

Basenjis at Morris and Essex Kennel Club Show 1941

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We paid no attention whatever to the 3,870 barking dogs at the Morris and Essex Kennel Club Show in Madison, New Jersey, the other Saturday, our sole and limited objective being the four Basenjis, the barkless dogs from the Belgian Congo. We pushed determinedly through howling ranks of schipperkes, schnauzers, papillons, Pekes, and pugs, and finally found the Basenjis in a far corner of one of the tents, quietly watching a fat poodle being sprayed with an atomizer. The Basenjis had satiny brown coats and the build of fox terriers; their faces bore the wrinkled, worried expression of investment counselors. They were in charge of John Lang, a sallow, barkless keeper who had brought them to New Jersey from the Aurora, Ontario, kennels of their owner, Dr. A. R. B. Richmond, who imported them from England a year ago. They are one generation removed from the Congo. Lang pointed out to us Koodoo and Kwillo (males) and Kiteve and Kikuku (bitches). “In the kennel, Kiteve is called Stella and Kikuku is known as Fatty,” Lang told us, and at the sound of their names the bitches uttered a strange, singing chortle. “They’re oodling,” said Lang. We asked him about the nature of the oodle. “You know—oodle,” he explained. “Like Swiss oodlers.”

Lang told us that Basenjis are highly prized as hunters in the Belgian Congo and the natives consider two of them fair exchange for a wife any day. A pair of them can pull down a gazelle or jackal. They scent their quarry as far as eighty yards away. While hunting, they wear wooden bells around their necks, so the natives can follow them through the tall elephant grass. They were palace favorites at the courts of ancient Egypt, as evidenced by rock engravings of Basenjis seated at the feet of Pharaohs (circa 2300-400 B.C.) which have been

preserved, or were preserved, in the Egyptology Department of the British Museum. The breed fell into obscurity for a good many centuries, but in 1895 a pair were shown in London. These died of distemper, and no Basenjis appeared again in England until 1932, when several were imported from the Sudan. By 1937, a Basenji fad was under way in England, and the English Kennel Club officially classified them as a sporting breed. Three generations have now been bred in England, and four months ago, in Ontario, Kiteve and Kikuku gave birth to five and four pups, respectively. The only Basenji resident in the United States at present belongs to Byron H. and Olga H. Rogers of Poundridge, who have him kenneled on the outskirts of Boston. Male Basenjis are firm creatures and rule the house; a bitch, for example, wouldn’t dream of eating until the male has finished. Basenjis are affectionate, especially with children, and generally remain quiet, except during the mating season, when they engage in continuous oodling.

Lang had no idea whether their throat structure differed from that of other dogs, so we dropped a line to Dr. Richmond in Canada on this point. He promptly replied that he didn’t know, either, why the dogs are barkless but suspected that their vocal cords have atrophied from generations of silent hunting. He said that Basenjis delight in tracking down reed rats, vicious, long-toothed creatures weighing about twelve pounds, and that one essential of a reed-rat hunt is absolute silence. Dr. Richmond also said that he intends to take the matter up with someone at the University of Toronto, hoping to get some light on the subject.