

## The Agreeable Vagabonds from Arkansas

It is well known among animal shelter workers that finding homes for black puppies is difficult because they are so common. Finding a home for two black puppies together is almost impossible.

Against those odds, this is a story about two black lab cross-breed puppies that were lost in rural Arkansas and, thanks to their agreeable personalities, made their way to a new home at Woodland Trails Bed and Breakfast in rural Hinckley, Minnesota.

The part of their story we know begins when the puppies appeared on the doorstep of Sally and Russ Kiker. The former Medora, North Dakota cattle ranchers moved to Arkansas in 1992 because Don was “tired of working in the cold”.

Sally and Russ’ Arkansas home is situated on 87 acres of a small valley in the middle of the Ozark National Forest. It looks out on a meadow covered with thousands of daffodil and crocus bulbs they planted. The closest town is Harrison, a 90-minute drive away. Sally says, “The first 45 minutes of a trip to town is spent negotiating 10 miles of gravel road that has many rocks the size of grapefruits and a few the size of basketballs.”

Sally and Russ are used to dealing with stray dogs. In Arkansas, hunters run beagles, walkers and other hounds to flush deer out of the rough terrain and on to the roads where they are easy targets. During hunting season, several lost dogs show up at their place. If the dogs are wearing a collar with a phone number, Sally calls the owner who usually comes by within a day or two to pick them up. Some of the dogs have no collar and are in really poor condition, full of fleas and ticks and half starved to death. With these, Russ does the humane thing and puts them down.



“The puppies arrived at our place in early September, 2005 without collars,” Sally said. “We were surprised because black labs are not common in this area. The puppies, which we judged to be brother and sister and about three months old, impressed us because they were so responsive and loving. Russ named them ‘The Bungee Twins’ because they were always shoulder-to-shoulder and bounced like rubber bands.”

Hoping to find their owner, Sally and Russ stopped every hunter they saw, called the local animal shelters and left word at the country stores nearby. After a few weeks with no luck, they had to do something because they were about to leave on a month-long vacation.

“The shelters I called were full and had waiting lists,” Sally said. “I talked to one woman in Little Rock who said she places hundreds of dogs each week and could take ours in two weeks. This spooked me because I thought ‘experimental lab dogs’.”

By early October, Sally and Russ enlisted the help of their daughter, Jane, who lives in Lake Elmo, Minnesota and is a partner at Faegre and Benson, a big downtown Minneapolis law firm. Jane posted a notice about the puppies, along with their photo, on her firm’s intranet. A young lady at the firm named Kelly Isker responded saying her aunt and uncle operate a B & B out in the country, that they recently lost their two chocolate labs and might be interested in the puppies.

“Russell was planning to drive to Minneapolis to attend a surprise party for a high school classmate,” Sally recalled. “Since the intranet response seemed to be the best lead we had, we decided that he would take the puppies up to Jane’s. When Russ was ready to leave, we tried to put the puppies into the two dog crates we had borrowed but they would have none of it; they wanted to be together in the same crate.”

Just 45 minutes after Russ left for Minnesota, Sally received a call from the lady in Little Rock saying, “I am ready to take the puppies now.”

“Russ called me from Iowa where he had stopped to exercise the puppies but he couldn’t get them out of the crate. After a lot of tugging, Russ did get the male out but he jumped right back in with his sister. I think they knew this drill and were afraid of being abandoned again.



*Sally and Russ Kiker*

“Russ then drove straight through to Stillwater and arrived at 11:00 p.m., after 14 hours on the road. The puppies still wouldn’t come out of the crate so Jane and Russ picked it up and more or less dumped them out.”

Jane’s children named the puppies Hansel and Gretel because of the time they spent alone in the Arkansas forest.

Meanwhile, Minnesota B & B owner Sandra O’Reilly said “no” to the prospect of adopting the puppies. “We decided we can’t have puppies,” she said, “because we know from past experience that it takes three years for them to settle down enough so they do not harass our B & B guests.”

Niece Kelly enlisted help from others in the family to work on Sandra. “You are coming to the city next week and you should at least come through Lake Elmo to see the puppies,” they said.

When Sandra finally relented and met the puppies, their agreeable personalities convinced her to reconsider. “O.K., I’ll take them home on trial for the weekend to see how they act around our guests.”

When Sandra got them home, both she and husband John were amazed at how calm yet friendly and eager to please they seemed to be. They came when called, despite the fact they didn’t have names.

On the first evening, it took 30 minutes to coax the puppies into coming inside. Clearly they had never been inside a home before.

The puppies passed the agreeability test on their first day. The next evening would be their big test with guests. It was Saturday, the first day of the Minnesota deer hunting season and the occasion of John and Sandra’s traditional dinner for local hunters.

The puppies amazed all the guests, as well as John and Sandra, by lying quietly together on a dog bed as the two dozen dinner guests enjoyed their meal. Second test passed.



The two vagabonds from Arkansas have since been named Lady (left) and Lucky. They have earned positions as assistant innkeepers in charge of accompanying guest on long walks over the Woodland Trails property – all thanks to their agreeable personalities.

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