

Patient Tales of Traveler

In Loving Memory

She arrived May 3, 1996; a citizen in Wheaton had seen her walking along by herself. The citizen thought the opossum was too small to be alone and brought it to SCWC for care. I was still operating the Center out of my home in Potomac but the building in Gaithersburg as being readied for occupation. My small room was bursting with animals and I was eager to move to larger quarters, Still, I found room for one young 'possum.

The young animal appeared to be uninjured although she did have a small kink in her tail. The next morning, she seemed to have a bit of a sneeze and was extremely active, circling continuously within the confines of her cage. I suspected she had suffered a head injury and placed her on an antibiotic in case the sneeze indicated a respiratory infection. For the next couple of weeks, the 'possum traveled around her cage until she was worn out. Once wearied, she would simply stop and go to sleep wherever she was; middle of the cage, in her food dish or in her nest box. One of my volunteers, noticing the 'possum's endless travels, promptly named her Traveler.

On June 1, 1996, the big move to Gaithersburg took place. Hand-fed babies were the first to be moved as volunteers were on hand at the new location to keep up with the frequent feedings. One by one, the cages and supplies were carted from my home to the old farm house. Toward the end of that sunny Saturday, the "low maintenance" animals, including Traveler, made the move. Sunday saw the move completed and none of the animals seemed any worse for the wear.

Over the next few months, the circling slowed and finally stopped all together. Traveler appeared to be recovering quite well. Although she was very non-aggressive, we thought nothing of it as we often have adult 'possums that are easily handled. Finally, around the beginning of August, we decided it was time to release the young animal. We carried her to the back of the property and placed her on the grass. She sniffled, snuffled and started to walk; one step, two steps, stop and pull whiskers. Something was definitely not right! Every time she took a couple of steps, she had to stop and pull at her whiskers as if she thought something was on her face.

We returned her to her cage and I wondered if I was misreading the signs, if she was really ok and I was just delaying her release because she was so sweet. A week or so later, we tried releasing her again with the same results. I watched her closely and decided I was not mistaken, she was definitely had a problem. This animal could not possibly survive in the wild; her brain seemed to misread what her whiskers were sensing. Instead of realizing that it was just grass brushing her face, she seemed to think something was on her and she had to stop to clean herself. She appeared oblivious to everything else around her and probably would not have survived even 24 hours in the wild. Her disposition, however, made her a good candidate as an educational animal. Thus began Traveler's career as good-will ambassador for 'possum-dom.



Chris with Traveler



Traveler enjoys a nap

Most 'possums have a number of defensive postures that they use to convince potential predators, including people, that they are ferocious creatures best left alone. If cornered, they will stare you in the face, show their teeth, drool and even give a bit of a growl. Over time, we realized that Traveler had never displayed any of these behaviors. She did not know that she should be afraid, that she needed to defend herself from danger. My decision not to release her was right on; she would have been an easy meal for any predator. In fact, we had to keep an eye on her when she was loose in the clinic. She wandered through all the rooms and, occasionally, onto the Side Porch. If we

had herons or geese that could get their bills through the bars of the cage, they would strike out and hit Traveler as she passed.

Traveler became quite a hit around our Center and was in great demand at schools, scout camps, garden clubs, etc. In February 1998, we applied for and received our Class "C" Exhibitor permit from the USDA. This made Traveler "legal" and made her our only legitimate permanent resident. For two years, Traveler made friends with hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people of all ages. "I've never pet a 'possum." became a frequent comment from visitors. People marveled at the special features of North America's only marsupial. School children learned her words like "prehensile," "nocturnal" and "marsupial."

Traveler appeared on TV several times, most recently on Fox 5 Morning News. She won hearts everywhere she went with her sweet, non-complaining nature. Never did she display the slightest displeasure at being held, pet or examined. Recently, Traveler's arthritis was a concern and she was given medication to help ease the stiffness. A 'possum's normal life span is only three to five years and this was the first sign of her aging. We knew her time was running out. On Saturday, June 13, I noticed she was obviously weakened and her pouch was moist and smelled of infection. We



cleaned her pouch and began antibiotics. Monday morning, I checked on Traveler first thing. She was still alive and I was hopeful we would be able to get her problems under control. Sadly, a volunteer discovered she had died quietly around twelve-noon on June 14, 1999. She died as she had lived, quietly and uncomplaining. On Tuesday, June 15, Traveler was buried here at SCWC. Bill Kenealy, jack-of-all-trades and Board member, constructed a beautiful casket and Traveler was placed gently in her bed, wrapped in a soft blanket, and into the box. Volunteer Kim Patterson offered a can of sardines and flowers were placed on the casket by some of her young friends. Words were said, tears were shed, and Traveler was finally released.

As I write this, with a large lump in my throat, I marvel at how a small, voiceless creature can affect so many people simply by her gentle nature. She is sorely missed. Other 'possums will come and go here at SCWC but there will never be another Traveler. Rest in peace dear friend.

by Chris Montuori, staff

To Travelina-bina

I liked to call Traveler "Travelina-bina" because it seemed to reflect her gentle, graceful, lady-like personality. Well, she was not *always* lady-like, but still, that is what I liked to call her. Since she passed away, I have thought of her often and how her absence makes SCWC feel a little empty, even now during our busiest season and we are bursting with hundreds of other animals.

How could a creature that regularly was seen sprawled on her back, exposing her full belly and pouch to the world be so endearing? Was it the snuffles and sneezes she offered as she nuzzled your neck when you woke her up from her endless naps? Was it her ever-so-patient nature as children and adults pet her coarse fur and marveled at her long, thick whiskers, her grabbing paws and wrapping tail? Was it the determined look she had as she took her morning constitutional throughout the Center before settling down amongst the cozy towels on the shelf for a day-long snooze? Or was it the sheer, unadulterated pleasure she showed as she scarfed down her carefully prepared evening meal of cat food, grapes, cottage cheese, banana and the choicest pieces of raw fish?

I think it was all of the above. Travelina-bina's sweet, unassuming self always had the effect of soothing a stressful day and putting a smile on your face. She is sorely missed by all of us.

by Jenny Martinez, volunteer

Traveler's Travels

During her all too brief life, Traveler won the affection of everybody she met, and she met a lot of people. She put in an appearance at the Herb Shop in Olney during their Open House and Bake Sale to benefit SCWC. Traveler was a favorite with many area women's and garden clubs, including Washington Grove, Silver Spring and Potomac as well as various men's clubs like the Kiwanis in Silver Spring.



Traveler visits an elementary school

Elementary schools were often host to this wonderful animal. Children at Flower Hill Elementary, the Elf School, the Hebrew School, Tilden Middle School, Hoover Middle School, Norwood School, Potomac Day School, the Coast Guard HQ Child Development Center and, of course, Resnik Elementary and Montgomery County Community College Science Fair all enjoyed getting up close and personal with a real, live 'possum.

Traveler frequently participated in programs put on at our area nature centers. Locust Grove in Bethesda, Brookside in Wheaton, Meadows in Rockville and Fountain Rock in Walkersville were able to educate hundreds of people regarding our wild friends with Traveler's help. She



Another one of Traveler's favorite nap spots

was also the main attraction at an Audubon Naturalist Society family program and helped out our own Suzanne Shoemaker with the Owl Moon Program.

Knowing no territorial boundaries, Traveler was happy to visit Montgomery County Humane Society during their pen House and meet people at the Frederick County Humane Society's Walk-and-Wag in 1998. Being the civic-minded creature she was, Traveler paid a visit to the Gaithersburg City Council to let them know about the work of SCWC and the problems wildlife face.

Although a star of TV, appearing several times on Montgomery Cable Channel 21 and most recently on Fox 5 Morning News, she never let it go to her head. She remained the same sweet creature she had been when still a complete unknown.

Add to all those activities the literally hundreds of Girl and Boy Scouts that Traveler has entertained and educated, plus the countless people who met her in residence at SCWEC and it is easy to see that this was one truly beloved creature. I feel privileged to have known Traveler and know all who met her mourn her passing.

by Chris Montuori, staff

A Tribute to Travie

On a scale from loser to winner, you won baby! You accomplished more as a 'possum in your short three-year life span than most humans do in their 85-year ones.

You were a main feature of several well-known news shows and newspapers on more than one occasion. An honor most people do not get.

You had men and women alike coming from miles around, volunteering to scrape your poop off towels. People brought you free food, while others slaved willingly in the kitchen to prepare it for you. Now, how many other half-blind, cripple orphans do you think have ever gotten that treatment? Not a whole ton, I'll bet.

You touched the lives of those who believed they were untouchable. You reached children who were, to us, unreachable. And you did nit with grace, not an adaptation which comes naturally to most 'possums.

Yes, Trav, many people work their whole lives trying to get the fame and fortune you had. You also got something else, though, a thing that often alludes those rich and famous. You had love.

We'll miss you, Trav.

by Natasha Lewandrowski, junior volunteer



Traveler naps with a friend