

A Better Squirrel Dog

By Reese Blakeney

My grandfather has had some good squirrel dogs in his time, but I'm sorry to say this story is not about any of them.

The first dog, Clyde, came long before I was born. My grandfather wrote a check to pay for Clyde, but secretly took the same amount in cash so that my grandmother wouldn't know how much he really cost. It wasn't until later, after he proved how valuable Clyde truly was, that Papaw told her.

Clyde was a veteran squirrel hunter and a gentleman. He would bark only three or four times, then he would shut up, put his back against the tree, pull out a cigar, gaze at his pocket watch, and wait. Maybe the bark was a way of saying, "Dear good sir, it is my pleasure to announce that once again I have treed a most handsome squirrel for you. May I see you soon."

Sometimes Clyde would keep five or six squirrels in a tree until every one of them were killed. If there were still squirrels hidden in the tree, Clyde wouldn't budge until every last one was found. Back in the 80's, Clyde treed thirty-four squirrels in one day and ate a steak dinner that night.

But Clyde is now long gone. When Papaw retired and the grandkids grew older, Papaw began dreaming of the sound of claws against the bark of a tree, the panting of tired lungs, warm pockets of brown fur, and deep conversations made during the long walks.

In the spring of 2016, Papaw's search for a new squirrel dog began. He looked high and low for a new dog, one with pedigrees and certificates and documents. What he stumbled upon was Dan-- Tree Stylin' Dan. This dog reminded me of a professor or a doctor. Based on his paperwork, he was qualified to be one. Being "a pretty dog," Dan had won two or three dog shows and treeing competitions, and he had a lineage to rival the queen of England.

When Papaw saw Dan, he could almost smell the mulligan cooking in a cast iron pot and the putt putt putt of a frosted four wheeler chewing leaves under the wheel. Sadly, Dan died of cancer three months after he arrived, long before our first squirrel season began.

But I've gotten off subject again. This story isn't about Clyde or Dan.

It seemed like no time had passed before a new dog was barking in Dan's pen. Because Dan's death was outside anyone's control, the kennel presented Papaw with a new pup. Cash was a young mountain cur with lots of potential. He had short, prickly hair, like a fresh military haircut; his tail was like his hair, short and pointy, like someone clipped it off. Speckles and spots covered him from head to toe.

All Cash needed, it seemed, was training. We trapped several squirrels and let him sniff around to get him used to the smell, sound, and sight. Before long Cash was barking into trees and looking for brown fluff. The first time Cash was let out of his pen for a hunt, everyone was excited. But apparently it was a bigger deal to us than it was to him. Hunting with Cash was wild. He ran like a cheetah and yelped without stopping. Then, he ran off, crossed a river, and wouldn't come back for hours. Papaw rode around the cornfields the rest of the day trying to get him back across Big Creek. By the time he got home, Papaw was exhausted and a little perturbed.

But we stuck with him. Cash had energy and hunted with all his heart; the poor thing just couldn't tree a squirrel yet.

Papaw decided to invest in a training collar. This collar was capable of detecting barks when the dog wasn't within earshot, tracking the dog and giving precise measurements, and sending a little shock if the dog disobeyed. When the collar arrived, Papaw convinced me to try it out. He slipped it around my neck, gave me a pat and a scratch on the head, and told me to take off across the pasture and find him a squirrel. I slipped into a little patch of woods and sat down under a tree. All this squirrel-dogging was hard work. As I sat panting under the tree, I could feel a satellite glaring at me from space, and a retired man with a little too much time on his hands riding my way. Long story short, Cash didn't realize that the collar was meant to improve his skills. I don't mean to brag, but Papaw says I'm a better squirrel dog than Cash.

Phase two of project squirrel dog was obedience school. Cash went to school for several weeks, but like most college students, all he did was party. The only thing he learned was to ken-

nel when told. When Cash came home, his life of crime began. His dreams of becoming a squirrel dog had died, and it seemed all Cash wanted to do was cause trouble.

First, he chewed everything he could. He chewed through the chain-linked fence to get to the neighboring dog. He chewed up his igloo dog house. He chewed up his plastic food bowl. Papaw was afraid to give him a heater for his cell because he would have chewed through the extension cord and electrocuted himself. Water hoses were Cash's prime victims. He destroyed so many we lost count. Cash once pulled a hose into his pen, ripped the water pipe right out of the ground, and then chewed up the hose into individual four-inch pieces. When Papaw came home, water was spewing everywhere. If ever there were a time he was tempted to braid that water hose into a whip and overturn the tables in Cash's temple, that was the day.

Second, Cash made enough noise to annoy a deaf man wearing earplugs. If you walked near Cash's pen, or walked anywhere on Papaw's property for that matter, all you could hear was the clanging of his metal water bowl that he pushed around on the concrete for maximum noise. His incessant barking made it hard to sleep, or even hold a conversation. Papaw always said, "That dog will bark at anything... except a squirrel."

Yet Papaw still loves him. He said so himself. Papaw somehow managed to "pardon" him for every offense he committed.

Cash has never been successful with squirrels, but one day, Papaw came home from a squirrel hunt with excitement in his eyes. Cash had treed a possum! Now most people wouldn't be proud of a squirrel dog for doing such a thing, but maybe possum hunting is Cash's calling? Maybe we've been training him for the wrong task all along. Someday, with some work, I believe Cash could be the best possum dog in all of Louisiana.