

We have always had a farm dog here at Coe Creek. Long before my time, a Duke, or a Prince, or a Lady has been a helper and, also, a companion to both children and adults. Most farms had this same kind of dog, a combination, I suppose, of collie and something else. The dogs we had were usually a little bigger than a border collie, most often brown, but not long-nosed like a Lassie collie. For many years now, though, we have had border collies.

We aren't experienced or very proficient dog trainers, and the dogs we have raised have performed at various levels of ability. Probably, most of them could have been made more competent with better training.

When it came to our first border collie, though, had she been professionally well-trained, she would probably have been too good a dog for us! Tutsy was three-quarters border collie and one-quarter blue heeler. During her lifetime, we had not yet begun any rotational grazing program that involved small paddocks and frequent movement of stock from one paddock to another. So, the way was open from the farm buildings all the way back to the Speicher Woods on one side, and up over Hayford's Hill on the other. Tutsy was comfortable herding either sheep or cattle. She could be sent nearly half a mile from home to bring down the sheep or cattle. We never needed to accompany her.

We were also milking a small herd of cows at the time. Tutsy brought the cows up to the barn in the morning before daylight. One morning, a cow had not been with the rest of the herd, and when Tutsy brought them into the barn, the puzzled expression on her face was comical. She looked around, turned back, and went after that recalcitrant cow. We had not said a word. She knew that one cow was missing. After about fifteen minutes, the cow came barreling into the barn, followed by a thoroughly disgusted dog.

Tutsy had only one quirk. She was afraid of thunder storms, and she would not leave her dog house in a storm, even to fetch the cows or herd sheep. We didn't argue with her about that.

Our second Tutsy was related to the first border collie, and she was a good dog, too, but no match for her aunt. Like her predecessor, she lived to a good collie age of about fifteen. She ran with me for years, never on a leash, and she never left to chase a rabbit or deer or nose around in the bushes. As she grew older, though, she would wait halfway across the mile, knowing I would turn around at a particular corner. Then she would trot home with me, having shortened her mileage a bit, but still remaining eager to go the next day.

Pepper was an interesting dog, but her herding ability was limited, and she wasn't all that much help. Fortunately, we still had the second Tutsy for part of her life, so we were not without assistance with the livestock. Pepper, though, had other attributes. She would "sing," howling at the top of her lungs on command. She was also helpful if we wanted an unwelcome guest to leave. A small, whispered hum in the throat was enough to make Pepper bare her teeth and growl at strangers.

She never bit anyone, but she put on a good show.

Then came Nellie. Nellie was a good dog, and she had a well-developed instinct for herding, but she was somewhat headstrong. She wanted to herd anything that moved, and though we live far from the road, she sometimes started for a passing vehicle with the intention of biting tires or chasing it. In time, she became easier to control, and she was a pretty good sheep dog. Her favorite job, though, was “helping” with barn chores. The long 60 foot alleyway between the two sides of the barn was her runway, and she went from one end to the other—over and over again—while we were in the barn doing chores. She eventually succumbed to a hip ailment that was probably caused by all those years of quick turns at each end of the barn.

Then came Fly. She was a nice dog and was healthy her whole long life. On the day she died, she had moseyed down around the barn, not running as she did when she was a young dog, but obviously in no pain. She could still hear, could see well, and was a big help to us even as an old dog. She never had the self-confidence of either of the Tutsy dogs, but, with encouragement, she would round up the sheep for their night pasture, saving us a lot of steps. She suffered something that looked like a severe stroke when she was nearly sixteen years old.

Now, we have Blue and Kate. They are just a year and a half old and are finally showing some signs of maturity. We don't know yet if they will be superior dogs or not. Blue is very intelligent, and she wants to please. But, so far, our control of her is quite effective at short distances, but not so perfect if she is far from us. And she is very fast. Kate is more stubborn, yet more timid, and we can't treat them just the same. When summer comes, it will be fun to see just how much they can learn now that they are past puppyhood. We have learned that even an average dog can be of great use in moving and sorting sheep. The animals have a respect for a dog that they never show us. And that ram that follows me just a little too closely is a bit more submissive if I have a dog with me.

