

# FACT AND FICTION

## About Our Breed

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A monastery and hospice was founded in the year 980 by the Augustinian monk Bernard de Menton on the mountain which in Roman times was called Mons Jovis and from that time on the Great Saint Bernard Pass. This pass leading from Switzerland to Italy is called the Great Saint Bernard in contrast to the Little Saint Bernard Pass leading from France to Italy.

Many tales have made the rounds as to how Saint Bernard dogs came into existence that early by the chance arrival at the Hospice of a single dog, often mentioned as having been a Pyrenean mountain dog or bitch, which was then supposed to have been mated with a dog they had there at that time. This is not the case. First because there are no records anywhere to substantiate these stories, and second because the crossing or even several crossings between two different breeds do not create a new breed. Bernard de Menton, after who the mountain pass was call ever since the foundation in 980, cannot be identified with being the creator of the breed because there were no Saint Bernard dogs at the Hospice at that time. They were first heard of no less than 700 years later.

The Saint Bernard dog was never pictured until 1695, and then at the Hospice on the Great Saint Bernard by an unknown painter. The two paintings at the Hospice show well-built, short-haired dogs with long tails and dew claws, typey heads, practically white. One is a mantle, the other a splash-coated dog. How, when, and from what place did these dogs come to the Hospice on the Great Saint Bernard? It has been definitely established that up to the first half of the seventeenth century the Hospice was without any dogs. Inasmuch as the two paintings of 1695 show a completely developed, even inbred, breed, Professor Albert Heim fixes the time of their first introduction at the Hospice as between 1660 and 1670. In doing so he allowed 25 years for the development of the dogs until the breed looked as pictured in these painting of 1695. Thus we can say that our breed today is about 300 years old.

The dogs that were bred consistently at the Hospice from about 1660 on until they looked like those represented in the picture of 1695 came from Swiss valleys in the neighborhood of the Hospice. These, let us call them valley dogs, existed there for centuries without being known as a particular breed. No particular notice was taken of the dog in general in those times, and his existence was just taken as a matter of course. Consequently we see that the type developed at the Hospice and only very much later call the Saint Bernard dog, named after the Hospice, was bred from dogs existing before that time in the countryside of Switzerland.

The first time a Saint Bernard dog is mentioned was in 1707. Therefore the written history of our breed begins with that year. It is generally taken for granted that the dogs of the Hospice were first intended to be used as watch dogs. Gradually, as a matter of course, their famous and unique life-serving work came into being. The first record of this lifesaving work dates from 1774, at which time such work was mentioned as having been generally known for a long time. This leads to the assumption that lifesaving work began early in the eighteenth century. Other dates regarding that lifesaving work of the dogs were recorded in the years 1787 and 1800.

This brings us to another milestone. So far we have had these important dates: Between 1660 and 1670 the beginning of our breed, around 1700 the beginning of lifesaving work, and now from 1800 on it was generally known the world over that there was a special dog breed on the Great Saint Bernard Pass carrying on such work although the breed had no name at that time.

From 1800 to 1812 the most famous and most honored dog known in history, the Saint Bernard Barry, lived and worked at the Hospice. His deeds have been recounted in many books. He saved the lives of some forty people and, having been retired, died in Bern in 1814, where he can be seen today in the Museum of National History. The story that the famous Barry was killed when trying to save a person, supposed to have been the forty-first, is a fable. Many other Saint Bernard dogs did similar outstanding rescue work like old Barry, and their names can be found in the archives of the Hospice.

This Barry of the Hospice on the Great Saint Bernard, who lived from 1800 to 1814, remains the basic ideal type of the smooth-coated Hospice dog along whose lines the modern breed, many years later call the Saint Bernard, was developed.

During the winters of 1816, 1817 and 1818 the snow storms at the Great Saint Bernard were especially heavy so that several dogs perished while doing their rescue work. In those years reports spread that the breed was completely extinguished. Although this was not the case, the story found its way into many magazines and books. What was about to be, but not entirely, extinguished during those hard winters was only that Saint Bernard strain living at the Hospice. It was relatively easy for the Hospice to get dogs of the same breed from the nearby valleys and it is a matter of record that the stock at the Hospice was completely replenished two years later. Reports that on account of the so-called extinction of

the Hospice family during those severe winters the remaining dogs were crossed with Great Danes. Danish dogs or English Mastiffs do not coincide with the true facts. Such crossings have never been made at the Hospice.

The only experimental crossing was made with Newfoundland blood, first in 1830, and it has to be borne in mind that the Newfoundland dogs used were of the old type, very well known in England since 1800, and on the continent since 1820. Why was the crossing made? As just mentioned several Hospice dogs perished from severe, cold weather and the Hospice reasoned that the long hair of the big and strong Newfoundland would protect the shorthaired Saint Bernard dogs better against the cold.

Up to 1830 the Saint Bernard was smooth-coated dog. From the moment of the crossing with the Newfoundland dog some litters now and then contained a long-haired puppy. In other words the rough-coated Saint Bernard came into being in 1830, which is 160 years after the breed's origin.

Soon it became evident that the long-haired dogs could not be used for rescue work. On their long patrols through high snow, ice formed in the long hair and soon the dogs were weighed down to incapacity by an armor of snow and ice. Therefore the Hospice sold or gave away the rough puppies which appeared as a result of the Newfoundland crossing between the years 1832 and 1860. The Hospice kept only the short-haired puppies. The Swiss recipients of the rough puppies from the Hospice – their names have been carefully recorded – used them for breeding with the valley dogs, which resulted eventually in litters with partly smooth and partly rough puppies. The rough-coated Saint Bernard dog was generally preferred in the countryside of Switzerland, while the smooth-coated Saint Bernard was mostly at home in the mountainous parts. Such was the situation in Switzerland between the years 1840 and 1880.

The temporary crossing with the Newfoundland dog, as done in three instances at the Hospice, did not spoil the Hospice Saint Bernard breed. It took only one or at most two generations for the original Saint Bernard type to break through in the old manner. The only characteristic remaining with some of the puppies born was the long hair and that characteristic was retained by selective breeding done only in the Swiss countryside.

While all this was going on the breed was still without a name. The first people to recognize that there was an outstanding dog breed in Switzerland were the dog-minded English who came across these animals on their travels through Switzerland. They called the Hospice dogs Holy Dogs and Saint Bernard Mastiffs. Landseer called them Alpine Mastiffs. Others called them Mountain Dogs, Monastery Dogs, or merely Hospice Dogs. The Germans suggested in 1878 calling them Alpine Dogs. The Swiss living in the canton of Bern called them Barry Dogs (Barryhung) up to 1860, because Barry was their most famous representative.

In 1823 for the first time a so-called Saint Bernard dog is mentioned, but it took almost sixty years more until in 1880 the name Saint Bernard Dog was finally recognized.

Having arrived at 1880, it would be well to review the status of the newly named Saint Bernard breed as of that time. There was no Swiss Saint Bernard Club yet, no Swiss Kennel Club and no Swiss Dog Stud Book. The only thing established in 1880 was the fact that the valley dogs and the Hospice dogs were one and the same breed. It was further established that the valley dogs came first to the Hospice on the Great Saint Bernard between 1660 and 1670, and again in 1818, 1857, 1866, and other years. Since 1800 Hospice dogs came down to the countryside, especially so in the years following 1832, (the first rough ones), then again in 1862, 1884, etc. There is no question that many of the breeders throughout the countryside during the eighties bred the Saint Bernard dog only to satisfy the ever increasing foreign, especially English demand. They did not have the proper breed knowledge and consequently the type of our breed suffered some damage in Switzerland during those years.

In order to save and preserve the originality of the Saint Bernard breed the Swiss Kennel Club (*Schweizerische Kynologische Gesellschaft*, or short S.K.G.) was founded in 1883, and when the society called its first meeting on March 15, 1884, for the purpose of bringing order into a situation which could best be called chaotic, Heinrich Schumacher (1831-1903) from Holligen near Bern appeared just in time and supplied to that meeting all the necessary data regarding the history of the breed. Schumacher had been the first one outside the Hospice to carry on pure breeding and he had started the first Saint Bernard stud book. Moreover, he had

been responsible for the introduction of the breed to many countries outside Switzerland. Schumacher's vast experience was of immense value to the Swiss Kennel Club (S.K.G.) in its struggle for the preservation of the original breed.

Schumacher, who was a great dog lover and had an expert eye for breed characteristics, knew which of the various dogs spread all over Switzerland were of Hospice origin. He selected from their progeny the short-haired specimens in order to recreate the original ideal of the old Barry of 1800-1814. Thus he selected in the year 1855 his Barry first who became the ancestor of the Schumacher family tree. Thus in the year 1855 the first organized breeding of Saint Bernards began outside the Hospice, but based on former achievements of the Hospice. Schumacher was frequent guest at the Hospice and was recognized there as an expert on these dogs. He not only brought dogs and bitches from the Hospice to the countryside, but he also took Saint Bernards of both sexes, bred by himself, to the Hospice where they were used by the monks to replenish their own stock. When in 1866 he brought a dog and a bitch to the Hospice, the old prior exclaimed with tears in his eyes: "Here is resurrected old Barry of 1814." This event is of historical importance because it proves that the Schumacher dogs bred from Hospice stock were identical in appearance with the Hospice dogs, which some 75 years earlier brought the breed its first worldwide fame. I am thinking of Barry and many others before and after him.

Schumacher's most fruitful breeding period extended from 1860 to 1890, and during these years he sold a great many dogs to England and Russia. While, as mentioned before, in the countryside many incompetent breeders cropped up just to satisfy the steadily increasing demand for long-haired dogs and while thus many strange, bastard-creations appeared all over Switzerland, often only to satisfy English demands, Schumacher remained firm and stuck to the old ideal of Barry. He could follow that path because with his experienced eye it was easy for him to single out the various Saint Bernard families in Switzerland which had resulted from those sales and donations of the Hospice between 1832 and 1860.

Despite his many sales of Saint Bernards to foreign countries Schumacher was always in a position to supply the various domestic breeders with the best material to carry on the breed in Switzerland. He was the only one at that time who gave his

dogs a pedigree proving correct ancestry, and he was the first breeder to register his dogs in the Swiss Dog Stud Book (SHSB). Schumacher's first registrations are recorded in the first volume of the Swiss Dog Stud Book which appeared in 1884 and which continues to the present day. Schumacher retired in 1890, and future breeding of Saint Bernard dogs in Switzerland from that time on was built upon and developed from his stock and can be traced accordingly in the early volumes of the Swiss Dog Stud Book (SHSB).

So far we have followed the history of the Saint Bernard dog up to 1890 in Switzerland, and now let us see what happened outside the boundaries of Switzerland. As already mentioned, the dog-minded English were the first people to find something extraordinary in these dogs which the Swiss so far had taken for granted or as a matter of course. The English were first attracted when Barry's fame spread over Switzerland's frontiers, and as far back as 1820 the first Hospice dogs were brought to England, where they were crossed with the English Mastiff. While such crossings were made in England with the imported Swiss Hospice Dog, it must be borne in mind that the English Mastiff was never brought to the Hospice for any crossing. In 1815 the Hospice dog Lion was brought to England and portrayed there at the age of one by Landseer. This famous painting, to my knowledge, is in a private English collection. Two sons of Lion, also painted by Landseer a few years later, can be seen in the National Gallery in London. All the Ancestors of what today we call the English Saint Bernard were imported from Switzerland to England. The oldest English picture of a Saint Bernard is the one of the just mentioned Lion, as painted by Landseer. It was painted 150 years later than the two pictures at the Hospice on the Great Saint Bernard.

Imports from Switzerland to England on a large scale were made between 1860 and 1870, mostly from Schumacher who even at that time kept his own stud book. From those early years in the sixties date the beginning of the breed in England where Saints Bernards appeared for the first time at dog shows in 1863. As early as in the seventies it appeared that the continuance of the breed in England was accompanied by a loss of type, a phenomenon which I will take up later. The dogs in England not only turned out to be very tall but also very narrow in body and head. To correct this situation new imports were constantly necessary, but even these could not prevent the development of a dog which was different from the original Swiss dog.

English fanciers, indifferent to this development of the breed in their country, formed the first known Saint Bernard club in 1882, although that club operated without a standard for five years. It was then, when more and more people returning from travels in England reported about their different Saint Bernard dog, that the Swiss Kennel Club and the Swiss Saint Bernard Club began their work for the rescue of the Swiss National Dog from Anglicization. Together they issued the Swiss Saint Bernard Standard in 1884, as published in the aforementioned first volume of the Swiss Dog Stud Book. This Standard of 1884 was the first standard for the breed. The English Standard dates from 1887.

Upon the issuance of the Swiss Standard there followed three years of quarrels for the supremacy of the breed. An international congress which took place in Brussels in 1886, did not settle the question whether England or Switzerland was the breed authority. Not until another international congress took place in Zurich on June 2, 1887, was the question of supremacy for the breed settled. There all countries, except England, recognized the Swiss Standard and confirmed it on an international basis. Germany which had been in the English camp up to that time had made investigations in Switzerland and found that the Swiss claims regarding the breed were fully justified in accordance with its history.

From 1890 on the Swiss Saint Bernard became one of the most popular dog breeds not only in Europe, but practically in every country of the world where the dog sport is practiced. The difficulty of breeding the dog along traditional lines was always present wherever the Saint Bernard became popular because Switzerland could not supply enough stock for building up breed in other countries.

Popular request was generally for the long-haired variety and those responsible for setting the styles care little about the fact that these dogs cannot be kept up to standard without proper short-haired foundation. It is that phenomenon of the breed, which is unfortunately not understood in many a country breeding the Saint Bernard dog. Whenever and wherever rough-coated dogs are used exclusively for breeding, the type gradually degenerates and loses its original characteristics. On the other hand, as long as the breeding of the rough variety of the Saint Bernard dog is periodically strengthened with Swiss smooth stock, that rough variety will always retain the necessary breed characteristics.

In the United States the breed did not make progress for many years because there was a lack of the proper Swiss short-haired stock. In the past two decades this deficiency has been corrected and as a result the Saint Bernard dog in this country today has reached equality with the status of the breed in the country of origin.

My sources of information in the foregoing were the researches made by Richard Strebel, Albert Heim and others.

### **A Word About The Author**

*Arthur Hesser was a member of the Saint Bernard Club of America from 1932 until his death in 1993, and served as Vice-President, Governor, Delegate to the American Kennel Club, and as Correspondent to the AKC Gazette. He showed his first Saint Bernard in 1919 and since that time has been active in promotional work for the breed in the U.S.A. and in Europe. He has judged seven of this club's national specialty shows. For his contributions to the Saint Bernard in this country, Mr. Hesser was awarded an honorary life membership in the Saint Bernard Club of America and was honored by having two National Specialty shows dedicated to him. Mr. Hesser was also an Honorary Member of the Swiss and German Saint Bernard Clubs in recognition of promotional activities in behalf of the Saint Bernard dog, and held the golden honor pin with citation from the German Kennel Club (V.D.H.).*