

CLAUDETTE'S CORNFIELD CAPER!"

Story and Photos by Patti Means



"HAZY, HOT, & HUMID"

was the weather forecast for the day: Monday, August 7, 2000, and what better way to start the day than with a wake-up call at 3:45 a.m. from the police department requesting our assistance with our bloodhounds for an armed robbery! My husband, Al, was already in the shower and getting ready for work when I stumbled over to brief him on the location. He got his gear together, woke up our oldest detectives: Hannah & Claudette, and off they went. I, on the other hand, elected to stay home in order to care for the boarded dogs we were responsible for and to feed our horses, turkeys, and pheasants before heading off to work.

My work day was coming to a close at 5:00 p.m. when the phone rang and it was Al saying: "AS SOON AS YOU GET HOME, BRING CLAUDETTE AND BEAU OVER TO MEL'S FARM. I BAGGED A SCENT ARTICLE FOR YOU. ONE OF THE STATE TROOPERS WILL HAVE IT!" and I haphazardly responded: "What? Where? When? and In What?" That morning, Al drove our van, equipped with crates, to the early morning call which left me sporting our farm's 1981 Ford flatbed truck which we sarcastically refer to as "The Cadillac." As soon as I hung up the phone, I dreaded the vision of sharing the front seat of that flatbed with two adult bloodhounds which had never been in the front seat of any vehicle—LOOSE! They have always been transported in their crates! I pondered a solution the whole

way home. My solution? Get them both in, shut the door, and hang on to the wheel!

In any event, the situation at hand was this: about noon time, two men attempted to rob a bank near the PA/MD line and fled in a stolen pick-up truck which ironically landed practically in our backyard! For a total of six hours, the two suspects eluded police. Al had returned home that morning from the first call (approximately a four mile trail) and was taking a nap when the state police called him for this particular situation. Al responded with his two bloodhounds (Hannah and Shooter) and worked for approximately two hours in the hot and humid weather conditions, prior to my arrival. There was a German Shepherd police dog which was also on scene but tired quickly. Al couldn't understand why,

since both the dog and handler were flown to the scene by helicopter and then to and from every possible sighting thereafter, whereas Al and his hounds had to "hoof it"!

Al scented Hannah from a gauze pad he obtained from the front seat of the suspects' abandoned vehicle and started from a positive sighting. Al and Hannah worked for approximately three miles, in and out of wooded areas, streams, and cow pastures. At one point, Hannah decided she was going to cool off as she approached a nearby pond in one of the cow pastures. What transpired next—Al found absolutely hilarious! Sharing the pond with Hannah were several cows which seemed content as they waded in the cool water that covered their backs. Hannah enjoyed a quick dip and as she exited, the curious girls began to follow,

and that was when the state troopers with Al became noticeably nervous! Al heard one of them ask the other, "Hey! Do you have any mace on you?" "MACE THOSE THINGS IF THEY COME ANY CLOSER!!!" Al just laughed and told them to relax and ignore the cows, as they were just curious! Hannah trailed a little farther until Al thought it was best that his eight year old veteran take a break and chose to start Shooter (age two) from the abandoned vehicle. Hannah's trail was later confirmed by Amish neighbors who had been watching the suspects run through their pasture, exactly the way Hannah had been working.

As Al and Shooter worked through the fields, they came upon an old wooden fence that was overgrown with weeds. One of the troopers anxiously leaped forward to help hold up the fence so the dog team could crawl underneath. Al stood back and grinned, then asked the trooper, "Do you get poison?" and he responded "Yea, REALLY bad—why?" Al pointed to the fence that the trooper was gripping with his bare hands and just laughed! A few choice words could be heard in the distance.

Throughout the afternoon, the local TV news station reported on the man-hunt in Strasburg, PA, and advised people living in the area to stay inside and be cautious of two individuals who looked out-of-place. Dana Good, a dairy farmer, and his family were well-aware of who the two men were when they walked through the door of his milk house that afternoon and asked for a drink of water and a ride to where their truck broke down. The Good family stayed extremely calm and handled the situation with ease. Dana obliged the men and gave them each a drink of water and told them that he would be happy to give them a ride, only after he and his family were finished milking, which would have been within the next hour. Without looking conspicuous, Mrs. Good,

who was very frightened and very pregnant, managed to leave the milk house and called 911. She exclaimed, "THEY'RE HERE! THEY'RE HERE!" and the operator said, "WHO'S THERE?" "THE ROBBERS!" "WHERE IS HERE?" and within minutes – the state police helicopter and cruisers converged on the Good's farm. Al and Shooter were immediately called off at that point and relocated to the milk house.

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Meanwhile, I had made it to Mel's farm in one piece where I obtained the bagged scent article which Al had prepared for me to use (a gauze pad from the front seat of the suspects' vehicle). I was immediately directed to the Good's farm and just as Al was arriving, so was I—in the handsome flatbed, with my team of bloodhounds (Claudette, age seven and Beau, age two) hanging out the window. We made it with minimal slobber coverage on the inside of the front windshield!

Al briefed me on the most recent development and said that when the

helicopter appeared over the milk house, the two men fled into a cornfield. I swallowed hard and reached deep down inside for some energy as I experienced a flash-back of another criminal case I had worked with Claudette early one fall: right through the middle of a cornfield! That was one trail I knew I wouldn't forget too soon and at the time, was constantly reminded of it every time I looked in to a mirror and saw the slice marks around my neck from the razor-sharp, dry corn leaves that repeatedly slapped me as I was being dragged behind Claudette. So, I thought: "Well, here we go again!" as I grabbed my harness and lead. I knew it was going to be a difficult trail but I was ready to do my best.

I harnessed Claudette by the side of the milk house and was accompanied by two state troopers: a young athletic chap and an extremely tall Lt. who was actually in charge of the whole ordeal! The first part of the trail encountered some cow manure which I thought might be a deterrent for the troopers if it meant losing the shine from their shoes, but they reluctantly left their hats behind and followed along! We made our way to the edge of the cornfield where Claudette took her time in choosing just the right row to step into, so we could begin our roller-coaster ride through the corn maze!!!

Once inside the 12 ft. high corn, Claudette worked like a hitched plow horse making turn after turn as we knocked down stalk after stalk! I squatted waist-high and managed to keep my eyes focused on the area from the lowest leaves on the stalks to the ground, and was constantly looking for knees out in front of me. I was being dragged in all directions and then it finally hit me! "WHERE are those troopers?" Just then, I convinced Claudette to stop long enough for me to yell for them. I could hear the troopers crashing through the corn,

several rows behind me. I waited until they found me and then proceeded to give them a quick lecture on the importance of "staying in my back pocket" since "I" was the one OUT IN FRONT! From that point on, I didn't have any problems!

We zigged and zagged and when I could, I looked down and was reassured to see scuff marks and heel prints along the trail. I knew we were "right on the money" as I yelled back to the troopers "Look down!" I was straddling the row as we kept moving so I wouldn't disturb the signs for the troopers to see. "Do you see them?" I yelled and they responded "OK! We're right behind you!" Apparently, my request for proper backup proved quite effective! The troopers were in contact with the police helicopter pilot, and on several occasions I could hear them ask, "Can you see us?" and the pilot replied, "No! The corn is too tall!" Only twice did we cross a small open area where we were in full view.

The oven-like heat was becoming unbearable inside the massive corn maze. There wasn't a dry hair on my head. The sweat streamed down my face and was burning my eyes but I kept them peeled for any movement of any kind. It seemed like an hour went by but in reality, it was about 20 minutes when all of a sudden, both troopers sprinted past my left side, past Claudette which I had on a six foot lead, and then made a sharp cut to the right where the next thing I knew they were thrashing through the corn and yelling: "STOP! STOP! GET DOWN ON THE GROUND! GET DOWN ON THE GROUND! STOP RESISTING!!!" I immediately reached for the main leather strap on Claudette's harness and held her tight. I dropped to my knees and held her close as I peered through the cornstalks and watched both my troopers apprehend

one of the suspects! The only thing missing was simultaneously hearing the theme song from the TV show "COPS": "Bad Boys – Bad Boys – Whatcha Gonna Do?" The other suspect was tackled by the troopers who were flanking the field along the road. "WE GOT EM!", I gasped into Claudette's floppy ear! "WE GOT EM!" WHAT A RUSH! I was SOOOOO proud of Claudette and her ability to nail that trail with all the confusion of sounds,



the difficult terrain, the heat, and having to drag me behind her the whole way! She ran an "EXCELLENT" trail!

I waited until the coast was clear and the suspect was handcuffed and standing when I approached the Lt. in charge. With a proud smile and trying to catch my breath, I told the Lt. that it was important for me to let Claudette connect with those two "dirt bags" and he leaned down and gave me a big hug and said: "You can do whatever you want to do!" So, once we made our way out of the cornfield, I walked Claudette up to the two "dirt bags" who were, in fact, covered with mud! She sniffed them, but didn't have much interest due to all of the distractions going

on all around us, so I immediately sat on the ground and praised her religiously as did the other troopers who were standing by. She knew that her job was finished! "A job well done!" Even the helicopter pilot made his way through the crowd to shake my hand. Everyone was thrilled with the outcome, but none more proud of my girl—than me!

Claudette and I were then escorted back to the Good's farm in the back seat of a cruiser where Al and the Good family were happy to see us. As we pulled up to the milk house, I stuck my thumb out the window and raised it high in the air, when I saw Al reciprocating the same gesture accompanied by a smile. Claudette and I enjoyed a drink of cold water as we talked with the Good family. Dana told me that the width of that section of cornfield was approximately 500 yards.

My husband usually has a memorable comment at any given time! In fact, in his high school yearbook, the caption under his senior picture reads: "ALWAYS FOUND IN THE MIDDLE OF FUN AND ALWAYS HAS A COMMENT!" Well, after Claudette and I finished our drink and we gathered our gear, we were asked to speak to the news media at the end of the driveway. I drove out first in the flatbed and Al followed in the van. Just before the end of the driveway, there was a cruiser parked off to the side with one of the suspects standing next to it. As Al slowed down, he leaned out his window and yelled to the suspect, "Hey Buddy!" - once he got the man's attention, he recited the phrase that appeared the back of the Maine State Prison t-shirt he wore that day. It had a picture of a bloodhound and the reading: "YOU CAN RUN. . . BUT YOU CAN'T HIDE!" The bad guy looked at Al and said, "Hey man! I know that NOW! You got some damn good dogs, man!" Both the escorting trooper and Al shared a laugh as they waved goodbye!