

Greater Swiss Mountain Dog Turns 100

by Catherine O. Cooper

It was on a fateful day 100 years ago this year that the Greater Swiss Mountain Dog was “discovered” at of all places a dog show! If not for the expertise of a dog show judge and Sennehund expert the Greater Swiss Mountain Dog would most likely have fallen into extinction or at best become a short-haired version of the Bernese Mountain Dog.

Dr. Albert Heim was officiating at a show in Langenthal Switzerland where Franz Schertenleib, a well known breeder of Bernese Mountain Dogs and Entlebucher, entered a dog he thought to be a large, but accidentally short-haired “Berner Sennehund”. The dog’s name was Bello vom Schlossgut. Schertenleib was eager to learn what Dr. Heim would think of this dog. Bello was a beautifully marked, sturdy dog with very pretty colors. Any other judge would most likely have dismissed him from the ring as too short coated for a Berner and of no value for breeding but Heim told Schertenleib “This dog belongs in a different category: he is too gorgeous and thoroughbred to push him aside as a poor example of a Berner. He is an example of the old-time, almost extinct, butcher dog.” Heim wrote in his judge’s notes “Bello is a marvelous, old Sennenhund of the large almost extinct breed. Had he been entered under “other breeds” I would have recognized him as grossen Sennehund and awarded him first prize with pleasure. Since he was entered among the Durrbach’s I cannot give this interesting dog more than second prize. This dog is out of place here.”

On the spot Heim named the breed the Grosse Schweizer Sennehunde which translates to the big or large dog of the Swiss senne (alpine herdsman). The GSMD joined the ranks of the three existing Sennehund breeds, the Bernese Mountain Dog, the Appenzeller and the Entlebucher. Schertenleib began a search for other members of this “new” breed and systematic breeding of the GSMD began. Originally there were 21 dogs registered in the SHSB but only seven of those show up in the pedigrees of the modern day GSMD. This shows how closely the inbreeding has been. The breed is remarkably healthy in spite of the fact that it traces its roots back to seven individuals. This is undoubtedly because selection over the centuries for this type of dog had created a robust dog of a fairly uniform look.

In 1968 the first GSMD were imported to the US by J. Frederick and Patricia Hoffman and Perrin Rademacher. At this time there were thought to be 350-400 in existence. In 2007 the GSMD ranked number 90 amongst the AKC breeds in popularity up from 111 10 years ago. The breed continues to enjoy a very slow, but steady growth.

On this 100th anniversary of the recognition of the breed GSMD admirers would like to extend a heartfelt thank you to Dr. Albert Heim, the dog show judge who recognized the uniqueness of this wonderful breed.

Source: Quotes from Die Schweizer Hunderassen by Hans Raber

Ms. Cooper is an AKC Breeder Judge and is the Greater Swiss Mountain Dog Club of America’s AKC Gazette columnist, where this article was first published in 2008.