

CRASH...

By Wanda Pooley

PROLOGUE

Big-G was a 1989 GMC Sierra 4x4 pickup truck. She was a beauty! She boasted a one-ton chassis, sported a pretty silver coat when polished, and had a magnificent heavy duty suspension. Her heart pounded strongly – all 454 cubic inches of it. Big-G lived with me all of her life and through those years we pulled “mountains.”



In the early years, Big-G happily towed a 28 ft gooseneck trailer crammed with horses, tack, and gear. We drove the hills of Missouri and went up the mountains of the lower Tetons; we crossed the plains and wallowed through mud in Wisconsin fields. Never once did she utter a disparaging sound. When the dogs came along, without so much as a grumble, she accepted the change to the load she had to carry. Many a basenji sat on the front seat to watch Big-G charge down the road.

She enjoyed those times when club members would sit on her tailgate as she carried them across the field while they sang songs and gathered up the fence from the field trials. Big-G would idle patiently while we spread out over the grounds, gathering up fence stakes. She even offered her tailgate as a perch for the lure operators many times over.

Big-G was asked to tow a clumsy old Road Ranger camper nicknamed ‘Roady’ for a couple of years. She didn’t really like ‘Roady’ but she never complained. I could tell it was awkward for Big-G, and finally decided to search for a more likely companion. That’s when we found ‘Sunny,’ a 29 ft, pretty, sparkling Sunnybrook travel trailer. Big-G loved ‘Sunny.’ They would dash down the highway together, and I could tell Big-G was back to her proud self. They were a team.

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 25, 2005

It’s early, just getting light and the sky is overcast. Mist spreads across Big-G’s windshield. We are excited because today is the big day. Today we go to Missouri for the national specialty. ‘Sunny’ has been parked by the front door for days. The dogs sense my excitement as they are loaded in their crates in ‘Sunny’s’ living room. The bungee cords look like a spider web with strands crossing and re-crossing the wires of the crates. Big-G’s engine starts with a throaty burst of energy, and then we move forward – me, Big-G, and ‘Sunny.’

As the morning draws on, the mist turns to a light rain, and then grows heavier with each passing mile. Mid-afternoon and now we are only several miles outside of St. Louis on I-55; traffic is building; the wind picks up; rain and spray from the semis are now pounding the windshield. We slow up, but now more cars are surging from the on-ramps. More traffic.

I move the truck and trailer over to the next lane, and we come along side a semi-tractor pulling a commercial car carrier. Suddenly I feel ‘Sunny’ begin to pitch as we are pulled in to the vortex of the carrier. Tap, tap, tap, slow, slow, but ‘Sunny’ doesn’t respond. Tap, tap, tap. I strain at the wheel, but it’s no use. ‘Sunny’s’ tires catch the lip between the shoulder and pavement, and she pitches faster and stronger. Big-G is out of control now, looming towards the side of the car carrier. Impact! We shudder as Big-G bounces away and careens in a 360 degree counter-clockwise spin. My dogs! My dogs are riding out this spin in ‘Sunny,’ who is now in command! We are pushed around, and I see the guard rail loom. Another hard blow to Big-G, and yet we keep spinning. We bottom out, and I feel ‘Sunny’ lurch. Gravity takes over, and I can feel Big-G being tugged. I hear a loud ‘whoomp’ as ‘Sunny’ falls over on her side! Big-G lurches and shudders, but remains upright. We finally come to a stop with Big-G resting on ‘Sunny’s’ hitch.

Silence except for the hum of Big-G’s mighty engine. The seat belt has me pinned to the back of the seat. I’m alive. Slowly, I unfasten the seat belt, then reach forward and turn off the ignition. Complete silence. Stepping out of Big-G I am confronted with a cacophony of sounds – people calling to me, traffic surging by in the eastbound lanes; the rain and wind and sirens. A woman yells, “I’ve called 911!”

Traffic is stopped behind me, and some people stare at the horror of what they have just witnessed. Everything is in slow-motion. My head turns towards the wreckage, and I see Big-G. She is mortally damaged; her frame wrenched like it was a toy. Behind her lays 'Sunny,' – helplessly on her right side. The whole scene is surreal to my brain. A state trooper arrives, but I can only stare at him blankly.

I fish the cell phone out of the pocket of my rain coat. Lisa Marshall is just 40 minutes behind me. "Lisa," I say, as she answers, "You are going to come up on a big traffic jam soon because I just flipped the trailer and totaled my truck. We are strewn across I-55." A few more sentences of explanation, and she hangs up to call Karla Schreiber. From there, word spreads rapidly across the country. Cell phones, Internet, and Lists carry the news in hopes of catching others near this spot on the road. Karla reaches Sally Wuornos at the show site who calls to her husband to unload the van. She is on her way. Laurie Stargell in Colorado picks up the news on the List and calls travelers Sheila Lund and Pam Geoffroy who, in turn, contact Bob & Sue Joyner. They are close by the crash site and head my way. The "cavalry" is coming, I soon learn.



Meanwhile I stand in the downpour and stare at the trailer lying on its side on the only door. My dogs! My dogs are inside! Two young men come up to me and ask if I am all right. "No, no, no I'm not. My dogs are inside the trailer!" I cry. "How many?" they ask. "Four," I reply. One fellow climbs up on 'Sunny's' other side, breaks a window and peers down. "I see four dogs; they're looking at me." But that won't do. I have to see for myself. Gripping the undercarriage of 'Sunny', I find footholds upwards. With strong hands, the young man pulls me to the top. I have to get inside; I have to get to my girls. The young man lowers me through the window, and I skid across debris and shards of glass. Struggling for balance, I make my way across the bedroom towards the dogs. The crates are tilted and crammed in a heap, but they are still fastened together and miraculously undamaged. I search through the rubble for leashes, casting off glass, clothing, and broken dishes. The girls give me happy yet sad looks and whine for help. "Easy" is pinned under her rubber crate mat, but still manages to glare at me expressing her inconvenience.

"If I hand these dogs up to you, one at a time, do you think you can put them inside the cab of the truck?" I call out to the young man above me. "*Oh my God,*" I ask myself. "*How do I hand my dogs to one stranger standing topline who will then pass them to yet another stranger who will have to crawl from the top of Big-G down to the pavement, and then put each one in the cab of the truck?*" What if they bolt, what if they get away, what if, what if. But I have to trust; I have to believe it will be fine; I have to move forward. We can't stay here.

Unlatching the first crate door, I cradle Ashley in my arms and make my way back to the opening above. Slipping a Premier collar over her head with a leash attached, I let her go to the waiting arms, cautioning the man, "Please hold her tight, don't let her go, she's scared. Her name is Ashley." "*Please, please*" I plead in my mind. The man carefully holds her close to his chest, softly speaking her name. I hear him talk to his friend standing on Big-G's roof as he passes her down. Trying to assure myself this is right, I crawl back over the wreckage for another dog. Another siren wails in the distance, but I keep working. I can hear the voice of someone saying he's a paramedic. The young man on top calls to the paramedic, "Sir, she is getting her dogs; she won't come until they are all out." I hear him say, almost as an after thought, "She looks OK, though."

One by one, the girls are passed through the window to awaiting hands. Each time the fellow assures me the dogs are safe. I try to picture them in my mind as I begin dismantling the crates and passing them up through the window. Forward, move forward. Plan ahead. The girls are safe. I spy the bag with all their food and my grooming kit and hand those to the young man. One last look around, and then I am pulled to safety, and we all scramble down to the ground. The dogs are in the cab peering out at the chaos. In true basenji style, they seem to look upon this as a new sort of adventure. Not a scratch on any of them!

While I stand on the highway and look once again at the trailer, it now occurs to me "I have no place to sleep!" Cell phone out again, and I call Beth Straub, who is planning to stay with me during the specialty. "Beth?" I say as she answers. "Yeah, what's up?" she replies. After listening to me, she wastes no time in calling the Holiday Inn to plead for a room.

The state trooper comes over to say the trailer will be pulled upright soon, and the truck is being loaded on a flatbed car hauler. "Once we get ready to clear the highway, you will need to go sit in the tow truck," he tells me. "Yes sir," I say, but still I find myself moving about from one spot to another. I spy the ex-pens lying in the pavement and retrieve them. Again, the trooper cautions me, and this time I understand I'm just making his job harder and go to the wrecker.

Traffic finally moves forward, and in the blink of an eye, my two heroes are gone. Life resumes and only small bits remain to even suggest the earlier chaos. We go to the state police headquarters to finish the accident report, and then Lisa arrives. We are instructed to follow the awaiting flatbed car hauler to the impound site where we can retrieve anything I need. It feels like a funeral procession as Lisa follows the car hauler carrying my battered truck.



As Lisa and I start to sort through the rubble in the trailer, Sally arrives, with Bob & Sue close behind. A plan is made, order is restored, and we begin the task of organizing what to take and what to leave. It's hazy here as to who did what as my brain is only working at half-time. Voices in the background as the wire crates are pulled from the truck and assembled. The dogs are removed from the cab and placed carefully in their crates. They are quiet and attentive. Lisa and I fill garbage bags with clothes; dog bedding; and other things I deem important at the time. Sally, Bob & Sue jimmy open the tailgate on the truck and pull out the lure coursing

equipment, a generator, and several other boxes. Amazingly, there is little damage to all the equipment.

We are moving forward; ever forward despite the persisting rain and the exhaustion we are all beginning to feel. At the hotel the lobby is quiet. Check-in is finished, and Lisa helps me search for my room. Helping hands again from more people who have heard about the accident, as we unload the dogs and a large assortment of garbage bags and boxes. The room looks like a warehouse, but I'm in and a hot shower is waiting.

The next day is Monday. I rent a SUV and drive back to the impound site for more things. Big-G is setting off to the side of the lot, and 'Sunny' has been shoved between two rows of wrecked cars. A few hours later all I can fit is packed in the rented Explorer. Caressing Big-G on one of her smashed fenders, I tell her what a great gal she has been over our 17 years together, and that I'll never forget how she saved my life. 'Sunny' may be spared and return one day to AdventureLand.

The rest of the week is spent fielding phone calls from the insurance company and enjoying the specialty, but through it all I feel wrapped in a cocoon of friendship and warmth from fellow basenji folks. I am humbled to be spared and profoundly touched by everyone's thoughtfulness and concern.

EPILOGUE - OCTOBER 2, 2005

All my belongings are packed in a rented cargo van, and the girls curl up in their crates for the long drive. It's night time, and the trip home is quiet. As I make my way back to Rockford, my mind reflects on the past several days. Expectation, tragedy, despair, help, assurance, comfort, and then stability restored. I am deeply blessed.

Footnote: "Sunny" was diagnosed with a warped frame. She never returned to AdventureLand.