

GREAT READ OWNER TAKES ACTION AFTER DWP BLOODIES HIS DOG

By PETER JAMISON

AUGUST 3, 2015, 2:35 AM

"Beat a dog once," observed the late Russian writer and dissident Alexander Solzhenitsyn, "and you only have to show him the whip."

The same cannot always be said about the beaten dog's master. Especially when the affronted canine happens to be a Pacific Palisades mutt named Ralph.

On a mild morning last August, a Los Angeles Department of Water and Power meter reader walked past a pair of "No Trespassing" signs onto Steve Markoff's property in Rustic Canyon. Before walking back out, the worker used a wrench to strike Ralph in the snout. He later said he was acting in self-defense after the boxer-Labrador-Rhodesian-ridgeback mix charged at him.

Ralph cannot find or speak the words to protest his treatment. But Markoff can — and has, with gusto. Over the last year he has demanded compensation for his dog's pain and suffering, campaigned for changes to the utility's meter-reading policies and set up a provocatively named website, *dupmuggedourdog.com*.

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The episode has raised irksome questions for L.A.'s 113-year-old municipal utility, whose ingenuity in supplying an arid metropolis with modern life's necessities sometimes seems surpassed only by its inventiveness in finding new ways to anger customers. It also illustrates what happens when William Mulholland's heirs face off with the offbeat characters, human and canine, who dwell in the moneyed enclaves beneath the Santa Monica Mountains.

"They're hoping I'm going to go away, and if they think that, they haven't done any research on me," said Markoff, a retired dealer in precious metals. "I'm sure they've had the conversation: 'Steve's a crazy and we don't have to listen to him.' I am a crazy, by many contemporary and even by many ancient standards. But that doesn't mean I'm wrong on the policy issue."

The DWP has few concrete restrictions on when its meter readers can enter yards posted with warning signs. The result, Markoff asserts, is the sort of situation in which Ralph — who reacts suspiciously to uninvited guests — was smacked.

Markoff is agitating for stronger constraints on DWP employees' access to posted property. He hasn't gotten far. Utility officials acknowledge the meter reader struck Ralph and even sent Markoff a letter of apology. But they say the policy shifts he seeks are impractical.

"It's an unfortunate incident," DWP Chief of Staff Guy Lipa said. "I have a dog. I understand. But we also are a utility with 1.6 million electrical meters, and we have to serve our customers."

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Markoff's fenced compound is one many might find seductive, even absent an official duty to measure its water and electricity use.

The home sits on two wooded, wildflower-covered acres near Will Rogers State Historic Park. The entrance gate swings open, "Jurassic Park"-style, on a primeval scene, complete with a totem pole and two snarling, life-size tin tyrannosaurs that emerge from each side of the driveway as it winds between latticed palm fronds.

Markoff, 71, has the composed demeanor and diminutive mustache of an administrator in the British Raj — an impression offset by his curly silver hair and bead necklace. His zeal for questioning orthodoxies doesn't end with electric meters: In 2004 he founded a critical-thinking website, *procon.org*, that lays out contemporary political arguments' pros and cons.

"We have succeeded," Markoff said of the site, "if we have confused you."

His wife, Jadwiga, 63, grew up in Poland when it was still behind the Iron Curtain. She doesn't share her husband's penchant for tangling with the government. "I follow the rules more than my husband," she said. "It's my socialist upbringing."

The Markoffs' land is home to a sizable nonhuman contingent, including six chickens, three cats and two dogs. Sheila, a young pit bull mix, displays a hyperactivity that contrasts with the more stately bearing of 10-year-old Ralph, who has a copper coat turning white at the muzzle and a barrel-shaped body as thick as a wild hog's.

As the lunch hour approached on Friday, Aug. 29, the family's housekeeper said, Ralph trundled up to the house with blood dripping from his face. She wiped his snout and brought him to Jadwiga, who found a laceration between his eyes and nose.

About the same time, tree trimmer Chris Ray said he saw a DWP worker walk out the open front gate. Ray said he warned him that there were dogs loose on the property and offered to put them up but that the man held up his meter key — a specialized wrench used for gaining access to water meters — and said, "They learned already."

Within about an hour, Markoff was told of the incident and fired off an email to the utility alleging a "DWP attack on our dog." It was the first volley in what would be a protracted dispute.

At first Markoff asked for \$1,000 to compensate Ralph for pain and suffering, saying he would donate the money to the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. (No veterinary care was necessary, he said, noting that his wife is a retired pediatrician.) After DWP brass rejected that idea, Markoff set out to challenge what he says are deficiencies in the department's rules for when its employees can enter yards.

The DWP alerts customers in their bimonthly bills of their next estimated meter-reading dates. Markoff said that's not sufficient, and argues the utility should direct its workers not to venture onto posted property (except in emergencies) unless a customer consents — be it on the phone, in writing or simply in a conversation at the front door.

Such an approach would reduce the risk of dogs, or humans, mistaking meter readers for potentially dangerous intruders, he said.

"They believe they have a right to go on anybody's property at any time whether it's posted or not," Markoff said. "All they had to do was call us and make an appointment."

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Meter readers, like mail carriers, have long had wary dealings with dogs. Some utility companies have largely solved the problem through the widespread use of "smart meters" that wirelessly transmit measurements of power use. Southern California Edison has installed about 5 million such meters, a spokeswoman said, removing the need for manual readings at most customers' homes.

Officials at the DWP, the nation's largest municipal utility, acknowledge they lag far behind comparable private power providers in the use of these devices, in part because of their cost. (Southern California Edison's program cost \$1.6 billion.)

DWP officials said violent confrontations between dogs and meter readers are relatively rare: The department has recorded only 10 dog bites since the beginning of 2014, even as millions of measurements have taken place.

Lipa, the utility's chief of staff, said employees are trained according to industry standards in dealing with dogs and even carry special umbrellas to shield themselves from aggressive animals. He said the meter reader who hit Ralph, Jabril Durr, reported to his supervisors that he called out at the Markoffs' front gate to announce himself and saw no dogs before entering.

Durr alleged he hit Ralph with his meter key because he didn't have time to reach for his safety umbrella, Lipa said, noting that no witnesses were present to contradict this account.

"He and the dog were the only two people there to observe," Lipa said.

DWP officials declined to say how long Durr has worked for the utility or whether he was disciplined after the incident. Staring through the screen door of his bungalow in Hyde Park on a recent morning, Durr confirmed he still works for the DWP but refused to discuss what happened on that distant summer afternoon between him and Ralph.

"You'll have to talk to the department about those things," he said.

In audiences with a reporter, Ralph was a near-caricature of canine benevolence, liberal with sloppy kisses and eager to show off his knack for delivering rolled-up newspapers in his mouth. But no angels inhabit the City of Angels, even in the idyllic canyons of the Palisades, and on close inspection it turns out that Ralph is a dog with a past.

There was the time he bit the Markoffs' neighbor when she walked unannounced into their yard to return a pie pan. ("He wasn't trying to hurt her," Markoff said, explaining that Ralph was leaping for the dish she carried.) And the bicyclist down the road from the house. ("Ralph has some things about wheels.") The mysterious woman who wandered onto the property one day without explanation; Markoff speculates that

she wanted a better view of the chicken coop. (Ralph "took one bite and that was it.")

"Ralph isn't an aggressive dog," Markoff said. "Ralph basically protects our property. That's what dogs are supposed to do. That's one of the reasons people have dogs."

Markoff's insurgency has yielded one small but meaningful victory. Late last year, the DWP installed a radio frequency meter at his home that can be read from outside the fence.

Department officials say wireless electricity measurement is too expensive to mount on a wide scale. But for peace on two acres in Rustic Canyon, the price may have been right.

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Ralph, owned by Steve Markoff, at rear, was struck on the snout by an L.A. Department of Water and Power worker who had entered Markoff's Pacific Palisades property, which had "No Trespassing" signs.

(Jay L. Clendenin / Los Angeles Times)



Steve Markoff at his Pacific Palisades home with Ralph, left, and Sheila. Markoff has pressured the Department of Water and Power to change its policy about entering private property.

(Jay L. Clendenin / Los Angeles Times)