

# TEXAS

by Paul McGagh

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"Take it easy girl. It's OK urged Phil. The fawn colored Gyp, remained inconsolable, releasing a series of plaintive wails. She paced frantically, hackles raised, within the confines of the small walled garden. This was extraordinary behavior for such a normally dignified, self-assured animal.

"What's up with her?" I asked.

I followed Princess, a curious albeit confused Springer Spaniel, out of the front door of the single story Texas ranch house. Princess proceeded to offer a series of lame sympathy barks.

Phil, who was leaning against the 3 foot solid wall with his ever present cigarette curling from the corner of his mouth, tipped his head motioning over the blind side of the wall. "Snared him over at Owl Hollow" offered Phil, referring to one of our pheasant drives. As I looked over the wall, the focus of the dog's grief became apparent. A dead coyote lay on his side. A massive gray male with blood clotted around his face, usually indicative of a blow across the head.

Princess walked through the front gate and sniffed the corpse half heartedly, while the young Gyps anxiety intensified. Whether Gyp mourned his death or resented his posthumous intrusion, I knew not. Seeing Gyp and the coyote together, one fact was clear. The cold blood that congealed against the muzzle of the old gray male, coursed hot through the veins of the young bitch before him.

We had taken possession of the small walled Ranch house only a few months before. It was cradled within a rolling valley along the western boundary that was Diamond Shamrock's Riverside Farms. Scrub oaks, mesquite trees and prickly pears cactus comprising its most visible neighbors.

The previous tenant had recently died. I knew him only as Bart. He had apparently spent all his life farming this unforgiving land with his brother Art. As local legend had it, during the probation days, the brothers supplemented their income with a still and bootlegging operation. Their cottage industry thrived until running afoul of the federal government. One brother was issued a stiff jail sentence, while the other was allowed to stay on the ranch and tend stock, a type of Wild West justice.

A decade earlier, Diamond Shamrock first started forming what would ultimately become a multi thousand acre ranch. They gave some previous owners lifetime occupancy. This was the case with Art's Farm, which since his brother's death, he had occupied alone, save

a smattering of feral dogs. Bart's death had occurred shortly before the arrival of three young Englishmen to assist me as Gamekeepers on the ranch's English style driven shoot. Two of the men, Alex and Jim, were straight out of top English public schools. The third, Phil, was a gamekeeper's son from the south of England.

Bart's house was the perfect "keepers" cottage, but what to do about Bart's wild dogs.

Every country farmer knows one of the greatest assets in managing livestock are well trained dogs, conversely one of the greatest liabilities are those that have reverted to the wild. The conclusion is usually simple. Shoot straight, dig deep and say nothing.

This proved a difficult task. These were tough self reliant animals that for generations had interbred with and took on a striking resemblance to the extensive coyote population. They had shared the old man's land, but it had been a long time removed since they had shared his companionship and food. When Bart died, and the scent of strangers began to permeate through their domain, most simply vanished back into the hills that fed them.

All of them, that is, except the young Gyp. My first clear view of her came on a startlingly hot 3 digit August day. She was the picture of health with a well muscled frame, complemented by a lavish, shining coat. Why had she remained when her companions had melted away? One glance had convinced me it wasn't for hand-outs.

We studied each other. I though the scope of a semi-automatic rifle. She through the most riveting wild amber eyes I had ever seen. The Mexican gulf wind toyed with the feathering on her ears and face. I acknowledged the wind on the back of my neck, my scent traveling straight to her. I centered the cross-hairs on her chest, approximating the range at 70-80 yards. I ever so slowly squeezed the trigger. Still she remained.

A micro-second before the bullet would have ripped into her body, I relaxed my grip. This felt wrong. Life is simply a compilation of memories, both good and bad. I sensed shooting the mysterious animal would have left me with lingering memories I would prefer to live without.

Placing the rifle at my side, I glanced at the ground giving a cursory check for lurking critters that would either bite or sting. Finding none, I lay down keeping my eyes focused on the bitch at all times. By coming down to her eye level, I attempted to convey a non threatening appearance to her. She held her ground.

I scoured the Texas scenery and focused on a scissors-tailed Fly Catcher feeding a recently fledged chick, perched on an old cedar post. After a stand-off of about fifteen minutes, a strange thing happened. She rose and with a slow but deliberate gait proceeded to walk directly towards me. I sensed neither fear nor elation in my presence. Just this relaxed self assurance. I reached over and gently cradled her head in my hands. She in turn accepted my gesture with broad sweeps of her tail.

Within days of gaining the bitches confidence, the English keepers arrived and moved into Bart's old home. Gyp simply claimed them as her own. None of the other "dogs" ever returned to the homestead. The young Gyp seemed to relish the rather stark comforts of the bachelor pad. But, come evening, she would become restless and sit by the door like an old Tom longing to drift off into the Texas night.

Moving straight from England to central Texas could take a little adjustment if one was inclined towards a social nightlife. The county we resided in was dry (alcohol free) and the closest town, Hico, was fifteen miles away. I loved the solitude. The newly arrived, on the other hand, were going a little stir crazy. The signpost entering town proudly announced that Hico was the birthplace of Billy the Kid. Phil theorized the reason young Bill turned to crime was abject boredom.

Spicing up evening entertainment would include attempts to follow Gyp on her forays. This proved impossible. Her reaction was to refuse to leave, simply sitting and staring with a rather tiresome expression. The second she sensed attention was diverted from her, she would disappear. I believe her reaction to the old dead coyote gave the best clue to her nocturnal exploits and rendezvous.

Princess was one of the ranch's English Springer Spaniels. Springers were used for flushing pheasants on the driven days which were held twice a week during the winters for corporate groups. They were also employed for dogging in the pheasants which wandered after seemingly endless plagues of grasshoppers. The ranch's working dogs were housed in a large state-of-the-art kennel centrally located on the ranch. Princess had been bred and then moved when eight weeks pregnant to the "Keepers" cottage so she could be monitored. She whelped three pups which were promptly named Bon-Bon, Baldrich and Balderdash after a combination of English television characters and God knows what else.

Princess proved to be an awful mother, initially resenting the pups and then abandoning them altogether. The young Gyp on the other hand, rose to the occasion dotting over the liver and white youngsters. As the pups grew, sensing their mother's apathy, they gravitated more and more towards their surrogate mother.

As winter encroached and the three spaniel pups matured, the young Gyp would lead them further and further afield. What subliminal signal she would give the pups as an OK to follow, I don't know. But, sometimes they would be right behind her and other times they would all stop, riveted in one spot and watch her away. Upon her return she was always enveloped by an exuberant melee of cavorting bodies.

One Saturday morning, a regular guest, Bill, had spotted the pups parading single file past the ranch lodge behind their foster mother. The wanderings of this canine step-family was beginning to raise eye-brows, not least those of ranch manager, Paul, who I believe did not particularly relish explaining to the Diamond Shamrock CEO, that the ranch's training program

for the gundogs on his English driven shoot, consisted of turning them loose with the local coyote population.

Bill had taken a liking to Baldrich, the smallest pup, with a solid liver head and exuberant personality. He was indeed a striking pup. The pups were reaching five months and although the other keepers immensely enjoyed monitoring their miniature safaris, the hand writing was on the wall and it was time to split them up.

I was due to fly out of Dallas/Fort Worth airport the following week and it was agreed I would drop Baldrich off at Bill's home in Fort Worth. I felt a heavy burden every time I glanced at the young Gyp. She was sprawled out on the porch of the "Keeper's Cottage", the three pups were squabbling over a jack rabbit carcass she had brought them.

As usual, I waited until the last minute to rummage through a shed for a dog crate, quickly washing it out and returned for the pup. I glanced up at the house where the pups had been minutes before and they had vanished. I was frantic having a two hour road trip and plane to catch. She had decided to take the pups on a walk about!

Alex and Jim took the four-wheelers while Phil and I jumped into the truck to scour the ranch's roads and back lanes for the dogs. I had almost given up when Phil spotted her, about 300 yards in front of us, crossing the narrow lane we were traveling. I gassed the truck traveling in a cloud of dust, stopping at the approximate spot where she was spotted.

We jumped out and started calling, masking as best as possible any anxiety. I knew if she sensed the slightest hint of anger in our voices she would not respond. "Come on girl, it's just us!" I yelled.

"Pups! Pups! Pups!" beckoned Phil. Again, she had disappeared.

"Look!" I followed Phil's stare. He seemed to be focusing on a lone mesquite tree not ten yards in front. Initially I saw nothing. Then my eyes focused on her. The young Gyp laid rigid, her head low, blending perfectly in the native grasses; her eyes not even blinking. I scanned furiously to the right and left of her. Then I spotted one, then a second and finally a third. Each pup's action mirrored those of the bitch. Not so much as an eye blinked or a muscle twitched. They lay in wait like lion clubs on the Serengeti.

"It's OK girl," I whispered, breaking the eerie standoff. She stood, stretched, shook herself and began ambling towards us. The moment she relaxed, the pups changed tempo running to greet us while cavorting and tugging on a branch.

Eventually all three pups were sent to new homes. The young Gyp was left to undertake her explorations without her three shadows.

Of one point I am resolutely sure. Many years ago my life crossed paths with a wild eyed young bitch that never turned to any man's whistle. She taught me many things overlooked in the training manuals, a few things about myself.

What internal voice had beckoned the pups away from safe domesticity to the exhilarating dangerous world of their ancestors? How had they known to remain rock still in the face of a perceived threat? Was it simply the nurture of their stepmother? Or perhaps the voice is louder in a breed like the working spaniel and reduced to a whisper in non-hunting breeds?