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The Dogs of Western

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"No one appreciates the very special genius of your conversation as a dog does," the writer-editor Christopher Morley once observed. Perhaps this is why these creatures so easily capture the hearts of the academic community and become a familiar sight on university campuses. Whatever the reason for their popularity, many dogs over the years have had their day on the Hill, making friends, scoring a little food, and adding their stories to the chronicle of Western's history.

A famous example is Coach E. A. Diddle's Irish setter, Rex. One of Western's first unofficial mascots, said to rival Mrs. Diddle for his master's affections, Rex could often be seen trotting across the grass (an activity then forbidden to people), circulating among classrooms, presiding on the sidelines at football and basketball games, and positioning himself prominently in athletic team photographs.

Naturally, students and faculty were alarmed one fall day in 1933 when eleven-year-old Rex went missing. "Boys," Coach Diddle told his basketball players, "we ain't gonna sleep, practice or eat until we find old Rex." The boys may have been glad for this break in their routine. Years earlier, when Diddle still coached football, some of the players had tied his beloved pet to a distant tree, knowing that Coach would soon halt their strenuous workout to organize a search.

This time, the quest to find Rex spread from campus, to city, to county—without success. The mystery was only solved a day or two later when Coach walked to his car, opened the trunk and, to his surprise, saw the hungry but otherwise unharmed pooch looking back at him. In classic Diddle fashion, he shouted, "Rex, where in the hell have you been all this time?"

In 1934, an Irish setter also joined the family of art instructor Ivan Wilson. His pedigreed name was Rufus the Red, but he was known to all as "Poody." Though never properly trained as a bird dog, Poody instinctively raced over fields and hills out of the sheer joy of being outdoors with his master. "He never wanted me to walk alone," remembered Wilson, "no less did I wish to walk without him." Wilson was a prolific painter of watercolors, but when he decided to have Poody's picture made in oil, he recruited local artist Herman Lowe to do the job. The completed portrait of Poody in repose, his coat of dark red hair gleaming in the sunlight, hung prominently in Wilson's bedroom while his own canvases lay stacked in piles on the floor.

Other distinguished canines followed. Music teacher Nelle Gooch Travelstead's dog, Trouble, was pictured with his mistress on the dedication page of Western's 1942 yearbook. In 1962, little Louis "Louie Rockhouse" XIV stood watch over the football players who then lived in the Rock House. In Coach Diddle's household, Rex was followed by Betty Boo, a high-strung Pekinese. More recent "top dogs" have included President Gary Ransdell's black Labrador, Topper, who, in the company of Mrs. Ransdell, takes an early morning walk across campus as successor to the family's Dalmation, Maggie. At the top of the Hill resides Garnet, an "incredibly spoiled black Lab" who serves as guide dog to University Publications Editor Kimberly Parsley.

These dogs have owed their principal loyalty to individuals, but others have attached themselves to entire groups. One day in 1954, a mixed-breed barkless dog appeared on Western's Training School playground. When he showed particular affection for the fifth-grade boys and girls, they christened him "Tippy," outfitted him with collar and leash, raised money for his license tag and contributed to his upkeep at the home of a classmate. The students entered him in a local pet show, where he won the coveted "biggest dog" trophy. When the children advanced to sixth grade, Tippy was also promoted after taking an examination administered by the Training School director. Asked "What is 4 minus 4?" Tippy correctly answered. . . nothing.

Other Western dogs have been still more footloose, making the entire Hill their home. Spring 1948 saw a multitude of these campus canines, prompting the *College Heights Herald* to ask if a bitter "third-year freshman" had spread the word that Western was the place to lead a dog's life. But still they kept coming. In the 1960s there was Oliver, whose missing right front leg earned him the nickname "Tripod." In the 1980s there was Sheila, an easygoing mutt who students first thought was dead because of her habit of collapsing to the ground whenever she needed a rest. Only the sight of Western mascot Big Red, who she once chased across the football field, would arouse Sheila's temper. Like Coach Diddle's Rex, some of the more sociable pooches have wandered into classrooms where, to the envy of students, they lie down for a nap once the lecture begins.

The end of any dog story, of course, is never happy. In 1936, in the midst of his rounds across campus, Rex lay down for the last time. All of Western, declared the *Herald*, mourned the "king of Western dogdom," soon interred in the garden of Coach Diddle's house on Normal Drive. The passing of Poody in June, 1948 inspired Ivan Wilson to write an affectionate tribute to the dog who had begun life as a "mischievous red lump of curiosity," lived it as a "perfect gentleman," and left it without fear or complaint.

Wilson recalled that his affection for Poody had quickly grown despite the fact that he had recently lost a dog and had steeled himself against loving another. How many times have other Western faculty, staff and students made—and broken—this vow? No sooner do we declare irreplaceable the one just gone than another furry pup comes bounding over the Hill, and we turn a deaf ear to Rudyard Kipling's warning:

> Brothers and Sisters, I bid you beware
> Of giving your heart to a dog to tear.

Sources:

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