

A new beginning for an old stray

Falling for Old Fella

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Although Old Fella doesn't quite fit the celebrity bill, nearly 85,000 online readers from California to Canada are rejoicing in his story.

But Old Fella just thumps his tail on the hardwood floor, content with a full belly and the prospect of a late morning nap.

He's got his own agent, a book about his life, and there's even whisperings of a movie.

But Old Fella's idea of excitement is the jingle of the leash and the rattle of his treat jar.

The good life, they say, the easy life ... a new beginning for an old stray accustomed to scratching fleas and begging for bread-crusts.

Old Fella's recent stardom sparked off last Labor Day when Waynesboro residents Richard and Sue Daniels caught wind of him while "RVing" in Modoc, S.C.

He was old, ugly and stank to high heaven. He was missing a paw and nearly all of his teeth. His ribs juttied out like a shipwreck, and his face was mottled with a fungal infection that made the stomach turn.

Old Fella hung out at the Daniels' campsite and made friends with their Australian Shepherd, Levi.

He tentatively took their handouts, but wanted no part in petting and patting.

The camp host said he'd been roaming the camp for at least five years, living off leftovers and minding his own business.

"Old Fella's normal procedure was, 'I'll eat and leave,'" Richard says, as a much fatter Old Fella snores softly at his feet. "But for some reason he decided to hang around with us."



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO Old Fella before the Daniels took him in

Like thousands of campers before them, Richard and Sue gave Old Fella a good meal, then put their RV in drive.

But unlike the others, Richard couldn't shake the image.

At home, he kept returning to the photograph he'd snapped of Old Fella. He stared into the dog's tired eyes and tried to shake the odd sensation that there was more to it.

"Those eyes were so haunting," he says. "I don't think I'd ever seen anything like them in my life."

Richard took his dilemma online to the "Open Roads Forum" where he asked fellow RVers, "What would you do?"

Do you pick him up and bring him home or do you let nature take its

course?"

They answered back with a resounding "go get him," prompting Richard to act on the feeling that had gnawed at him for days.

"I felt sorry for him but I wasn't about to bring him home to be our pet," Richard says while he wraps Old Fella's stump for a romp down Jones Avenue. "I wanted to give him an opportunity for another life ... but my whole intention was to carry him to the vet and find someone to adopt him."

That was no easy feat. Richard returned to the campground three times in one week, and couldn't spot Old Fella on two of the tries. When he finally found him and tried to lift him into his truck, Old Fella bucked and bristled and got away. Then, on Sept. 12, one week after he posted that pivotal question, Richard returned with sausage biscuits, seven sedatives and a city worker.

"I thought you were going to bring me something to work with," the veterinarian told Richard as they heaved Old Fella onto the exam table. "This dog doesn't have much of a future."

Old Fella was a pitiful specimen, Richard admits. Beyond the obvious, his old heart was riddled with worms and on the verge of giving out.

The veterinarian offered to put him down right there on the table - to give him an easy death after such a hard life.

Richard thought about how Old Fella had fought him so fiercely at the campground and knew he could never do it.

"You see, I knew he had a lot of life left in him, and I had to give him a chance," Richard says. "I had to find out what he was made of."

The following weeks were painful ones, and Old Fella nearly died as dead heartworms filled his lungs.

The Daniels' cat Izzy curled up next to his head, and Richard sat by his pallet through the night.

A church in Los Angeles kept an all-night prayer vigil to St. Francis, and donations to cover the vet bill began rolling in from around the world.

Online supporters checked the forum at all hours of the day and

night, waiting for a word and living out the drama from offices and bedrooms miles away.

Richard contacted *The True Citizen* last October when Old Fella was through the worst of it. He hoped a dog-lover would read the article and offer to take the dog home.

Their telephone never rang, but Richard soon found his own calling ... one revelation at a time.

"The first revelation came when Levi was pestering me," Richard said. "I said 'Levi, sit,' and Old Fella sat. Then I said 'Levi, lay down' and Old Fella lay down."

Richard figures Old Fella was a pet who visited the campground with his family.

He thinks Old Fella got caught in a steel trap while exploring the woods and chewed off his foot and broke out his teeth trying to get free.

"The family probably searched for Old Fella, but eventually had to leave without him," Richard says as Izzy arches her back and rubs against his legs. "I think Old Fella had been roaming the campground for five years ... looking for his family."

Fittingly, Old Fella found his family with the Daniels' next revelation.

The old dog, they decided, was meant to share their home.

Old Fella is mostly mended now, save the bad limb he hobbles on like a peg-leg pirate.

His story won't die either, thanks to the network of RVers who keep it pulsing on the web.

As Old Fella putters to the mudroom and begs like a toddler to be taken around the block, his whole story still begs the question: Why do so many people care?

The True Citizen asked, and RVers from across the states piped up.

"We are all looking for common ground to draw us together," Mark Lipman of southern Oregon answered. "What better than a lame old abandoned dog rescued by a southern gentleman with a gift for

pulling heartstrings with words?"

Ron and Shirley Knoche of Missouri concur. The snowbirds had flown off to Texas when they found the postings on line. They stayed up reading the story the better part of the night, laughing, crying and cheering the old dog on. Checking the site is now part of their daily routine, and, though they've never met,

the Knoches consider Richard, Sue and Old Fella part of their family. Gary Shapiro, a Colorado RVer, is also hooked. He says the real life story has all the makings of a good novel - an underdog, interesting characters, humor, drama and a happy ending.

"Although this story is, on the surface, about a dog, it is actually much more than that," he says. "It represents the best in people."

Did you know?

RVers are gathering in Branson, Missouri this Saturday for the first annual Old Fella Rally.

Waynesboro Mayor Jesse Stone signed a proclamation declaring June 22 "Old Fella Day."

Old Fella will be Grand Marshal of the Pooch Parade during downtown Waynesboro's Dog Day of Summer celebration on July 20.

You can read Old Fella's story at www.trailerlife.com.