

Danville News Column
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"The Dog of Donkey Island"

What do you do with a dog abandoned on a spit of an island in the middle of a Pacific ocean gulf?

There we were playing, enjoying a refreshing swim off the deserted beach, having been boated there from the Honduran mainland. To our left, a mile away across the water, was the volcanic island of El Tigre. Cantinas and shacks fringed the sloping shoreline. To our right, another mile away, was the Honduran mainland with its jetties, haciendas, and beaches. This was our play day after having built a chicken house in the remote village of Ojo de Aqua. We dug trenches, hauled and skinned trees, made mud, carried rock, dumped wheelbarrows of dirt. After our week of muscle-aching labor, we reveled in the beach. We traveled by van to the harbor village of Coyolitos where we rented a boat, a skipper, and his Gilligan. This is no Cancun nor corrupted Caribbean tourist spot with spoiled tourists snapping fingers for the servile waiter to bring them another margarita. This is local. We motored across the gulf. The skipper beached on an island, an arid and barren place of black rock and white sand, deserted of life except for the occasional flock of turkey vultures scrounging for scraps of desiccated fish washing up along the shoreline. There we gloried in our rest and recuperation, at least until the dog showed up. The dog crept from the scrub behind me.

My first instinct was protective. I was worried the dog would urinate on our back backs. I worried that the dog might be rabid. But the dog was a she, nor did she seem dangerous. She slunked down toward the waterline, keeping well away from both backpacks and giggling gringos splashing off shore. She started lapping up the salt water.

Thirst's madness will make us do desperate things, such as drinking salt water because there is no fresh water on the island. Then I counted her ribs. Her legs barely supported her frame. She periodically curled up on the sand to rest.

How did she get there? Likely she was swimming off the mainland and got swept up in the ebb tide. Here she was, stuck, starving, and thirsty. Neither water nor food could be found on this island. Just plenty of vultures and fish bones.

Someone pulled out their water bottle and used the cap as a dish. He set it down but she refused to approach it until he stepped away. He did and she did. She finished the small amount, then backed away when he stepped forward to refill it. She drank the entire quart. Others of the group offered bits of their snacks. She timidly came forward and nibbled.

Did you ever see the scene from the TV series, "Band of Brothers," where this unit of the 82nd Airborne liberates the Jewish concentration camp? The soldier's first instinct was to give them water and food, until the Army Doctors arrived and made them stop. Too much too quick will kill the starving. Our dog began to get sick. She threw up.

The group held a quick huddle and resolved to ferry her back to the mainland where she could be released. There she might stand a chance of survival, depending on how the other

dogs of Coyolitos would receive her. Odds were they'd kill her. But on the island, she stood no chance, and the vultures would hop toward her dying body and start tearing into her before she had the chance to exhale her last breath.

Someone remarked at the irony of how sympathetic we can become over a suffering dog but ignore the starving children of the world. But someone else pointed out that this dog's plight was likely the result of unfair circumstance. The suffering of children always is the result of our bad choices.

With shoelace and belt we tried to leash her. Each time we tried she distanced herself from our bait of water and food. Even the Honduran Gilligan tried to capture her, but she snarled and nearly bit his hand. He shrugged. We too realized that we'd never be able to get her into the boat with us. There was no rescue for her. She was too afraid of humans to let us save her. The vultures would have their meal.

What disturbed me the most wasn't that she would die but how she would die. Yes, it is terribly sad how fear prevents salvation, whether for dog or human. But sadder is how alone she was on this island. For dogs are pack animals, meant to belong. She was alone and she would die in solitude.