

Mac and His Friends, the Animals

By Dennis Payton Knight

My sister and her husband, Stuart, who we called Mac because of his Scottish surname, in their retirement purchased a farm in Nebraska. It adjoins the North Platte River flowing out of Wyoming, not far from its confluence with the South Platte streaming from Colorado below the city of North Platte.

The river drifts beyond a country road, trees, dense willow brush, sand bars and marshes. It is home to song birds, long-legged fishing birds, owls, cardinals, wild turkeys, deer, foxes, badgers, raccoons, frogs, turtles, and other critters. Fish, maybe some big ones from the Rockies, lurk in the quiet pools of the river. In the early spring, sand hill cranes by the tens of thousands pause for six weeks in their migration north.

The MacMillans rented their alfalfa field to another farmer on shares. Boarded horses occupied the big barn and corral. What Mac considered farm work was a matter of keeping things tidy and painted. He had a tractor to rumble around in, but he didn't pull a plow. They had a nice pond in a cottonwood grove some distance from the house, stocked with fish.

Not a farmer by trade, my brother-in-law was a retired teamster, and talked like it. He was a wiry bantam in size but a giant at heart, loving all that lived in his world. He added chickens and ducks to his menagerie, and always had a dog. Our brother, Jim, was so taken by Mac's relationship with animals that he bought and placed a colorful statue of St. Francis of Assisi in a special place on the farm.

Mac kept bird feeders on the porch for cardinals and other colorful birds. Even when big, messy crows took over the feeders, consuming up to ten pounds a day, Mac continued to serve them costly seed, telling Maureen that 'crows get hungry, too.' Maureen thought she won that battle, as usual, but the feed bill didn't say so.

He would amble about his farm with an entourage of two dogs, Chyna, a Pomeranian, and Buddy, a Chesapeake Bay mixed breed who stood fully half Mac's height, and probably weighed more. Assorted barnyard fowl would join his parade.

Owls, hawks, and eagles took their toll on the chickens and ducks, surely crediting Mac for the feasts. There were still hens around, but eventually only one duck remained, a social being, who, when she finally realized she was the last of her kind, took to making lumbering old Buddy her companion duck. She would follow the dog everywhere, nestling against him as he slept in cool places.

Time passed, the Pomeranian died, and Mac encountered heart problems and began to lose his mental acuity, so they sold the farm and moved to my neighborhood at Windsor Gardens. They couldn't bring the wild birds and animals, but they did bring the St. Francis statue. Buddy came too, and remained with Mac, his unwavering friend to the end.