come on!" Lee said, as he slid down the bank at the side of the bridge, then holding the lantern still so I could see to slide down the bank behind him.

At the bottom of the creek one of the black-n-tan pups came up to us and started following.

What's wrong with that pup Lee?

"Trading dog," he said, as he started down the creek with the pup and me following close behind.

"Lee, is that you and Gary?" Dad's voice came through the cold night air from somewhere out in the darkness.

## DUST

Yes. You better cross the bridge because she treed on this side and the water is pretty deep from here on down the creek for a long way.

OK, hold them on the tree until I get there. Could you tell which two pups voiced in on the track?

No. I wasn't down here when they came through but I think one of them was that tick-dog.

Lee! You're only telling me that. You just said you didn't see.

I could hear Lee chuckling quietly up ahead of me in the darkness.

Which pup is that following on your heels?

It's the little black-n-tan gyp pup. I think you should give her another chance because we ran out in front of her and distracted her, but I chalked her anyway.

Lee, why did you put yellow chalk marks on her back?

So that later we can tell which of the pups broke the track.

But you put two marks on her.

I think your Dad will want to try her again, after all she was right up here with the leads. If she breaks the next time then we'll trade her.

Trade her for what?

Oh damn, a blind mule or something.

(Now why would Lee want a blind mule?)

Soon we were at the tree where Toots was standing with her front feet on the tree trunk, howling up a storm, and three pups standing near her trying to figure out what all the commotion was about.

"Well Gary, your tick-dog made it to the tree." Lee said with a big grin.

I stared over to where Blue was standing looking up into the tree top at the coon.

"Gary!! Don't you pet that pup." Dad said from out in the darkness. "He's working and you'll distract him from the tree."

I backed away knowing that Dad was right, but I never wanted to pet Blue so bad in my life.

Frank, I think Gary's tick-dog is going to make the cut.

## DUST

Suddenly my spirit was soaring as high as that coon in the tree. My Blue was in it all the way.

"That coon isn't on the ground yet." Dad replied. "I'll squall him down for the fight then we'll see where the tick-dog is. Lee, when Toots has wore the boar down you pull her out when you can and we'll see how many of the pups will stay in."

Dad started squalling at the coon (the way a boar coon squalls at another boar coon when he is challenging for a fight during the mating season). It wasn't long before the boar became so frenzied that he leaped out of the tree ready for a fight.

Toots met him at the ground and one of the black-n-tan went in with her, then Blue jumped into the fight as the other black-n-tan circled not knowing if he really wanted into a five way fight. Blue jerked himself out of the fight slinging blood in a large circle from a tear in his ear.

Lee, pull the gyp out!

Just as Lee took hold of Toots' collar and pulled her out of the fight, Blue ran back into the Malay with such force that he knocked coon, pups, and all, over the creek bank into the water below.

"Frank!" Lee shouted. "We'll have to go in after them or that boar will drown those pups!"

Just as Lee ran over to the bank with the lantern one of the black-n-tans came to the top and swam back to the edge crawling out onto the bank. The other black-n-tan was swimming out on the other side of the creek leaving only Blue and the boar coon under the water together.

Lee, I'll have to go in after him. That boar is balled up on the tick-dog's head and he'll hold the tick-dog down there until he's drown.

Just as Dad jumped into the waist deep, ice cold water, the coon came to the top toward the other side of the creek, then Blue's head came out under him with the coon's chest in his mouth. When Blue was standing on solid ground again he pushed the old boar to the ground and the coon's fight was over.

Dad was standing in the waist deep ice water and he just stood there looking around with surprise in his eyes, saying, "Lee did you see that blue tick hound go to the bottom and walk his first coon out of a water fight?"

(Dad had called my Blue a hound. Blue was a trainer.)

"I never saw the like in my life, Frank." Lee said, as he reached down and gently squeezed my shoulder.

Gary, your Blue hound is a real "true-to-the-blood", and Frank, if there is any stray blood in that hound, I want to know where it came from so I can have some of it in my hounds.

## DUST

I rode home that night with my arms around a blue-tick Coonhound, with wet dog hair that smelled very much like spring lilac blossoms, while Dad kept saying to Lee, "A blue-tick? I can't believe it. A blue-tick."

Now Frank, don't go changing color on me.

I'm not Lee! That pup's daddy is a black-n-tan. His mother is a black-n-tan, in fact, Blue is a full blood black-n-tan, something just went wrong with his hair color. That Blue is the only black-n-tan blue-tick true-to-the-blood hound in the world!

After that night, Blue was in the pack. Never to be left behind again and never to be called "That Tick-Dog". The only hunts which Blue wasn't allowed to go on was when Dad was thinning the litter because Blue was too strong a hound for first blood pups to stay up with.

Late the next morning after Blue's thinning run, I walked into the kitchen where Mother said to me, "Gary, there's something on the table for you."

Walking over to the table I saw laying next to the salt and pepper shakers a collar, newly made from old harness leather, with a flat strap of copper braided to the center. Picking it up I read the tooled in lettering "BLUE--HOOPER--THOMAS, OK".

I looked at Mother, but she had turned looking the other way.

"Thank you." I said, walking out the door to collar my hound with the only ID collar in the county which had a definite feminine touch.

In April of the next spring I was awakened early in the morning with the sound of Blue yelping in obvious pain. Running out of the house barefoot and still in my long johns I saw Blue running in circles slobbering at the mouth and trying to bite himself. But when I tried to catch him Dad hollered at me from the front door.

Gary! Stay away from that hound. He may be phobic.

I was panic struck. My Blue couldn't be hydrophobic. He just can't be because a good hound man has to kill his own hound if something goes wrong, that is expected, but I just couldn't kill "My Blue".

Dad came out of the house wearing a heavy coat, thick leather gloves, and carrying his strong leather belt.

Gary stay back I'll try to muzzle him with this belt and we'll put him in the granary with a pan of water until he drinks.

Standing next to the house I watched while Dad circled Blue trying to reach his head with the belt when Mother walked up at my side saying, "Gary, stay back out of the way."

## DUST

Looking around at her, I could see that she was holding a loaded shotgun. In the cool morning air there were rivers of sweat running down my face like liquid ice sickles, then to my relief Dad managed to muzzle Blue and start toward the granary with him under arm where he placed Blue into the room nailing a piece of hog wire over the opening.

Dad how long will it be before Blue drinks water?

Son, if he's phobic, he won't and we'll have to kill him.

I know.

On the other hand, he's a hunting hound and he may only have worms and that can be taken care of reasonably easy.

Blue laid in the corner of the granary bin all morning too exhausted to raise himself up then about noon he picked himself up and came over to the door looking out at me with his sad droopy eyes.

Blue drink your water. P-L-E-A-S-E drink your water.

Taking an old hog weed I poked it through the hog wire door and stirred the water in the old dishpan. Blue bent down and started drinking.

"Dad! Dad! Blue is drinking." I shouted, as I ran toward the house so fast I tripped over my own feet and rolled in the dirt.

Dad took a can of oil packed sardines, placed two drops of laundry bluing in the sardines and stirred them up. Then he took about twelve kitchen matches and soaked the heads off of them and put the match heads in the sardines.

Dad why did you do that?

Gary, a hunting hound has his nose to the ground sniffing for a scent most of the time, as a result of that he sucks a lot of worm eggs up his nose. When those eggs hatch the hound ends up having worms. Bluing is the best medicine you can give them for that, however sardines is the only thing that you can get a hound to eat with bluing in it, and the match heads are made of sulfur, I put them into the mixture because with sulfur in Blue's blood stream, when ticks or fleas suck blood out of him, the sulfur in the blood will kill the fleas and ticks.

Blue received more sardines doped with bluing than any of the other hounds because if he wasn't sleeping off a long night's hunt, he was hunting for coon tracks in the canyon, or hunting for my tracks during the day.

One evening Dad and Mother were hosting a card tournament. When Lee, with his wife Sally, drove into the yard in Lee's old Ford car and stopped. When Lee opened the driver's door, Blue



## DUST

jumped inside and ran over Lee while climbing into the back seat of the old Ford while Lee laughed saying, "Gary I think your Blue is ready to go hunting."

Later that winter Dad, Lee, and I, loaded our hounds up into Lee's Ford and started out for a good hunting spot on Deer Creek. Following us were two pickup trucks loaded with hounds and five other Coonhound men, each of them ready for a good hunt.

Lee, those hounds of mine haven't had anything but weevil cornbread and cracklings to eat for a month, so they should be meat hungry by now. I think we'll have a good hunt tonight.

The way they all loaded up, I would say so.

Gary, when we stop to jump the hounds, you hold Toots and Blue and I'll hold Bob and Buck until we're ready to start all of the hounds together.

Holding the brace of hounds on the road in the cold night air I could feel the tension building, the hounds muscles were quivering from excitement, while anticipating release for the hunt.

Toots looked up at me wanting to hear the command "get-em" while Blue leaned gently into his loosened collar impatient to feel the release. The other hunters were deciding who would drive the chase car around the mile allowing the rest of us to run in the chase. Lee, which of these hounds will be "first on the tree?" Dr. Ryan ask.

Probably Frank's Bob.

What about the black-n-tan gyp?

Toots? Well, she is a little small to run with the power hounds, but she'll likely "start the track" and she'll be there with the middle of the pack.

What about the Blue-tick?

He'll be at the tree when we get there.

Well boys, let's "turn em loose" and see what's down there.

I released the collars I was holding, "get-em!" All ten hounds went running into the canyon, Black-n-tans, Blue-tick, Walkers, and Red-bones. No sooner than they had reached the water's edge when Bob reported with a loud bawl and Dr. Ryan's Walker gyp voiced in with him.

Dad ran through the brush shouting back over his shoulder, "They've started hot boys, leave the vehicles here, that coon won't run more than a half mile."

Dad was right, the chase didn't go more than five hundred yards before the hounds began to bay on tree.

## DUST

"Frank, I think one of those hounds trashed out on a rabbit. I can hear him going across the field on the other side of the creek." Lee said.

I know, and it sounds like that Blue-tick.

My heart sank under my heavy coat. (No Blue, don't trash out on a rabbit right here in front of all these hound men. Dad is going to be real mad about that.)

Frank, that was a real fast tree. What do we have?

"Three young kittens. We shouldn't even jump them out, they're too young for a fight with any of these hounds. I can't believe that Blue trashed out on a rabbit." Dad said, as we were catching the other hounds.

"I know Frank, maybe the rabbit jumped up under his feet and distracted him in the heat of the chase." Lee said, looking at me. (He could tell that I was upset over Dad complaining about Blue in front of all the other hunters.)

When we had all of the hounds collared and about calmed down, Dad said, "That darned Blue has his rabbit bayed over in that dry canyon across the field."

I don't think so Frank, he isn't bayed in a rabbit hole that hound's on a tree.

The other hounds had heard Blue bayed on tree also and were becoming nervous to be turned loose so they too could answer to the tree.

Dad listened intently to Blue's voice for a moment, then told Lee and I, "He IS on tree, turn-em-loose!"

Free from their handlers all the hounds took off across the field to answer Blue's call for help, while hunters all followed. Never in my life did I hope so desperately that there would be a coon or bob cat in that tree, instead of a possum, or worse someone's house cat. (That would be almost as embarrassing as it was for the man who had bragged about his high dollar Upper New York Coonhound for several weeks, then when he brought his hound out to show us how good "Ole Streak" was, Ole Streak bayed an electric fence charger. That night I learned you NEVER brag on your hound until AFTER he has done a good nights work for you because sometimes they do make mistakes. (Coonhounds ARE human you know.)

Frank, what do we have up there?

It's the old sow coon. That was her kittens she put up in the tree back there where the other hounds treed.

Frank, you know what that means. Don't you?

Yes, and you are going to tell everyone here what it means. Aren't you?

## DUST

Of course I am. After all you've been scolding Gary's hound for half an hour.

Lee looked at me with a gleam in his eye and excitement in his voice.

Gary, the old sow coon ran up that first tree to put her kittens up where they would be safe, then she crossed the creek on a overhanging tree limb and took the lead hound off away from the tree where her kittens were. The first hound there was your Blue, so he stayed with the sow, while all the other hounds came in later and were fooled into treeing on the kittens.

I knew you was going to tell that kid on my black-n-tans, Welchel.

I suddenly knew what it meant also. With Bob and Toots getting older and slowing down, Blue was "Leader of the pack." (Boy! How's Dad going to handle pride and disappointment at the same time?)

I knew what he was thinking. "If only Blue had been black-n-tan."

By spring of 1947, Blue was a full grown Coonhound. (None of the Coonhound magazines has a hound as good looking as Blue, even with his coon fight scars, ripped ears, and beginning to show dog fight scars, because of his contention with the older hounds for dominance of the pack, an attempt on his part to establish himself as pack sire.)

One day an all too familiar pickup drove into the farm yard, but Blue didn't tuck his tail and run for the safety of the manger in the barn. Instead, before the pickup could stop, Blue was jumping at the window, snarling and growling, with killer fangs showing to the gums. Intense eyes fixed on his most hated enemy, Blue was prepared for a fight to the death to protect his domain. When the driver was startled into stopping suddenly, Blue ran a wide circle, then leaped onto the hood of the truck with hair bristled and feet set. He issued an undeniable challenge to the man who had kicked and taunted him for three years.

I ran up the cellar door to get a good advantage point where I could watch. This was what Blue and I had been waiting on for three years. With angry thoughts of a kicked and frightened pup under the manger in my mind, I started screaming as loud as I could.

HELP! HELP!

Thirteen kill dogs came from every direction converging on the pickup ready for a fight while I stood clear of the fray and saying though clenched teeth, "Come on mister get out and kick my Blue now! Then we'll see if you can walk away boasting about it!"

Dad came running out of the house, seeing what was going on he quickly pulled Blue off of the hood, then holding him by the collar with two hands while Blue stood on both hind legs, snarling with a muffled voice.

## DUST

The neighbor rolled his window down about three inches and shouted out the opening, "Frank, you should kill that dog! He's crazy! What's the matter with him?"

He's that pup you kicked a couple of years ago and I think you're right, he's never going to forget that.

Well you shouldn't keep a fighting dog like that around the place.

I don't keep a hound around that refuses to fight.

The neighbor backed out of the drive and drove away never to return again.

Dad turned and started talking to me in an excited voice.

Gary! When a hound is in a fight crazed frenzy like that don't ever start screaming the way you did or you'll have every hound on this place all over any stranger that happens to be close to you.

I know.

Dad looked at me with a strange look just as Mother walked up and put her hand on my shoulder, saying, "Gary, you better collar Blue and walk him out in the pasture until he calms down. He's so uptight right now if you don't, we'll have dog fights on this place all day."

I jumped down from the cellar top and went over to take Blue by the collar and walk him down into the canyon, talking to him softly, stopping now and then to pet him or rub his back for a long time until the tense muscles relaxed enough to allow the hair on his back to lay down from its bristled stand.

Blue was a full grown blood fighter and he wasn't going to take anymore disrespectful kicking.

While playing in the canyons one day, Blue suddenly growled and lunged forward coming up with a bull snake in his mouth. After he had shaken the life out of the snake he returned to my side. Maybe I shouldn't have rewarded him for killing a harmless bull snake, but I petted him anyway, it could have been a copperhead (a poisonous, infectious, and filthy snake that is far from harmless.)

I don't know if I ever really owned Blue or if he owned me, but we liked it just the way it was. He was always there, walking home from the one room school house, bringing the milk cows home, plowing in the field, or playing in the canyons, and of course, there was always those cold winter nights when there were other hounds with him leading us down those endless canyons gouged into the dusty windswept plains.

Blue's voice would sound through the night to report that, "The chase is on again. We have that old chicken house bandit on the run, and fast we are closing in, we'll run him until he climbs for safety, then we'll hold him there by standing on his tree, and bay at him in the bright moonlight to let you know just where we'll be. Our names are Bob, and Toots, or Bill, Joe, Rock, or Jake."

## DUST

And of course, there was one that was always standing on the tree. His name was just "Ole Blue".

Maybe Blue went to the barn and crawled under the manger to wait for me to come and comfort his fear that frightful night in May when the tornado came and blew the barn away, but there he waited for me, and there he died.

I went hunting many times after that, but my heart was never quite into the chase again, perhaps because Blue's voice was never again in the wind.

Some people would look at the eleventh pup and all that they could see was a sleepy old hound with sore feet and fleas.

Looking back through misty years, I'm able to clearly see out there on the dusty plains, standing under the memory tree, my Dad, my Blue, and me.

DUST