

## Hound Dog Men

A nostalgic tale of men, boys, dogs, and the bond of adventures shared

by  
Jim Sayles

John and Judy Matthews, close friends of my parents, owned the 28,000 acre Kickapoo Ranch southeast of San Angelo on the Fort McKavett road. The ranch was named after Kickapoo Spring, a 300 gallon per minute spring from which flowed Kickapoo Creek, and it was there that the original owners built a two story, fourteen bedroom, rock ranch house.

Kickapoo Creek is a live, constantly flowing creek from the source spring until it crosses the Fort McKavett road one and a half miles to the east, and because it is a live creek with clear running water and deep swirling pools lined with lily pads, it teems with aquatic life and wildlife of all kinds. Giant elms, native pecans, black walnuts, and cottonwood trees, with their tap roots drawing a constant supply of water, grow to an extraordinary size along the creek bottom, and like ancient, silent kings, they rule the magic kingdom.

It was there that I first experienced a Monarch butterfly migration and saw millions upon millions of orange and black butterflies covering every square inch of the huge, monolithic trees like a living blanket. It was there, too, that Indians had lived for thousands of years before the white, European settlers usurped the land and moved the indigenous people onto reservations, and just being there in that unique setting stirred a young man's soul with wonder and awe.

John, whose four boys and one daughter referred to him privately as "the warden", is the grandson of his namesake, John Alexander Matthews, the rancher who established the famous Lambshead Ranch near Albany, Texas in the late 1800s. John was, and still is, a physically tough man, with short hair brushed up in the front like a flat-top, only shorter, and, although he did smile from time to time, he seemed serious most of the time. And, like my mother, he exuded a natural authority that we all respected.

John kept a black and tan hound at Kickapoo for running raccoons at night along the Kickapoo Creek bottom. John's oldest boy, Joe B. Matthews, had run with the dogs before, but that fall night, during my junior year of high school, was my first time to hear the deep, melodious bellows of a hound echoing up and down the big timber creek bottom.

The cool night air settled into the creek bottom shortly after dusk, but my blood ran hot as Joe and I pushed ourselves to keep up with John and the dogs. When the black and tan treed a raccoon with his voice becoming high pitched and urgent as he jumped against the tree, I was shocked to see John climb up to the first branch as easily as a cat and then on up into the tree and onto the limb chosen by the big boar raccoon for safety.

John shook the limb vigorously until the raccoon fell head over heels thirty feet to the ground, and, as the big boar fell, John yelled out to Joe to release the Airedale, the fighting dog that would save his black and tan some terrible scars about the face and ears.

A year later I heard my high school classmate, Ronald Snow, talking about his hound dog, and I invited him to bring his bluetick, aptly name "Blue", out to the Sayles Ranch, and he, in turn, invited his hunting buddy, Alton Williams, two years our senior, to join us.

Ron was a friendly, soft-spoken, guy who always had a smile on his face, but Alton was a wild man, built like a spider monkey, and just as agile.

Ron and Alton were traditionalists. We didn't use flashlights. We used calcium carbide lamps made of brass with a small water container and a chamber where we placed calcium carbide chunks. Calcium carbide mixed with water produces acetylene, so our lamps, with a round brass reflector were actually acetylene lamps.

An added benefit to carrying calcium carbide was demonstrated by Alton one night when the dogs "treed" a raccoon in a hollow tree trunk. The dead tree was still standing, and the hole that the raccoon entered was about six feet off the ground.

Alton, ever the man of action, and never the man to let a raccoon escape, threw a handful of calcium carbide rocks into the hollow cavity followed by half a canteen of water.

After waiting until he could smell the gas, Alton struck a match and tossed it into the opening in the old dead red oak tree.

The explosion knocked Alton down and showered us with wood debris. In the aftermath, seeing that none of us was dead or mortally wounded, we searched for what we were certain would be the remains of a crispy raccoon.

None was found, which is a mystery to this day.

From time to time various people, hearing of our nighttime adventures asked Ron or Alton if they could come along on one of our hound dog hunts. Ron and Alton, having experienced the problems associated with introducing newcomers to the sport, generally said, "No."

When Ron's girlfriend, Cindy, and my girlfriend, Terri, conspired one night on a double date, begging us to take them on a hunt, Ron reluctantly agreed.

After we put it off as long as possible we took them out one Saturday night and parked our vehicles at the roadside park near the Pecan Bayou crossing. The girls wore jeans as instructed, and they carried flashlights while Ron and I carried our traditional carbide lamps.

The girls managed to keep up with few complaints until the dogs struck a hot trail. Within minutes it was apparent that they would not be able to keep up with us or the dogs, and Ron said, "You go on with the dogs, and shine your lamp back towards us from time to time so I can see where you are. I'll stay back with the girls, and we'll get there as soon as we can."

Ron could see my flickering lamp half a mile ahead with the dogs, and he stayed out in front of the girls in an attempt to quicken their pace. But a scream from one of the girls, thirty yards behind him, made him stop, and the continuous screeches and shrieks filled him with dread as he imagined one of them with a snakebite, a nail through the foot, or a broken ankle. He even imagined the possibility that one of them had fallen into a prickly pear patch and was screaming her lungs out as thorns penetrated her body head to toe.

When he got to them he saw that it was Terri, and, as soon as she saw Ron, she screamed as she flapped her arms up and down in terror-stricken panic, "Get him off! Get him off! Get him off!"

Ron was stunned, but he did as she requested. And, after picking the big yellow grasshopper off of her blue jeans, he threw it away calmly.

If it had been me, I would have done the wrong thing. I would have chided her for her inappropriate panic, and I would have ridiculed her incessantly. But Ron, being a polite, sweet natured gentleman, quietly said, "I think maybe you girls ought to go back to the truck. Jim and I'll be back in an hour or so with the dogs."

The girls agreed, and neither asked to go again. Being attacked by a big, yellow grasshopper was just too frightening to endure.

One short, blonde-headed kid named Otis, who was in shop class with Ron, begged for months to go on a hunt with us, and eventually he was invited.

The first trail that night carried us up a header to an abandoned, fall down barn, and a pair of raccoons took refuge under the floor of an 8' x 8' enclosed feed bin so that we had four hunters, three dogs, and two raccoons in an 8' x 8' room. All three dogs barked loudly and urgently at the raccoons under the floor, and Alton closed the feed bin door behind us to keep the coons from escaping once we pulled up the rotten flooring.

We had ripped up two thirds of the floor when the first raccoon, a boar, attempted to escape. Otis stood in the middle of the feed bin, and the boar, seizing this opportunity to climb up out of the reach of the dogs, scrambled up Otis's right side and perched on top of his head with the claws of all four feet digging into his scalp.

As blood ran down his temples, Otis, in about the same pitch and intensity that Terri had used, screamed, "Get him off me! Get him off me! Get him off me!"

All the dogs jumped up against Otis anxiously, as if he was a tree, and that made the coon dig his claws into the "tree bark" even deeper.

Otis began to cry and scream incoherently, having at least enough sense in his moment of panic not to reach up and try to grab the boar, and Alton, always a man of action, picked up one of the floor boards to swing it like a bat at the old coon.

The home run swing caught Otis in the back of the head, knocking the hapless kid down, but, at the same time, it caused the treed raccoon to jump off of his shaky, knee wobbling perch.

In the melee that followed, the two raccoons raced around the feed bin walls like a pair of motorcycles racing around "The Wall of Death" at the Abilene Fair and Rodeo while Otis, on his knees, held his bloody head with rivulets of blood running down his arms while he wailed at the top of his voice.

Afterwards we took Otis back to the trucks with his own shirt wrapped around his head, and we dropped him off at his house without a word.

The older, experienced raccoons, with dogs close on their trails, often swim out into deep water to evade their pursuers, and many an eager, but inexperienced dog has been drowned by a raccoon when the raccoon turns on them and climbs up on the dog's head the way the old boar had climbed up on Otis's head and perched there until Alton knocked the "tree" down with a 1 by 6 plank.

One freezing night in January, Ron went to Pecan Bayou on his own, and, at some point during the hunt, Ron's dog, Blue, disappeared as he trailed a raccoon who was zigzagging back and forth across Pecan Bayou. Ice had already formed on the water in the bayou with only the largest holes still having any patches of open water.

The star-filled night was silent and still. Not a single bark or bellow, just a great horned owl a long way off. Dread filled Ron's heart and mind, made all the worse because he was alone.

At 2am, almost in tears, Ron went home alone, and it seemed like the emptiest drive he had ever taken, but at daylight he came back out to search for his dog.

Pecan Bayou was completely frozen over, and Ron never found his dog. After that Ron gave up hunting with hounds for almost fifteen years before he took it up again.

The best, and most interesting working dogs I was ever around belonged to Billy Huddleston, the aboriginal "ringer" (cowboy) on Oolloo Station in the Northern Territory.

The wild bulls we were catching had never been handled by men, and the crude working pens we had did not make the job of loading the bulls onto cattle trucks any easier. Each bull had to be roped and then pulled up the ramp either with a winch or with the rope fed through

the cattle truck to a Toyota on the other side to pull the bull with his hooves splayed out and his head and horns tossing from side to side as he fought the rope all the way up the ramp.

Then the bull had to be pulled in the opposite direction towards the front of the crate where he would be tied off with an individual head rope to keep him in place.

This process, even with experienced hands, took two or more hours just to load twenty-five bulls. But Billy had two Bull Terrier cross “rough dogs” that had a unique way to quickly load a cattle truck.

At a word from Billy the two dogs would enter a pen full of bulls, dodging horns and hooves as they went for the bull closest to the ramp, and with one getting the bulls attention from the front, the other would latch onto the balls, growling and shaking his head as the bawling bull ran up the ramp and all the way to the front of the truck.

The dog then trotted back down the ramp, and the pair ran the next bull up the ramp. It was a wonder to watch, and, if I didn't have video for proof, I would never have told the story.

When my children were young we had an Irish wolf-hound named Dylan, a tall, black, curly-haired dog who, for some reason, loved to hunt and kill snakes. Unlike most snake-killing dogs, he wasted no time barking and feinting until he had a good opportunity to grab the snake. Instead he just grabbed the snake and whipped it against his own body until it was dead.

I liked having him with me, because he always knew when a snake was close, and once I saw him get struck by a copperhead as he clawed at a rotten log to get at the hidden snake. For the next three days he lay in the shade with his head swollen up like Ned Butler's head after a bee sting. Then he got up and immediately went out looking for more snakes.

We often found dead snakes around the house where he brought them home with the snake draped from his mouth and his chest stuck out as he pranced around in his own victory parade, and, on one occasion, I am certain that he saved a life.

I had a Mexican boy working for me named Aurelio. Dylan liked hanging out with Aurelio, and he began to stay with him in Aurelio's cabin, going out to work with him each day and ranging around to look for snakes while Aurelio worked on fences or picked weeds in the garden.

Once, while Aurelio was picking weeds, Dylan rushed past him and grabbed a rattlesnake that Aurelio had not seen. The snake never rattled. One minute it was coiled up a few feet in front of Aurelio, and the next minute it was being whipped viciously against Dylan's body.

Aurelio was the best ranch hand I ever hired, and I looked forward to using him again. But I was surprised when he simply left without telling me one morning after being paid. Then, when I noticed that Dylan was gone, too, I understood. The boy and the dog had bonded, and neither could bear parting with the other.

Before I was married I had a Rhodesian Ridgeback given to me by John Matthews, because John couldn't break him from running cattle. I called him “Rum”, and Rum was a terror to behold. But I broke him from running cattle.

I used a choke chain and fifty feet of rope. Then I took him for a walk in the pasture where we were running some heifers. As soon as he spotted them he took off after them, and just before he hit the end of the rope I yelled, “Get back!”

I had on gloves, and I had a double wrap around my hand as I jerked as hard as I could. Rum weighed at least ninety pounds, but he did a back flip when he hit the end of the rope.

Ridgebacks are smart dogs, and that was the only lesson he needed on running cattle. And, until this day (when he reads this story) my friend, Dan Boone, thought he was the smartest dog he had ever seen.

Ridgebacks are powerful, short-haired dogs, with muscular definition like that of a body-builder, and Rum had a peculiar habit of curling his lips back and biting the grass burrs stuck in his leg using his bared teeth. Then he would spit the grass burrs away. And, being attentive to his master, he performed the same service for me when I had grass burrs stuck in my jeans.

One day when Boone was at the ranch I said, "You wanna see a smart dog?"

I called Rum to me, knowing that he would automatically pull the grass burrs out of my jeans when he saw them, and when he got close to us, I said, "Get the stickers, boy."

Rum began his biting and spitting routine until all the grass burrs were gone, and Boone was awed.

Boone's father, Dan Boone, Sr., was an architect, and he and his partner, Mr. Pope, invested in a champion quail dog that they got at the bargain price of \$1500.00, which was enough to buy a new Chevrolet pickup in those days. They could scarcely wait for opening day of bob white season, and, just as they had hoped and dreamed, the champion pointer went on a rock solid point two hundred yards from the pickup.

A good size covey flushed, and the two men each took down a bird. "Champ," as Mr. Pope had nicknamed the pointer, went to the closest bird, picked it up, crushed it, and then swallowed it whole, while the two men looked on in shock.

"Well, he's just hungry," they agreed hopefully.

Seven quail later, ol' "Champ," was no longer hungry, and he lay down under a mesquite and refused to hunt.

Some dogs, like some men, are not what they're reputed to be.

To exercise Rum I let him run beside my pickup while I drove several miles through the ranch, and, because there wasn't room for him and the pickup both going through the open gates, Rum just jumped the fence in stride like a gazelle. He was so beautiful as he ran that it made my heart soar, and, if I had to be re-incarnated as a dog, I would want to be re-incarnated as a ridgeback.

Rum wasn't a working dog, though, and I had to give him an alternative to running cattle. So I let him chase armadillos at every opportunity. I was surprised when he caught up with an armadillo and crushed through the shell with a single bite while on the run. That's when I thought he might make a fine raccoon dog like the Airedales John Matthews always used.

I called Alton, and he and a friend came out to the ranch one night to hunt raccoons. I asked if I could bring my dog along, and, although I could tell by the look on their faces that they wanted to refuse me, they couldn't bring themselves to say "no" to their host.

When Alton shook the first treed raccoon off a slender limb just before it broke from Alton's weight, the big boar hit the ground with a "plop" and then stood up with his back to the tree and his arms apart, inviting any of the dogs barking and feinting at him to try and grab him.

Any dog naive enough to try it would get a face full of claws and teeth, but Rum just jumped in and grabbed the boar, shaking him so violently that we could hear the bones snapping.

After that Alton and his coon huntin' buddies called me frequently. Yet, they never invited me to go with them.

"I guess you can come if you want, but what we really want is to borrow your dog."

The neighboring rancher, Mr. McAndrews, had a fine Australian shepherd bitch, and one morning I noticed that Rum had bird shot under his skin all over his rump. I called Mr.

McAndrews who confessed that Rum had climbed over an eight foot fence to get in the pen with his bitch.

“I never seen a dog could climb like that,” he said, “but I put a round of number eights in his butt as a warning.”

I told Mr. McAndrews I would keep Rum on the chain while his bitch was in heat, but that he should call me whenever his bitch went into season again.

Six months later I was attending classes at ACU in the mornings and doing contract fencing for an oilfield company in the afternoons, and I kept Rum on a long running line in front of the ranch house while I was gone.

When I came home after school one day I found Rum on his side, vomiting with his legs jerking stiffly. I quickly loaded him in the back of my pickup and raced into Abilene, but he was dead from strychnine poisoning before I got to the vet.

That afternoon I wept as I buried him, and I felt as if I had lost my best friend.

That’s the thing about dogs, especially hound dogs or working dogs. I can’t even remember the names of some of the girls I dated and was crazy about, or even what they looked like. But I remember Rum and everything about him like it was yesterday.

