

The Legend of Ole Shakey

By

Travis H. McDaniel (1960- 1994)

Brief Summary: This is the story of “Ole Shakey” as told by Travis H. McDaniel, Manager of the Noxubee Refuge in 1975. Mr. McDaniel talks about the impoundment of deer dogs on the refuge and one in particular, Ole Shakey. He tells the story of coming into possession of the dog, the owner fighting him in every step of the process to get the dogs back, and what happened with the dog. He recounts going to a meeting in Starkville, Mississippi where the owner of Old Shakey showed up and accused Mr. McDaniel of shooting his dog, in which McDaniel had not shot the dog, but was given to a local man where his father-in-law lived. When the original owner called the local man who had Shakey, the local man stated he never heard of such a dog, in which Mr. McDaniel had to call the original owner and explain to him what happen. The original knew that the man wasn’t about tell a total stranger about the dog, but his story would follow Mr. McDaniel throughout his career.

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It was 1975 if I remember right, about three years into my tenure at manager at Noxubee Refuge, when an event occurred that stuck with me for the rest of my career. I was the brunt of many jokes because of this, and the story was even retold at my retirement roast, albeit it with a little embellishment. By then ole “Shakey” had reached legendary status in the annals of memorable tales from Noxubee, a refuge noted for stories made famous by the previous manager of 23 years, Burt Webster. Here’s my recollection of how the events unfolded:

By my second hunting season at Noxubee we were going strong impounding deer dogs caught running on the refuge. The local dog hunters were in an uproar and I was getting hate calls and threats fairly regularly. As unpleasant as this was, I knew I had to hang tough with this policy or we would have continued to be over run with deer dogs. Our efforts had reduced the number of dogs found on the refuge considerably, but we still caught a few each season. Some of these may have come from legitimate hunters hunting off the refuge with dogs that happened to chase deer onto into the refuge. However, many others still had their buddies turn dogs loose on one of the many boundary line roads and let them run into the refuge, where they were waiting on deer stands.

Anyway, one day some of the crew picked up three deer dogs on the refuge and brought them in. Two of them were prime walker hounds, the worse kind for us because they were great trackers and would run until they dropped rather than give up the chase. The third dog was a pitiful looking mixed breed that looked to be mostly blue tick. As a puppy he had distemper and it left him with a constant tremor – thus the name Shakey. Evidently, this had no affect on him when he was running a deer. As was my custom, I checked the collar for a phone number and called the owner that night. The owner told me he was not going to pick them up, but instead was going to call his congressman. This was nothing unusual. People not pleased with refuge policies were always calling their congressmen or senators. Mostly they wanted me fired – or at least transferred and out of their hair. He warned me I had better take good care of his dogs while I had them impounded, since the walkers were worth “several thousand dollars each.”

The Code of Federal Regulations outlined a sequence of steps to go through for impounded animals. Briefly, I had to contact the owner by certified mail and give him 30 days to retrieve his property. If no results, a formal notice in the newspaper gave another 30 days. If nothing had happened by then I could follow up with an auction to try and recoup expenses. If none of these worked, the animal could be dispatched. I immediately mailed the owner a certified letter and began the long process.

The owner fought me all the way. He knew exactly how long he could leave a letter at the post office box without retrieving it. He waited out this limit, then the 30 days, then 30 more days for the newspaper, and then the days we had to wait for the auction. In the meantime, we kept the dogs in our pen. We kept them so long they were almost like our own. Of course the congressman got into it, but I had done everything by the book, and there wasn’t much he could do about this specific incidence. The owner was furious! He had tried every stall tactic he knew and they had all failed. If he had picked up the dogs the day after they were caught, he would have owed only a modest catch fee. Now, he

not only owed the catch fee but also the expense of food and board for the several months we held the dogs.

The day finally arrived for the auction, which was set for 11:00 am. I couldn't believe it when my assistant, Lee Fulton, came running into the office the first thing that morning, all in a huff. "They're gone! The dogs are gone. I can't find them. I haven't the slightest idea how they got out or where they can be. All I know is they're gone."

I put the entire crew out on the refuge roads looking for the dogs, with instructions not to come back until they were found. In the meantime the owner arrived about an hour before the appointed time for the auction, demanding his dogs since obviously no one else was going to bid. Of course, I knew no one would bid against him, no matter how much they were worth. I was sweating bullets by now, with the dogs still missing. I gave him a bureaucratic response about having to wait until the official time for the auction. I could see my career going down the tubes, and owing him a couple thousand dollars to boot.

As I sweated out those last fifteen minutes, I finally heard a refuge truck pass the office going towards the dog pen. A minute or two later I heard a second refuge truck, and it pulled into the office parking lot. The dog owner was in my office and had his back to the door. Curtis Smith came into the office, walked to my open door and gave me the high sign – without the owner seeing him. What a relief to see Curtis with that big grin on his face. As calmly as I could, I stood up and proceeded to tell the owner what we were going to do.

"Well, it's just a few more minutes 'till time, but I don't think anyone else is coming, so lets get started," I said, as if everything was going as planned. "Since there's no one else to bid against you, you can have your dogs for the total amount of expenses we have invested in them. That's the cost of boarding and the salary cost involved in catching them," I told him as I handed him the bill, which was a couple of hundred dollars as I remember.

"Just figure it for the two walkers," he said, "You can keep Shakey. I'm not paying that kind of money for him. He's your worry now."

I was surprised and shocked at this turn of events and wasn't quite sure how to react. But there was nothing I could do to make him pay if he didn't want to redeem his dog. He paid for the two walkers and left.

Lee suggested we go ahead and shoot Shakey, since no one would want him and we obviously couldn't keep feeding him indefinitely. I almost agreed, but in a moment of fortuitous insight I made one of my better decisions and said no. I had a feeling this case wasn't over yet and I wanted another option. Lee eventually thought of one and took Shakey to Alabama to his father-in-laws place and found a local man to take him.

A year or so later the impoundment of hunting dogs and stray cattle, as well as other topics the locals were concerned about, were generating a lot of congressional inquiries and local complaints. The regional office decided to hold a public meeting to address these concerns. The meeting was to be in Starkville, Mississippi and would give the

concerned locals from Noxubee and Winston counties an opportunity to say their peace. Hopefully, when finished, and we had explained our position, things wouldn't be quite as tense.

During the course of the meeting many of the owners whose deer dogs had been impounded in the past stood up to make speeches denouncing my impoundment policy. One of these men was none other than Shakey's old owner. He gave a synopsis of the events surround Shakey and then accused me of shooting him. By this time he was on a roll and went on and on about what despicable behavior it was for a government employee to do such a thing. He threatened to advise the Humane Society of my actions and to sue the Fish and Wildlife Service for what I'd done.

You can imagine my relief to know I could honestly tell the audience I had not killed Shakey. However, my explanation of what we had done with him brought nothing but an "Oh, sure you did," especially when I couldn't give him the new owner's name. Finally, my supervisor, Curtis Wilson, was able to calm him by promising the new owner's name if he would come to the refuge office the next morning, which he did. By calling Lee's father-in-law the next morning we were able to get the man's name and telephone number, which we gave to the now subdued hunter. I suggested he call the new owner to confirm our claim. He indicated that he might, although it was now obvious he was much relieved at what I had done. He even indicated he would use his influence with his fellow dog owners to make a stronger effort to keep deer dogs off the refuge.

Out of curiosity, we call Shakey's new owner a day or two later to see if anyone had called him about the dog. The poor old man indicated someone had called, but he had denied knowing anything about such a dog. I couldn't believe it! All the humiliation of standing before a group in a public meeting and letting them run you down, all the trust and cooperation I had developed with the dog hunters over the last week, I could just see all this going down the tubes. But what was I to do?

I immediately call the old owner to explain as best I could why I thought the new owner had lied to him about Shakey – knowing I didn't have a chance in a million of his believing me. "You've got to believe me; I wouldn't have lied to you about this."

"Oh, I know you didn't lie to me. That man didn't know me from Adam's house cat, and I caught him unawares. I didn't expect him to tell a stranger who called him on the phone the truth about a dog he knew had been mine."

And so ended the story...the legend of ole Shakey.

Travis H. McDaniel Retired (1960- 1994)