

The Swiss Farmer's Best "Hired Hand"

BY M.J. NELSON

Imagine being in a business where your employees never asked for a raise, never goofed off on the job, never demanded that you renegotiate their contracts, worked seven days a week for however many hours you worked, did whatever job needed to be done and never took a sick day. Sound like a business owner's utopia? Well, that is exactly what the farmers in Switzerland had in the days before the development of mechanized transport.

The Grosser Schweizer Sennenhund or Greater Swiss Mountain Dog, the largest of the traditional Swiss Sennenhunds, was a guard dog, drover and draft dog for the dairymen in the Swiss Alps. On any given day, the dog might be called upon to haul the farmer's products to market, drive the cattle from one mountain pasture to another and defend the cows in the event a wolf or a lynx fancied a meal of beef or more likely, a veal dinner.

The early Swiss farmers, Celts, started selecting the biggest dogs from the small "torf-hunde" to protect their livestock against the wild animals. The Celts were also known to breed cattle so some of the dogs were used to drive the cattle from one place to another. When the Romans occupied Switzerland, the Celtic farmers remained along with their livestock and their dogs.



Ch. Whispering Palm's Heaven Can Wait CD JHD NWPD VGS ("Halo") and Ch. Macalphine's Blackberi Brandi CD RN JHD NWPD VGS ("Brandi") on a hike with owner Laurie Carmody.



Ch. Whispering Palm's Happy Ending CD RA JND NWPD NDD VGS ("Molly"), another of Carmody's Swissies, hones her herding skills with the sheep that Carmody keeps on her property on Long Island.

There is one theory that the Sennenhunds were descendants of the Molossean dogs, a large Mastiff type dog that may have accompanied the Romans on their forays through the Alps in the first century B.C. However, some doubt has been cast on that possible origin by recent scientific findings which state that the Roman Mastiff origin for these breeds was based on a single dog skull. This skull was found to have been buried nearly 1,000 years after the Romans had departed. A second theory is that the Phoenicians brought large dogs with them to settlements in Spain. These dogs later influenced the development of the Spanish Mastiff, Great Pyrenees and finally the large Swiss breeds. But, still another possibility is that a large breed existed in central Europe as far back as the Neolithic period. In all likelihood, the Romans eventually brought their dogs to the alpine regions and these dogs very probably were bred with the dogs that were in existence in the area at the time.

Farm dogs in central Europe for centuries served as watchdogs and protectors for the farm. They were also used to drive cattle from one place to another as this is something that

is very easy for a dog to learn. In some areas, they were used to pull carts. The big farm dogs were used to bring milk to the cheese factories. The result was that many of these dogs were very versatile and this versatility has persisted through the generations to the present day.

The Greater Swiss Mountain Dog is one of the breeds that has retained this versatility. In addition to being very skilled as draft dogs, many Swissies are excellent herding dogs and packing dogs. Some Swissy owners have decided to use these skills. "I wanted a large dog that was good for hiking and obedience. Since Swissies were originally bred to be farm dogs, I thought they'd be good at both. Because I like to hike, having my dog be a pack dog was pretty much a natural move. But, since they were farm dogs, I also decided to try herding," said Kelly Nevin who owns Ch Markee's Green with Envy CD RE WPD X WWD VGS ("Titan") and Ch. Matterhorn Whispering Palms Pleiades RA JHD NWPD WWD ("Fury.") "While Swissies can be a bit stubborn, they generally want to please you and they are also very food motivated. While herding aptitude varies from dog to dog, there are some that are naturals. If the dog has a strong herding instinct, it is a matter of shaping that instinct so you have control of the dog. The hardest part is getting the dog to

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learn that sometimes they have to stop and wait before they get to herd again. Stopping and waiting isn't much fun for the dogs so they need to learn that they have to wait before they get to play. Swissies are pretty smart so most dogs catch on to this fairly quickly. Sometimes you get a dog that is not interested in herding at all and they ignore the sheep. With these dogs, you have to take a few introductions before they get interested in herding sheep. Another thing that works sometimes is putting a second dog that really finds herding exciting in with the disinterested dog. This frequently turns the light on for the dog that is not interested in herding. However, it is important to take herding lessons with someone who is accustomed to herding with large dogs before you start. However, since most people can't get access to stock without taking lessons, this usually is not much of an issue."

Laurie Carmody, who owns Ch Whispering Palm's Happy Ending CD RA JND NWPD NDD VGS ("Molly"), Ch Whispering Palm's Heaven Can Wait CD JHD NWPD VGS ("Halo") and Ch Macalphine's Blackberi Brandi CD RN JHD NWPD VGS ("Brandi.") agreed. "The dog's desire to herd depends on the dog as is the case with most breeds. Most Swissies have enough 'prey drive' to herd. Their style of herding is that of a drover. They push/drive stock. One thing I've found is that some people are surprised to see a large dog that can herd. When most people think of a herding dog, they think Border Collies or Australian Shepherds, not a Swissy. The one difficulty all herding enthusiasts face is finding training facilities. They are few and far between and herding trials are also in short supply. That's why I keep a small flock of sheep at my home on Long Island. This means I can not only train my own dogs but I can offer herding instinct tests and lessons to other people who want to start herding with their dogs."

There is considerably less training involved in teaching a dog to be a packing dog. "Packing is more a matter of conditioning than anything else," said Nevin. "Swissies love to wear their packs. My boys bark when they see the packs because, to them, the pack means a long walk and what dog doesn't like to go for a long walk? It's really just a matter of finding time to go out and hike with your dog. You gradually increase the weight the dog is carrying as they get more conditioned. Most people that pack a lot hike with weight at least twice a week for at least five miles. I try and get out once a week with packs but my dogs run five miles a day with me almost every day so they are already in great shape. For the occasional dog that doesn't like the pack on them even with no weight, try different styles because the straps fit differently depending on the shape of the dog. Just having the dog wear the empty pack around the house is sometimes enough to get them used to it. It is important



Titan (Ch. Markee's Green with Envy CD RE WPDV WWD VGS), one of Kelly Nevin's Swissies, shows he has a natural instinct for herding.

to make sure the dog is full grown, at least 18 months old, before you start packing and to start out slowly with a large dog breed like a Swissy. But I am always amazed at their seemingly endless energy. Even after hiking ten miles carrying 20 percent of their weight, most Swissies are ready to do the hike all over again. Dog that have working ability are very important to this breed because it is a utility breed. If the dogs lose the ability to do draft work or herding or packing, what makes Swissies unique will also be lost. This is a distinct possibility as more and more people seem to want flashy dogs that only do conformation."

While the breed does not have high population numbers—only 715 were registered with the AKC in 2008—the breed faces some problems that sound familiar to people concerned about preserving the working abilities of breeds across the spectrum. "We need to see more breeders involved in working events," said Carmody. "There is simply too much emphasis on what wins in the show ring and not enough on the original purpose of the breed. The Greater Swiss Mountain Dog is a draft and drover breed and structurally it should appear as such. Our breed standard states that Swissies are striking, tri-colored, large, powerful confident dogs of sturdy appearance. It is a heavy-boned and well-muscled dog which, in spite of its size and weight, is agile enough to preform the all-purpose farm duties of the mount regions of its origin. We need to see more dogs that fit this description winning in the show ring and we need to see these same dogs proving that they have retained the ability to do the tasks the breed was developed to do. Without both the conformation called for in the standard and the ability to do draft work, herding and packing work, a lot of the essence of the breed is lost." •