

It was in Spring. As we put our garden in, that the caravans would roll in. Whole families with trainers and hired help showed up in Broomhill. To train their dogs. Pointers and Setters mostly. A big deal for our community. And great for rich American dog owners. It's mildly hot here in summer, but not blisteringly so as in Texas or Louisiana! And, we don't have rattlesnakes. A huge bonus for dogs and trainers.

I'm Bill Kilkenny. Born, raised and content in Broomhill. We're a village just north of Melita on #345. Yeah, not a beaten track. Unless, you visited during those heady days, when 'we'd go to the dogs'.



A sign at Broomhill

It started in the 1930s. Dry as a bone. All over. Particularly around Broomhill. We called it Poverty Plains. Hard to make a living from cattle or wheat. Most fellas had to go elsewhere for work. But then came the dogs, giving us rental income and summer employment. Our Kilkenny family owned the store, so an annual influx of happy spenders was a godsend. Our wide open spaces, was exactly what trainers needed to prepare dogs for competitions around North America.

One of the most reliable caravans was Mr and Mrs John S. Gates from Georgia. They first came in 1936 and ended up buying land, they were so pleased. Each caravan would bring 30, or up to 90, dogs. John and son Rex would determine which to groom for competition and which for hunting. John was particularly proud of War Storm that he trained for five years at

Broomhill. War Storm eventually won the two biggest field trials, one of only 6 dogs ever. Here's John talking about him. "No trainer is a miracle worker. The dog has to have it in him, and no dog is any better than his nose. This dog had a nose like a magnet. He'd pick up the scent of quail or pheasant and take off and you never knew when he was going to stop. He was a cocky dog, who absolutely trusted his nose. There've not been many like him."

It took a lot of space, human attention and food to keep these dogs focused. The trainers set up camps using farm buildings or even our curling rink as home base. We'd bring in food, offer bedrooms for visitors and set up modest field trials to bring in competition from Saskatchewan and Alberta.



A dog training site, near Broomhill

I enjoyed the relationships we nurtured from, unlikely places. My good friend was John Gates' camp manager. Peck Kelley. Loved it here. Found Manitoban's to be extraordinarily friendly. For Broomhillers, we hadn't had the opportunity to befriend African American folks. The two of us were always laughing. Until, that is, it got cold. Then he and his wife Sook, the camp cook, got grouchy. Didn't appreciate our September snow squalls. At all!

Love us and leave us, I guess. Till next Spring!

Gone to the Dogs is based on a story in Vantage Points 5.

David Neufeld