

Sweet William

by Frederick Wickert



*Lucky winning at an outdoor show
(handled by Ruth Benhoff)*



Sweet William



*Willow sitting by the leg of the grooming table, surrounded by
three of her children.*

I retired from the Air Force and moved back to my home in Gilboa, New York. My wife and I had become interested in raising and showing American Cocker Spaniels during my last two years in the service.

I was currently showing Lucky, my first parti-color variety show dog. Lucky had done most of the winning he needed to get his championship title. Pudge, my ASCOB (any solid color other than black) foundation stud dog was currently campaigning for his championship title also. I was in search of an outstanding female parti-color and an outstanding female ASCOB to breed with my two great stud dogs. This was to obtain the next generation of puppies to show.

Ruth Benhoff of Maryland, owner of the sire of Pudge, and recognized as the top breeder of ASCOB cocker spaniels in the USA and probably the world, was coming to a show in Albany, New York. Albany was only sixty miles from our home. She told me she had a female she believed would do very well if bred to Pudge. She could bring her to Albany. We could meet her there and see the puppy and take it home with us if we were interested.

We went to the show and saw the puppy. She was beautiful and of course Ruth Benhoff's advice was priceless. We brought the puppy home. We named her ARTRU Mountain Stream Willow. ARTRU was the famous kennel name of Ruth and Art Benhoff. Mountain Stream was the kennel name we had adopted because we lived on the banks of a stream in the mountains, and of course Willow was the name given the new little girl.

Willow was a precious jewel of a dog and quickly became a house pet. Though she was show quality, we decided not to show her. We often took her with us in the car when we went somewhere and she always brought forth remarks about how well behaved she was

Her name was Willow, but she soon began to be called by other names. Among them were Willow Dillow, Willy Dilly and Sweet William. Sweet William was a favorite of mine. Perhaps it was because she was so sweet natured.

In the evening, she went to the den with us while we watched television. We were amused greatly because whenever a puppy in a pen on the other end of the house pooped in the pen, Willow suddenly began to sniff the air and then gave forth with an ooooooohhh. When this happened we knew there was a mess to clean up. We used to laugh at Willow always telling on the others.

We had a Toy Poodle that ruled the place, and he and Willow loved each other and played together often. Willow also loved Pudge, and together with him produced some magnificent puppies, a number of whom became famous champions in their own right

We had large outdoor dog runs. We let the puppies outside in the runs during the day. When my wife, Tae wanted the puppies to come inside to put them in their pens for the night, they often made it difficult, not wanting to cease their play. Whenever Willow saw this, she ran out into the runs, herded the puppies toward the door and brought them in for us. She always made the job easy.

At one time there was to be a show to raise money for a worthy charitable cause. Having a good baritone singing voice, I was requested to perform two songs during the show, in addition to taking part in a comedy skit.

During the final rehearsal for the show I took Willow with me. One of the songs I was singing was, "How Much is That Doggie In the Window" and my plan was to have Willow sitting on the stage beside me in a chair as I sang the song. Sydney Vining, director of the show made the remark, "That dog of yours is going to steal the whole show." Those words were to prove prophetic.

On the big night, the two and a half hour show was proceeding smoothly. When the time came for me to perform my Doggie in the Window number, a chair was placed beside the microphone, and I carried Willow on stage and placed her sitting in the chair. This met with the immediate approval of the audience.

As I was singing my number, Willow was made nervous by the band. All the rehearsing had been done with a piano and she had not heard the band previously. Perhaps it was the drums that unnerved her. As I was singing, Willow suddenly jumped down from the stage and ran to Dominick, where he was sitting on the aisle in the audience.

The crowd went wild. They just loved it and broke into applause. Dominick scooped her up into his arms, rose from his seat and carried her to the stage. He held her up to me and I placed her back into the chair, where she remained for the rest of the song. When the song ended there was a standing ovation, and it wasn't for me. It was for Willow. Sydney Vining was right. She did steal the show.

A few years later I was working as a security guard at the North Gate of the Gilboa-Blenhiem pumped storage power facility. A truck with a crew of men came to the gate. They were from the St. Lawrence power project and had been sent from St. Lawrence to help with some work going on in the Gilboa-Blenhiem facility. Both plants were operated by the state Power Authority. I walked around the truck, sometimes stepping up on the running boards and reaching inside the windows to check all the ID cards. After carefully checking everything I opened the gates and allowed the truck to proceed inside.

That night when I got home, Willow sniffed at my boots and my clothes thoroughly. Two weeks later, Willow was obviously in distress. She was having problems with her breathing. I took her to an animal hospital. They took X-rays and found something was eating at her lungs. They didn't know what it was. They said it was different from cancer and they had no idea what to do about it. The vet office said they were going to send the X-rays to Cornell University Vet College for help. In the meantime there was no more they could do, and we were told to take her home.

We stopped at a nearby Burger king and bought her a hamburger, which she ate with gusto. Then we took her home. When I came home from work the following day, Willow was much worse off. She could not lie down but sat in an upholstered chair panting. She could not tolerate her weight on her chest if she lay down.

I sat in another chair talking to her. Finally I gently picked her up, being careful to relieve any pressure on her chest. She looked at me with those big soft brown eyes, took one deep breath, let out a long sigh and she was gone. We were devastated.

We took her back for an autopsy, and the report from Cornell was coming in just as we arrived at the animal hospital. The report said the dog was inflicted with a very rare disease, an airborne virus found only around the St. Lawrence River. They said it would be interesting to know whether the dog had been anywhere in the vicinity of the St. Lawrence, which of course, she had not.

The autopsy revealed the disease had spread rapidly through Willow's lungs and destroyed the tissue. There was nothing that could have been done. There was no cure for it. Tissue samples were taken and sent to the Lab at Cornell, who confirmed the rare disease.

The only possible explanation for her getting the disease is that some of the air borne virus was on that truck or on the clothing of the personnel who had entered my gate from the St. Lawrence Power Plant. It had transferred to my clothing and when I came home from work that day, Willow sniffing my boots and pants had inhaled the virus from my clothing.

What a terrible twist of fate that her curiosity of strange odors on me when I came home, led to her untimely death.