



GRAMPA POSSUM: A BITTERSWEET TALE

He arrived late in the evening at the end of July 1996. My friend, Terry Cummings, of Poplar Springs Animal Sanctuary, found him on a mulch pile the previous evening. He was an opossum and, judging from the size of his head, I guessed he was at least three years old (about 85 in human years).

As I examined the old guy, I marveled that he was still alive. He was the most emaciated creature I'd ever seen; literally, skin and bones. I explained to Terry that he might be too far gone to save and perhaps it would be best to put him to sleep. Then, Terry mentioned that she had given him a can of cat food and he had eaten it. If he'd eaten and processed the food, perhaps there was a chance; but was it worth it? He was clearly at the end of his lifespan. There's no cure for old age. The best I could offer Gramps was a pleasant retirement, but I told Terry I'd give the old guy a try.



In addition to weighing less than 3 pounds, the 'possum had several infected toes, an abscess under the left eye that had affected vision in the eye and bot-fly maggots in various places on his body. His nose had been split side to side, making him look like he had just one large nostril. It appeared that he had been struggling along with his injuries for some time and had, finally, simply given up.

We gently cleaned the eye and applied an antibiotic ointment. We began a course of injectible antibiotics, made him as comfortable as we could in a large kennel and served him a nutritious dinner. He accepted our handling with the patience and tolerance I've come to expect from opossums. By the next morning, his dinner bowl had been licked clean and he was resting peacefully.

We continued the antibiotics for a week and his toes were healing nicely. The eye was more of a problem and required daily attention. After about a month, weighing 7 pounds, we treated Grampa for internal parasites that are more or less inevitable in wildlife. I remained astonished that a creature could lose so much weight and still recover with just a little protection and nourishing food. We were all becoming very fond of Grampa; perhaps some of you saw him during our open house. Our plan was to keep him through the winter and, if he survived, perhaps he could be released in the spring. If not, at least he had a nice retirement home.

By mid-October, Grampa was a healthy 12-pound 'possum. His wounds had all healed, the eye was not functional, but was healed and he was eating well. I began to think he might make it through the winter and we could release him at Second Chance so we could keep an eye on him. Alas, it was not to be; he died peacefully in his sleep the morning of December 10, 1996. Although I knew he was very old, his passing saddened me.

Most of the time, I scold myself for not ending the suffering of an animal that ultimately dies despite our best efforts. In this case, however, I like to think we were able to give Grampa 'possum a few months of heaven on Earth free of pain, warm and safe and with a full belly. He is sorely missed.

NOTE: Poplar Spring Animal Sanctuary is a 400-acre nonprofit refuge for farm animals in Poolesville, Maryland. For more information, call Terry Cummings at 301-428-8128.

Reprinted from "Second Thoughts" newsletter – Spring 1997.
Copyright 1997 - Second Chance Wildlife Center, Inc.