

WHERE'S NORMAN?

by Patti Means

The title to this story soon became a household phrase among residents of the otherwise peaceful Amish country in Lancaster County, PA. Even the T-shirt industry profited! He was a human UFO. He would appear and disappear. His picture was in the papers almost every night and people who never locked their doors or windows were turning their keys and shutting them tight!

Approximately 20 years ago, brothers Bruce, David, and Norman Johnston ran a multi-million dollar burglary ring, stealing hundreds of trucks, cars, and farm equipment in PA, DE, and MD. At least 25 other people were convicted of burglary and fencing charges until the gang's demise in the 1980's. The Johnston brothers were convicted of killing four teens to cover up the burglary ring and have been serving life sentences. This real life drama was the basis for the movie "At Close Range" which starred Sean Penn.

On August 2, 1999, Norman Johnston escaped from the Huntingdon State Prison in PA (a maximum security facility) and had been successful in eluding police over the next 18 days. There were multiple sightings of Norman reported throughout PA, DE, and MD, and rumor had it that the reasons he remained in the local area were either to recover buried money from his crimes of yester-years or to seek revenge on those who helped put him behind bars, including his nephew.

The first of many "Norman sightings" was at a phone booth at a park in Nottingham, PA. Johnston was involved in an altercation with a park ranger, broke away, and fled to freedom. For the next several days, police received numerous calls from people who thought they spotted Norman throughout the tri-state area.

On Tuesday, August 17, 1999, at approximately 6:30 p.m., my husband, Al, and I received a call from the PA State Police requesting us to respond to the Avondale barracks in Avondale, PA to help in the search for the notorious escapee and convicted killer: Norman Johnston. He was spotted again at a phone booth but this time in Newark, DE. After we got the call, we immediately

threw our gear together, our bloodhounds Hannah (7) and Claudette (6) in the back of the van, and headed for Avondale.

Upon our arrival at the barracks, we were introduced to several key players and briefed on the situation at hand: The night before, Monday, August 16, 1999, a security officer from the University of Delaware recognized Norman at a phone booth at a diner in Newark, DE. He attempted to apprehend him but was unsuccessful

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and once again Norman slipped into the night. A backpack was recovered from the scene and fingerprints were matched (as well as the prints from the telephone) to that of non-other than Norman Johnston. We were then led into an office and asked to prepare scent packs from the items in the backpack.

The forensic expert told us that all of the items from the backpack were handled with rubber gloves and placed into separate zip-lock plastic bags. After much discussion, Al and I chose the items which we believed to have had the most personal contact with Norman, i.e. toothbrush, dirty hand towel, dirty t-shirt, and a freshly bloodied napkin. We placed multiple sterile gauze pads into each of the plastic bags containing those articles and sealed them for approximately 15 minutes. We then removed the gauze pads from each of the bags, placed them into their own separate bags and marked them accordingly: TOOTHBRUSH, TOWEL, T-SHIRT, BLOODY NAPKIN.

We were then instructed that we would be departing for Newark, DE and begin trailing from

the phone booth at the diner where Norman was last seen, approximately 22 hours prior. We arrived at the command center and were introduced to the person in charge who made it clear that he only wanted "runners" to go with the dog team. Al and Hannah drove to the diner where they started trailing from the phone booth using the napkin scent article. They headed behind the diner and turned onto the railroad tracks. Hannah worked to a point and then turned herself around and headed down the railroad tracks in the opposite direction. Somehow, the news media caught wind of this and were following Al down the tracks with lights and cameras yelling "Hey! What are you doing out here?" and Al just yelled back "Training!" and kept right on going!

Hannah trailed for approximately 4 miles. They continued across the main highway, looped back around and into the University, to the swim club door, through an alley which had just been macadamized and still tacky, under the railroad tracks, across intersections, into a vacant home which was being renovated, along another highway to a point where Al gave her a break and requested that I bring Claudette to that location to pick up the trail.

I harnessed Claudette about 20 yards previous to where Hannah had stopped, faced her in the opposite direction (for confirmation), and scented her from a second gauze pad from the bloody napkin. Claudette immediately spun around in the opposite direction and continued heading the same way Hannah had been trailing. The trail continued along a highway to a company called "Gore" where Claudette made a deliberate left turn along a wooded area surrounding the company's ground. The trail continued to follow a tree line around the property to a picnic area for employees where Claudette climbed up on top of one of the tables in particular. She did this several times, ignoring all the other tables, and then worked her way over to the dock door and around the building twice, returning to that same picnic table each time. Then, she continued to work out into the middle of the parking lot with less enthusiasm.

Suspecting that the trail ended at this point, I worked Claudette at the entrance of Gore and she

The headline of the
local paper the evening
Norman was captured

nosed in the opposite direction from which we had originally entered. She went approximately 20 yards to an intersection where she looked confused. She worked the other side of the street and returned to the middle of the intersection, again looking confused. I pulled the harness and we returned to the vehicle. It was our opinion that the trail had ended at the Gore company with the possibility that either someone picked up Norman or that he hitched a ride on one of the delivery trucks at the dock door the night before.

UPDATE: Per Trooper Jon Nelson (8/22/99): Two days after the apprehension of Norman, we received a message on our answering machine from Trooper Jon Nelson who ran with us in Newark, DE. Jon said that he spoke to Norman before he was returned to prison and throughout the conversation, Norman was surprised to hear exact paths of his flight details that only he alone thought he knew. Jon said, "He looked at me like, 'How did you know that?' and then he said 'Damn those dogs are good.'" Norman confirmed that the direction of travel that night was exactly the way the hounds worked, he said he walked the railroad tracks, crossed the highway, through the University to the swim club where he took a shower and stole some clothes, then proceeded under the railroad tracks to a company he thought was called Avondale (Jon said that he probably meant Gore) and that he sat at a picnic table for a "long time." Norman never said how left that area but Jon thought he was probably covering for someone. We were glad to hear that bit of good news.

On Thursday, August 19, 1999, at approximately 10:30 p.m., we were once again called by the PA State Police at the Avondale barracks, but the tone this time was much more intense, stressing that they needed our dogs



"IMMEDIATELY!" There was yet another "Norman sighting," so once again we loaded everything into the van and headed for the command post which was located at Routes. 1 & 52S near Longwood Gardens in Chester County, PA, the Johnstons' hometown.

Earlier that evening, Norman stole a late model car and was spotted at an intersection by a young woman whose headlights shown directly on his face. She knew immediately that she was looking at the one and only Norman Johnston and called 911. In the meantime, Norman drove right by a PA State Trooper where he slowed down and then actually came to a dead stop in the middle of the road, stared directly at the trooper, and then sped away. The trooper said "it made the hair on the back of my neck stand up." Knowing that a suspicious vehicle was just reported to be in that area, the trooper ran the plate number with no match, and as a result, the chase was on. Weaving his way through an exclusive development, Norman came to a dead end, wrecked his vehicle, and fled into the night. The PA State Police didn't waste any time and instantly set up a perimeter barrier with a massive amount of manpower and vehicles. This time, Norman wasn't going to slip

through their fingers.

When we arrived at the command center (thanks to Al's driving skills which made for a record-breaking response time), the sense of adrenaline was overwhelming and we could hear some officers saying "OK! THE DOGS ARE HERE, TONIGHT'S THE NIGHT, WE'RE GONNA GET HIM TONIGHT!" With that pressure in mind, we were taken to the wrecked vehicle so we could start one of the hounds and begin collecting scent articles for later use. The vehicle had been properly secured—it couldn't have been handled any better.

Al harnessed Hannah, instructed her to climb into the front seat on the passenger side (since it was open) and smell the seat. He gave her the command word "FIND!" and off they went accompanied by six armed officers. There was a gas can and a 4' piece of garden hose on the floor of the wrecked vehicle and a screw driver thrust into the upholstery of the front seat. We were reminded that it had been almost 20 years and Norman was unfamiliar with how to operate the present day gas pumps or how to steal the newer cars! Once Al and Hannah were on their way, I wore a pair of rubber gloves and placed two gauze pads on the backrest of the driver's seat to let them absorb Norman's scent. With another, I wiped the steering wheel and gear shift knob and placed each gauze pad into a separate zip-lock plastic bag and

marked them accordingly.

Hannah worked her way along Route. 52 to the location where it was known that Norman had stolen a license plate to put on his stolen vehicle. This was approximately a mile from the wreck site. We determined that Norman's driver's side window was down and therefore it would stand to reason why Hannah followed the scent to that most distant point and then turned herself around to follow the scent the way he last drove down Route. 52. At the bottom of the hill, Al and Hannah passed by newspaper and television reporters who were flashing their cameras and then blew right by the command center, made a hard right, and followed that road for a about another 3 miles with a steady pace and nose glued to the ground. The trail led in and around a heavily wooded development.

After working the development for some time, Al gave Hannah a break and requested that I bring Claudette to his location and pick up the trail, just as we did in Newark, DE two nights prior. Accompanied by about six armed officers and fellow team member Charlie Hawkins, Claudette climbed into her harness, sniffed the gauze pad marked "Steering Wheel" and proceeded to trail in and around the homes of the development. She worked her way back and forth across the road, into almost every driveway to the driver's side doors of the parked vehicles. As I observed Claudette working, it was obvious to me what Norman was doing. He was looking to steal another vehicle. She continued with a solid drive. The phrase "reading your dog" became as clear to me that night than ever before, as my every sense was focused on her every movement to the point that everything else around me became a blur. We entered a thick section of woods and I was sure that Norman wasn't far in front of us because of the way Claudette began to churn with such force that I yelled for Charlie to grab the lead to help hold her back. At the same



New Era Photo by Chris Knight - Lancaster Newspapers Inc., Photo

Hannah the bloodhound, right, seems to bowl with joy at the arrest. With her are handlers, Patti and Allen Means, of Strasburg, and fellow tracking dog Claudette. The bloodhounds helped in the successful search for escaped killer Norman Johnston.

time, the officers were yelling for me to "Hold Up!" "Hold Up!" so we could re-group. Everyone was overheated and like a Godsend—it began to rain a light rain. It felt great!

The trail continued in and around several homes, through a tennis court, and headed directly for a barn where officers again yelled to "Hold Up" as they searched the interior of the barn. It was just like in the movies to watch them perched at the doorways and count to three! When they yelled to me that it was clear, Claudette worked her way down and into the barn where she tried to climb the wooden ladder that led to the hay

loft. Claudette worked around the barn, through a three-board fence into a horse pasture, and then back up into a yard where I decided to give her a break. She was tired and laid down on the cool grass - she needed a break.

Immediately, another officer with a German Shepherd started working by the barn and continued into the darkness. After working for about five hours, we returned to the command center and within a short time, the call came in and we heard the Captain scream: "THEY GOT HIM!@#%*"

There is no way to describe the feeling we felt when we heard about 200 people (state and local police, FBI Agents, US Marshals, etc.) scream with joy and watched them hug each other with jubilation! The Captain gave me a hug and a kiss and congratulated us on the work of the dogs.

Within minutes the cheering grew increasingly louder as we watched several heavily-armed troopers move swiftly through the crowd to a parked cruiser where low and behold we finally had our own sighting of Norman—seated in the back seat

between two state troopers, staring straight ahead with Manson-like eyes.

Everyone finally got to see the elusive Norman Johnston they had spent the last eighteen days and five and a half hours searching for - now in custody. It was a proud feeling knowing that we played an important role in the apprehension of this most wanted man. The Captain, as quoted in the newspaper articles stated "If it weren't for the hounds and the pressure they put on, Mr. Johnston might have stayed put all night. We could have missed him."

We later learned that Norman was flushed

into a resident's yard where he cornered himself and fell to the ground yelling, "I'm not armed! I'm not armed!" Norman's "run for freedom" had just ended. One of the troopers later told us that Norman was covered with hay when they caught up with him. The weary escapee was also heard saying, "You just didn't let up. You just kept coming."

It was 6:30 a.m. now and as we were driving home, we got a call from the PA State Police who requested our presence at the press conference at the Avondale barracks beginning at 8:00 a.m. We turned the van around and headed for Avondale where we were surprised to see a massive amount of news vehicles and news helicopters hovering, reporters and police everywhere! We never saw anything like it. We pushed our way through the crowd and made our way inside the office where we were invited to attend the de-briefing in the lower level of the building.

The Captain spoke well of the teamwork and encouraged suggestions of how things could have been handled differently during the 19 day ordeal. Al raised his hand and said that "a bloodhound should have been called to the phone booth in Nottingham, PA - the first go-around - where Norman fought with the park ranger." The Captain agreed and said that they all learned a lot about bloodhounds and that we had made "believers" out of many of them. Al thanked everyone for their support and faith in us and our dogs.

We were asked to be present at the podium behind the Captain and were mentioned as "the dog team." We were also included in the question and answer period with reporters. On a humorous note (and for those of you who know Al) after the Chester County D.A. spoke, Al slowly began walking away from me and towards the podium. I wasn't focusing right away on what was happening, and then suddenly I felt a sense of urgency to reach out to grab his belt loop and pull him back, but it was way out of reach. Once he made it to the microphone, all I remember is seeing his arm raise straight up in the air holding his plastic bag containing the gauze pad he used as his scent article. Then, he addressed the media by saying, "THIS IS NORMAN IN A BAG!" They loved it! That quote and picture made the morning paper! I guess he just wanted them to understand what our bloodhounds used to do their job! Oh well. After many pictures and interviews, we headed back to Strasburg to get some sleep.



New Era Photo by Chris Knight - Lancaster Newspapers Inc., Photo

Al Means fields questions at a local press conference following the capture of Norman Johnston near Longwood Gardens - Al is holding the infamous "Norman in a Bag"

We are extremely proud of our girls - Hannah and Claudette, as they are the true heroes in this case, thanks to their natural-born abilities and unwavering efforts. The teamwork and support we received from the PA State Police and other law enforcement personnel who trailed with us both in Newark, DE and PA was absolutely outstanding. We're usually forgotten or categorized by the news media as "tracking dogs" and are thrilled that in this particular case we were thoroughly recognized for our efforts and that our hounds actually had names and were spelled correctly!

Our sincere appreciation goes out to the members of Virginia Bloodhound Search & Rescue whose training throughout the years enabled us to be successful in our efforts during those early morning hours on August 20, 1999.

The many hours of training over the past 11 years certainly paid off. It was truly a gratifying ending for everyone involved.

"Where's Norman?" "BACK IN PRISON, WHERE HE BELONGS!"

Note:

One month after his capture, we heard from a Camp Hill State Prison guard (Norman's new residence) that, "Norman is still talking about those damn dogs!"

ALLEN & PATTI MEANS

RED ROSE K-9 S.A.R. TEAM