

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

From Ontario to Wisconsin, Traveling with Beau

Author's Note: This is the third in a series of stories reflecting on a 2007 trip to Alaska with my dog, Beau.^{1,2} During that trip I began a personal journey to an expanded understanding of One Health, the implications of which would unfold over several years.

By Dr. Donald F. Smith
October 16, 2014

Sombra, Ontario

Rather than take the large bridge that traverses the St. Clair River from Sarnia, Ontario, to join with I-94 in Michigan, Beau and I drove 40 km south to the Bluewater Ferry that crosses the river near the hamlet of Sombra. Waiting in line, we wandered about the water front watching the massive lake freighters grunt down the river while water-skiers danced over their rolling wakes. Beau had an unending wave of people coming up to pet him while they shared stories of their own pets--their *children*, they called them—which were at home. The bond between humans and animals was starting to become a unifying theme.



*One of the 200+ cars waiting in queue for the ferry in Sombra, Ontario.
The privately-owned ferry crossed the St. Clair River to Michigan.
(Photo by the author, 2007)*

The crossing was swift – only half a mile separates the two docks – and we passed through immigration and customs once again. Rather than following a predetermined route, we just zigzagged north and west across Michigan to the town of Ludington on the eastern shore of Lake Michigan. It was 1:00 am when we parked at the large ferry dock. Totally exhausted from the long day, I lay back in the jeep with Beau's head draped over my arm and immediately fell asleep. I woke only once to his soft snoring.

Day Two (Ludington, Michigan)

At 7:00 am, I was startled by the sound of tires on gravel all around us. The cars were lining up to enter the ferry so we rushed to our respective bathrooms and joined the queue.



Beau meeting one of the many dogs traveling across Lake Michigan on the large ferry, the S.S. Badger.
Photo by the author, 2007

Dogs were everywhere as we mingled outside our cars, waiting to board. Vehicles with pets were loaded last so they could be unloaded first on the Wisconsin side. For security and safety reasons, drivers were not allowed to remain with their vehicles. I relaxed on deck, a cup of evil-tasting coffee in one hand and a map of Wisconsin in the other. Ahead lay Manitowac, and the entrance to the Midwest.

Inhaling the brisk sea air from the top deck as we steamed across Lake Michigan, I dozed on and off. In my dreamlike trance, I imagined Beau and his friends having a big party on the deck below, sporting around their necks the green bandanas they had all been given before they boarded the ship.



*Beau with the green bandana he was given before boarding the ferry to cross Lake Michigan.
This photo was taken at a coffee shop in Minnesota later in the trip.
Photo by the author, 2007*

Just before 11:00 am, the ferry slipped into Manitowoc, Wisconsin. Jostling my way down the narrow steps among hundreds of other people scurrying to depart the ship, I scanned the parking apron for my silver jeep among the vehicles that were unloaded first.

Car after car continued to spew from the hold, but mine was not among them. "So much for first on and first off," I said out loud to no one in particular. I hurried along the rows of waiting cars until I reached the end of the line. Then I doubled back, darting among rivulets of cars that were rushing away from the ferry. Still no jeep! No Beau! I got anxious, then agitated. Where was my boy!

Just then, my jeep swept past me and slid into a narrow aperture between two cars. Hours earlier, I had left all four windows open just a few inches, but now the passenger side window was wide open and there was Beau, sitting fully erect, looking straight ahead. As his eye caught mine, he yelped and almost exploded through the window into my outstretched arms before the jeep even stopped. I was too relieved to scold the young driver for carelessly opening the

window all the way. At the same time, I could not help but wonder if, in the freedom of the great ship's hold, perhaps the dogs had organized quite a party after all.

We drove west and gently north across Wisconsin enjoying the farmland and reminiscing about the five years we had spent in Madison in the mid-1980s while I was teaching in the recently-opened veterinary school at the State University. I had taken the job because of my love for the dairy industry, and seeing herds of black and white Holstein cows along the drive brought back fond memories.

At the little town of Weyauwega, we strolled up the main street and found a park that seemed suitable for lunch. A local woman was interested in Beau and stopped to chat. She told us that during a March night in 1996, a train with 37 cars loaded with propane and other combustibles derailed just north of town. It caused such explosions, fires and dangers of residual toxins that the whole town was evacuated. People were hastily forced from their homes during the night. They were instructed to leave their pets behind, anticipating they would be back in a few hours.

But they were not allowed to return home as they had thought, and their pets were alone and uncared-for. By the third day, they had become so agitated and angry that they threatened to break through security lines to rescue their animals. The governor finally ordered the Wisconsin National Guard to intercede. They went home-to-home, retrieving the pets from the houses and reunited them with their families.

The tragedy at Weyauwega became a learning exercise for the handling of animals during Hurricane Katrina a decade later. The more important lesson—people will not tolerate being separated from their pets during an emergency—resonated with me, and would return time again in my thoughts during this trip and long after.

Arriving at our evening destination in Eau Claire with an hour to spare before the sun set, we located a comfortable camping site for our little tent. However, the clouds appeared menacing and the wind had a strange gurgling sound, so we dismantled the tent in the fading light and checked into the local Econo Lodge.

In the early morning hours, we awoke to a vicious storm slamming against the windows of our room. Beau left his blanket on the floor, jumped on the bed with me and snuggled closely. As the storm raged outside, he quickly went back to sleep as I pondered what could have happened had we stayed in our tent.

Day Three (Eau Claire, Wisconsin)

A soft misty rain clung to my clothes, the dampness seeping through to my skin, as we went for our morning walk. It was barely 5:00 am. Beau was ready to go, however, and I wanted to get to the North Dakota border before dark.

Not far from Eau Claire, we saw damage from the night's storm. By the time we reached Menomonie, 30 miles further, damage from the near tornado-proportion storm was dramatic, with more downed trees, wind-swept buildings and other havoc that diminished as we approached St. Croix Falls at the Minnesota border.



Storm damage from the preceding night, as we traveled north of Eau Claire.
Photo by the author, 2007

We stopped at so many interesting places during the morning that it was early afternoon when we reached the Minnesota border. In the river town of St. Croix Falls, Beau made friends with Hunter, a 17-year-old boy working at a local bike and canoe rental facility. While feeding Beau some cheese curds that I had purchased at an Amish stand hours earlier, Hunter told me how he had planned to become a veterinarian until he witnessed the death of a calf one day while his would-be mentor operated on her to repair an umbilical hernia.

His comment was poignant, "I don't want to do anything to harm animals, so I've decided not to become a veterinarian."

¹ Smith, Donald F. Traveling with Beau: My 34-day Trip to a Deeper Understanding of One Health. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*, September 9, 2014.

² Smith, Donald F. Returning to my Canadian Roots: Traveling with Beau. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*, September 11, 2014.

KEYWORDS:

Human-animal bond
One Health
Traveling with a dog

TOPICS:

One Health

LEADING QUESTION:

What Wisconsin town disaster helped officials realize that you can't separate pets and their families?

META-SUMMARY:

The author continues his journey across America with his dog from Ontario to Michigan to Wisconsin.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.