

Strays find an honest-to-goodness home out in the country in rural Eustace

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EUSTACE, Texas – For 15 years, Linda Arnold thrived on the noise and the chaos and the infinite excitement of Manhattan, where she and her husband ran a 300-employee printing operation.

That was before they came back to Texas to join the family business.

Now she gazes from the front porch at the open Texas countryside. Her driveway is a dirt track, winding past a stock tank to a little farm-to-market road. The nearest restaurant with tablecloths is 50 miles away; the closest one with valet parking is probably twice that.

"I used to go catch the subway and go watch the weirdos at the station," Linda says dryly. "Now I sit on the porch and watch the cows."

It's farm livin' a la *Green Acres*, all right, complete with the chores and the fresh air and the Arnold Ziffesque snuffling supplied by feral hogs that root along the fence at night.

Except for the barking. Nobody ever heard this much barking in Hooterville. Or, for that matter, in Manhattan. The "farm" – the family enterprise – is a sprawling country home for orphaned and aging dogs.



Photos by MONA REEDER/DMN
Erin Arnold Johnson gives treats to three of her favorite Straydog residents. Johnson lives in Plano (where, among other things, she rescues feral cats), but she makes the 65-mile drive south to Eustace several times every week to help out the family-run operation.

Straydog started as a personal crusade 17 years ago, when a Garland secretary named Pat Arnold started taking in strays. Ultimately, she and her husband, Bill, moved their growing dog-rescue operation to a country compound north of Athens, near tiny Eustace.

Their hearts were in the project. You can say that about many people who try similar operations but ultimately fail, frustrated by the expense, the time commitment or simply the endless supply of desperate, abandoned animals.

What made the Arnolds different?

Perseverance, determination and selflessness, I guess, that endured even after Pat unexpectedly died in 2003 of a brain aneurysm.

A longtime fan of their canine missionary work, I had private doubts about whether the shelter could go on without Pat, who had devoted herself so completely to ensuring the dogs she took in had attention, care, love and a home for life.

But the extended Arnold family soldiered on: Bill, who turns 70 next week, married a longtime Straydog employee – one of Pat's friends, Juana.

Juana Arnold, 40, shares Pat's uncanny gift for handling skittish strays. Her son is the night kennel manager; her daughter-in-law, Lacie, works with dogs during the day. Some of the employees, like David Rentz, are family friends who have been with the outfit since the day it opened.

Bill and Pat's daughter, Erin Arnold Johnson, lives in Plano (where, among other things, she rescues feral cats) but makes the 65-mile drive south several times every week to help out.

Now Tom, Bill's younger brother, and his wife, Linda, are living there as well. The couples have separate homes – tidy, modest houses that back up to the maze of kennels and hospital buildings that now house 120 dogs.

Some of the canine residents are as old as the rescue operation itself – "lifers" like Jack and Jill, a brother-and-sister pair that were dumped as puppies because they were deaf and blind, or gentle old Misty, a generic "BBG" – big black dog – of indeterminate breed, gray now around the muzzle.

Astoundingly, they're all treated like family pets, all 120 names and personalities familiar to everybody who works there.

Straydog employees and volunteers faithfully hold adoption sessions every weekend at PetSmart locations in Rockwall and Plano. But for every dog adopted out, of course, there

are hundreds more abandoned strays, roaming Dallas streets or wandering along country roads.

The ones that find their way to Straydog are phenomenally lucky. It's a rare, real-life, happy "farm in country" for homeless dogs that perhaps only innocent children believe can be real.

And even with its employees and volunteers, even with the extended Arnold family's inexhaustible devotion to Pat's vision, Straydog's success always hangs by a perilous thread.

Tom and Linda handle the business management now, and they're not shy about asking for donations, dog food, free labor – anything somebody might be willing to give.

"Right now, we're trying to get trees donated," Linda said.

Trees that Pat planted on the open hillside years ago have grown to provide shade for some of the kennels, but they want every dog to eventually have access to a doghouse and a shade tree.

There's more about this remarkable enterprise at www.straydog.org, or you can write them – well, I won't beat around the bush; Linda says, "Tell them to help!" – at P.O. Box 1465, Gun Barrel City, 75147. I know a lot of people who love dogs, who rescue them, foster them, pay their vet bills, find them homes.

But I don't know anybody else who loves them like the Arnold family. They're a breed apart.