

FAILED FARM DOG BLUE

Carl Petterson, February 2024

Scientists think dogs and mankind have lived near each other for thousands of years. Early man saw that when the bands of the tamer wolves lived around their camp the larger, more dangerous wild animals stayed away from camp. Today with abundant food and leisure time it is hard to realize that idle dogs were an unaffordable luxury for farm folk as recently as 1900. Earlier dogs needed to earn their keep by herding livestock, killing rats around flour mills, and protecting young children while parents were working in the fields.

Near the Willamette Valley town of Lafayette lies a farm that has been in the Washburn family since 1847 when it was first homesteaded by an immigrant ancestor. It was decades later before the distant government in Washington D.C. had surveyors divide lands into the now familiar landscape of sections and townships. The boundaries on older farm like the Washburn's was more irregular and follow edges of creeks and other landforms. On both sides of the Willamette River modern maps show the irregular plots of these early settlements.

There are a lot of stories told by this family who has lived so long in the area. In the earliest days packs of wolves would cruise the valley looking livestock to supplement their usual prey of deer or elk. The Washburns needed to own dogs from the very first to guard their livestock. Their working dogs were a more integral part of the farm than you would think.

As the young children played in the developing country the parents made sure there were dogs around to keep the kids safe from any dangerous animal. Normally the noisy children scared off any wild animals. There is a story about one time that was different. The children were picking wild huckleberries in a patch on a nearby ridge where a mother bear and two cubs were also gorging on ripe huckleberries. The first signal that something was wrong was when the kids heard the mother bear growl. The family legend says two large farm dogs reacted before the young children realized they were in danger by standing between the bears and the kid. They set up a chorus of barking and growling, which gave the children time to run the mile or so that it took them to reach home safely. The industrious children even brought home the berries they had picked.



Six generations of Washburns had lived and died in Oregon when Jerry Washburn was born in 1968. Jerry's first dog was a Labrador puppy that he got for his fourth birthday, on the condition that he take care of the puppy. Laddy as Jerry named his dog was a faithful companion for the growing boy. It was hard for Jerry to be responsible for Laddy at Jerry's young age but he turned to the responsibility of caring for and training this puppy with an unusual enthusiasm.

Laddy and Jerry grew up together, in a manner of speaking. The first time they were separated for more than a week was when Jerry went into the service. During his two-year stint in the Army Jerry wasn't able to visit home very often and poor Laddy missed his master. Before Jerry's hitch with the Army was over Laddy died from a combination of old age and loneliness. Laddy had been a one-person dog and no one in the Washburn family could have the same relationship with Laddy that the dog had with Jerry.

When Jerry returned home as a civilian he wanted to be the next generation that to farm the old place. His parents were ready to leave the farm work to the next generation. His first dog was Champ, a German Shepherd. Champ was a wonderful farm dog, but he grew old and died after adding his blood line into several generation of Washburn dogs.

About this time Jerry let his guard down and let Sam Allison, a neighbor, give him a puppy of unknown provenance. Blue was the name assigned to this dog. Blue was a good-natured dog but could do nothing right on the farm. He chased the chickens and made them too nervous to lay eggs. He barked all night for no reason. When coyotes called to one each other on summer nights Blue would ignore them. It soon was obvious, Blue was a hopeless farm dog.

The final straw for Jerry came in the spring when high water had laid down deposits of mud. This mud would eventually harden up and become fine alluvial soil over many months. Until late summer it was dangerous. It was when that Blue with his usual exuberance and ignorance jumped into one of the mud deposits. It had the consistency of quicksand. It was along the creek that ran through the corner of the farm and close enough for Jerry to hear Blue's alarming cries as he helplessly sank in the quicksand. After investigating Jerry brought a tractor and rope and pulled the hapless Blue to safety. The family album has a picture of Jerry bringing Blue home for a bath.

For Jerry to have the humiliation of having a totally useless dog on the farm was too much to take. Blue was bundled off the Humane Society where he found a city family who didn't worry that their dog was utterly stupid. After this Jerry was careful to check out the breeding of his farm dogs. Jerry Washburn's young energy and strength has made the Heritage Farm look outstanding. With the family dogs assisting the farmer another generation will make the place shine.