

Uncle George: and Cricket the natural pest manager

He was Uncle George to the few who remember this old time Maderan, with the protuberant belly, permanently tacked-on overall's, and the ever-present gnawed cigar. And though he told the same jokes over and over, mostly to get the "rolling eyeball" reactions from his niece's and nephews, he was forgiven because of his dog.

Uncle George had a special dog. To a kid's way of seeing things, that made Uncle George special too.

Cricket was a Border collie who answered a call. The call had nothing to do with what smart dogs are usually distinguished for. Still, around anyone who listened, George Russell would make the usual claims about his dog, though few had the pleasure of seeing the dog prove his claims. Naturally, reactions to George and his dog varied. One such claim had to do with the dog scouting tomato patches to find the big fat green hornworm's and eating them.

By the way, hornworm's are the bane of every tomato grower. They can destroy fruit and eat leaves down to nothing.

In the last few years the term IPM, which stands for integrated pest management is a popular field of study. The key idea centers around controlling pests safely. There are four parts of IPM: 1. Pest identification 2. Methods for detecting monitoring and predicting pest outbreaks 3. Knowledge of the biology of the pest and its ecological interactive hosts, natural enemies, and competitors. 4. Ecologically sound methods for preventing or controlling pest. (UC Davis)

With special attention given to # 4, no information I have seen supports the use of dogs to handle hornworm pest problems. The only source that comes close to it is a Fresno Master Gardener who owned a ten pound poodle. The poodle accompanied her owner on morning walks to the tomato patch and watched as she picked hornworms off plants. Later the little dog would stand on its haunches to reach the hornworms, mimicking her owners behavior.

Cricket, was Uncle George's answer to pest control and anyone else's too that happened to be within a certain range. I doubt that Uncle George ever heard of the word ecology, no less cared about it.

While boasting about his dog in front of a group of local farmers, Uncle George was stopped short and put to a challenge. It was a put-up or shut up kind of thing. The group agreed to meet the following day at George's brother Fred's tomato patch. After-all, George didn't have any hornworm's on his tomatoes since his fine dog Cricket, presumably kept its population down.

The farmers met at the agreed location, and having waited a sufficient amount of time, George posed, pulled back his shoulders and whistled. His dog alerted, paused at attention before making a bee-line to the patch to sit perfectly still next to George, with her ears perked.

One might wonder what she was listening for. Watching the dog, it seemed that her sensitive ears were picking up on the chomp-chomp sound of those big fat ugly green hornworms. The dog appeared to be collecting information; it's entire body was alert to the task. First it would cock its head, then the tail would begin to wave excitedly and one or both of her front legs would start to dance before George gave it the go ahead whistle. Hearing the whistle, the dog dove headfirst into the tomato foliage. All you could hear was the swishing of the leaves, and see a plummy tail sticking out of the bushes. A minute or two later, when the acrobat backed out, the only clue as to whether or not she had hit the mark was a hardly discernible lick of the chops. She would run back to George, he would give her the appropriate words of approval. "Good girl, good girl," and then signal to go-ahead, and she would eagerly go back again. This behavior repeated several times until no one could stand it anymore. Except for the dog, no one was doing much salivating.

The farmers were uniformly stunned. Sharing equal disbelief, jaws dropped as they were gradually transformed from disbelievers to something else. Like-wise, being the impressionable kid that I was, Uncle George was elevated in my mind to something close to God.

Uncle George's dog provided a highly respected service akin to "natural pest control." How could anyone with a dog like that, providing a service that would surely meet any organic standards be anything less than marvelous?

Uncle George's motivation wasn't exactly complex and there was nothing to prove beyond what you could determine for yourself. It was reassuring to know that my uncle's behavior had more to do with keeping the kids imaginations active and making believer's out of doubting farmers.

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