

# M'Bwa na Basenji

C. J. Warrington

"The Basenji" © May 1972

Dog fanciers, particularly Basenji owners, may be surprised that a North American resident of forty years duration, like myself, should have been unaware, until recently at least, of the wide popularity now accorded their favourite breed of dog. This is especially the case since the writer was an acquaintance in Africa of Mrs. Burn who was, I believe, the first to develop the breed and gave it the name Basenji. I must have been unobservant, or have led a cloistered life all these years, since I was quite surprised to learn, when visiting with a friend, Mr. G. L. Glavin of Montreal who recently acquired a Basenji, that there was actually a magazine devoted to the breed. Through a mutual friend, Mr. R. W. Cole of Ottawa, I obtained a copy of it and was encouraged to offer this short personal reminiscence of the origin of the Basenji dog. (It may interest some and anyway since I am retired and snowbound up here in Canada, it is warming to think of the tropics for a bit and to correspond with St. Petersburg, Florida).

During the years 1925 through 1930, I was posted by my employers, Lever Brothers, to their subsidiary company, S.A. des Huileries du Congo Belge, first as a chemist and later as area process inspector. Levers, Britain's largest soap-makers, had negotiated with the Belgians in 1913 a number of concessions in the Congo in which they were permitted to obtain fruit from the natural oil palm forest (*elaeis guineensis*). This they processed into red palm oil (used in soap and in tinsplate manufacture), and palm kernels, from which a white coconut-type oil was obtained for high-lather soap-making. A number of oil mills were built across the Congo at that time. In 1925 a program of plant modernization was undertaken by the company and a number of new mills were erected using a more sophisticated extraction process. My job was to travel among



the stations of the main Lusanga area and report monthly on the operating efficiency and product quality of the various oil mills. My headquarters were at the research laboratory at Leverville, which was located at the confluence of the Kwilu and Kwenge' rivers. Travel was by river boat, truck or with a 20-porter safari through the bush, and one of my new mills was at a spot named after the Kwenge' River on which it was located. This river flowed east from the Angola watershed, and the HCB Station at Kwenge' was at the end of the road, and the last white-occupied settlement before Portuguese West Africa. It may be located on the map at about 6.1° S, 18.6° E.

It was clear to me when I met her on my monthly inspection visit to Kwenge', this dead-end location would provide only a limited amount of opportunity for her to exercise her keen interest in horses and dogs. Of horses there were none, but in the course of her travells in the bush with her husband during his periodical safaris to the fruit - gathering villages, her experienced eye apparently noted the breeding possibilities of the only dogs around - the "M'bwa na Basenji." (The Burns, incidentally, excited a good deal of comment among the less formal Europeans in the area when the word spread that they followed the stiff-upper-lip 'pukka sahib' tradition of the Indian Army and always dressed for dinner at night, even when camping in the bush).

It should be noted that the word "Basinji" in the Kikongo lingua franca of that area means roughly "bush." The closest North American equivalent of "M'bwa na Basinji" as the natives call their dogs, would be 'bush' or 'country' dog, probably connoting the fact that their chief use was in hunting. If my memory serves me correctly the native pronunciation of the word, written phonetically, was nearest to 'basinji' than basenji. Incidentally, 'basinji na n'ge' was a favourite mild, cuss word, meaning 'you bushman' or in American vernacular, 'you rube!' Eventually Mrs. Burn acquired 'a string' of these dogs from their native owners and it was she who later chose the name for the breed. I presume she is acknowledged to have been the first person to breed them successfully since all strains are now known by this collective name. On one of my visits to Kwenge' in mid-1930, I snapped a group of puppies in the Burn's 'Iupango' enclosure

behind their bungalow. The picture reproduced here is enlarged from one of this group, and it is presumably one of the first progenitors of the new breed. Note the palm-frond fence in the background.

Shortly after I took this picture Captain Burn wrote me that his wife was going back to England with her dogs and asked me to give her a helping hand since he knew I was booked to travel on the same river boat, en-route to the coast and North America.

The journey on the S/S "Lusanga" from Leverville to Leopoldville (now Kinshasa) took several days via the Kwilu, Kasai, and Congo Rivers. Each night when the boat tied up for the night (the rivers being unsafe to navigate in the dark because of sandbars), it was my chore to lead this string of dogs ashore for exercise. I was some-what embarrassed because I sensed that the natives thought this an odd occupation for a 'mondeli' since most white men had European-bred dogs ('m'bwa na m'putu'), and as river dwellers they were not hunters and did not hold native dogs in high esteem.

I, myself, was doubtful of the whole deal, knowing that the cost of transporting these dogs to Antwerp, and then the six months quarantine in England would be considerable. It was not without relief that I saw Mrs. Burn and her dogs onto the train at Kinshasa for the 24-hour trip by narrow-gauge railway to Matadi, the seaport where she was to take the boat to Antwerp. Some days later I left from the same port by Elder Dempster freighter bound for New York with a cargo of palm oil which I was testing for deterioration enroute.

It was over ten years later, in Montreal in the early 1940s that I read in "Newsweek" a news item on Mrs. Burn, and her new breed, the Basenjis, and learned that she had had success with them at Crufts show in London and was now exhibiting in New York. I wrote to her and congratulated her, and apologized for the doubts I had expressed as to the outcome of her venture. I have had no correspondence since then, and I hope that if she reads this, she will not suffer any embarrassment and will excuse my errors and omissions in my account of those far-off days in the Congo (now the Republic of Zaire)