

September 20, 2008



## Dogs of the “Rez”

Journal entry, July 14, 2008: “The dogs are so happy; some are strays, some loosely owned, some feral. They run and play, then doze in the sun or shade depending on the weather and the time of day. Each knows its place in their social order. For the most part, the dogs are trim and healthy looking and are not at all concerned if they don’t find much to eat that day. And I am so happy!”

A lot of my vacations have been ruined by witnessing neglect and cruelty to animals. Years ago I decided not to return to certain places unless I was there to help the animals. This summer I had the opportunity to work at the Pine Ridge (Indian) Reservation in South Dakota, the poorest place in our USA. I was one of three volunteers accepted to work with RAVS (Rural Area Veterinary Services) which is a group that goes to remote areas in the United States, Mexico, Central and South America; places where people have little or no access to veterinary care.

Pine Ridge Reservation is the size of Connecticut with a population of 35,000. The town of Pine Ridge is the administrative center of the reservation and has 5,700 people and one grocery store. The life expectancy is 45 years for men and 52 for women. 50% of the population has diabetes and the unemployment rate hovers around 95%. Summer temperatures go up to 115 degrees or more and winters are twenty- thirty degrees below zero. Fortunately, when I was there in mid-July, the weather was a comfortable mid-eighties and dry, while back in Connecticut it was high nineties and very humid!

The RAVS travelling clinic set up in three different villages at the Pine Ridge Reservation. For one exhausting, yet exhilarating, week I worked with five veterinarians, five vet techs and thirty eight students who were there to vaccinate, treat and spay hundreds of animals brought in by owners and good Samaritans. Our day started at 4:45 AM and we did not stop until the last dog or cat went home, often after 9 PM.

Many people travelled over an hour to bring their dogs and cats to the clinic. At the villages of Kyle and Manderson, horses were also brought for gelding. RAVS services are 100% free. Every pet is given a thorough exam, vaccinated and wormed, treated with Frontline and, when necessary, Ivermectin is given for sarcoptic mange which is very common on the prairie. The owners are given follow up doses to be given at home. Even demodectic mange, which is very difficult and costly to cure, is treated by RAVS free of charge.

The animal control officer for the reservation is named 'Popcorn.' He has a true heart for animals. He gives out free Ivermectin so people can treat their dogs and the strays for mange, he sets up rabies clinics at the IHS (Indian Health Services) yet sometimes has to round up and shoot dogs if they are sickly or aggressive. Pit Bulls were banned from Pine Ridge about a year ago and many people had to kill their dogs. An Indian policeman by the name of Dan Crazy Thunder brought two young Lab/Rottweilers crosses to be neutered. He told me he had a wonderful seven year old Pit that he didn't want to kill so he brought her to his mother on a reservation in North Dakota. One woman I met (she is a schoolteacher) said she and her cousin go out on weekends and give Ivermectin to all the strays they see that need it. Her face lit up when she said how good they feel when they see these dogs weeks later and their fur is starting to grow back.

Three dogs were brought in with porcupine quills in their faces. When RAVS isn't there to remove them under anesthesia, the owners duct tape the dogs' legs together, and the jaws, and remove the quills with pliers. Although all medical services are free, a RAVS stipulation is that for a dog or cat to be treated for a medical condition, it must be neutered also. For some owners this is a hard decision, but they usually "see the light" in the best interest of the animal, especially if the pet is suffering.

Puppies and kittens as young as seven weeks were spayed and neutered; a dog whose leg was mangled in a car accident was tended to; a huge tumor was removed from a truly elderly dog that was not much bigger than the tumor, and more and more. Several unusual cases came to the clinics, but only two were told they needed to go to a 'local' veterinarian, the nearest being an hour away in Nebraska.

The Indians I met (indeed they do refer to themselves as Indians) were wonderful, caring people. Yet, obviously not everyone on the reservation loves animals. Dogs are shot and killed, and two were brought in that had been shot with BBs. RAVS had to remove the eye from one dog.

The summers are bearable for the dogs but many (dogs and people) don't survive the harsh winters. The people live in overcrowded trailers and shacks, most without heat or indoor plumbing. It is understandable that few animals are house pets; some have dog houses, but most just dig a hole under a porch or trailer for shelter. They may live one place for a few months and then move on. Hopefully, once spayed, the dogs will have more permanent homes. Several people mentioned that their dog was 'very old', that being five to eight years. Most are fed 'slop,' according to one client, except for Badger, the only obese dog I saw. His owner feeds him cat food because he is such a fussy eater!

It is amazing that such high quality care can be given from a travelling clinic. All the supplies and equipment are toted in a customized horse trailer. The receiving and discharge

areas, pharmacy, induction center, surgical stations, recovery stations, humane education booth...everything is set up and broken down in less than an hour. Each week the trailer moves on to a different reservation with a new set of volunteers. It very much reminded me of MASH on TV.

Of the students who 'extern' on RAVS trips, most will probably become traditional urban/suburban small animal practitioners in affluent areas, but hopefully some will maintain their idealism and compassion and remember why they got into the veterinary field in the first place.

I look forward to working on more RAVS trips at other locations, but I especially want to go back to Pine Ridge to see how many of my new friends and their pets return, hopefully only for vaccines.

Back in Connecticut, I had to pick up medication at a local animal clinic. While waiting, I looked at photos on their bulletin board. Almost all the pictures were of obese pets, many dressed in cutesy outfits. The 'rez' dogs may have simpler, shorter lives but I do believe they are happier and in many ways healthier.

I smile whenever I look at my live souvenir from South Dakota. "Sunkpala," ('pet dog' in Lakota language) has adjusted well to life in Connecticut. I took her from a happy life, lots of friends and miles to roam. The trade is that I hope to give her a longer life. As she runs around my property merrily tossing toys and sticks in the air, only to retrieve them and toss them again, chasing squirrels and making a mess of my lawn in pursuit of moles, I like to believe she envisions my fenced yard as her new prairie.

Dream on, Sunka!

