

From the ArcaMax Publishing Group, Health and Fitness Newsletter:
<http://www.arcamax.com/cgi-bin/news/story/1002/1015/13561/240347>

SOS for St. Bernard, Victim of Progress

Peter Popham

Talk to the enthusiasts and you will quickly learn that there are few things on earth more magnificent than a St Bernard dog. Forget Mike and Bernie Winters and his massive friend Schnorbitz - these dogs are epic. Marco Polo, on his journeys through China, was introduced to the Tibetan Mastiff, "tall as a donkey", he declared later, "and with the roar of a lion." St Bernards are their closest European cousins. If you believe the experts, they have been bounding around in the Alps for two thousands years.

But now the St Bernard risks being torn once and for all from the place after which it was named, and where it learned to do that special St Bernard thing. The one picture everyone carries around of a St Bernard is of this huge dog, a small barrel of brandy strapped to its throat, rescuing unfortunate travellers caught in the snow and ice.

The barrel of brandy was always, sadly, a myth, or perhaps the artful invention of the first man who painted the St Bernards at work.

But the person-saving task was real enough, and lasted for centuries. At the Great St Bernard Hospice, 2,500ft up the Alps on the way to Mt Blanc, there is both the highest church and the highest ancient Roman temple - or rather its ruins - in Europe. The hospice, founded and still run by Augustine monks, was for centuries a life-saving institution at this perilous crossroads on the roof of Europe.

Everybody who was everybody came through St Bernard's Pass: Hannibal, Charlemagne, Napoleon (who dined at the Hospice), Stendahl (one of the 40,000 soldiers keeping Napoleon company). If you wanted to get into Italy the quick way before they bored the tunnel, this was the way you came.

But if fate was to brought you here late or early in the year, your chances of getting buried alive in an avalanche, or merely succumbing to the cold and altitude, would be extremely strong. In which case you would normally die - and if you didn't it was because one of the St Bernards kept by the monks, their great size complemented by their incredible senses of hearing and smell, came to rescue you.

Now, sadly, that whole extraordinary tradition risks being snuffed out. The monks at St Bernard's are down to four, including Father Hilary. These days it's hard to find healthy young novices happy to spend eight months of the year in freezing isolation. And more critically, the dogs no longer serve any purpose at St Bernard's. "It's not that some other breed of dog has taken over," says Giovanni Morsiani, president of Italy's Saint Bernards club, "but they've been supplanted by the inventions of man: helicopters, mechanical diggers, sensors."

It's getting on for 40 years since the St Bernards of St Bernard's last performed their traditional function.

The only reason they remain, in fact, is because they've always been there, and because the thousands of tourists who tramp through in the summer months expect to find them there. Many visitors come through only for that reason. But the experience is frequently disillusioning: long gone are the monks photographed for National Geographic in 1957 who practically lived with the dogs, and who depended on them to fulfil their duty of care and rescue for travellers in trouble.

"The monks have inherited the dogs," says Mr Morsiani. "These days they don't need to be dog-lovers to be monks at the hospice. So steadily a distance has been growing up between the monks and the St Bernards."

Meanwhile the dogs' living conditions have deteriorated. In 1957 they were housed in a barn of a building behind the hospice, but in recent years they have been confined to small kennels, far too small for them to exercise properly. "My one St Bernard has more space than all 10 of theirs had," says Mr Morsiani sadly. "The monks were heavily criticised for that, so they built a new metal kennel outside - but it was very ugly with steel bars and gave the impression that the dogs were in prison." When the snow and ice closed in recently the monks moved the dogs to the museum for warmth, as a temporary measure. But that was considered inadequate, too, and they have all been moved now to the main Augustine monastery in the Swiss town of Martigny.

The Swiss authorities - the hospice straddles the Swiss and Italian borders - have now said that the conditions in which the dogs are kept do not satisfy Swiss law. "The brothers have built new structures to improve the conditions of the the animals," said Armando Besomi of Switzerland's Federal Association, referring to the new prison-like structure behind the hospice. "But other works are necessary to improve the situation further."

And at this point the monks are ready to throw in the towel. They can no longer, they say, afford to keep their enormous companions, each of which gets through five pounds of horsemeat and dog meal per day. "We no longer have the money to breed and look after these marvellous dogs," said Father Hilary. "Until a short while ago we were able to rely on contributions from friends and lovers of the breed, often we were also helped by people whose lives had been saved by the dogs.

But today those resources have dwindled away. And the number of monks has shrunk, too. To sum up, we can't do it any more. Regretfully, we must hand over to others."

It's a sad conclusion. The ancestors of today's St Bernards have been high in the Alps for about as long as the people. Their ancestors are probably the large, short-haired mastiffs that appear in Assyrian reliefs dating back 2,500 years. Then when the ancient Romans built the road they brought their huge dogs with them. "The Romans used these great mastiffs in battle," said Mr Morsiani, "as fighting dogs. They took them to Britain when they invaded, and the Old English Mastiff is their descendant. Then when they were on their way back to Italy after conquering Gaul, they left some of the dogs behind in the Alps. They were used by the farmers high up in the mountains, and breeding and keeping the dogs became a matter of status with the local aristocracy. There is a mastiff in the coat of arms of one of the local noble families."

So far so doggy: huge, ferocious, war dogs, a nightmare version of the rottweiler, guarding mansions, frightening the life out of smugglers and thieves, if not actually tearing them to pieces. But then comes the unlikely twist: the colossal mastiffs turn benign.

The Great St Bernard's Pass, it is said, was a fearsome place in the Middle Ages. The Romans may have built the road through it, and marked it with the highest temple in the empire, dedicated to Jupiter. But once the empire imploded the area became notorious not only for ice and avalanches but also for bandit gangs, marauders who ambushed and murdered pilgrims and merchants passing through. There was a curse on the place - or so it seemed. Into the story marches the figure of Bernard de Menthon, son of the great feudal baron Richard de Menthon of Savoy. Bernard intimated to his dad on his return from studying in Paris that he wanted to become a monk. It was a calamity for the family: his father overruled him, organising a marriage to an heiress so he could fulfil his duty and become a lord of Savoy. But on the eve of his marriage, the religious hothead tore the bars from his bedroom window and ran off to the monastery.

Bernard established a church high up in the mountains, and one stormy winter night his meditations were interrupted by terrified villagers who said they had been attacked by an enormous devil who worshipped at the Roman temple to Jupiter. Bernard, gentle as a dove but strong as a lion, as he is remembered, did not hesitate but led the villagers up through the appalling storm to the Plain of Jupiter where the temple stood. The devil, it is said, appeared, turned into a dragon and was on the point of swallowing Bernard when he flung his stole around the brute. The stole turned into a chain which held the monster immobile while the monk killed it. The villagers then demolished the temple, to cleanse the plain, and peace returned. And to make sure it lasted, Bernard also built a hospice so that his fellow monks could dedicate themselves to the welfare of travellers.

It would be nice to report that the temperament of the dogs, like that of the plain, was transformed by St Bernard's act of heroism. And it's as likely to be true as any other part of the story. One explanation had it that the dogs and monks first came together towards the end of the 17th century, when the monks discovered the dogs could be trained to operate a treadmill, to keep meat turning on the spit in the kitchen. Only later was it discovered how invaluable they could be in the snow.

Certainly they were deep into their life-saving activity when Napoleon came to call. By some quirk of breeding, training, religious grace or all three, the very instincts and qualities that made the St Bernard fearsome in war also made it ideal in these high slopes. Big enough to trundle unbothered through deep snow drifts; strong enough to haul sleds loaded with supplies like a train of huskies; endued above all with amazing hearing and smell, so they can hear an avalanche coming critical seconds before their human companions. They can also sense whether humans buried - under the snow and ice or in the wreckage of an earthquake - are alive or dead, which at the scene of a major disaster is a faculty of obvious importance.

Then there is the sheer benignity, which is harder to explain or understand. When they find a traveller unconscious in the snow, they instinctively cover him with their bodies to raise the blood temperature. They instinctively lick his face, repeatedly. If there are several dogs at the spot, one will stay with the victim while the others set up a hullabaloo of barking, to bring help. The most celebrated dog in St Bernard history was known as Barry - Barry the First. He lived close on 200 years ago and the monks still regale visitors with tales of his achievements, rescuing 41 people from death in the snow, including a small boy unconscious on an icy ledge, whom the dog dragged to safety. Since then until quite recently, the bravest and biggest dog in the hospice was always called Barry.

For a long time St Bernard's hospice was the only place in the world to find St Bernards. Here the breed was refined,

with other breeds such as the Newfoundland and perhaps the Great Dane and some variety of sheep dog being introduced into the mix. Today of course St Bernards are found all over the place, despite their inconvenient size. Mr Morsiani says that Italy alone has 1,500 adults, and there are 100 St Bernards clubs around the world. Nor are they merely kept as huge pets: besides their work in disaster zones, their benevolence has also been harnessed for use in "pet therapy". At a meeting of St Bernards owners close to the hospice last weekend, an Italian woman, Maria Jose, 46, attributed her recovery from a crippling stroke to the St Bernard puppy bought by her husband: over 18 months it kept her company, licking her face and enabling her to overcome depression and recover her power of speech.

At the place where they originated, meanwhile, they are now penned up in nasty cages, a burden to monks who no longer have any use for them. This week the monks launched an appeal for funds, with the collaboration of Italy's St Bernards club and the Italian and Swiss towns closest to the hospice, to enable the monks to hire two specialised dog handlers and build new, decent kennels, so the connection of the St Bernards with St Bernard's may be preserved.

This news arrived on: 09/28/2004

Copyright © 2004 ArcaMax, Inc., and its licensors. All rights reserved.