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Berner Sennehund
The Bernese Mountain Dog

*HISTORY*

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Molassian Dogs
The most likely theory about the origin of the Sennehunde (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 arm Mann einen Hund hat / so darf er keiner anderer Knächten mehr.” (“When a poor man owns a 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 Senner dogs is scarce. In general, it is assumed that they developed from crossbreedings 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 Senner 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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Ordination 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 Rasputen 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 Sennenhunde are mentioned in this book.

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 different.

The oldest task of the Bernese Mountain Dog: transportation of the cows’ milk to the Käserei (creamery). (Photographer unknown)
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 Dürrbächler. 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 Hundefreunde*, 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 Chüjärtöff), 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 von 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
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 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.

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