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The Happy Dog

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The Happy Dog

The unlikely but true saga of a renegade pooch and true love.

By Greg Little, Editor of the Mariposa Gazette Newspaper

It's the doggondest of tails. It has escapes from law enforcement, community outpourings, a court appearance, and most importantly, a happy ending filled with love. This saga began in Coulterville way back in August of 2020. Ben Adams, 39, was staying at his cousin's place in the Northern Mariposa County town when this stray dog "started showing up." Ben described him as "real skiddish". Ben was living in a tent on the property, but he left the area for some four months before coming back. Once back, he was fast asleep one night and "noticed something sleeping on my head. He jumped on the bed and then ran off."

At that time, Ben was able to walk into town to go to his job. It seems his new acquaintance wanted to follow him into town on a regular basis. But, as Ben said, he would "keep his distance."

Celebrity Status

And then he found out that this wayward mutt was somewhat of a celebrity around town. In fact, he was "The Happy Dog". "He is a good watch dog," said Ben.

For Ben, he wasn't sure he wanted a dog. You see, he was heartbroken once before when he owned a dog and the animal died. But The Happy Dog was persistent. "He picked me," said Ben. "We hung out together." Well, kind of. When Ben was doing work around the place, Happy would "sit next to me," he said. But that was it; there was no petting involved. "He always kept his distance," said Ben. One day, while he was working on some fencing, the dog "was laying there," said Ben, and for the first time ever, he allowed his new friend to pet him. "He was so embarrassed," is how Ben describes the pooch. "He wants it, but he doesn't."

As time passed, Ben said every time he would go into town, he'd tell Happy to "stay" until he came back from work. "But he ran over the hill and was waiting in Coulterville," Ben laughs. "Then he ran back and was back home." That, said Ben, was when the bond was sealed.

The Incident

But then it happened. One day, he said law enforcement personnel "stopped me, thinking I was someone else." In fact, he said, they tackled him, and pepper sprayed his dog. Even though, technically, it wasn't his dog. Many people in Coulterville knew The Happy Dog well. Some called him "the town dog." But apparently, law enforcement didn't see things the same way. Around this time, local resident James Rhodes began chronicling his "tail" of the dog, and submitted various stories and opinions to this newspaper, outlining the circumstances with The Happy Dog. The entire episode led to a public outcry – and landed Ben in court in Mariposa where he was accused of harboring a fugitive. It turns out nobody was able to catch old Happy. Some say there were unmarked vehicles at one point as law enforcement attempted to take Happy into custody. They failed.

But Ben did have to go to court and even though the dog really didn't have an official owner, the judge didn't see it the same way. Ben insisted the dog was technically not his, but the judge gave Ben a list of rules he had to follow, including having the dog vaccinated and always on a leash. He was also given two years of probation, or at least something similar as long as he had the dog.

In April of 2021, Ben had gotten through high-profile episodes with The Happy Dog and was working at a local taco joint on Main Street Coulterville. At the same time, a young lady by the name of Katie Hulme, 22, was also living in Coulterville. Like any small town, there were just a handful of places to gather, one of them being the taco place. Katie and Ben had talked on occasion at the restaurant. A lifelong animal lover, Katie knew all about The Happy Dog. "I made it my mission to pet him," said Katie. Ben, on the other hand, appeared to have a mission as well. It seems The Happy Dog was a focus for Katie, who owns an 80-pound dog of her own. After the two (humans) met, Katie said they began hanging out a little bit more and got to know each other. She was living with her mother at the time and as it turned out, she also got a job at the taco place. Ben and Katie were now working at the same business.

Mission Accomplished, Kind of

As they became closer, Katie was able to accomplish her goal of, at least, petting The Happy Dog. In fact, it had gotten so good that she began keeping an eye on the dog, sort of dog-sitting for Ben while he was at work. But The Happy Dog had grown quite attached to Ben. As Ben said, "Happy has separation anxiety." That became quite apparent one time when The Happy Dog had learned Ben and Katie sometimes left together without the pooch. "He busted a window," said Katie, by jumping right through it. "He thought we were going to leave," she said. All of that brought back many memories for Katie. "I was there for court," she

remembers. She said animal control officers tried to say” that he was a “vicious dog”. She knew better.

At one point, the animal control officials said they were going to have to take The Happy Dog. “They could never catch him,” said Ben. He recalls when the new animal control officer came onto the scene and spent three hours trying to corral The Happy Dog. It was to no avail.

Getting out of Dodge

During the town-wide gathering with The Happy Dog as the focus, Ben said he knew it was not going to end well. He saw Katie and then he decided to go get The Happy Dog and take him away from Coulterville for a while. At least “until they were gone,” he said, speaking of animal control. For Katie, she said Happy would always follow her around town, but he would never get in a vehicle. In fact, one day she tried to get him into the car because they were going out of town some 13 miles. The Happy Dog would have none of it. He was content to run with the vehicle but would not get inside. At one point, Katie got Ben on the phone and Ben tried to talk The Happy Dog into getting into the car. No luck. The Happy Dog ran all the way along Smith Station Road.

All of this was getting to be too much for them both and Ben said his cousin was the chef at The Iron Door Saloon in Groveland. That saloon bills itself as the oldest such establishment in California. Its reputation is solid, including the food, service, and general great atmosphere of the place. Ben thought maybe it might be best to get out of the wild west town of Coulterville and move in another direction. With his new companion, of course.

The Best is Yet to Come

Ben remembered that it was his cousin who first came up with the name The Happy Dog. Cousin Jimmy, he said, was actually the first “owner” of this stray. He would try to feed him and even tried to get him to come inside. Again, no luck. “You must be happy outside,” remembers Ben of what Jimmy said. The dog had a name. If all of this isn’t enough, the best part was yet to come. In February, Ben and Katie (now Katie Adams) took the next step and tied the knot in a ceremony at the Coulterville Park. Their “best friends” were by their sides: The Happy Dog and Bella, Katie’s large pooch. In another turn of events, it turns out after Ben was working at The Iron Door Saloon, Katie had also taken employment at a café in Groveland. Ben, however, thought she might be fine material to come work along his side at the old saloon. So he arranged for an interview, and she was hired as a server. Ben does various duties, some in the kitchen, some cleaning things up and just about whatever needs to be done. “It did work out,” said Katie, remembering the drama that unfolded over such a long period of time in Coulterville. She also remembered the date she first met Ben – April 1.

“Is this an April Fool’s joke?” Ben thought when it seemed they were hitting it off. Another major thing that happened after the newlyweds moved to Groveland is they found a place to live out in the country. It has 22 acres, and the owner of the property also has a dog. “All three get along,” said Ben of the trio of canines who now hang out and play together. Interestingly, Katie

said people in Groveland knew the story of The Happy Dog. It seems the word spreads in the sprawling mountain country that lies between Coulterville and Groveland. But even though The Happy Dog is a celebrity, they both say he has changed. Sometimes celebrity status does that but sometimes, love and companionship can do it as well.

“I think he has changed,” she said of The Happy Dog. That seems pretty clear as the pooch now comes into the saloon and hangs out with Ben and Katie. Yes, he is still skiddish and doesn’t allow others to pet him, but the simple fact he now hangs out in public means he has come a long way since those days of being the most wanted fugitive in Coulterville. And get this, the couple recently were able to go on a honeymoon and they went to San Diego. The Happy Dog went too. Katie said they didn’t even realize dogs were not allowed on the beach and nobody really said anything until they were about to leave. It was someone with law enforcement. “The cops said to get the dog on a leash,” said Ben. They got into their vehicle and left. Another run-in with the law. “He’s never been on a leash,” said Ben, which is one of the great qualities of The Happy Dog.

New “Leash” on Life

Overall, Ben and Katie said they are happy and especially that they were able to move to Groveland. “I like it here in Groveland,” said Katie. “There is less gossip here.” Ben grew up in Coulterville and still has many relatives there. Katie is originally from Baltimore, MD, but her family moved to California years ago. Her mother still lives in Coulterville too. And that means, on occasion, The Happy Dog gets to return to where all of the drama unfolded. Ben said one interesting thing is whenever they do go to Coulterville, The Happy Dog refuses to get back into the car until he knows they are heading out of town – and back to Tuolumne County, where he’s not on probation. It’s also where he can now roam around the 22 acres and live the life of most normal dogs.

“We’re great,” said Katie of both their marriage and their beloved pets. For Ben, he’s pleased things worked out in the end. He did say that at one point, he considered changing The Happy Dog’s name; but it just wasn’t in the cards. And the reason is quite simple in summing up the entire episode. “He’s always happy,” said Ben. And hopefully, they will all live happily ever after.