Galveston dogs

In the 1890s, Texas put its medical school in Galveston because it was the biggest city in the state. Galveston has not grown much since, so now it is a small town with a huge medical centre.

In my first trip to Galveston, I drove a rental car around town, trying to get a feel for the place. I came across eight to ten dogs in the middle of the road—lying, sitting, standing, just hanging out. Pack would be too sinister a term to use for this collection, group would be better, or bunch.

How to describe them? They were big and small, black, brown, and white. They were just regular dogs. Every one seemed to have a collar. They were just sitting there comfortably, like they were having coffee together. They looked friendly, happy, laid back.

Several dogs looked up as my car approached, and slowly ambled out of the way. I knew then that we would move to Galveston. We were living in Milwaukee at the time. Milwaukee has a Germanic flavour, while Galveston tends toward the Hispanic. The differences are not subtle. In Milwaukee, there are rules for everything: what side of the street to park on, how many animals you can own (no more than three), and the list goes on. Galveston has no rules. In Galveston it is sometimes difficult to figure out on which side of the street a car is parked. I figured that a town where dogs lay down in the middle of the street had a good pace of life for me. If the dogs could survive without getting run over, so could I.

Dogs are everywhere in Galveston, individually and in groups, and rarely associated with their owners. Instead, the dogs seem to live parallel existences. They cross Seawall Boulevard, a four-lane, 40 mile-an-hour thoroughfare that skirts the Gulf of Mexico. Sometimes they cross at the lights. If not, cars stop. I don't understand it. It's not as if Galvestonians are polite drivers—we are too close to Houston for that.

In the morning, I drive my youngest child to school. We go down 25th Street, a broad avenue with a grassy strip in the middle of the road, lined with Victorian houses. We often see the dogs. I think it is the same group that I came across 10 years ago on my first visit. Most mornings they are lounging on the grassy strip. To me, they are Disney dogs. I imagine them all with distinct voices, like in *Lady and the Tramp* and *101 Dalmatians*. Sometimes we reach them just as they are crossing the street. One morning, one of them, a small, white dog, stopped in the middle of the street to scratch himself. The other dogs stopped and waited for him, as did all the traffic. No one honked.

Where do the dogs go? When do they meet? Do they spend the night in their individual homes and get together in the morning? Who is in charge? How does one join? What do they do for fun? I wish I were a high school student again, and I could study the Galveston dogs as a science project. Better yet, I wish that I had a job that paid me to study those dogs. I would write the classic monograph: *Dogs of Galveston: millennial canine social behaviour in the Old South*. It would be a strongly moral, metaphorical work.

But that is just a dream. For the present, all my thoughts about dogs must be poured into this piece. It comes down to this. You can learn a lot about a society by observing the dogs. If they are happy, then in all probability, so too are the people. If the dogs are leashed, cropped, castrated, or otherwise restrained—watch out for their owners.

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