

FIRST DOG

The first dog I could call my own was a long-haired, yellow and white mongrel puppy named Sammy that somebody gave me. I hadn't had it very long when my Uncle Lester, whom the family called "Legs" because he was the only one of the brothers who was tall and thin (also the only one with curly hair), dropped by one evening unannounced. (Most visits of and by family members and friends were unannounced in those days. People were usually glad for the company and nobody cared if there were dirty dishes in the sink.)

Uncle Lester lived in Coalmont, about 13 miles to the southeast. He had a son a year younger than I, and he had been looking for a dog for him. An aimless sort, he was a part-time preacher who sometimes tried to sell insurance and frequently quoted scripture proving that the end of the world was near. He rarely bought anything new and never paid for anything if he could avoid it.

He had a sack of oranges with him that night, and knowing my passion for oranges, he offered me three of them for that pup. Not being one to consider the consequences of my actions at that age, I took him up on it. I think my Aunt Esta thought it was just his teasing way of giving me some oranges, so she stayed out of it.

The oranges held my attention for a while after he left, but then I started looking for my puppy. I searched the house and went outside, even though it was dark and I was afraid of the dark, and called and called. No pup. When it finally dawned on me that I had indeed traded my puppy for three oranges, two of which were already gone, I burst into tears.

My Aunt Esta was a sweet, compassionate woman with a heart of gold, but she had a lot of Irish in her. She seldom got it up, but when she did, those who knew her—especially my Uncle Clarence—stayed out of her way. The more she thought about the deal I had innocently made with my uncle Lester, the madder she got.

She finally went to the telephone and called my uncle long distance. Nobody called long distance in those days unless it was for a reason of vast importance. He had just arrived home, and when he came to the phone she spoke one sentence and slammed the receiver back on the hook: "You have that pup back here by noon tomorrow, Lester McCrocklin, or you're gonna have to answer to me!" He returned the pup before I was out of bed the next morning, and he never did get his three oranges back.

(It's ironic that even though he was the youngest of the five brothers, led a chaste life and appeared to be healthy, Uncle Lester was the first of my mother's older brothers to pass away. He died of a heart attack when he was about 45, leaving a widow with no marketable skills, little if any insurance, and two small children.)