

Troubles With Animals

by

Sam Aurelius Milam III
% 4984 Peach Mountain Drive
Gainesville, Georgia 30507

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Other of my memoirs are available in *Pharos*.

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caveat lector

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When I was six years old, my father gave me a BB gun for my birthday. Nowadays, he'd probably be castigated as an unfit parent. Back then, nobody gave it a second thought. We all had BB guns. I still have that BB gun. I know exactly where it is. I could find it in the dark.

The first thing that I did with my new BB gun was to go out into the back yard and start shooting at birds. Pretty soon, I hit one. Then, I stood there, holding the little dead bird cupped in my hand, my new BB gun in the other hand, and wondering why I'd wanted to kill a bird. Why did I do it? I didn't know. After that, and ever since then, I've been reluctant to unnecessarily harm an animal.

I suppose that, at that age, I didn't consider ants to be animals or, at least, not legitimate animals, and I had another weapon besides my BB gun. It was a Fresnel lens that Poppa had salvaged from an overhead projector. I now have a Fresnel lens in my collection of stuff. Who knows? It might actually be the same lens that I used all of those years ago. It recently came into my possession from another member of the family who didn't want it any more. She didn't know its history. It was just in the collection of family stuff. Maybe it's the same lens. There can't be very many of those things floating around. I know approximately where it is. I could find it, but maybe not in the dark. Of course, I couldn't use it in the dark.

Anyway, back to my story. One of the pastimes that I devised was frying ants. Nobody told me to do it, or taught me how to do it. I just thought of doing it and figured out how to do it. I'd hold the Fresnel lens perpendicular to the hot east Texas sunlight and focus a tiny spot of light on the ground. The lens was about 12 inches in a side. A square foot of Texas sunlight, focused into a spot about 1/8 of an inch in diameter, makes a very hot spot of light. I'd get down on my knees and chase an ant with that spot of light. The instant that the spot of light hit the ant, the ant would fry. All of those hours of frying ants might have something to do with my poor eyesight. I was focusing on a very bright spot of light, too bright for viewing without some kind of a filter. Maybe I'm lucky to have any eyesight at all.

One night, I had a bad dream. I dreamed that I was scrambling around in a region filled with boulders, some small, some as big as houses. I was trying to hide from a very bright point of light, way off on the horizon, that kept flashing at me. I knew, in the dream, that if the point of light ever hit me, then I'd be dead. After that dream, I never again fried any ants. Now, if an ant gets into the place where I'm presently living, I'll try to kill it but, outside, on the sidewalk, the driveway, and elsewhere, I walk around the ants. They have as much right to be there as I do.

I suppose that I must have been around 10 or 11 years old when it became one of my daily chores to carry the table scraps out to the chickens every evening. I don't remember when that became one of my chores. I don't remember when or why it ended. I just remember doing it.

The chickens lived in a fenced lot behind the house. It was fairly large, as such things go, but not nearly large enough for the number of chickens and ducks that Poppa kept in it. The ground inside of the enclosure was pecked and beaten hard. Nothing lived on it except for the chickens, the ducks and, briefly, any grasshopper that strayed into the lot. We fed hen scratch to the chickens, but not enough. They were always hungry. Incidentally, I remember my mother commenting to one of her friends that it was embarrassing, at the checkout counter, to pay for both chicken feed and eggs.

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The chickens might have produced more eggs if they'd had more to eat. They were always desperate for food. They quickly learned to recognize my arrival each evening as the arrival of food. When they saw me coming, they'd rush in a frenzy toward the fence and form a clucking, quivering mob, right in front of me. I'd heave the pile of scraps as far as I could out into the chicken lot and watch the chickens stampede toward it, each chicken trying to get as much as possible for itself.

After a while, I had an idea. I changed my tactics. I'd take one scrap of food at a time and throw it as far as I could, out into the chicken lot. The chickens would stampede after it. One of them would grab it and run. The others would chase the chicken that had the scrap. The chicken with the scrap couldn't swallow the scrap while it was running and if it stopped, then another chicken was likely to grab the scrap out of its mouth and run. I got a lot of entertainment out of those poor starving chickens. They were utterly at my mercy. They didn't have any choice at all. They had to chase each other, driven by desperation. At the time, I didn't understand what I was doing to them. I was just a kid. I didn't kill them, like I used my BB gun to kill the little bird, but I was cruel to them. I don't remember what brought an end to that activity but, to this day, I regret the torture that I imposed on those poor starving chickens.

Sometime when I was around maybe 12 or 13 years old, maybe a little younger, I don't know for sure, my parents temporarily kept a dog for a friend who was on an extended trip overseas. The dog was a registered, pure bred, female Boxer. My parents had some friends who had a registered, pure bred, male German Shepard. After getting permission from the overseas friend, they bred the two dogs. I got one of the puppies.

At that time in my life, I had a somewhat starry-eyed notion of the wilderness, the far North, the Yukon, the Klondike, the Mounties, the fur trappers, the huskies, the wolves, and so forth. I'd been reading a lot of books of the type written by Jack London. Poppa had gotten me started on them. So, I named my puppy Wolf.

The puppy grew up to be a large dog. He also turned into a mean dog, having spent most of his life chained to an iron stake driven into the ground. Nowadays, people disapprove of that practice, people like the teary-eyed dog weepers that I see in the boohoo puppy commercials on the television, but at that time, in southeast Texas, that was the way things were done. I'll mention here, in passing, that I'm completely disgusted with those meddlesome dog weepers. Sure, some people treat their animals poorly but, in my opinion, the right of a man to own his dog, and thus to have complete authority over its treatment, is far more important than is the alleged right of some animal, property, to enjoy some particular kind of treatment, as specified by the meddlesome dog weepers. What those people have accomplished is to utterly destroy a man's right to own his dog and convert it into nothing more than a privilege of

OWNERSHIP The right by which a thing belongs to some one in particular, to the exclusion of all others.

—*Bouvier's Law Dictionary*, 1889

Custody. The care and control of a thing or person. The keeping, guarding, care, watch, inspection, preservation or security of a thing, carrying with it the idea of the thing being within the immediate personal care and control of the person to whose custody it is subjected. Immediate charge and control, and not the final, absolute control of ownership, implying responsibility for the protection and preservation of the thing in custody.

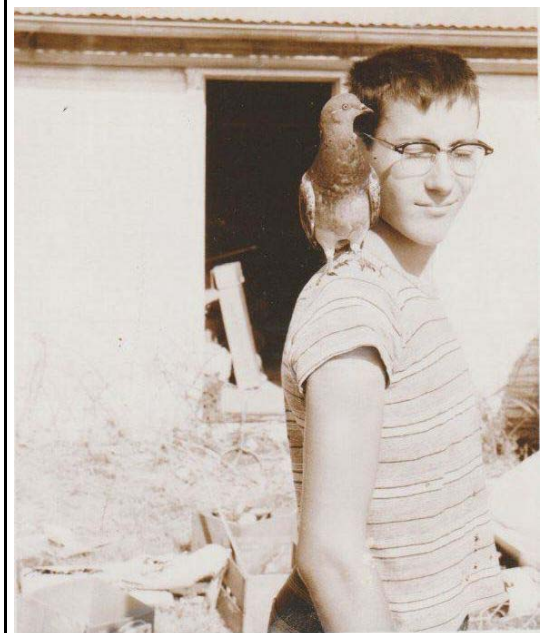
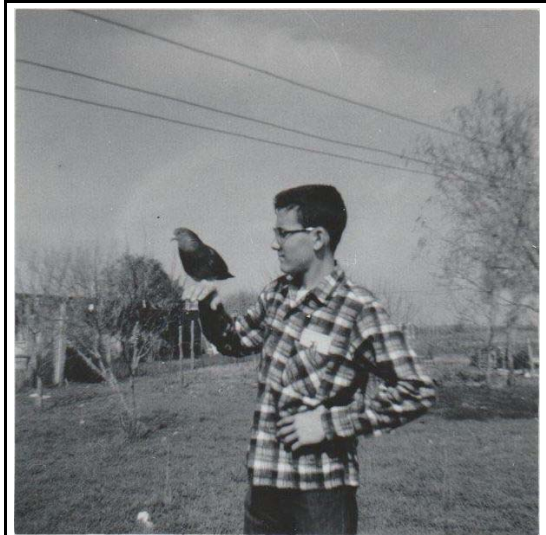
—*Black's Law Dictionary*, 1979

custody, regulated by the county. The county is now the actual owner. It has the power of ownership to seize any animal that the so-called owner, actually a custodian, doesn't treat according to county standards. It's shameful and it's a good example of Heinlein's comment, in his novel *Glory Road*, that good intentions are the cause of more folly than all other causes put together. So, Wolf was a large, mean dog, but he was absolutely submissive to my control. He never did anything that was even remotely threatening to me. Other people avoided him.

During the time that I was in junior high school, I found two baby mockingbirds on the ground. I didn't know where their nest was so I took them home and tried to raise them as pets. At the time, I didn't know how to raise a baby bird and, within a couple of days, they died. It was such an emotional event for me that I actually skipped school the next day. As much as I hated school, I'd never before skipped school. As far as I can remember, I never skipped school again.

Eventually, I became proficient at raising baby birds and found birds to be excellent and loyal pets. One such bird, a pigeon that I named Homer, was so attached to me that, when he figured out where we all went on Sunday mornings, he started flying from home to church and flying right inside. It was amusing the first time but, after that, I had to lock Homer on the back porch every Sunday morning. He never showed any inclination to leave except for once. He flew away and was gone for a few days. I got worried but then he returned, accompanied by a whole flock of pigeons. They all moved into Poppa's garage, onto the rafters. I don't remember how Poppa dealt with that. I don't remember what ever became of Homer and his flock of friends.

When I entered high school, my father gave me a .22 rifle. Nowadays, the meddlesome intruders into everybody else's business would probably declare it an outrage to arm a teenager. They'd probably seize me like a dog from the custody of its "owner", and put me a foster home. See *The Lone Raver Writes Again*, in *Pharos*. When my father gave me the rifle, nobody gave it a second thought. We all had rifles. Every pickup truck had a gun rack in the rear window and most of the gun racks had rifles on them. I believe that, nowadays, school shootings are vastly overreported. I consider such overreporting to be an intentional alarmist agenda designed to stampede people into an anti-gun frenzy. I hold those reporters who're overreporting school shootings in very low regard. At my high school, we all had guns and we didn't shoot each other with



Me and Homer

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them. There must be some other reason for the alleged increase in shootings nowadays. Maybe there isn't really an increase, and they're just more frequently reported, an instance of propaganda. Maybe there are more of them and it's a consequence of overpopulation, as are most of the other things that are getting worse lately. See *Population Studies*, in *The Frontiersman Website*. I still have that rifle. I know exactly where it is. I could find it in the dark.

Beginning in junior high school, and throughout my entire time in high school and junior college, the situation at home was intensely stressful. That situation doesn't enter into this account except as it tended to motivate the events that I'm about to relate. It can be found in other of my memoirs. One way that I dealt with the severe stress at home was to take my dog and my rifle and disappear into the huge tract of unoccupied land east of our house. I could be gone for hours, and never be missed. I never fired the weapon except for one time when I shot into the air, trying to scare away a meddlesome stray cat that kept hanging around. Nobody ever commented to me about carrying the rifle. I took it with me as a matter of course. That's how things were done, back then. On those walks, Wolf would run wild. He'd run in large loops and circles around me, crossing back past me every few minutes. He always knew where I was. On the many trips that he and I made into that desolate region, he never stayed gone for too long, or went too far, except once. That time, he didn't come back. I don't know why. Eventually, that day, I walked back home without him. I never knew what happened to him.

During my first semester at Texas A&M University, I found a wounded grackle on the ground. At the time, I was working as a part-time student at the Texas A&M chicken farm, so I drove over there and begged a surplus chicken cage that wasn't being used. I put the grackle in the cage and took it to my dorm room. As soon as the floor supervisor found out about it, he demanded that I remove it. That weekend, I drove home and left the grackle there, asking for someone there to take care of it for me. I never saw either the grackle or the cage again. I don't know what happened to them.

While I was in college, I married Elaine, my first wife. She acquired a yellow and white cat, and named it Chester. I never knew who the original Chester was. I didn't like the cat. There were cat hairs in and on everything. Eventually, many years later, after we'd moved to California, the cat died. I didn't mourn its loss.

One time, in California, we visited some people who were having a birthday party. There was a cat on the countertop, sampling whatever food they were preparing. I refused to eat any of it, not with a cat involved in its preparation. You can't train a cat to stay off of the countertop. The best that you can do is to train it to jump off of the countertop and run when it hears you coming. Cats are annoying animals. I don't like cats.

After we moved to California, I experimented with various things. For a while, I experimented with geese. I thought that maybe I could use geese to trim the lawn, instead of using a lawn mower. Even back then, I was already thinking about the environment. The experiment with the geese didn't work out at all. They ate all of the weeds that had long, thin leaves, but rejected weeds that had round leaves. I ended up with a yard full of round-leaved weeds, and had to resume using the lawn mower. I thought about goats, but rejected the idea.

Once, Elaine invited some friend of hers, and the friend's husband, over for dinner. I

wasn't enthusiastic, but she didn't ask me. She just did it. They arrive and, to my considerable annoyance, they brought their little piece-of-shit dog with them and turned it loose in our house. I tried to be civil. A few weeks later they invited us over to their house for dinner. We were ready to leave, Elaine was sitting in the car, waiting, and I came walking around the corner of the house with one of my geese under my arm. Elaine asked what I was doing with the goose. I told her that I was going to take it with us and turn it loose in their house. She wouldn't let me do it. I don't recall ever seeing those people or their little piece-of-shit dog again. I didn't mourn the loss.

Eventually, Elaine sprang a surprise divorce on me. That story is told in other of my memoirs. I got to keep the property and the mortgage payments but, with her and the cat gone, and none of her crappy friends coming over with their little piece-of-shit dogs, I could do as I wanted. I named the place *Mere Keep*. That name is explained in the introduction to *Milam's Dictionary of Distinctions, Differences, and Other Odds and Ends*. I eventually gave my geese to one of my neighbors because they kept attacking my daughter on the weekends that the fascist family services thugs allowed her to visit me.

I also experimented with ducks. Properties in that region were heavily infested with snails. Everybody used snail bait to kill them. I went to a local store to buy some snail bait, and read the label. I learned that the stuff would kill snails, birds, pets, kids, and almost anything else the moves or breaths. I decided not to buy any of the stuff. I checked around and somebody told me that a duck would effectively rid a yard of snails. I got a duck, and it worked. After that, I had various ducks, and they were all effective. No snails at all. I had one little Khaki Campbell female who believed that snails came from Heaven. Here's how that happened. The back of the property was fenced with a tall board fence. The woman on the other side of the fence had a garden in her yard, right up against her side of the fence. She'd prowl through her garden, grab every snail that she could find, and there were a lot of them, and throw them over the fence into my yard. The duck would stand by the fence and watch the sky. When a snail came whizzing over the fence, she'd run after it and usually grab it by about the third bounce. Snails from Heaven.

I never made pets of my animals, at Mere Keep, because if the local kids could catch them then they'd carry them off. So the Khaki Campbell duck was somewhat of a wild duck. She didn't want me or anybody else to get close to her. Late one night, I heard her screaming. That's the only way that I can describe the sound that she was making. Many years later, at my present place of residence, I heard a chicken make the same sound, when confronted by a fox. On that occasion, which happened during the day, I ran out the door and yelled at the fox. It dropped the chicken, which it had just then grabbed, and ran away, as did the chicken.

When I heard the duck screaming, I jumped out of bed, donned a minimum of clothes, and rushed into the yard. The little duck ran desperately to my side and actually leaned against my ankle. I wandered around the yard, trying not to step on her, with her leaning on my ankle. I couldn't see anything wrong. I turned back toward the house and she immediately began to scream again. I looked further, with the duck almost clinging to my ankle. When I looked behind a row of garbage cans that I was using to collect things to recycle, a fairly large animal, it looked in the dark like a raccoon, scampered up the corner post, over the fence, and away. The little duck immediately lost interest in me and wandered away.

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Animals are smarter than we believe. That duck had a good understanding of my role in her life. I was her protector and provider. When the duck needed my help, she called me. When I started to leave, without having eliminated the threat, she objected. Otherwise, she wasn't particularly interested in having anything to do with me. Sadly, I don't remember what became of the Khaki Campbell duck. In the end, she was just one more of a long line of ducks that I had while I lived at Mere Keep.

After the fall of Mere Keep, I had only one option. I moved to southeast Idaho, to live and work on Mecham's farm. At the time, I had one duck, a white American Pekin drake named Mr. Duck. By the way, just for the record, I'd previously had an American Pekin drake that I called Sir Francis. I liked to name the animals. Anyway, I took Mr. Duck with me, in a little cage improvised from two plastic shipping crates, one upside down on top of the other. He took the trip well and arrived safely. When I arrived at the farm, and with Jan's prior approval, I turned him loose with her ducks.

While I was living at the farm, I acquired the ownership of a small gray and white cat. I didn't want to own a cat, I don't like them, but I didn't have a choice in the matter. The cat decided that he was my cat and that was the end of the discussion. He followed me around. No matter how many times I turned around and stepped on him, no matter how many times he yowled and jumped out of the way, he was usually underfoot. I named him Sir Underfoot.



Sir Underfoot

I also acquired a goat. Again, I didn't want to own a goat. Here's how that happened. Jan had arranged to buy a young goat, just weaned, from another woman nearby, who also kept goats. We went to get the goat. She was skittish but we cornered her in the corral, caught her, and I held her in my arms, against my chest, head on one side of me and tail on the other. She immediately became calm, and began to stare at my face.

The women talked and talked and talked. By the time they were finished, my arms were almost finished, too. We went to the truck and I gratefully laid the little goat on the floor in front of me, between my feet. She stayed very calm, and continued to stare at my face. When we got home, I carried her to the barn and released her with the other goats. After that, she was my goat. She'd stay with the herd if I wasn't around but, as soon as I stepped out the door or walked around a corner, she'd leave the herd and walk over to the fence, as close to me as she could get. If I went into the pasture, then she'd follow me around. Fortunately, Sir Underfoot was an inside cat. I named the goat Honey, because of her sweet disposition and because of her color, a nice light brown on a white background, kind of like honey on ice cream.



Honey and a Visiting Friend

When I was forced to leave the farm, I had to abandon both Honey and Sir Underfoot. I didn't have any place for them where I was going, a doublewide mobile home on a

tiny lot in Arizona, and the owner of the place didn't want any animals. Both Honey and Sir Underfoot were relatively young, and in good health. A couple of months after I left the farm, Jan contacted me and told me that they'd both died. There wasn't any obvious cause of death. They just died.

While I was living in Arizona, I did my traveling on Crazy Horse, my bicycle. One day, I found an injured humming bird beside the road. I suppose that he'd been hit by a car. I took him home and tried to keep him alive but he died the next day.

When I first came to Georgia, I was unfamiliar with the local wildlife. I encountered a few snakes living near the place and I didn't know what kind of snakes they were. I didn't know if they were venomous. I tried to describe them to some locals, and to some family members, but nobody had any information for me. I was afraid to leave them loose, near the house. At the time, there were frequent visits by members of the family who had small children who ran around outside. So, I killed a few of the snakes. As usual, whenever I've killed an animal, I've later regretted it. I very much regret killing those snakes. I later learned that they were Indigo snakes, very beneficial, very harmless, and somewhat endangered, mostly from being run over by traffic on the roads or from being killed by nitwits like me. For a while, I rescued a few of them from near the house, and took them down to the creek. Now, if I see one near the house, I intend to leave it alone. The kids seem to have all grown up and moved away, but it wouldn't matter anyway, since the snakes are harmless. Sadly, they're very rare, now. Previously, there were a lot of them, but no more. However, I recently saw a young one in the grass, near the garage, the only one that I've seen for about 5 years. I hope that the local population will recover.

Some time later, I was at a neighbors house, tending his chickens while he was on vacation. He had, over the chicken run, a big piece of plastic netting, to keep the hawks out. I noticed, trapped in the netting, a young bird, not yet old enough to fly. I couldn't see a nest anywhere nearby. I don't know how he got there. I rescued him and took him home. I kept him alive and healthy for a week or so but, as he got bigger, I realized that I didn't want another pet. As soon as we were able to locate an animal rescue center, we took him there. I suppose that he grow up and was released. I don't know.

I've had dealings with many animals over the years. I've mentioned only a few of them here, but I'm done with pets. I don't want any more of them. I'll just sit in my lawn chair and watch the trees and the birds, or sit in my office and watch the nature shows. That's it for now. No more pets.



Crazy Horse and my Trailer, The Global Cooler



Indigo Snake, from Reptiles Magazine

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