

Although dogs have been our companions for millennia, we have to guess at what prehistoric dogs looked like exactly. One thing we do know for sure, though, is the work they did. They followed the prey, drove the flocks and herds, guarded livestock and defended their owners' property.

Berner Sennenhund

The Bernese Mountain Dog

text and illustrations by RIA HÖRTER

Molassian Dogs

The most likely theory about the origin of the *Sennenhunde* (mountain dogs) in Switzerland is that they descended from dogs that traveled from the ancient Far East via Epirus and Greece to Italy. During the Roman conquests of large parts of Europe, these Molossian dogs traveled with the Romans over the Alps into Switzerland, where they mingled with local farm dogs. Again... it's a theory.

Books about along with depictions of dogs – mostly guard dogs, gun dogs, and herding dogs – dating from the early Middle Ages, were kept in monasteries, and with noble families, etc. A dog was considered a valuable possession. In *Historia Animalium* (*History of Animals*) by Conrad Gessner, published in 1563, the author stated in the part known as *Thierbuch*:

“So ein armer Mann einen Hund hat / so darffer er keiner anderer Knächten meer.” (“When a poor man owns a



“Because of its lovely colors and color pattern, in my opinion a good Bernese Mountain Dog is the most beautiful dog in appearance,” wrote Prof. Albert Heim in 1914.

(Drawing by Piero Cozzaglio, circa 1970)

A Senn or Sennerin is an Alpine herdsman or dairymaid who cares for the cows, and churns the milk into butter and makes cheese.

dog / he does not need other laborers.”)

Dürrbächler

Because the high mountains in the Swiss cantons (provinces) restricted contact, the Swiss dogs (formerly Roman dogs) developed in isolation. Information about the 16th- and 17th-century Swiss *Sennen* dogs is scarce. In general, it is assumed that they developed from cross-breeds of old farm dogs with dogs of occupiers and transients.

Often, 18th- and 19th-century Swiss art depicting life at the farms includes one or more dogs. Ancestors of one of the present *Sennen* breeds can be recognized. Their coat is black, white and rust-colored, or white and rust-colored. These farm dogs were called *Ringgi* if they had a white collar, *Blässli* for those with a white blaze, and *Bäri* if they had little or no white in their coats.

The first type of

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Sennenhund (mountain dog) that developed into a distinct breed was the Appenzeller Treibhund, later Appenzeller Sennenhund (Appenzeller Mountain Dog), Appenzell being a Swiss province. At the turn of the 19th to 20th century, the Dürrbächler or Berner Sennenhund (Bernese Mountain Dog) followed, its name derived from the Swiss capital of Bern. Then the Grosse Schweizer Sennenhund (Greater Swiss Mountain Dog) and finally, the Entlebucher Sennenhund (Entlebucher Mountain Dog), named after a district in the province of Lucerne.

Order in the Chaos

Without any doubt, the greatest supporter of the Bernese Mountain Dog was Swiss professor Albert Heim, a well-known geologist born in Zurich in 1849. During his geological expeditions in the Swiss Alps, young Albert saw numerous farm dogs used as cattle dogs, guard dogs, and *Käsereihunde* – draft dogs for transporting milk and cheese – and developed an interest in this national heritage.

Heim lived when the Victorian passion for sorting and classifying everything was developing, and the various types of dogs were being given distinct names and bred separately.

In the Netherlands, there is a fine illustration of this development in Henri Comte de Bylandt's 1894 book *Raspunten van den meest bekende hondenrassen* (*Breed points of most of the well-known dog breeds*), where the author tried "to keep order in the chaos" of names, types and breeding points. However, none of the Swiss



The oldest task of the Bernese Mountain Dog: transportation of the cows' milk to the Käserei (creamery).
(Photographer unknown)



'The Small Party'

by Swiss artist Sigmund Freudenberg (1745-1801)

Without any doubt, the tri-colored dog is an ancestor of one of the four Sennen dogs.

(Collection Schweizerische Landesbibliothek, Bern)

Sennenhunde are mentioned in this book. When de Bylandt published his book *Honderassen* (*Dog Breeds*) in 1897, only the Appenzeller Mountain Dog was mentioned.

Two German dog writers, Ludwig Beckmann and Richard Strebel, published their books about dog breeds in 1894 and 1903/04 respectively, and again, included no information about the Swiss breeds. Most of the dogs in Switzerland were farm

dogs because few could afford expensive dogs from abroad, but the interest in old farm dogs was growing.

Pioneer

The attractive coat colors – black and tan with white markings – contributed to the spread of the mountain dogs outside the farms. In the province of Bern, they were used as guard, herding, and draft dogs.

The legendary Franz Schertenleib, a pioneer in breeding the *Sennenhunde*, bought his first Dürrbächler in 1892 from a traveling basket maker. Later, he started breeding mountain dogs using the kennel names von Schlossgut and von der Rothöhe. As well as Schertenleib, Dr. A. Scheidegger, a veterinarian from

Langenthal, was breeding under the kennel name von Oberraargau.

In 1899, the dog club Berna was founded and members occupied themselves breeding Dürrbächler. However, at the end of the 19th century, this mountain dog was threatened with extinction.

According to Dr. Hans Räber, in the chapter *Bauernhunde* (*Farm dogs*) in his unsurpassed *Enzyklopädie der Rassehunde* (1993), it was to their credit that these fanciers collected the best types of various farm dogs, classified, and bred them.

Thus, according to Räber, they did not save Swiss farm dogs from extinction, but divided the general population of various farm dogs and cattle dogs into separate breeds.

Domestic Farm Dogs

Albert Heim wrote the following about Swiss domestic dogs: "Only between 1895-1910, did the Swiss people become aware of the fact that in our country we owned, still unnoticed, ancient dogs. Not a single book published before 1900 mentioned these Swiss dogs that had no names. The dogs were everywhere but nobody saw them as a breed. They were too differ-



Albert Heim (left) and Nanny Behrens-Sieber, the first breeder of Bernese Mountain Dogs in Germany. Photo taken in 1920 during an exhibition in Olten, Switzerland. The dogs are Regina von Oberraargau and Ch. Leo Greiner.
(Photographer unknown)

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ent in appearance. But then everywhere in Europe a lively interest awakened in domestic dogs. In Germany the modern Schnauzer was developed from the *Stallpinscher* [stable dog]; old sheepdogs formed the foundation of the German Shepherd; the old bull-baiting dog was developed into the German Boxer; and old bird dogs stood at the cradle of modern pointing dogs. Encouraged by these developments, Swiss dog fanciers became interested in domestic farm dogs.”

I think a good-looking Bernese Mountain Dog is the finest dog in appearance because of its proportion and lovely coat color.

– Prof. Albert Heim, 1914

Split Nose

Albert Heim noticed the Dürrbächler – later, Bernese Mountain Dog – for the first time in 1904. By then he was already a well-known fancier and judge in Switzerland and abroad.

In 1907, a number of Swiss breeders from Burgdorf attended the dog show in Lucerne with their Dürrbächlere. As the judge, Heim was informed exhaustively by the exhibitors about the dogs and their origin. Heim published his experiences in the *Centralblatt für Jagd- und Hundeliebhaber*, an official publication of the Swiss Kennel Club (*Schweizerische Kynologische Gesellschaft – SKG*), founded in 1883.

Heim became the first president of the breed club, the *Schweizerische Dürrbach-Klub*, founded in 1907 with 14 members. In 1908, the club published a breed standard, and changed the breed name to Berner Sennenhund, and the club name to Berner Sennenhund Klub. In the same year, Heim judged the breed at the SKG’s 25th-anniversary show.

A striking breed characteristic at that time was a split nose. Some breeders regarded this as typical for the Dürrbächler, but Heim offered strenuous resistance. As a result, almost no split-nosed Berner Sennen dogs were seen thereafter.

Fit for Function

In 1910, an unbelievable amount of 107 Bernese Mountain Dogs were exhibited at the *Klubschau* (club show) in Burgdorf (Switzerland), held to gain an overview of the breed and assess breeding stock. Most of them were owned by farmers from the vicinity.

Burgdorf, in the valley of the river Emme, had become the center of activities with Bernese Mountain Dogs, after Franz Schertenleib arrived in 1892 and began to breed and promote the Dürrbächler.

Other early breeders in Switzerland were the Frankhausens (von Chüjerhof), Fritz Iseli (von Sumiswald), and the kennels von Angstorf, Holzweid, von Dürsrutti, Gerimoos,

von Hogerbuur and von Chaindon.

At the 1979 World Show in Bern, the World Winner title was awarded to Asso van Hogerbuur, a six-year-old male who still made a daily trip to the *Käserei* (creamery).

Today we would say “fit for function.”

A faux pas made by Pluto

By the middle of the 20th century, the breed in Switzerland was producing shy dogs. Dr. Hans Räber stated in his book *Die Schweizer Hunderasse (Swiss breeds)* “... this is absolutely not a consequence of inbreeding but the legacy of old farm dogs.” “Somewhat reserved to strangers” is a trait seen in many breeds. Crossing with fresh blood could be a solution.

In 1948, a lucky occurrence was the Newfoundland male Pluto von Erlengut jumping over a hedge to mate the Bernese Mountain Dog Christine von Erlengut. The result was a litter of four males and three females. All of them looked like Newfoundlands with small white marks at their feet. In 1951, one of the females bred to

a Bernese Mountain Dog produced eight puppies, two of them marked like a BMD. In 1952, when the BMD-marked female from that litter was bred to a BMD, all five pups were marked like Bernese Mountain Dogs. Many years later, one could conclude that Pluto bringing the Newfoundland’s “sweetness of temperament” to the breed was a blessing for the Bernese Mountain Dog.

Unfortunately, in the Netherlands, after some turbulent years as a result of serious behavior problems, the Dutch Kennel Club had to give notice of a general ban on BMD breeding for 1973 and 1974. Some breeders were pointed out as the cause, that inbreeding had resulted in bad and unreliable temperaments. Negative press about the breed’s temperament resulted in distrust of the Dutch breed club. In the end, a new breed club was formed and new imports from Switzerland helped to solve the problem. I can’t speak for other countries, but today in the Netherlands, the Bernese



Vieräugler (“four eyes”) is a term used to describe a Bernese Mountain Dog with small rust-colored markings above its eyes. When Prof. Heim suggested changing the name Dürrbächler to Berner Sennenhund, his plan faced a wall of resistance. Only in 1908 did breeders give in.

(Photo: Eva-Maria Krämer)



In 1948, Crown Princess Beatrix of the Netherlands and her sisters, Irene and Margriet, received a Bernese Mountain Dog as a present.

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A draft dog test in Kelso, Scotland, 2010.

Trials for draft dogs were held in Switzerland as early as 1901.

(Photo: Bernese Mountain Dog Club, Scotland)

Mountain Dog is a happy family dog. However, good socialization and training are absolutely necessary.

Something about the Breed in America

Isaac Scheiss, a farmer in Florence, Kansas, imported the first two Berner Sennenhunde in the U.S. in 1926. Donna von der Rothöhe (breeder Franz Schertenleib) and Poincare von Sumiswald (breeder Fritz Iseli) were not registrable with the AKC since the breed was not recognized. When they produced a litter in 1926, Scheiss registered the pups with the Swiss Kennel Club under the kennel name of the Clover Leaf.

In 1936, Glen Shadow of Ruston, La., imported another pair: Fridy von Haslenbach (Fridy, breeder F. Stadler) and Quell von Tiergarten (Felix, breeder A. Schoch). Because of Shadow's efforts in promoting the Bernese Mountain Dog, the AKC adopted the Swiss breed standard and recognized the breed in the Working Group on April 13, 1937.

The first Bernese Mountain Dog to earn an AKC title – a CD in 1962 – was

Bernese Mountain Dog

Country of Origin: Switzerland

Used as: Draft dog, herding dog and guard dog; now, family dog

Life Expectancy: 6 to 10 years (some sources say 7 to 8 years)

First Breed Standard: 1908 (based on the Dürrbächler)

FCI Breed Standard:

fci.be/Nomenclature/Standards/045g02-en.pdf

AKC Breed Standard

images.akc.org/pdf/breeds/standards/BerneseMountainDog.pdf

Breed Group:

FCI Group 2 – Pinscher and Schnauzer – Molossoid and Swiss Mountain and Cattle dogs

AKC Group 3 – Working Group

Breed Clubs:

Schweizerischer Klub für Berner Sennenhunde;

berneseennenhund.ch/club/

Bernese Mountain Dog Club of America; bmdca.org

Aya v Verlap, owned by Bishop W.W. Horstick and his daughter, Mary Ann, of the upper Midwest. In 1966, Sanctuary Woods Black Knight, bred by Bea Knight of Oregon and owned by Roberta Subin, won the breed's first group placement, a Group 4th at the Riverside KC show in California. He was six months old. In 1968, he became the breed's first AKC champion.

Registrations grew slowly, from two in 1937, and three in 1955 to 31 in 1966 and 43 in 1968, the year the Bernese Mountain Dog Club of America was formed.

We have tried to find the names of all photographers. Unfortunately, we do not always succeed. Please send a message to the author if you think you are the owner of a copyright.

A retired bookseller and publisher, Ria Hörter is a dog writer from The Netherlands. She is the contributing editor of the leading Dutch national dog magazine Onze Hond (Our Dogs) and works for the Welsh Springer Spaniel Club of the Netherlands of which she was one of the founders. She served the club for 44 years, as secretary and chairman and is a Honorary Life Member of this breed club. She was nominated twice, and a finalist in the 2009 Annual Writing Competition of the Dog Writers Association of America, for her articles in Dogs in Canada.

On April 12, 2014, she was awarded the Dutch Cynology Gold Emblem of Honour. The award was presented by the Dutch Kennel Club.

For more information visit: riahorter.com



*Swedish Multi Champion Berntiers On Demand
The Bernese Mountain Dog
is the only long-haired Sennenhund.*

(Photo: Berntiers Kennel/Madeleine Lundh, Sweden)