Dachshund Ranch

story of the month

By Richard W. Jennings, the author of Orwell's Luck
"The Master of Middle American Whimsy"

Summertime and the living is boring.

At least if you're a former fifth grader at Sunflower Elementary School in upper Wisconsin, but not a sixth grader.

Not yet.

Aubrey, the smallest kid in the fifth grade, who lived on Cheery Street with her mother Anne and former neighborhood stray cat Porchie, was hoping this would be the season when she grew.

This, of course, is a wish that remains out of one's control. Besides, there are different ways to grow. Aubrey had no idea that by the end of this summer she'd grow substantially, although not much taller.

Aubrey was thrilled when her mother announced a plan that would consume the months of her summer break.

"How would you like to spend your summer as a volunteer at a nationally acclaimed working dachshund ranch?" her mother asked.

"Sounds interesting," Aubrey said. "But what's a dachshund ranch? Also, what will happen to Porchie while I'm gone?"

"A dachshund ranch is like a dude ranch," Aubrey's mother explained, "but instead of horses and cattle, it's home to a thousand little dachshunds from all over the country. Lost dogs, injured dogs, misplaced dogs, discarded dogs and runaways. All of them in need of attention and loving care."

"I'd like that," Aubrey responded. "But what about Porchie?"

"Reverend Gordon's Ranch for Troubled Dachshunds in Fosterville, Kansas, includes a fully equipped cat corral," her mother replied. "Dachshunds love to bark at cats and, as you know, cats are much too independent to care."

"True," agreed Aubrey, cuddling her fluffy, orange rescued

MORE STORIES

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angel. "Okay, count me in."

"I'm glad you mentioned counting," Aubrey's mother said, "because I've discussed this with Bean's parents and they think he and his dogs would benefit greatly from this opportunity."

"Bean!" Aubrey shouted. "Oh, Mom! How could you?"

Bean was Aubrey's backyard neighbor and fifth grade classmate who had three little brown dachshunds, Sophie, Owen and Jozie, that he'd successfully trained to sing, an achievement that had won Bean a meeting at the White House with the President and his Portuguese Water Spaniel, Bo. Aubrey was impressed, but her interest in Bean continued to be like one's interest in a flailing clown at the circus being shot from a cannon.

Aubrey's concerns quickly disappeared when her mother handed her a brochure.

Inside were dozens of color photos of dachshunds, some in wheelchairs, some with big brown sad eyes, others with long hair being brushed by children, or fed, or walked or watered. One wore a saddle upon which sat a skinny black cat. One little bow-legged dachshund appeared to be dancing. Still another was sniffing an annoyed-looking groundhog. Entire packs of dachshunds seemed to be engaged in a race.

Wow! Thought Aubrey. This place is really something!

The drive from upper Wisconsin to Central Kansas is long and hard, a total of more than seven-hundred-and-fifty miles during which you pass through Minneapolis, Des Moines, and Kansas City, a thirteen-hour drive under non-stop circumstances, but with two hungry pre-teen kids, three pee-filled dogs and one nervous cat, there's no such thing as non-stop. Wisely, Aubrey's mother decided to accomplish it in two days.

Embarking at five a.m., they drove all the way to a small town in Central Iowa where they spent a restless, crowded night at a Holiday Inn Express. The second day the drive was shorter. They arrived at Reverend Gordon's Ranch for Troubled Dachshunds in the beautiful town of Fosterville, Kansas, set amid the state's breathtaking Flint Hills, a paradise surrounded by prairie grass, wildflowers and gently rolling hills that must have inspired the famous phrase "Purple Mountains Majesty."

Reverend Gordon, a smiling white-haired man, greeted the weary travelers personally and guided them directly to the dinner that had just begun in the bunkhouse cafeteria.

There must have been as many as a hundred other school kids, parents and volunteer college students and even more

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dogs and a handful of cats being held on leashes. One girl, Aubrey's age, held a ferret.

Pretty risky, Aubrey thought.

Dinner consisted of steak, mashed potatoes, green bean casserole, and buttered carrots and, for dessert, cherry cobbler with ice cream on top.

Yum!

The newly arrived dachshunds ate abundant meat scraps beneath the table.

Double yum!

Before the meal began, the Reverend Gordon gave a brief but thankful prayer. Aubrey heard not a single word because of the barking of the dogs. Dachshunds are well known for their loud, sharp and ear splitting yaps that they will do for any reason or, based on evidence, no reason whatsoever.

But when puppies' tummies are full they quiet down. Reverend Gordon took advantage of their food-induced naps to hand out assignments.

The parents who decided to remain with their children would share the newest bunkhouse. It had a kitchen and a reading room.

Girls would share the one with extra bathrooms and a view of the Flint Hills. Boys would bunk in the original clubhouse outfitted with new electronics. Not that they'd have much time to use them. There was lots of work to be done.

Aubrey, with two college partners, was given the most important part of a dachshund's life: feeding time twice a day. With a thousand hungry mouths to feed, this was an eight-hour task.

Aubrey's mother was placed on the dog-walking crew, a team led by Revered Gordon himself and providing a chance to explore a landscape that one TV documentarian has described as "resembling the African savanna."

Because of his recent fleeting fame, Bean was asked to teach the dogs to sing a special song adapted by Reverend Gordon from a hymn written many years ago by P. P. Bliss titled "Let The Lower Lights Be Burning." Reverend Gordon's version was called "Let The Lower Dogs Keep Learning." Bean was expected to use his talent as he saw fit and conduct a performance for everyone at the ranch on the last day.

Meanwhile, there were bark offs, squirrel chases, licking contests and tree peeing competitions. Aubrey soon developed a following, her own personal pack, among whom were

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Mickey, a fat, long-haired dapple; Larry, a shorthair with stubby legs; Doubting Thomas, a full size longhair with the spirit of a terrier; Bubba, a young runaway from Arkansas; and of course Bean's three dachshunds. All fell in love with Aubrey, a feeling she returned.

Aubrey noticed that love was also in bloom among the dog walking team. Reverend Gordon and Aubrey's mother always led the way, walking side-by-side and talking endlessly.

Finally, as summer was drawing to a close, the last day arrived. The sun was setting in the gold and lavender Flint Hills as Bean led a thousand little dachshunds into the barn where hay bales had been placed along the walls for seating.

Like a conductor at Carnegie Hall, Bean raised a baton and blew a silent dog whistle. The music began softly, rising slowly in canine praise of a better life:

Brightly beams our master's mercy
From his fridge light ever more
But to us he gives the teaching
Of the dogs that drag the floor
Let the lower dogs keep learning
With a wagging tail to wave
Some poor lost and lonely dachshund
You may rescue; you may save.

When all three verses ended, there wasn't a dry nose in the house.

"Oh, Bean," Aubrey whispered, wiping away a tear. "How I've misjudged you. I'm so proud to be your friend."

Visit the Kids' Learning Center here!
It's filled with fun activities for kids about all types of pets.

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