

## NICK OF TIME

By Jackie Vivelo

*Appears here with the kind permission of Frank Vivelo*

ONE OF THE EARLIEST pictures of Jared, after his baby pictures of course, showed him with his arm around the neck of a sturdy brown dog who looked, with dignity, right into the camera. Around the two of them, the toddler and the dog, were several roly-poly puppies. Both Jared and the puppies were covered with dust from the dry, grassless area around the doghouse.

Nick, who was Jared's companion in the picture and also the dark, handsome father to the litter of puppies, was a part of Jared's childhood, always there and always the standard against which Grandpa compared the new puppies.

"That puppy'll never be a patch on Nick," Grandpa used to say.

None of them ever measured up, even the occasional fine pup that Grandpa chose to keep. At some point in between Jared's visits to his grandparents' farm, Nick came to the end of a long, splendid life. Eventually, there was only one dog left, a son of Nick.

"No, he's not much like Nick," Grandpa would say.

He must have said it many times over the years because Jared always thought of it when he looked at Monty, a dog who was named for a general but who had no fighting spirit, according to Grandpa. Jared couldn't help wondering what had made Nick so special.

Just the same, seeing Monty was one of the things Jared looked forward to when visiting his grandparents. "Treasure hunting" was another. Like most kids, Jared dreamed of digging for buried treasure, but at his grandparents' house the dream could become a reality. Grandpa's farm sat on a piece of land that had been in active use since long before Columbus reached America. Indians had lived on this fertile stretch of the stream still known by its tribal name. Jared knew all about the Indians; Grandpa had explained about them the first time he showed Jared the coffee can filled with arrowheads found on the farm. Together with stone hammerheads,

these were the most common finds. Jared had even found a few himself. These were one kind of treasure, but there were others.

Buttons and coins could be turned up too, and these certainly hadn't belonged to Indians. Some were German.

"Hessian," Grandpa explained. "People who were paid to fight for the British in the Revolutionary War."

Other items came from the Civil War.

"There's a cemetery over that hill that's filled with graves of Union soldiers from a battle fought nearby, nothing big enough to get into the history books, just a skirmish. Maybe it was fought right here."

Sometimes when Jared was helping with the plowing, he and Grandpa found bullets, which made it clear that some shooting had taken place on that land. Digging up the past was one of the best things about being with his grandparents.

The year he was ten, Jared was walking with Grandpa and Monty, who was grown but not really old, along the Socodoquinet Creek, which ran through the farm.

"The Indians believed the water could cure you, speed up the healing of wounds. See that?" Grandpa stopped and knelt on the bank to point to a muddy swirl in a shallow section of the creek.

Jared knelt beside Grandpa while Monty splashed out into the water stirring up reddish brown mud.

"First the Indians used that mud from the creek's bed to plaster over wounds, then soldiers from the Revolution, and then men wounded in the Civil War. I guess my old Nick was the last one to find out its secret."

Jared had thought he knew all about Nick. Nick had been the bravest, handsomest, finest dog ever. Despite all he remembered and all he'd heard over the years, Jared knew nothing about Nick and the mud.

"How did Nick find the secret?" he asked.

"Nick used to roam into those woods over there, and once in a while he'd run afoul of a pack of wild dogs. He'd fight like a real demon, that Nick, but what could he do against a dozen or so wild animals?"

"More than once he got so chewed up that I thought there was no hope for him. But you know what he'd do? He'd roll in this mud, get coated with it, and the darned stuff would heal him. Not right away, but over time. Over time, it would," Grandpa repeated.

Jared leaned over and ran his fingers through the mud. It felt just like ordinary mud.

“What happened to Nick?” Jared asked, realizing that there must be one more story he hadn’t heard.

“The dogs finally got him,” Grandpa said. He sat staring into the water, and for a minute Jared thought he wasn’t going to say anymore.

Then with a sigh he went on. “One evening he didn’t come home and I went out looking for him. He was right over there. See, just under that big maple. I almost didn’t recognize him. One ear was torn. An eye was slashed. He was cut right through to the bone on a front leg. I thought he was dead then, but after a bit I could see he was still breathing.

“Well, I didn’t think he had a chance. But I carried him as far as this mud; and, by golly, he managed to roll himself in it. With some help from me he got covered with it.

“For two days he lay there, and I’d check on him each day. He was getting well—even after the wounds he had suffered.”

“But what happened to him? Didn’t he get well after all?” Jared couldn’t help asking.

“The wild dogs came back to the creek. Oh, they were bold in those days. I heard them, and I got my rifle. When I reached the creek, I couldn’t believe my eyes. Five or six wild dogs with muzzles covered with blood and foam were fighting what looked like a mud creature. Nick had somehow gotten onto his feet—and he was fighting. That dog didn’t know how to quit. I fired right into the pack, and they cleared out. But it was too late for Nick. A second battle was too much; he was dying when I reached him.”

Monty came up shaking off water, and Jared stretched his hand out and rubbed the dog’s head, his thoughts on the dog he still remembered, a lost part of his own past.

In the early spring of the following year Jared made the biggest find of his life. Even Grandpa said it was the best ever. On a Saturday afternoon, with some help from Monty, he was digging a circular flower bed for his grandmother. A lifetime of experience had taught Jared to look at each spadeful of dirt.

He was letting the soil slide off when he saw the glint of something metallic. Quickly he picked it up and rubbed it on his jeans. It wasn't exactly round, and it was larger and heavier than any coin he had ever seen.

Calling as he ran, Jared took the find to his grand-parents.

"There's writing on it," he said when his grandfather met him.

"I have to get the magnifying glass."

Examining it under the glass, all three could see that the writing was not English.

"It's German," Grandma said. "I can tell that much, but I don't know what it means."

"What's this for?" Jared asked, pointing to a sort of slit in the object.

"That's for a ribbon because this is a medal. That's what it is!" Grandpa exclaimed.

After supper Jared sat on the porch with his grandparents talking about the find and drinking lemonade as the day ended.

"What's that noise?" Jared asked, as a sound from the distance reached them.

"The dogs," Grandpa said shortly.

"The **wild** dogs?" Jared asked, instantly remembering the story of how Nick died. "I thought they were gone a long time ago."

"Sometimes all of us around here try to get rid of them, but after a time there are more of them. In a pack like that they're as dangerous as anything you could meet in the woods."

"And this latest bunch is getting bolder," Grandma added.

Instead of being satisfied with the medal he had found, Jared wanted more than ever to hunt for the farm's buried treasure. Wherever he sank a shovel he seemed to be digging into history. Before his parents picked him up the next afternoon, Jared had doubled the size of the flower bed but without finding anything else of interest.

More than two months passed and school had ended before Jared came back to stay with his grandparents. This time he brought a suitcase for his annual two-week visit.

Little green plants were coming up in the flower bed he'd dug. Grandma was pointing to them before the car even stopped.

"My new flower bed is going to be beautiful," she told Jared and his parents.

Grandpa joined them and invited everyone to come around back to see what he'd just dug up. They found it on the back steps: a large curved bone with teeth, big teeth, in it.

Jared tentatively touched the curve of the bone and, just for a second, he thought of dinosaurs.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Jawbone of a mule. A big, fine animal. Who knows how long it has been in the ground.”

“Maybe it came from the Civil War,” Jared’s father suggested.

“Or it may have belonged to the mill owner who built this house around the time of the Revolution.”

After lunch when his parents had left, Jared went back outside to get reacquainted with the land. Monty joined him in a circuit of the big field beyond the creek.

The two of them had reached the far edge of the newly planted acreage when they heard the dogs. The baying sounded far away and not much different from the last time Jared had heard it—the day he had found the medal.

The fur on Monty’s back bristled, and Jared stepped up the pace, not out of fear but as a precaution. He and his parents had also talked about the dogs after his last trip to the farm. “Nothing’s more dangerous,” his dad had said, echoing Grandpa’s judgment.

Something changed in the barking of the dogs. They picked up a new, more urgent sound. In response, Monty growled and broke into a run, and Jared joined him. With relief he spotted the corner of the field and kept moving steadily along, knowing that each row he passed brought him that much nearer home.

As his feet pounded the soil, his heart pounded in his ears. He had already walked a long way before he heard the dogs, so he wasn’t running at his peak speed. Ahead of him he could see Monty’s hindlegs and tail sailing over the ground.

*We’re both going to look pretty cowardly, he thought, if we come flying into the house scared and breathless.*

He made up his mind to stop at the creek, catch his breath, and walk calmly back to the house. As the creek came into sight, waves of relief swept over him. Moments later the relief was succeeded by shame. The main danger, Jared told himself, had been to Monty. The wild dogs frequently killed small animals, including

farm animals and pets. Several people, Grandpa had said, had been trapped by the animals but had gotten away. Still, Jared knew his fear had been for himself. The dogs could kill. If no one came in time, if nothing frightened them away, a pack of wild dogs would kill.

Monty waded into the water and drank deeply. The run had been hard on him.

“He only ran because I panicked,” Jared told himself and decided to say nothing of his fears to his grandparents.

The next morning Jared was up early enough to help his grandmother fry sausages and make buttermilk blueberry pancakes for breakfast.

“Do you think it would be all right for me to dig on the other side of the creek? I want to find some more arrowheads while I’m here.”

“Why don’t you try around the maple? That land’s never been cultivated, so there are likely to be some left there,” Grandpa suggested.

After they had eaten, Jared collected a pick and a shovel and headed across the creek. At the edge of the lawn he whistled for Monty, but the dog didn’t come and Jared didn’t want to go looking for him.

Taking his grandfather’s advice, Jared chose the area around the maple for digging and started by loosening the ground with the pick. Before long he had set a steady rhythm of plunging in the shovel, lifting it up, and tapping the dirt off gently so that he could look it over carefully.

In less than an hour he had found a broken piece of chipped stone that must certainly have been an arrowhead. The discovery gave him new energy. Watching each shovelful intently, he picked up the pace: dig, lift, spill; dig, lift, spill.

Before long he glimpsed a flash of something white, possibly a quartz arrowhead. He was bending over to examine it when a sound caught his attention, and he looked up. Pale brown eyes that were almost yellow looked into his own.

In that instant he knew he was looking into the eyes of a wild dog, and his heart gave a leap of fear. Carefully he turned his head and looked to each side of him, searching for the best way to run. Instead, he found himself surrounded. He and the maple tree were at the center of a circle of silent, watching creatures, as frightening as snakes and even more dangerous. These ill-matched curs were the wild dogs. And for the moment, it was a standoff.

Jared gulped air and only then realized he hadn't been breathing. The word "help!" screamed through his mind, but his voice wouldn't work.

He had never in his life imagined that dogs could be so terrifying.

He realized he was still holding the shovel, gripped it tighter, and raised it over his head. If he had to fight, he would fight. He began swinging it in a circle, trying to keep them off from all sides.

From a great distance, he heard a canine howl of rage. Across the creek, at the top of the slope to the house, Monty was in the yard by the fence. He was doing more than complaining; he was also running. Jared felt a surge of gratitude for the dog's loyalty even as he saw that Monty could never reach him in time.

Waving the shovel in the air, he kept turning, trying to keep all the wild dogs in sight. Eyeing him warily but relentlessly, the dogs began to move in, slowly at first. Jared had time to wonder if Grandpa might be coming to call him to lunch. Then with a burst of speed so quick Jared didn't even see him, the first dog struck. His teeth cut right through the denim of Jared's jeans. In the shock and pain of the attack Jared almost dropped the shovel. Knowing it would be a disaster to lose his only weapon, he held on and swung at the head of the attacking dog. Shovel and head met with a crack, but the dog didn't let go of the leg he was fastened on. As though on signal, the rest of the pack rushed Jared at once. Pain made his sight blur.

*This is it, Jared thought. I can't fight them off.*

Even if someone heard the attacking dogs or if Monty's alarm could bring help, help would come too late. No one could reach him in time. Grandpa had been too late to save Nick. No one was coming to save Jared.

Beyond the heaving mass of savage beasts rushing at him, he caught sight of one more dog. Although it had arrived late, this one, battle-scarred and filthy, looked fiercer than all the rest of the pack. Maybe this was the leader. Jared was taking wilder and wilder swings, rapidly losing out to the dogs, when he saw that this last animal did not belong to the group. As he swung at the inner circle, the new dog attacked from the outside, ripping flesh from bone and sending yelping dogs flying to the underbrush from which they'd emerged.

In the agony of the mass attack on his legs, Jared began to fall to his knees and one of the wild dogs launched himself and bit right at the bone of Jared's forearm. No longer able even to swing at the dogs, Jared knew his fate was up to the strange, fierce creature that had come to fight for him.

Quickly reducing the pack to two die-hard attackers, the new dog went for the throat of the animal whose teeth held Jared's arm, and the last two wild dogs turned on the scarred, dirty intruder.

An outburst of raucous barking drew Jared's eyes toward the creek. Late, but there at last, was Monty, making enough noise for the whole U.S. Cavalry.

Just before he passed out, Jared thought he heard Grandpa calling his name.

By midafternoon Jared lay quietly in bed, pale but still conscious. Both his arm and leg had required stitches. He had been bandaged, given injections, and sent to bed to sleep as much as possible. Now Grandpa sat beside him talking, talking about his fear, about Jared's courage in driving away all the dogs, about the unexpected bravery of Monty who had charged into the fight like a mad bull.

"I guess he does have a bit of Nick's spirit after all," Grandpa was saying.

Jared was glad Grandpa had found something to praise in his old friend Monty, but his own curiosity was too great to ignore.

"Who was the other dog, the first one that helped me?"

"Other dog? There was just Monty and then me. You drove the rest of the pack away yourself."

"No, I didn't. I tried with the shovel, but once I was bitten I couldn't really swing at them. It was the black dog that drove them away. He was still there when Monty came. You must have seen him."

"I saw Monty reach you and the last of those miserable scroungers slink away. There was only you and Monty and those two curs. I could see you clearly, and I was running as fast as I could but you fell before I reached you."

Grandpa kept talking and Jared felt himself beginning to drift off. His last conscious thoughts were of his rescuer. He saw the dog, like Monty, only black. Or no, maybe not black, maybe mud-covered. Dripping mud and a little stiff-legged, the avenging dog had hurled himself into that circle of death.

Consciousness slipped into dream as Jared saw first the menace of a face with yellow-brown eyes that—in the way of dreams—was supplanted by another face, this one with a single eye glowing with courage. The other eye in the dark face was closed by a long, ragged gash.

Jared smiled at the battered face and slept deeply.