

LARA JENSEN



Flying veterinarian Dr Rick Fenny cared for the legendary 'Red Dog' (below) at his practice in Karratha, WA, in the 1970s.

Red Dog has his day

Red Dog, a feature film celebrating the life of a legendary Kelpie who roamed the Pilbara in the 1970s, is set for release in Australian cinemas in August.

The film, produced by Nelson Woss, tracks the life and times of 'Red Dog' – a gutsy four-legged larrikin with an uncanny nose for a social occasion who touched the lives of all with whom he crossed paths in the mining towns of Western Australia's north-west region.

The stout, rust-coloured Kelpie was believed to have been born in Paraburdoo in 1971, had several owners and several nicknames but never stopped in one place for long. Red Dog gained a reputation for being an intrepid hitchhiker, often stopping cars and iron-ore trains and

refusing to get out until he reached the destination he had in mind.

Veterinarian Dr Rick Fenny first encountered Red Dog when he opened a practice in Karratha in 1975. "Red Dog was loved and accepted by us all because he epitomised the spirit and the people of the times – the restless, itinerant, single, knockabout men of the north," Rick says. "He was all of that in a dog – a bloke's dog. He and I were kindred spirits and I considered him a mate as well as my patient."

Red Dog broke all the rules when it came to established protocol and convention and was held in such high esteem by Pilbara locals that they adopted him as their own. He was a fully paid member of the Transport Workers Union, the Metal Trades Union and the Dampier Salt Sports and Social Club.

"One thing that struck me about Red Dog was his incredible nose for an occasion – whether it was a football or cricket match, barbecue, outdoor movie or a session at the pub – it was simply expected and accepted that Red Dog would be there," Rick says.

Being Red Dog's vet was not without complications, as Rick found out after

discovering Red Dog had heartworm. "Because he was always moving I had to lock him in the pound so he could complete his heartworm treatment that took 28 days back then," Rick says. Word quickly spread that Red Dog had been impounded and enraged locals broke in and released him. The following day notices were put up around town to explain his impounding was for treatment purposes only.

"To avoid the chance of a repeat escape the ranger picked him up the following day and for the rest of his treatment he was guest of honour in the ranger's paddy wagon, sitting up as proud as punch while he cruised the streets and barked at every cat and dog within view – he had an absolute ball," Rick says.

Sadly, Red Dog became critically ill after a suspected dose of strychnine poisoning. Rick put Red Dog down and buried him in late 1979.

"Red Dog was a free-spirit who did exactly what he wanted – he had no master and he was nobody's servant," Rick says. Rick was a member of the original committee that arranged for a lifelike statue to be built in Red Dog's honour in the Pilbara town of Dampier.

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