

## Beginnings of the AKC: The AKC Under Attack

### The formation of the American Kennel Club.

*By Amy Fernandez*

Interest in breeding dogs exploded in the late 1800s with the heavy importation of a wide range of breeds, as well as the proliferation of dog shows. Activity was especially brisk in major cities, and advertising breeding stock became more commonplace. AKC implemented a mandatory registration policy in 1888. It met with the expected initial resistance, which was soon overshadowed by a brand new nightmare. As AKC picked up steam, clubs as well as individuals started having second thoughts about the organization. In part this reflected growing public distrust of big business and monopolies; it was also attributable, however, to the fact that clubs had not anticipated the tremendous, sometimes insurmountable, obstacles they would face sending delegates to meetings. Many parts of the U.S. west of St. Louis had very few paved roads at that time, leaving train travel as the only viable option for traversing any appreciable distance. Most trips took several days, often in combination with coach travel, with costs comparable to a first class airplane ticket today.

Dog clubs could scarcely afford these expenses, forcing delegates to pay out-of-pocket to get to the meetings, which many could simply not afford. Those delegates who were able to make the trips complained of the dangers, discomforts and costs of getting to the AKC delegates meetings. Delegates from the West Coast were almost always out of luck, since a week of travel each way was required, virtually impossible for the average person. The AKC officers were either located in New York or in nearby cities or towns and were always able to make these meetings. The skewed voting that resulted became hard to overlook, and began to seem suspiciously like "taxation without representation," a notion that was played to the hilt in the press. Some fanciers began to consider alternatives to working within what they perceived as AKC's limitations.

"Dr. J. Frank Perry has issued a call for a meeting for the formation of the National Breeders Club, which is to be composed solely of breeders. The circular issued says: As you well know our kennel club is largely made up of individuals, each owning no more than a single dog; a few do not even have one, and are merely so-called dog lovers. The breeders are always in the minority. It is really only the last mentioned who by their experience and frequent attendance at bench shows can have any true idea of what is needed to advance canine interest." (American Field, March 10, 1888)

The newly seceded New England Kennel Club held its fourth show in April. During the show a meeting was held to form the National Breeders Dog Club. Their declared mission statement was to advance the interests of individual breeders without club affiliation, which at that point represented a substantial portion of the dog fancy. Equally worrisome was the fact that Perry's group never made it clear whether they intended to work with AKC or supplant it. Worse yet, the entire situation encouraged the perception that America's dog fancy had progressed from chaos to monopoly in four short years.

On July 5, 1888 the National Breeders Dog Club held its second meeting in New York, reportedly well-attended by many influential people. "Unrest among fanciers was rampant, indicating high interest in all related matters." (AKC Gazette)

It was not until 1910 that the first championship certificate was issued by AKC, No. 1 to a Beagle named Sir Novice. Weeks later, on Aug. 4, August Belmont, AKC's fourth president, convened a special meeting to discuss publishing a monthly gazette. Presumably to keep costs down, he recommended a no-frills format. "We shall withhold no news from the gazette. It will be a dry bones compilation of information." The AKC Gazette subsequently debuted in January of 1889 with no illustrations, photos or editorial content. At that August meeting Belmont also stated for the record that it was "time to do something about the National Dog Club."

By mid-year Belmont proposed offering associate memberships in AKC, which was approved in January 1889. This prompt action suggests that AKC recognized the threat that the National Breeders Dog Club posed and the validity of the issues they advanced. Perry didn't take it well, but AKC offered a deal that was hard to refuse. AKC's associate membership fee matched the National Dog Club's \$5 fee and permitted one AKC delegate per 100 members. To sweeten the deal, AKC threw in two free registrations and a one-year subscription to the newly launched Gazette. It worked.

"The principal reason for forming the National Dog Club was to give breeders, outside kennel clubs, an organization for

mutual protection. Mr. Belmont, in proposing 'associate membership' in the American Kennel Club, attempts to take from us our very existence, and were it not for the blunders, favoritism, and maladministration of the American Kennel Club there would now be no call for the National Dog Club. In my opinion, it has a great task before it, that of ridding the doggy world of fraud and tricksters." (American Field, March 10 1889)

The National Dog Club disbanded in 1889 and most its 200 members joined AKC. But a few differences were soon discovered. NDC policy provided identical membership privileges for everyone. AKC forbade women to hold office or serve as delegates, which must have been a double whammy for female dog breeders. In 1900 the Ladies Kennel Association of America was founded in response to the pervasive "boys club" mentality promoted by Westminster and AKC. "The members of the dog clubs in the United States apparently enjoy themselves and what are known as 'the boys' seem to get on very well. Turf, Field and Farm reports that an excellent banquet was held after the Lynn KC show and the Lynn doggy men fairly jumped off their chairs." (The Canine World, June 6, 1890)

The Ladies Kennel Association was admitted to AKC in 1900 but was forced to send male delegates to meetings, as did all clubs until 1974. The American Kennel Register ceased publication the same year that NDC disbanded, and AKC's most formidable opponent, James Watson, was immediately appointed to the stud book committee. Two years later he became chairman of both the AKC stud book and the rules committee and in 1898 became the first editor of the Gazette.

All these individuals came to the American dog scene armed with immense knowledge, unwavering conviction and absolute belief in the power of the pen. They never avoided controversy and often found themselves at odds with one another. Although they very nearly killed it before it was even on solid footing, AKC coalesced around their relentless efforts to ensure the best future for purebred dogs.

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