

## Rich and Gigi

Dan Dreier

Al the Fisherman and I stood together on the third floor balcony in front of room 321 at Crossland Economy Studios. We looked out over the unremarkable landscape and remembered the remarkable events of this day, now two years past.

I've been a Lane Transit bus driver 29 years. The 91 McKenzie has been my favorite route from the first day I drove it one cold January morning in 1985. Lots of good folks live and work up on the 91, a route that follows the McKenzie River 50-some miles to the tiny village of McKenzie Bridge and on to the ranger station a few miles past that.

Al the Fisherman and I got to know each other on this route in 2005. He got off at Leaburg Dam to fish. Sometimes he would catch his limit of five rainbow trout by the time the bus came back down on the return trip 90 minutes later. Otherwise it was a long wait for the next 91 back to town.

Al and I become friends over the course of that year and we got to know lots of good people on that bus line. It's that kind of route. Decent, salt of the earth folks. Many, too poor to live in town, made their homes – be they cabin, camp, or trailer – along the river and the forest lands up that way. Al and I came to know an occasional rider named Rich. This fellow was a loner. He lived with his dog Gigi in a tiny camping trailer just above Blue River at Lazy Days, a low-rent trailer park. Gigi was a high-energy blue heeler. Rich would ride into town from time to time, or up to Harbick's general store. He left Gigi tied up at the trailer or brought her along in a kennel box. Gigi definitely preferred the latter. Other times we would see the two of them walking along the highway as we passed by.



Al the Fisherman departing

I started carrying dog biscuits in my work bag. The bus most always made the stop at Lazy Days. Many of the residents there are regular riders. Rich would come out with Gigi. Well, truth be told, it was Gigi who came out with Rich. In fact, it was all Rich could do to hang on to his end of the leash as Gigi was hell-bent on getting to the bus stop. The doors would pop open and Gigi would come bounding in, her treat devoured in a matter of seconds. But only after she would, "Sit!" and "Stay!" And then a "That's a good girl!" from the driver.

Rich swore that Gigi could not only tell an LTD bus from other vehicles on the road, she could tell who was driving. She didn't go crazy unless it was me, the driver with the treats.



Rich & Gigi

Rich and Gigi would disappear for months at a time. Once for nearly a year. Rich never told us he was leaving so we never knew if we'd see them again. Then one day, they'd be back. Sometimes back from California where Rich had a camp in a hollow redwood tree stump (we've seen photos, so we know it's true).

Rich was fiercely independent. He was tough, resourceful, yet gentle and honest. He never shared much about his life, but a few stories did emerge over the years. He had worked as a draftsman and a machinist in a small shop. But then something happened and he took to the road. He never said what that something was, but from that point on he lived in isolation working all over as a ranch hand here, a shepherd there, and once as a handyman at a county park. His sole means of support now was a small Social Security check.

Gradually Al, Rich and I became better friends. We even took a couple of road trips in my car. We had a great time at the Pottsville tractor show near Grants Pass. Another time we drove to the end of Horse Creek Road north of McKenzie Bridge. There's a beautiful valley vista at the end of the road with a waterfall off in the distance.

By 2011 Rich and Gigi lived in the woods somewhere near Lane Community College south of Eugene. Living at Lazy Days had become too much for Rich to endure. Too many people, too close together, and too much noise.

Rich was a tall and slender man. But we noticed he was looking more gaunt than usual. He began talking about how the trek to and from his camp was becoming difficult. He told us he was saving money to buy another trailer and wanted to move back up on the McKenzie, this time to the smaller Patio RV Park on McKenzie Drive.

After many months of saving, Rich found a good deal on an old camper trailer and had it towed to the Patio. Al and I went to visit soon after he got settled in. It looked like the perfect setup for Rich and Gigi.

By this time I was off the 91 route and driving a bus line between Eugene and Springfield. Rich would come into town and always made it a point to find Al and me. He began coming in more often as he had frequent doctor appointments.

We knew that Rich was dealing with physical problems. He was often in pain and not able to eat much or sleep. He dreaded the day he might have to rely on others for help. Rich began to worry and fret about Gigi. As his constant and only companion for the last six years, she was a one-man-dog. Rich once left her with a neighbor for three days. Gigi sat in one spot and stared at the door, waiting for his return. She wouldn't eat or even lay down while he was away.

And then one day Rich told us he'd taken Gigi to the vet and had her put down. We looked for emotion but didn't see it. We knew it was there, but it was buried and had yet to form an expression. Rich said leaving Gigi in another's care was simply not an option. Al and I were baffled. We knew what that dog meant to him.

It wasn't long before Rich confided that he had been diagnosed with colon cancer. He was scheduled for surgery. Al and I decided then and there to be at the hospital with him. After all, we were his only friends, his only family. So we were with him at River Bend Hospital as they prepped him for surgery.

Al stayed at the hospital and was there when Rich came out of the recovery room. Al then made it a point to visit Rich every day for the week he was at the hospital, and then for the two long weeks that Rich languished at a rehab center.

A section of his colon had been removed. However, in the process it was confirmed that cancer had spread throughout his body.

As Al and I began to realize what was going on with Rich, we were more able to understand his decision with Gigi.

After that miserable post-surgery stay at a convalescent facility, Rich got a room at the Crossland. To him, it was like staying at the Ritz; a queen bed, electricity and running water, heat, a bathroom with tub and shower, kitchenette, cable TV, and Internet. Even a table with two folding chairs. Floor space? Not so much. Still, compared to a tent in the woods it was luxurious.

Rich continued to ride the bus with Al and me. He shared the trials and tribulations of jumping through the various hoops set forth in Oregon's Death with Dignity Act. He asked if I'd be willing to be listed as his official "next of kin." I was. Before long, Oregon Hospice called to verify that Rich was not being coerced, was of sound mind, and in control of his actions. He was.

After endless doctor appointments to confirm his diagnosis and to meet the many safeguards that are part of the Oregon DwD Act, Rich and I met with two Hospice volunteers. These women, both retired nurses, carefully explained the process. They were eager to hear about Rich's life, his concerns now, his beliefs, and his religious preferences. They shared their experience with helping others who had chosen this path. In fact, the husband of one of these nurses had chosen Death with Dignity to end his suffering.

How many people know the hour of their death? Who would want to? But for Rich, it was a blessing. He could not bear to think of being an invalid. He was proud of always being able to care for himself be it in the woods, in a cave, under a tree, or out on the prairie. For him, having some control over his own death was a comfort.

Al and I arrived at the prescribed time on Saturday, March 10, 2012. Rich had all of his earthly possessions packed neatly in his khaki Army surplus backpack. The room was tidy, the bed neatly made. The final prescription was on the counter, a bottle of juice the only item in the small under-counter refrigerator.

The three of us stood on the walkway in front of room 321, leaned on the balcony railing, and spoke of our friendship over the years. Rich confirmed that we were the only friends he had and thanked us for being there with him now. He seemed calm, almost happy. He was certainly glad to have us there and was ready for what was to come. He did admit that he felt scared, but he seemed to have his fears well checked.

The nurses arrived. They assured Rich that he could change his mind, that it was perfectly okay if he did. Rich told us he was ready and said, "Let's do this."

The nurses mixed the prescription with the juice. Rich sat on the bed, his back against a pillow at the headboard. I sat on the edge of the bed, the room's window on my right, Rich to my left. Al sat on the bed behind me, at Rich's feet.

The room was quiet. Rich seemed relaxed and at peace. He took the glass and began to drink. The bitter taste made him cough. Then he continued to drink the mixture until it was gone. He handed the glass back to the nurse and thanked both of them for their help. He laid back against the pillow and looked at Al and me.

"Rich," I said, "Tell us about the time you took the scooter trip. When you stopped and heard the singing."

His eyes lit up. He knew exactly what story I was referring to – one he'd told me once several years before.

"I stopped my scooter along a road in Mississippi one afternoon," he said. "I was sitting on the bank having a smoke when I heard singing. I walked up over the hill and there on the other side was an old black man plowing a field. As he walked behind his mule he was singing "Precious Lord, Take My Hand . . ."

Rich's eyelids fluttered . . . then closed.

"Was it a sunny day, Rich? Could you feel the warmth of the sun?" I asked.

I remembered the story, so I knew that it was.

Rich nodded "yes" and smiled slightly, but did not answer with a word.

My left hand was resting on his chest. My right hand had been on his arm but was now resting on the side of his neck. I could feel his heart with one, and his pulse with the other. Al's hands were resting on Rich's legs.

"Was it a sunny day, Rich? Could you feel the sun on your shoulders?"

The room was still.

Rich was asleep. His breath normal. Not rushed. Not labored. Steady. Peaceful.

Had Rich finished his story, he would have told how he and the farmer struck up a conversation. And how eventually, the farmer invited Rich home for dinner. Rich never forgot that kindness and remarked when he first told me the story how much it meant to him.

Gradually, the breathing became shallower. Never faster. Just shallower. And shallower still.

Finally, there was no breath.

His pulse remained just as steady and just as even as it had been throughout.

The tempo remained constant.

It only diminished.

And diminished.

And finally disappeared.

Perhaps five, maybe seven minutes had passed since Rich began telling the story of the singing farmer plowing with his mule.

The nurse checked Rich's eyes with a light. She checked again a moment later and pronounced him deceased.

We had witnessed the miracle of death. What once was a person was now but a person's remains.

Where did you go, Rich?

Perhaps as profound as the miracle of birth.

Where did you come from, little baby?

The nurses gathered their things, hugged us goodbye and departed. (By the way, these retired RNs spend most of their time working as midwives.) I called the funeral home where arrangements had been made. We stayed in the room.

While waiting, Al and I took comfort in the thought of a reunion. Somewhere across the great divide a devoted blue heeler stands, staring at the door. And we imagined how overjoyed they would be to see each other again.

*Richard Lee Seamon, 69, of Springfield, died March 10, 2012.*



Al the Fisherman, Rich and me.