Farewell, Old Pal

By Charley Sampsell

I met him when I was 8 years old, in 1932. For the next 13 years he was my best friend. Together we explored almost every square foot of my parents' 80-acre farm at Portage Lake in southwestern Michigan.

During the lazy days of summer, we wandered well beyond the boundaries of our own property and hiked through fields of corn, wheat, clover and alfalfa. We visited rivers, lakes and gravel pits, and caught frogs, snakes, turtles and fish. We foraged for food, suiting our own tastes in orchards, berry patches and gardens.

When the summer heat became too oppressive, we took dips in the Portage River at Scott's Deep Hole and dried off in the cool shade of an old maple tree on the east bank.

In autumn we took a serious interest in bird hunting. I came by my interest in the sport through my dad's encouragement and teaching. My friend was born with a proclivity for the game. He was a registered purebred English springer spaniel.

Dido and me in 1933.

He had joined our family when he was only a few weeks old through the generosity of an older cousin who raised the breed as a hobby and for profit. Mom and I visited Cousin Pearl on my eighth birthday. While the ladies chatted, I played with the new pups.

One lively little rascal took great delight in tugging at my pant cuff and growling playfully. Soon we were inseparable. His teeth were stuck in my pant leg. Pearl noted our attachment and kindly offered to give the pup to me as a birthday present. He went home with us that afternoon.

Searching for a name for our new family member, we observed that he was very fond of the scraps of bread and cake dough leftover on baking days. We began to call him Dodo, but that didn't seem quite proper for a dog with his credentials. In recognition of his playfulness, Dad suggested that we call him Dido, which was a term in one of Dad's expressions, "cutting didos," meaning acting lively.

For my 10th birthday, in 1934, Mom and Dad gave me a .410-gauge, single-shot, bolt-action shotgun, and we began to prepare for the opening of pheasant season in October.

Dido never received the formal training normally granted to a purebred hunter. Instead, we worked out a system that suited our own abilities. As I walked a field, Dido would cross back and forth about 30 yards in front of me, searching for bird scent. When he detected a bird, he didn't stop and point or otherwise hold the bird. Instead, he simply quickened his pace, giving me ample notice that something interesting was about to happen and I should be ready.

When we encountered a marsh or other area where I chose not to walk, Dido knew instinctively that it was his job to cover that territory on his own while I stationed myself at a comfortable shooting station on the perimeter.

Soon we were bringing home more game than Dad was getting from hunting with his pair of beagle hounds. We hunted birds together throughout Dido's lifetime.

Apart from the serious business of pheasant hunting, our relationship amounted to being each other's best pal. We were together whenever I was at home. Three seasons of the year he slept in his oversized doghouse. But during the coldest winter months, he slept at the side of my bed.

Each morning we greeted each other and began our daily routine. He accompanied me to the barn, where I helped Dad milk our four cows. There were always cats present waiting for their breakfast of

warm milk. Dido respected the cats' barn rights and never interfered with them as they slurped up their repast from the tin dish.

After milking, we proceeded to the chicken coop to feed the flock and gather the eggs. Though Dido was a bird dog, he was also a farm dog, and he knew that he had to coexist peacefully with the chickens. There would be an occasional bark and a growl or two if a greedy chicken attempted to share Dido's dinner from his dish in the back yard.

As I left for school in the morning, he would accompany me down our 100-yard lane, across the front yard to the road. He remained there until I walked past Oernst's corner about a quarter-mile away. When I returned from school in the afternoon, Dido would meet me in the lane and we would resume our evening chores.

After supper, when days were long, we usually found some outdoor activity—a hike, a hunt, or just a few foot races and stick retrievals—to pass the time pleasantly until dark. For the rest of the evening, he would be at my side, listening to our battery-powered Philco radio or watching me read a book by the light of our powerful Aladdin kerosene lamp.

In September 1938, when I was approaching 14, I had to leave home and stay with older cousins during the week so that I could attend high school in Three Rivers, Mich. Our home district was Mendon, Mich., but there was no transportation provided to the high school there, and I had no way of making the daily 10-mile round trip.

It was the first time I had been separated from my best pal, Dido, for longer than an overnight visit. I was homesick for our farm and my parents. But I also had lost the constant companionship of my best pal.

For several weeks, I cried myself to sleep each weeknight and spent most of each day in deep gloom before I became acclimated to living with kind but unfamiliar relatives. Weekends and summer vacations back on the farm with Mom and Dad and Dido were the cherished rewards for my lonely high school days.

Nine months after graduating from high school, I was drafted into the Air Force, in the spring of 1943. Again I was absent from home and loved ones. I was fortunate that during my 35 months of service, I was able to return home almost every six months on furloughs and leaves. With each visit, however, I was saddened to find my best pal, Dido, aging steadily.

When I returned home on my last leave in the fall of 1945, Dido was 12 years old. He could no longer run and frolic as he had done for so many years.

On the day before I returned to duty, Dido and I took a walk across the fields and down the lane to the woods bordering Portage Lake. He wasn't able to work the field with the crossing patterns he usually followed for bird hunting. He was only able to keep a step or two ahead of me as we walked slowly along. Still, he was sniffing for bird scent and wagging his stub tail with the pleasure of familiar work.

We walked through the woods and found a fallen tree on the bank of the lake that provided a fine rest stop. As I sat on the tree trunk, Dido placed his head on my knee and gazed into my eyes as if asking if he had done a good job. I patted his head and told him that he had done very well, and that he was still my best pal.

The quiet of the woods and the lapping of the water at our feet provided a blank slate upon which many memories began to etch themselves. I remembered the playful puppy tugging at my pant cuff, the reliable companion sharing so many adventures during my childhood, and the always-concerned buddy who seemed to sense my sad times as well as the happy ones.

I knew that this was both a sad and happy time, for in spite of the pleasant moment, Dido could not share many more with me.

Soon, we walked back through the woods and across the fields to the home place where Dido had lived his whole life and I had lived an important part of mine.

I had been back on duty for about a week at the New Mexico air base where I was stationed when I received the letter from Mom. "Dear Son, I am awfully sorry to tell you that we had to take Dido over to Dr. Gorsline's and have him put to sleep. He was in so much pain and the veterinarian said he could not get well."

I sat on the footlocker beside my bunk with my head in my hands feeling a dozen emotions at the same time. Sgt. Mack in the upper bunk asked, "What's wrong, kid? Did you get a 'Dear John' letter?"

"No, it's worse that that," I replied. "I just got the news that my best friend is dead." My tears blurred the ink on the letter in my hand. ❖