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Donovan: The True Story of a Backyard Dog

By **Lori Jo Oswald**, www.alaskastop.org

Donovan was not a unique dog. He did not pull a child from in front of an oncoming car. He did not bark during a house fire and save an entire family from death. He did not win a ribbon in an American Kennel Club dogs show, or even in a community fun match. Indeed, Donovan was considered quite an "ordinary" dog.

Donovan's owners could be considered quite "ordinary" too — a young family, two children, several cats. Fourteen years ago they decided to get a dog. A dog would be fun for the kids, Mr. and Mrs. felt. So one day, perhaps at a shopping center giveaway, or maybe in the pet section of the local classified ads, they found Donovan and brought him home.

At first the kids were excited. They played with the little beagle mix in the backyard, throwing him sticks to chase and fighting over who got to feed him. As the summer wore on, though, the children began to fight over who had to feed Donovan.

Mr. built a small house for Donovan, staked it out back and attached his chain to it. Mr. and Mrs. agreed that Donovan would do "just fine" outside, and they wouldn't have to worry about dog hairs all over the house.

I never met Donovan. Though I'd once been to this house, I didn't know he existed. Because he was out back. The kids, I was told, couldn't decide if the last time they walked him was last year or the year before. Donovan lived on a 6-foot chain. He dug holes for entertainment. He dug and dug in his tiny yard. A friend who saw him told me about the circular trench around Donovan's dog house, as far as he could reach on his short chain.

Oh, but he was "well cared for." Mrs. complained of the way some people treat their dogs. She "can't understand" how some people could be so cruel. "We never starved Donovan," she said proudly, and it's true that he wasn't entirely neglected — he was well-fed. And it's also true that he was not completely ignored — when he barked, someone always yelled.

For 14 years Donovan lived out back on his chain. He ate his fill every night, but still he hungered — for attention and affection. One day he finally escaped his little world of chain and holes and doghouse: the day he died.

Donovan, unfortunately, is not a fictional character. Neither are his owners. They have been going to the local animal shelter lately and are talking about getting another dog. "We sure miss Donovan," they lament.

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