

Traveler finds a home in Hotchkiss

By Don Benjamin, Staff Writer

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A decade ago somebody dumped a young dog in Hotchkiss. The abandoned animal quickly became a local celebrity as she swiftly eluded local citizens who tried to corral her. For three years the dog avoided capture.

She established a familiar route between the town's Willow Heights residential area on Barrow Mesa and the Hotchkiss City Market. She kept on the move, scrupulously avoided humans, and grew increasingly adept at outwitting and outrunning her pursuers. Hotchkiss resident Sandy Wilson, who has since passed away, seemed to give voice to what her fellow townsfolk thought of the antics of the agile dog when she coined the name "Traveler."

Traveler was quick in a foot chase and skilled in avoiding automobiles until one day her luck ran out. A car collision severed her front leg just above the wrist and left a gaping wound in her side. And still she ran -- three legs, injured torso, and all.

Debbie Faulkner of Black Canyon Animal Shelter remembers Traveler. "She holed up in a barn, and I was called. That's when I saw her one leg hanging by a thread." Still the dog resisted capture. It seemed like nothing and no one was going to stop Traveler until one day the limping dog approached Venetta Sickles' front door and it was time to stop running.

"She came up pregnant," said Venetta, "But she wouldn't come inside and she went and had her puppies in my old dog house."

To keep the squirming pups from following in their mother's wandering paw-steps, Venetta's neighbor helped erect a fence around the refurbished dog house.

"That didn't work," Venetta smiled as she recalled how she and the neighbors kept busy rounding up the energetic critters.

Eventually the puppies were weaned and Traveler took the next step.

"She was a good little mama to those five fat puppies," Venetta recalled, "But she was pretty tuckered out and ready to accept my help. So she came to the door as usual and I gave her a bit of hamburger and when I offered her a second mouthful, she gave me that 'look' and walked into the house. And that was that."

Ann Wingfield is Venetta's neighbor -- a good friend whom Venetta describes as "my right hand and my left hand too most of the time." Ann has watched Traveler and Venetta bond over the years.

"The dog has been a good companion. A few years back, when Venetta had to go into a nursing home, Traveler ran off looking for her."

Traveler scrambled several blocks down the steep incline of Cedar Drive to the Hotchkiss senior center and then even further to Venetta's son's house -- searching in places the dog associated with her absent mistress. Finally, Venetta's son took the faithful dog to the nursing home. The two were reunited and they've been inseparable ever since.

Venetta doesn't drive much these days, but whenever she takes the car out, Traveler is up for the journey.

"She loves to r-i-d-e," said Venetta as Traveler's ears pricked up. "And when we're out in town people ask 'Is that the famous little dog?'"

Venetta has lived in Hotchkiss since 1964. She used to live in the San Luis Valley and she worked as a nurse for several years. She's retired now but it's never a dull moment with Traveler around. For example, consider the famous dog's current project. Traveler, a wanderer with plenty of experience as a vagabond, has adopted a stray kitten. Venetta named the kitten Scamper and Traveler has taken charge of the newest member of the Sickie household.

"That little cat is convinced that Traveler is its mother. They sleep together every night," Venetta smiled.

Both animals, it seems, have found a home.

But what about the famous dog's puppies? Thanks to Venetta and Black Canyon Animal Sanctuary, all five have been adopted. And their wandering mother would be proud to know that her pups have been placed in good homes -- all around the nation -- at all points of the compass.



Traveler the dog survived being abandoned and losing her front paw in a car collision. She was an elusive stray before she showed up on a Hotchkiss woman's doorstep seeking a safe place to have her puppies. Photo by Don Benjamin