

Bakersfield Dog Registration Books

By Sarah Woodman, Public Program Manager at the Kern County Museum

All persons keeping a dog or dogs within the limits of the city of Bakersfield, are hereby notified to call at once on the city clerk and procure a license and tag for each dog. All dogs that are not properly tagged, found on the streets or alleys of said city, after the date of this notice, are subject to the custody of the pound keeper.

Bakersfield, February 23, 1898
A.T. Lightner, City Clerk¹

The above notice appeared in the Bakersfield Californian on February 23, 1898. The City of Bakersfield made it mandatory that all dogs in the city be licensed and tagged. Dog licensing in America began in the 1700s with colonies passing laws to control dogs and reimburse farmers whose livestock was killed by uncontrolled dogs. Later, license fees helped to offset the cost of animal-control programs. In Bakersfield, it cost \$2.00 to license and tag a dog. This is equivalent to about \$50.00 today. Unlicensed dogs were taken to the dog pound, which was located south of downtown Bakersfield in the Lowell Addition.

Three of the early City of Bakersfield dog registration books survive at the Kern County Museum. The books provide a glimpse into early dog owners and dogs. The books are from 1898, 1900, and 1901. There are a total of 428 entries: the 1898 registration book records 125 dogs; the 1900 book records 174 dogs; and the 1901 book records 129 dogs. Taking into account that many of the same dogs were registered multiple years, the three books record approximately 342 individual dogs. Not every owner provided the same detailed information, but, in general, the owner's name, type of dog, and name of dog are recorded. For example, in 1898, blacksmith August Kratzmer registered a black setter named *Muggins*, while in 1901, Madam Louise de Yongh simply registered a black and tan dog.

Although the books are probably not complete, they provide a demographic representation of Bakersfield at the beginning of the 20th Century. From saloon owners to bank tellers to madams to doctors and everyone in between – it seems that everyone in Bakersfield had a dog. The average Bakersfield dog owner only owned one dog, and the most dogs owned by one person was five; in 1900, stockman W.H. Thomas registered a greyhound named *Blue*, two cocker spaniels named *Stumpy* and *Joe*, a fox terrier named *Pinto*, and a small, red female dog.

It appears that the breed type was left at the discretion of the owner, and most of the dogs are simply described by color and/or size. Some of the residents had trouble classifying their pet and described the dog a different way each year. For example, carpenter J.H. Redstone registered *Dick*, as a Black and Tan dog in 1898, a Black and Tan French Collie in 1900, and a Black and Tan Collie in 1901. Founded in 1884, the American Kennel Club's breed standards were still in their infancy, and these breed standards apparently didn't impress on most early Bakersfield dog owners.

Of the 213 dogs identified by breed, most fall into two broad categories - sporting and terrier. There were 99 sporting dogs, including spaniels, setters, pointers, hounds, and bird dogs, and 45 terriers including 23 fox terriers. Also registered were seven cocker

spaniels, seven pugs, four poodles, four Newfoundlands, five mastiffs, five bulldogs, and one stag hound.

The prevalence of sporting dogs may have been related to the popularity of hunting and field trial sports. The Pacific Coast Field Trial Club hosted the field trials at Bakersfield several times since the club's inception in 1883. In 1902, William S. Tevis offered the Stockdale Ranch as the host site, and for the next several years, dogs from all over came to Bakersfield to compete. According to a January 12, 1908 article in the *San Francisco Call*, the owners participated because of "the pleasure of the sport and the higher development of the breed."²

The registration books also provide a glimpse into how owners viewed their dogs. In addition to the type of dog, most owners also provided the dog's name. Naming a pet gives the owner an opportunity to illustrate his or her creativity, sense of humor, sophistication, and insight. On a more utilitarian level, names can signify the type of relationship between the animal and the owner. For example, while bank teller Charles Bickerdike may have taken his black and white bird dog, *Sport*, with him while hunting, Blanche Miller's black and white terrier, *Sunshine*, probably existed simply for the pleasure of its owner.

The Bakersfield dog registration books show that early residents were just as creative in the past as they are today in naming their animals. Contrary to what may be supposed, *Fido* and *Spot* were not popular names. Only one *Fido* and only two *Spots* were registered. The *Fido* was owned by county coroner Stephen D. Mullins who, considering his profession, probably was not the most creative individual. The most prevalent name in the registration books is *Prince* and was bestowed on spaniels, setters, pugs, a poodle, and a bulldog. While some of the *Princes* may have had a regal bearing, the name could also signify the esteem the family held for the dog.

Some of the dogs bear a descriptive name like *Brownie* or *Wags*, and some are quite comical. For example, C.F. Harpster had a black cocker spaniel he ironically named *Snowball*. Bakersfield also seemed to have a prevalence of lazy dogs as indicated by candy store owner Peter Spirtas' *Loafer*, driver Thomas A. King's *Bum*, and City Recorder Steven W. Mahon's *Shep the Bum*. Many dog owners today have similar monikers for their dogs to reflect their own sense of humor or the dog's behavioral tendencies.

Interestingly, many of the names have a literary connection, indicating that early Bakersfield residents may have been well-read. Although not readily familiar to us today, *Jip* was one of the most popular names for dogs at this time. *Jip* became a trendy dog's name after Charles Dickens' 1850 novel David Copperfield featured a dog named *Jip*. *Jip* is the spoiled dog of David Copperfield's fiancé and later wife, Dora, who is just as insufferable, irrational, and spoiled as her dog. Perhaps, the *Jips* owned by horseshoer J.N. Cross, shopkeeper Paul Galtes, shoemaker Hubert Muller, and the other owners were also spoiled. There were also two dogs named *Nemo*: a black and tan water spaniel owned by saloon keeper Frank M. Carrillo and a Saint Bernard owned by Earl Danjherthy. Perhaps they had read 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea by Jules Verne (published 1870) and decided to name their dogs after the captain. Other literary pets include Jim (Huckleberry Finn) and Crusoe (Robinson Crusoe). When she registered her dog in 1900, Mrs. Oliver C. Conley was not content with a mere character; she decided to name her brown water spaniel after an author to which she added her surname - *James Whitcomb*

Riley Conley. James Whitcomb Riley was a best-selling author and poet whose most famous poem is “Little Orphant Annie.”

Based on the pets’ names, it is easy to infer the relationship these dog owners had with their dogs. The detail and creativity that went into these names is a good indication that the animals were held at a certain level of regard and fondness. The willingness of the owners to pay the licensing fee shows the value that they placed on their dogs.

Most dogs live and die in relative obscurity, but, because these dogs were licensed and records were donated to a museum, these much-loved dogs will be remembered for years to come. If you would like to see a complete listing of the registrations go to the Collections and Research section of the Kern County Museum website:
www.kcmuseum.org.

¹ A.T. Lightner, City Clerk, “Notice – Dog License.” *Bakersfield Californian*, 23 February 1898, 3.

² H.T. Payne, “Field Trials Growing in Popularity.” *San Francisco Call*, 12 January 1908, 34.