

Sir Smoak, R.I.P.

Wallace, Idaho – It would be a rare visitor to Wallace, Idaho over the past decade who would not recall a slow-moving, comfortable-looking, very black fuzzy dog of large-ish proportions sauntering the streets, winter and summer alike, and taking at least a part of his day regardless of season to nap in the middle of the pavement at the intersection of Sixth and Bank Streets, posing as a sort-of hood ornament for the Center of the Universe.

Smoak got his name for his colour, and it is not a misspelling. A very black boat operator from Jack London's *Sea Wolf* was also named Smoak. This character, in *The Sea Wolf*, was dignified and utterly unaware of his colour, just of his prowess. Thus was our Smoak: big, black, powerful and quiet.

Smoak looked overweight but according to the vet he wasn't. It was all that chow-chow fur; he had the outside dimensions of an early-generation Boeing 737 but inside he was all power; he moved with a slow and regal ease that gave false premise to the concrete-busting qualities of a massive chest that over-shadowed his four-wheel-drive-and-studs forelegs. Smoak was descended from a race of dogs bred for their sled- and cart-pulling abilities on the Mongolian highlands. Indeed, Shauna would harness him to a sled in Wallace winters and they would walk the groceries home together.

Smoak became known to Wallace as the “town dog.” After walking Shauna to work, his black foreshortened tail all a-waggy, he made his daily rounds, attending first to the regulars at the Metals Club bar on Cedar Street, where he was pleased to shake hands for a stick of beef jerky, then cheerfully sauntering a block and a half back toward Bank Street when the 1313 Club opened and Jill was ready with a helping of meat-loaf. Come afternoons, he could be found holding court at the Smoke House, rewarded for his patronage by a gift of pulled pork from Max and Sheila's barbecue.

Tourists frequently photographed Smoak seated on his pulpit at the Center of the Universe. Two years ago, running for (and achieving) the title of Huckleberry Hound during the Wallace Huckleberry Festival, raising (on his back, mind you, with a couple of satchels fastened to his harness) nearly \$900 for our local Pet Rescue – his being a

rescued pet himself some 11 years ago, when his first owner was sent off to prison and he showed up on our doorstep.

For those efforts and many others of Smoak's good will, in 2007 he was dubbed “Sir Smoak” by the Grand Matron of the Order of the Eastern Star. He was adopted as mascot by the Swiss village of Wagenhausen and was the toast of the Sternen Club, and was presented with a regal collar from the heretical Swiss kanton of Appenzell brought all the way from Stein-am-Rhein. Three years ago he was benighted by the Royal Court of the Island Kingdom of Colemania for his laissez-faire point of view, and welcomed to its inner governing circle.

Smoak was a mine dog, too. He's been deep down at the Bunker Hill, the Corby and the Sunshine mines here in the Silver Valley. He took to underground life as he did to above-ground life: with grace and agility and enthusiasm.

Visitors to Wallace would ask, “Is that your dog?” To which we could truthfully answer, “No. He's the town dog. I'm just his can-opener.” And he truly was, Wallace's dog. Ask around. Everybody knew Smoak, and it was the rare curmudgeon who would not let him in. On his days off, when he chose not to bother with downtown, he'd stretch himself out in the middle of King Street to act as a voluntary speed bump for the hurry-up crowd from Kootenai and Spokane counties who feel the need to break residential speed laws for the sake of getting to a camping ground up Loop or Slate Creeks and start relaxing before the guy behind them. In the dog days of summer, he shaded himself beneath the lilac bushes out back of the house.

Smoak knew stuff that people, and indeed many dogs, didn't know. He could read you in a New York minute with his deep and piercing brown eyes, and decide on the spot whether or not you were worthy of attention. If you flunked his test he would politely pass you by. If you were felt worthy of his inner circle you would be favored with a dog-smile – oh yes, that mutt could indeed render a toothy smile – and you were given permission for a pet. He never forgot a friend, or even the sound of a friend. He knew the postman's gait, the sound of the footfall from a visitor who comes once a year on the front steps, and would raise an ear and an eyebrow, but never a woof. If a stranger approached the house, Smoak would assume the role of warning doorbell, letting us know that the unknown was on the porch.

In his youth Smoak was a bit of a terror. He yelled ferociously at passing cars and eschewed being alone, registering his discontent by digesting large quantities of first-edition books, television remote controls, and cellular and wireless telephones. It took an Amazon parrot named Buzzard to tame him. Buzzard, all teeth, toenails and beak, would occasionally fall from his perch after consuming some overripe and fermented fruit. Smoak adopted the bird, shepherding the inebriate avian away from stairwells and water hazards with his big black nose. We decided after a year that we were not fit to be parrot owners, but Smoak learned the bit about looking after one's fellows, even obnoxious parrots, and was a fundamentally better dog for the experience. He grew up planting himself between you and trouble.

At 4 a.m. this morning, by the shade of the lilac bushes in the back of our yard in the earliest morning light, Smoak slipped his anchor, tossed his lunch-bucket into the creek. Two days ago he'd given warning that his time was nigh. We were doing our daily swim in Placer Creek with his young brother, Chase. He was embarrassed that he could not re-take the riverbank we'd just descended. One eye bright but the other deathly dull, he looked back over his massive shoulder and asked for help in getting up. Asking for help was contrary to Smoak's nature. Giving help was all he knew.

Smoak was laid to rest today beside his beloved lilac bushes here in the town that he so loved, and in the town that so loved him back. John Streeter and Mike Rullman, bad-ass hard-rock miners both, were pall-bearers. They dug the hole and I buried him in it. Not wishing to be a problem, he fit neatly in it and we will plant some crocus and a lilac bush in his honour, to feed from his very wonderful energies.

The day before Smoak died, the vet had quoted \$50 for a euthanasia shot, and another \$250 or so to ship him to Kootenai County, where Coeur d'Alene is, to be cremated. One never expects death of a loved one to be so mathematical. Well, Smoak never liked Coeur d'Alene and neither do we. Thanks to John and Mike, and true to Metals Club form, he was properly and respectfully laid to rest in a miner's burial for the \$16 cost of a box of Rainier beer. We laid a couple of cans down with him to help him on his way.

You do not go forward from a day like this, any more than Dylan Thomas encouraged his father to go, "Gentle into that good night." Smoak has left us, and true Libertarian that he was, he left us with no Political Statement, I weep. Smoak was one helluva friend.