

## That Good Ol' Country Livin': Tulip Tales

By Terri White

When we moved, our children, ages 5, 7, and 8, easily adjusted to country living. What's not to like? Forty acres with woods, a creek, and pastures. Plenty of trees to climb, hide-outs to create, and acreage to explore.

Initially nervous about letting the kids explore on their own, Steve and I scoured the property with them to get the lay of the land. Our biggest concern was snakes. Then we gave them a two-acre boundary. A year later, after proving themselves trustworthy, we let them loose on the 40 acres. Only two rules: stay together and return home when you hear the whistle.

Sometimes our boys traveled beyond the shrill of the whistle. However, Tulip, our dog, heard it every time. And they all trotted back home.

Tulip: what a dog. The runt of the litter, Tulip bonded with our friend Lee as he trained her. When Lee gave her to us, we fell in love. Although a fierce-looking bullmastiff, she loved people. Anytime friends visited us, she was convinced that they all came to see her. Tulip's wagging tail could knock over a two-year-old in her excitement.

But don't surprise her. One day, friends visited our neighbor who lived a stone's throw away. As the little boy bounded out of the truck, he whooped in delight – free at last. Until. Until Tulip. Surprised by the whoop, Tulip bolted toward the boy with a WOOF. In a comedic rewind, that boy jumped back into the truck and slammed the door – terrified. Poor kid. Tulip thought the boy wanted to play chase.

Like any animal, Tulip could smell fear and detect unsavory folks. Fortunately, we led a pleasant life with pleasant folks. Then one sunny afternoon, I heard a car honk in our driveway. I noticed Tulip circling a beat-up station wagon - silently, menacingly - with her tail straight up.

I stepped near, but outside of arm's length and let Tulip continue her patrol. Shady-looking characters, asking about our neighbors across the creek, filled the car. I provided no information and sent them on their way. They never dared open their doors. They never dared dispute my lack of help. Tulip at your service.

Our boys often witnessed Tulip's hunting skills. Over the years, she killed various animals. The most striking – an armadillo. Lest you feel sorry for the armored critter, it dug up and devoured our plot of potatoes the day before. While trying to escape into its hole, Tulip attacked immediately, but it hid in its shell. No problem. Tulip opened her gigantic jaw, clamped onto the shell, and crushed it in one chomp. Brutal justice for our potato patch. Country living.

Despite Tulip's adorable charm, our cat, queen of the roost, became Tulip's target. She yearned for Ebony's position even if she was a late-comer. Each had a "house" – a dog mansion for Tulip and a cozy, cat house for Ebony. Although they spent most of their time outside, we allowed both our pets inside during the cold, or if we just felt like bringing them in.

With Tulip's attempts to usurp Ebony's authority, she often stalked the cat. Eventually, Ebony became paranoid, so Steve built a ledge for her cat house where she could safely retreat. However, once Tulip caught her unawares. She grabbed Ebony by the skin and shook her mercilessly. Yelling at Tulip to stop proved useless. So I grabbed a baseball bat and beat her. (Believe me, I hated doing that.) She released her grip and retreated, panting from her escape – tail between her legs.

That did it for Ebony. She disappeared. Soon, though, Joseph found her hanging out in the barn rafters. Refusing to come down, she lived there for a year, pooping on the barn roof. Joseph even climbed up there daily to feed and pet her. He adored that cat.

Thus, Tulip resumed her smiling personality without the competition. With the boys, she roamed the countryside. But Joy, our youngest, would climb into Tulip's dog mansion to play with her. Tulip lapped it up. In fact, she licked it up, too – anointing Joy with slobbery kisses. The boys, snickering, would tease Joy, "Tulip just licked her bottom before she licked your face! Ha! Ha!" Typical big brother stuff.

Every weekday morning after chores and breakfast, the kids and I took a long walk before diving into schoolwork. Of course, Tulip accompanied us. She loved the adventure of sniffing out new scents on the trail. Sometimes a jackrabbit popped into sight, then zipped off. Ears and tail up, Tulip charged after it, but never succeeded in the catch. What a sight!

Neighboring dogs often visited us. Err, rather visited Tulip, if you get my drift. Soon Tulip swelled with a womb full of puppies. When she determined to birth her puppies in one particular corner of OUR bedroom, we relented. No other spot or room would do. How charming.

After eight puppies, she seemed through, so we moved her and the puppies to the dog mansion, all snuggled up in cozy, old rugs. The next morning, we discovered four more puppies. Twelve puppies from at least two different fathers. Oh, joy.

Soon enough, those puppies were romping in the yard with our kids. What a sight! Especially when Tulip longed to explore the wilds. As she trotted off, a trail of twelve hungry puppies pursued her. Alas, there was no escape for a mother of nursing newborns.

Giving those puppies a good home proved challenging, but with help from friends, we found homes for ten of them. Sadly, one died, and we kept one as a pal for Tulip. We named him Big Boy. They made a happy pair.

One day, Tulip did not return from her daily adventures. We waited. And waited. And waited. Nothing. Inconsolable, Big Boy mourned. His mommy was gone. Although we never learned what happened to Tulip, we think that a pack of coyotes attacked her during the night. We'll never know, but we will always cherish our Tulip memories.