



September 2000
Number 25

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THE SOURDOUGH SAMARITAN

by William C. Anderson

Ever since we read the verse by Robert W. Service about cremating Sam McGee, Big Red and I have had a warm spot in our hearts for Alaska. It was on a sojourn to the Land of the Midnight Sun in Rocinante, our trusty rubber-hoofed charger, that Dortha and I met the old sourdough.

As we closed the distance to Fairbanks, we wondered at the derivation of the geographical names we stumbled across: Hard Luck Creek and Fortune Creek were undoubtedly named during the gold rush days; Wooden Canoe Lake was probably tagged by the Indians. But what was the reason for All Hand Help Lake, whose name conjures all manner of catastrophe?

Such musings were interrupted by the sight of working fish wheels along the river, where fresh fish were being bartered from the natives. We crossed over a high plateau, with occasional glimpses of the elusive Mount McKinley in the distance, and before we knew it we were in the outskirts of Alaska's second-largest city.

Before stabling Rocinante, we felt compelled to address an ailment she had picked up: a hiccuping generator. According to our indispensable Trailer Life Campground/RV Park & Services Directory, there were several RV service centers in Fairbanks. Tracking one down with the help of friendly residents, we were informed that the best generator man in all Alaska had his own shop in an area near the airport.

Again we headed out, now involved in quitting-time traffic, as I tried to heed instructions I should have committed to paper instead of to memory. When we finally ended up on the active runway of the town's private-plane airport and I was about to lock antlers with a taxiing Piper Apache, I decided to resign myself to life with a hiccuping generator. It was then that we stumbled upon the elusive street, and with the help of my faithful co-pilot, I tracked down the old building that fit the address.

My disposition mellowed considerably as a gent in bib overalls emerged from the generator shop

and managed to squeeze words of welcome around a large cheroot anchored to the corner of his mouth.

"Got a sick generator," I said, opening the generator well. "May have to shoot it."

"Looks like a new one."

"Got about eight hours on it."

He took out a screwdriver and fiddled with a couple of screws on the carburetor. "These new models are tricky. Carburetor's got an altitude-adjustment compensator that's so danged sophisticated it's too smart to work. Sometimes I think we oughta forget computers and go back to building products that are simple, but a helluva lot more reliable. OK, give 'er a start."

I energized the starter button. The generator kicked over immediately and started purring like a kitten. "Hey, the hiccups are gone."

"Throw a load on 'er."

I went into the motorhome and turned on the air conditioner. It kicked on, the generator picking up the load with nary a murmur. "Hot spit! Popcorn tonight! The wife will put up with any inconvenience as long as she can use her hot-air popcorn machine. For what it's worth, you may have saved our marriage."

"I'm for savin' any marriage," he said, tonguing his cigar to the other side of his mouth, "long as it ain't mine. Trouble with marriage is, it generally involves women. Gimme a grizzly bear to sleep with any day."

"Marry a redhead. That's sort of like sleeping with a grizzly bear."

"Forget it." He shook his head. "Let 'er run for a spell. Make sure we got her tuned up proper."

I nodded as an old camper came chugging up behind me in the driveway. The driver dismounted, an obvious winner for a Gabby Hayes look-alike contest. The old man pushed a fly-festooned fishing hat to the back of his head, opened the generator door and looked up at the mechanic. "Goldang thing just hauled off and quit on me. Gotta have it

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