

Commentary...

The hour of dogs a-barkin'

By Lynn Woodward
Correspondent

"It's the hour of dogs a-barkin'," as Tom Russell sings about Mexico. Seems to be true in the countryside of Mongolia as well. This night though, Stinky, Guetuerma and a nameless pup that belongs to someone else but is here most of the time, were barking well past dark outside my ger (Mongolian for "yurt").

It had been an unharmonious day for them: this afternoon, a large aggressive male dog hung around camp. Most dogs here are "Mongolian Dog" — black with brown points; few are neutered. The dogs strutted, snarling and posturing; the intruder chose a bone from a myriad of cow, horse and sheep legs the other dogs had brought in, and simply lay down to gnaw for hours.

Around dusk, a bellowing had ensued down the hill by the Terelj River. The black-and-white Holstein-looking bull lumbered up to where my hosts were milking. Yadmaa and Davasuren encouraged the bull to stop harassing their cows. So the bull stomped through the ger camp, slinging slobber. The dogs glared back. Very skunky, he was. Definitely looking for someone particular. Finally, far up the hill an answer to his bellows drew him in that direction.

Every morning and night, Davasuren drags each of the dozen-or-so calves by an ear into the small post-and-rail round pen, then deftly weaves a loop of one-inch webbing from a corral post around the horns of each cow to keep them anchored for milking. On horseback, Yadmaa pushes each udderly empty cow on up the hill.

Each day, a young man on horseback pushed several hundred goats and sheep through the "front yard," up-valley in the morning and down-valley in the evening. One day, I watched a palomino stallion wander through

and chase Yadmaa's horse.

Fences? Very few. Open range everywhere, even in the cities. Fences are not of the nomad mentality.

Every evening, Yadmaa unsaddled his horse and lit fires in the ger's woodstoves (no matches, just a minute with a butane torch). Davasuren would then appear in my ger with dinner, similar to breakfast or lunch, of mutton, potatoes, cabbage and carrots. I thanked her, "Bayarlalaa" (pronounced something like "bye errth la"); it was the first of four words I learned, although my pronunciation always made the Mongolians laugh.

My hosts knew about 40 words of English — nouns. While gestures and smiles led to some understanding; soon I yearned for more communication, so I got out my copy of Mongolian phrases. But I didn't want to tell them to "turn left" or ask "where to buy cashmere." I wanted to know what it was like to grow up here. How the fall of the Soviet Union changed their lives. If they'd ever been lost in a blizzard. If they'd ever been healed by a shaman... And I couldn't; so I watched and listened.

One afternoon, Davasuren appeared with walking-fingers and come-hither gestures. We walked to a casually fenced area of maybe four acres; this fence keeps animals out, not in. Davasuren started raking a section of cut dry grass with a pitchfork that Yadmaa repaired earlier that day with a spare ger pole for a new handle. Soon, I took over the raking and she pulled out her smart phone and made a call.

Yadmaa drove into the field with two more pitchforks, both with handles made of straight branches, bark smoothed from use. The tractor was left running, as it requires a roll-start. We all raked and forked the grass into the cart. Yadmaa gestured that I should get up on the cart and stomp down the hay. I did, as they forked more hay

on. And more. I stomped and teetered about a foot above the cart walls and a good five feet off the ground. Finally, they decided no more hay would cling to the angle of repose, so I carefully leaped off the cart.

They tied the load, then Yadmaa drove the tractor half a kilometer to their winter camp and unloaded the hay. Take two, and that section was done.

Mongolians set up their gers wherever they want; little of the land outside of the cities is privately owned. Yadmaa and Davasuren don't move far summer to winter. Some families move every season, as their ancestors did, quite a distance. They dismantle and move the gers in open-bed utility trucks. In Yadmaa and Davasuren's tidy ger there isn't much: a woodstove for heat and cooking, kitchen shelf and utensils, a small bed each, a dresser with photos displayed, a small wardrobe, a place for shoes, an extra car battery, his bow and arrows, her purse, a blanket with a stitched image of Chinggis Khaan on the wall, a waist-high blue plastic barrel



PHOTO BY GANA

Davasuren and Yadmaa and Lynn Woodward.

of fermenting cow's milk. One bare light bulb hangs from the ceiling; no running water, but only a short walk to an outhouse and drip-bucket for hand-washing. Along the ger's outside wall are a satellite dish, solar panel, water barrels.

Later I walked up to their winter camp. The large hay pen was about a sixth full and Yadmaa indicated that it would be completely full before winter. Several pens form the compound, where their horse, goats, cattle and sheep will stay. The pens have walled and covered sections, with rails of tree trunks and dirt and plants on the roof.

Cow dung has been pressed into the cracks between the bark-on logs to keep the wind from blowing through.

The skull of a large canine was on one of the pen roofs. Later, through an interpreter, I learned that it's a wolf skull and is believed to help protect the livestock. Last winter was an especially cold one; a cow's tail broke off. The coming winter is predicted to be another hard one.

The dogs finally quit barking; I slept deeply through only a hard frost of a summer night and woke to be further intrigued by a people merging the slick new stuff into an ancient way of life.



PHOTO BY LYNN WOODWARD

Guetuerma and the pup soaking up sun. Most dogs here are "Mongolian Dog," black with brown points.

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