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News

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Posted on Tue, Feb. 25, 2003

ROOSTER DIES AT PAWS OF PATRON

George strutted and crowed his way into people's hearts

By ELISABETH NADIN
Special to The Monterey Herald

The flag flies at half-staff this week at Hacienda Hay & Feed in Carmel Valley, a tribute to the passing of the store's beloved mascot. George, a 7-year-old English bantam rooster, met his death Saturday afternoon in the jaws of a customer's dog.

"He was an icon, an asset, an unbelievable asset," said store owner Chris Olow. "It's going to be a rough week. I'm going to have to break a lot of hearts," he said.

The 10-inch-tall white rooster with a red comb was more than just the store pet. "He belonged to the people of Carmel Valley," said Olow.

George's demise came quickly on Saturday, said Jack Endert, a part-time worker who saw it happen. A new customer came into the store with her black Labrador retriever leading the way, though pets aren't normally allowed in the store, Endert said. Before anyone could stop it, the dog lunged for George and attacked him, breaking his neck.

George came with the store when Olow purchased it about four years ago from Dick Roedder. Olow's mother, Toddy, jokes that her son actually bought the store from George. "George was a part of the store when Chris bought it," she said. "He's just been a fixture here for six years."

On the front counter of the small animal-care supply store is a testament to George's communitywide influence. It's a bin of "I Love George" refrigerator magnets and buttons, which Olow began selling last year for \$3 apiece to raise scholarship money for Carmel High School students planning to study animal science. "Since we started selling the George buttons, our scholarship fund has increased from \$250 per student to \$500 per student," said Olow.

All the regular customers visited George as they shopped. He could be found sleeping on the counter or strutting around the store, greeting shoppers, walking toward people when his name was called. "He was a ladies' man," said Olow.

Judy Benjamin of Carmel remembers the rooster fondly. "I'd always look for George," she said. "Many times he'd be roosting someplace or sleeping on a bag of cornmeal. I'd sometimes hold him for 20 minutes or a half hour. A certain few humans were lucky enough to pet and hold George until he would coo and warble, drop his head and snore."

"George was the tamest rooster I've ever seen," said Dylan Bryan, another Carmel customer. "Most people don't think of chickens as pets, but he was so tame and pettable and trusting of people," Bryan said. "He was kind of a symbol of the whole store."


The impact of George's death was visible. Tom Zobil, the store manager, has been moping around the store, unable even to speak of the rooster. Zobil was George's best friend. "Now it's quiet and Tom is crying and everything is just sad," Bryan said. George's crow may be curiously absent from the bustling store atmosphere now, but animal calls from the back yard break the stillness. The donkey Eeyore brays in his pen. Three large male turkeys, feathers splayed, warble, puff their chests and strut freely, trying to impress a hen. Olow gently coaxes his 1-year-old Australian emu, Sydney, to lie down.

Olow will soon pick another English bantam hen from the hundred or so 2-day-old chicks he regularly sells at the store. Olow will raise George II at home to become the next store mascot.

But the first George will always be part of the store. He is buried in a little lot in the front, his grave surrounded by small stones. Snapdragons, a tribute from the flower store next door, bloom from the little burial mound.

"Yesterday I put the flowers on George's grave," said Yon Choe, owner of Orchid Flower Bonsai. "I liked him. Everybody liked George."

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