

# LITTLE BROWN DOGS

---

The Boykin spaniel's size and versatility propels its rising popularity among sporting breeds.

STORY BY OLIVER HARTNER





While the lineage of most sporting breeds begins in Europe, the Boykin spaniel started domestically in rural South Carolina as an experiment that valued performance over pedigree. Corroborated oral histories in the book *The Boykin Spaniel: South Carolina's Dog* confirm the encounter between Alexander L. White, a banker from Spartanburg, South Carolina, and a reddish-brown stray he named "Dumpy," as occurring on a summer Sunday between 1905 and 1910. Their chance meeting happened near the First Presbyterian Church of Spartanburg, but apart from these facts, the details of that day vary. Some of the more spurious accounts report Dumpy as having followed White into the sanctuary and that both were ejected after quite a commotion.

White saw some measure of aptitude in Dumpy while working his Chesapeake Bay retrievers. He sent the little stray to his friend and hunting partner Lemuel Whitaker "Whit" Boykin, Sr., who was searching for a compact dog capable of waterfowling from the small boats he used in the Wateree River's swampy bottoms. Whit also needed a dog that could find wild turkeys and be hidden away in a burlap bag while he called the flock into effective range. Dumpy excelled under Whit's tutelage, and he sought a suitable female to establish his breed. He found promise in a little brown curly-coated female he named "Singo," and all Boykin spaniels since and hereafter descend from this pairing.

Whit's eldest living grandson, Baynard Boykin, believes his grandfather outbred the descendants from his *Dumpy x Singo* litter to eight different sporting breeds over the next couple decades. He purportedly used springer spaniels, American water spaniels, Brittany spaniels, American cocker spaniels, English field spaniels, English setters, English pointers, and even Chesapeake Bay retrievers. Official records of these litters do not exist, but anecdotal evidence from eyewitnesses and photographs from the 1920s and 1930s account for the development of "Mr. Boykin's Spaniels" or "those hunting spaniels from Boykin" or "Little Brown Dogs."

The popularity of these spaniels spread mostly by word of mouth to other parts of the state and region from the 1930s to 1960s. The town of Camden, South Carolina, attracted elite circles of society from across the United States for its charm and reputation for exceptional sporting culture. These influential families wound up with Boykin spaniel pups—and like many other sporting breeds—their handsome features, temperament, and athleticism inspired intrigue. Edmund "Beaver" Hardy, who bears a maternal family connection to Whit Boykin, Sr., whelped his first litter of Boykin spaniels around 1965. Alice

#### THE CLASSIC LOOK

Watching a Boykin spaniel in the field conjures up memories of upland hunting's past as if each memory was meant to be.



Boykin, who was wedded to Whit Boykin II, invited Hardy to a social event where he sold the entire litter of pups for \$100 each. Hardy said, "One hundred dollars was good money back then, and Alice called me and said there would be a lot of fancy folks at this party near Camden. I got there quick as I could and didn't have on cocktail attire, but that didn't matter since I sold the whole litter!" Hardy said a gentleman from Pennsylvania chose a pup that Alice wanted, so she convinced him the pup was inferior, then whispered to Hardy that she wanted it. "That's how Alice got pick of the litter."

Boykin spaniels remained a novelty breed among those in the know until an article by Mike Creel appeared in the September-October 1975 issue of *South Carolina Wildlife* magazine. His work encouraged a broader interest in the breed, but to meet market demand, irresponsible kennels established themselves apart from the Boykin family. Dr. Peter McKoy, a Camden veterinarian, saw alarming rates of genetic disorders result from these litters, and he approached the descendants of Whit Boykin, Sr., about saving the breed before it was too late. Seven concerned descendants with direct or marital ties to the Boykin family formed a steering committee in 1977. Among them was Baynard Boykin, Henry Beard and his wife Katherine DuVal "Kitty" Beard, and Beaver Hardy. They drafted a letter of appeal to all Boykin spaniel owners with legitimate ties to the breed, encouraging their

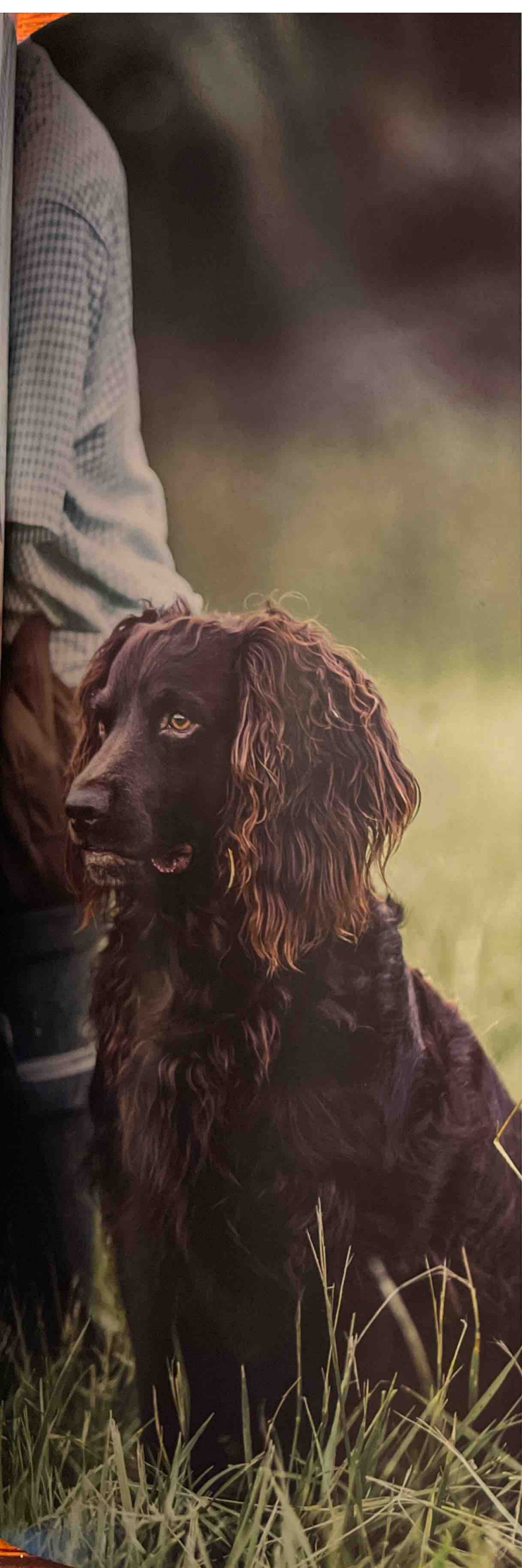
involvement in the newly formed Boykin Spaniel Society.

"We weren't sure at first if we would get enough response to establish a registry, but the support was overwhelming, and in the end we wound up with 667 dogs as foundation stock," Kitty said. Another major undertaking of the steering committee was to establish a breed standard. "Everyone on the committee had their idea about what made the perfect Boykin spaniel, and since everyone on the committee had the "perfect" Boykin spaniel, we had a lot of haggling to do," Hardy said. They eventually agreed on a breed standard, selected foundation stock, and ensured the breed's survival for posterity. During his tenure on the board, Hardy lobbied for a piece of legislation to have the Boykin spaniel named South Carolina's official state dog. Their efforts were successful, and on March 26, 1985, Governor Richard Riley signed this bill into law.

Since 2012, Dawn Crites has served the Boykin Spaniel Society in a full-time role as its sole administrator, and she serves on the board of a subsidiary organization called the Boykin Spaniel Foundation. "The Boykin Spaniel Society focuses on the *integrity* of the breed while the Boykin Spaniel

### VERSATILITY DEFINED

If a prospective dog owner wishes to hunt upland birds and waterfowl, a Boykin defines the meaning of being versatile.



execute.” Brent recommends leaning into their biddability and keeping their training sessions short, light, and positive. “A Boykin wants to learn, so if they’re not working against you, take that into account before applying pressure. Show them what you want out of them first. They prefer you *teach* them something rather than *mandate* it, and more often than not, you’ll get a much better outcome from this approach.”

Most people are charmed into Boykin spaniel ownership after meeting one, and once I met my friend Margaret Ellen’s Boykin named “Tackle,” I knew I’d found my next dog. He fathered several litters, and my wife and I wound up with one of his granddaughters. And now my Boykin spaniel—our Boykin spaniel—is laying on the floor of my study, curled into a little brown ball, as I try with words to describe our love for her. She goes by “Fowler” in addition to several aliases: Nutkin, Den Animal, and Proud Prancer (because of a neighbor’s comment about her gait). She knows the sequence of sounds when I open a jar of peanut butter, and regardless of any attempts at stealth and subterfuge, she prances (proudly, of course) into the kitchen and demands her share of its gooey goodness. When I gather my gear from the hunting closet, Fowler sniffs at my game vest and turns dizzying circles toward the front door like the cartooned Tasmanian Devil, her deep-throated barks echoing down the hallway.

Having attempted to train Fowler myself, I accept full culpability for any gaps and deficiencies in her gun-dog education. Every time I shoot at a mourning dove and it doesn’t fall, she barks and whines and paws at the earth until I’m afraid she might reach China if my shooting doesn’t improve. When a brace of pointers slams into a scent cone, she launches into the cover to flush the covey, shrugging off the gnarly briars that cling to her coat and scratch at her skin. But my proudest moment in the four years she’s been ours was when she retrieved a Canada goose. She plunged into the water with as much or more heart than any aquatic athlete and swam a quarter furlong before grabbing its leg and swimming back. She reached the shore and struggled to drag our prize inch-by-inch up the steep bank, and I hobbled down to assist and heap praise upon her. When I tried to send her after a couple more felled geese floating on the water, she flatly refused by explaining to me through high-pitched barks and prancing-in-place that she didn’t have the gas to get another...and I don’t blame her one bit given they weigh half as much as her.

If it’s true that all dogs go to heaven, then this Little Brown Dog surely will. And if I’m fit enough for the kingdom and we meet again, I’ll apologize to her for the inequitable exchange of being able to have offered her only a part of my life—because she will have given me all of hers. 🐾

### FAST AND FOCUSED

From aggressively attacking the grasslands to patiently waiting in the duck blind, Boykins can do both.