JIM THE WONDER DOG

One sunny afternoon, Sam took Jim to town to show off his intelligence.

"You need to see how smart my dog is," he told people.

Sam told the story of how Jim had identified the trees and how he had always been a perfect hunting companion. He was met with doubt.

"I'm sure he's a great dog, Sam," they said. "But he's just a dog. He doesn't actually understand what you're asking."

"I'll prove it," Sam said.

Sam's friends were gathered in town, and a few of them had cars parked just down the street.
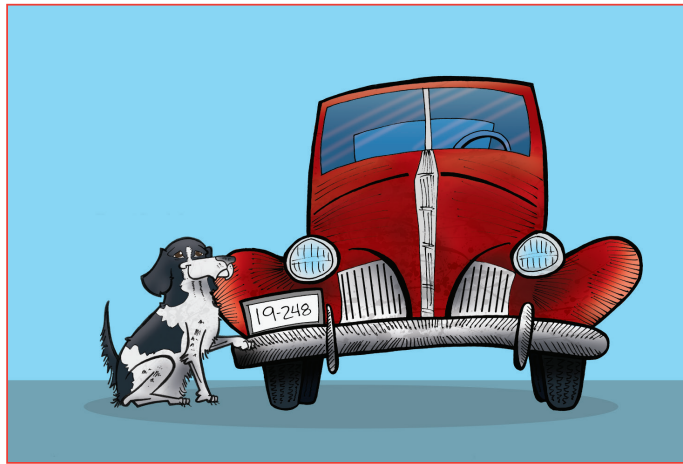
"Jim," Sam said to his dog. "Go and show this man which car is his."

My father looked calmly at his owner, then trotted over and placed his paw on the correct car, just as he'd done to the trees. Everyone was shocked.

"If he's so smart," one man said, "let me give you the license number of my car, and let's see if he can find it."

Sam wasn't so sure. He'd didn't know if Jim knew anything about numbers! The man wrote the numbers 19-248 on a piece of paper. Sam showed it to my father.

"Jim," he said. "This man has a car with these numbers on the plate. Can you find it?"

One quick glance and Jim was off! He ran right over to the man's car and put his paw on the plate! He then looked at the group as if to say, "See."

"I don't believe it!" Mr. Van Arsdale's friends said.

"He's amazing!"

"He's unbelievable!"

Soon, word spread of my father's abilities. Those were the first cars Jim was asked to identify, but he once told me that in his lifetime he correctly identified more than 1,000 vehicles! The people in town asked Sam to test Jim in other ways.

"Jim, show me a man with a red necktie."

"Jim, show me a man with a black mustache."

"Jim, show me a woman in a blue dress. Or white gloves. Or a yellow hat."

Question after question was thrown at him, and he always got them right, completing each task with ease.

Word of the Wonder Dog spread quickly. Sam owned the Ruff Hotel in Marshall, and it was there that Jim gave many performances demonstrating his abilities.

Sometimes Sam and Jim would leave the room and everyone would agree upon a task for the dog to complete upon return. When my father got back, all his owner had to say was, "Jim, do what they were talking about while we were gone." Jim would complete the task! Sometimes it would be to identify a certain person or object. Either way, Jim always got it right.

People constantly tried to fool Jim. Sometimes questions were tricky. For example, when asked, "Jim, if we had some money we wanted to keep where the famous gangster, Al Capone, couldn't get it, where would we put it?" Jim went right to the safe and placed his paw on the door!

Each time a crowd saw Jim perform, people commented on my father's eyes. Jim had big, chocolate brown eyes, like any Llewellin Setter, but there was something different there too. Anyone who met him could see real intelligence reflected in his eyes. It was as if this dog truly could understand.

Alex the Parrot

Another animal in history able to correctly identify colors and objects was Alex the parrot. Alex was an African grey parrot owned by a researcher named Irene Pepperberg. When Irene began her work with Alex, people thought that an animal needed a large primate brain to understand language—like humans or gorillas. But Alex, a tiny bird, demonstrated what Irene called a "two way communication code."

Alex could identify 50 different objects and recognize quantities up to six. He could tell the difference between seven colors, five shapes and multiple sizes. Since parrots can mimic the sound of human language, Alex could say 100 English words!

Of course, like Koko, Hans and Jim, Alex was met with doubt. Maybe the parrot was another case of training or the "Clever Hans Effect"? Still, people were amazed at Alex's ability to communicate and identify objects with ease.

Paper training

Jim was a pro at identifying vehicles. Find used cars for sale in your newspaper. Create a bar graph representing the types of cars for sale.

Learning Standards: I can read historical fiction and make text-to-text and text-to-world connections.