

GRANNY OF SANCTUARY WOODS ALONE WITH CANINE CHOIR

BY: TOD SCHNEIDER

Deep in the forest of the Oregon coastal range lives a 77 year old woman and 100 dogs. In the summer she sleeps with the puppies in a dilapidated shed. In winter she sleeps in the family homestead, built at the turn of the century. Except for the company of her animals, she lives alone.

Her name is Bea Knight. When I first went looking for her, I thought I was looking for a dog breeder. What I found was a combination folk story and living fairy tale.

I had driven 20 miles up the Smith River, on a tangled ribbon of road, dwarfed and lost in the forest. Farther along, I rounded a treacherous bend and discovered a strange sign posted along the roadside. It bore no words-only a large plywood silhouette of a Saint Bernard, lovingly painted. Accepting its invitation, I turned up a dirt path and almost immediately, came upon another strange sign. It read, "The Saint Bernards of Sanctuary Woods" and was bedecked with carved flowers and another Saint Bernard painting. **** and another Saint Bernard painting. The road was carpeted with autumn leaves. **its appearance so inviting that I ignored the warning and continued my journey.

I came upon an old farmhouse, sitting patiently on the edge of a field, deep in the forest. It was protected by a silent platoon of peacocks, which had it thoroughly surrounded, and a grey pony. There was no answer at the door. I continued down the leafy corridor. It ended at a locked gate, where I abandoned the car.

The serenity of the forest drew me along the road, beneath the vine maples and towering firs that stood in peaceful meditation, swaying in a faint breeze. Drifting past the frog pond, deer bed, gate, and an ageless moss-covered van which appeared to be sinking into the *oam, I emerged into a modest clearing. Weathered sheds and falling fences, were growing like mushrooms out of the earth. Bluejays darted through the fences, sheds and trees. Accompanying their performance was an unusual canine choir-a hundred dogs, barking out a greeting. They came to meet me, and in their midst walked an elderly woman: Bea Knight.

I was struck by her appearance-silver white hair and eyes that sparkled like gemstones. She was leaning on a simple cane, and as she came closer I noticed her boots-childrens yellow rubber puddle-jumpers. She shook my hand, smiling, and led me through a herd of Saint Bernards.

"I'll take you in the garden where we don't have quite so many dogs. Get back now! Go on! Not you! Everybody get back! We don't need you guys." She turned and wrestled the gate closed, then bent to stroke a pup. "They were all raised here in the garden. Cochina! No!"

We had entered more than just a garden - we were now in the nursery, where the puppies and small dogs lived. It was also more than a nursery, for it contained minor furnishings: a chaise-lounge covered in a fake leopard-skin, a hot plate, coffee-maker and other simple conveniences. It had shabby remnants of walls, no door, no windows, and not much of a floor. It did have hanging plants, dog shaped wind chimes, a fair-weather roof (it leaked) and it served well as a playhouse for the bluejays, nursery for the pups and summer home for Bea Knight, the granny of Sanctuary Woods.

We sat for awhile, and she told me her story. The tale traverses 77 years. It paints the picture of a woman with unshakable determination, and endless devotion to her animal family.

In 1910, her family homesteaded Sanctuary Woods. They traveled back and forth to California five times with a team and wagon, until the end of the first World War. Each trip took about six weeks. She spent the early part of her life in California, where she had her first encounter with dogs.

I was about seven years old and we were walking from my Great Uncle's house in Pasadena to the New Year's Day Parade. There were about eight grown-ups and about as many kids in the group. I was behind gathering flowers or picking up pretty little rocks. I came to a privet hedge that came up to my shoulders, and ...a great big head lay itself on the top of that hedge. That's all I could see. Like Alice in Wonderland's cat, that's all there was of that dog! I was too timid to approach the dog, but he smiled at me! I didn't know what kind of dog it was, but I did know it was a dog. That's all I remember in that New Year's Day Parade. I never told a soul about that dog until I was almost 35 years old. But I remember him. I can see his face just as clearly right now."

Over twenty years later she went to work for a sculptor named Ruth Norton Ball. When a man came and ordered trophies for a dog show the job was passed on to Bea. Along with the order went the job of distributing trophies to the winners. There was a Saint Bernard in the show that completely overwhelmed her. She was afraid to touch the dog, for fear of "mussing him up."

Six years went by, Bea had settled in Oregon, ill and expecting to die. But her health improved and she took a job working at a company store that served a sawmill. One day an ad appeared in the papers for Saint Bernard pups, and something clicked. She locked up the store, headed into town, and bought a pup. It had been "struck by a horse-a blow on the side of the head and one shoulder, and she could only use three legs. I bought her. Paid ten dollars for her. Didn't ask for papers or anything else-I had a Saint Bernard! Then I was afraid to go home-afraid of what my husband and son would say to me!"

A hearty round of barking grew in volume, breaking Bea's train of thought. "They're barking at the pony down there. I have an old pony. He gets too close to the fence, they bark at him." Standing, she suddenly launches into a routine that appears to be a common ritual; banging her cane against anything handy and bellowing, "Get away from the fence! Get away from the fence! Get away from there! Ponomo! Go on back! Get away from there!" The barking diminishes and she lowers her voice. "Now go on and lie down. Go on or I'll throw rocks!"

Calmly, she sits back down on the simulated leopard skin chaise-lounge. "All together they're pretty well behaved. So one dog led to another and here I am. I guess I'm about the healthiest dog owner in Oregon."

It was an impressively short summary of the transition from illness to health, as well as from one Saint Bernard to over 100, and clearly the only explanation I was going to get. We shifted quickly to the present, a place Bea seemed very content to be. But what had happened along the way? I dug through old newspaper clippings to find out.

A half dozen times over the past two decades Bea has entered the public eye, and for a variety of reasons. Foremost is the publicity surrounding her outstanding work with dogs. Breeders come from as far away as Switzerland to buy her Saint Bernards. Her kennels are highly unusual: they offer natural surroundings, allow socializing among the animals, and provide plenty of space for living a satisfying dog's-life: over twenty acres of serene wilderness. The dogs themselves-Saint Bernards, Bernese Mountain Dogs, Newfoundlands and Papillons, are renowned for their show qualities and outstanding personalities. But the publicity that comes with fame has disturbed the tranquility of the Sanctuary Woods more than once. In 1960, a writer tried to publish a biography of Bea Knight. The author arranged for Bea to appear on "This is Your Life." a television program and topped it off with an anecdote indicating Bea fed her dogs on pancakes and soda pop. The appearance and story irked Bea to the point where she blocked publication of the book. She felt further slighted by the media when one of her dogs was hired onto the Bob Cummings television show. It was a male dog, but was cast as a female named Ililda! The indignities bestowed upon her by the media faded into the past,

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In 1966 the OxBow fire, the fourth largest forest-fire in Oregon history, forced Bea to evacuate 160 dogs until the danger had passed. With the help of friends the dogs were packed into household cars and transported to a distant field-mostly in the dead of night. The danger eventually passed, and the dogs came home. Peace was restored to the homestead, and for the next thirteen years serenity reigned in the Sanctuary Woods.

The calm remained until 1979. In May of that year it became apparent that licensing requirements were going to jeopardize her livelihood. The federal government refused a license on the grounds that her dogs weren't kept separately penned, an idea the Bea considers unthinkable. With the federal permit, Bea was expected to purchase Douglas County permits for each dog-a sizeable sum. The end result was that, at age 75 she took on the County and survived court battles with the help of friends and neighbors. But the serenity of the sanctary didn't return for long.

In 1981 misfortune struck three times. Within a period of a few months the federal government sprayed the herbicide 2,4D over her watershed, endangering her dog's reproductive systems, causing some to lose their litters. This was the same summer that her husband, Bill, died, and the same summer that she broke her hip. Yet here she was, only a few months later, calm and unruffled, chatting amiably in the garden. It is clear that as long as she has her dogs, Bea will remain satisfied with the here and now.

She's proud of her dogs. Her Saint Bernards are world famous; "slobbery-mouthed, drooly lipped" characteristics have been bred out of them. She's been responsible for over 100 champion purebreds - a record in the field. Her Bernese Mountain dogs are known for their excellent farm dog qualities.

"My son thinks I'm silly to go on with the dogs. It's like asking an artist to stop painting. It's my life. It's an urge that I can't stop. I can't turn around and crochet in a rocking chair and grow old that way. I would grow old too fast. I'm old now! But if I quit my dogs, it would be the beginning of the end for me. There's nothing else that I want to do. And I work hard."

The sun slid behind the trees, and finally over the ridge. Bea's coffee pot was broken "because somebody ate my cord," so before I left I took it back to the car with me for rewiring. She came with me, helping me navigate the rickety fence.

"I'm gonna lose my religion over that gate. People that fixed the roof fixed that gate for me, too," she said, as we walked into a sea of dogs.

"See how my old dogs and my young dogs live together? Very well adjusted." She studied her progeny with maternal pride. They were the culmination of an unswerving devotion, and it was clear where they had learned their traits. They had been raised by the granny of Sanctuary Woods.

"Nothing...nothing shakes them." She spoke with quiet satisfaction. Then she turned, and accompanied me down the road.