

"Assigning Blame..."

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by Diane Klumb

One of the hottest topics in the Dog World this last year has undoubtedly been The Perfidious Puppy Mill Problem, or, alternatively, The Heinous High Volume Breeder Hassle.

Various opinions concerning What We ("we" in this case referring to the Truly Concerned Fancy and/or the AKC, depending upon which side of the fence you are hanging your feet over) should be doing about this have been expressed in print both here and in less erudite canine publications by proponents, opponents, and people who really don't have any solutions but presumably just like to get hate mail from perfect strangers...

I guess I must fall into the last category. It's not that I don't give a damn, because I do, I just don't see what we can do about it unless there is a sudden shift in philosophy, and frankly, I don't see it happening anytime in the near future.

The whole puppy-mill issue is not about *ethics*, it's about *economics*. (And don't start with me on the "AKC's just in it for the money" crap, either, because I just had lunch and I'd like to keep it down). I didn't say it was about money, I said it was about economics, which you'd know was entirely different, if, like me, you'd actually majored in Economics for a year before you found out it involved higher mathematics ("higher" in this case involving numbers greater than seven) and sensibly switched to Fine Arts, where you had a prayer of getting a passing grade or two...

Well, OK, so Economics was not my finest hour academically, but just because you don't like something does not mean you don't remember it. (If you don't believe me, just try as hard as you can

NOT to remember the tune, or the rest of the idiotic lyrics, which I can almost guarantee you NEVER liked, to the following musical masterpiece:

"Come listen to my story 'bout a man named Jed, A poor mountaineer barely..."

I rest my case. And I am sincerely sorry I had to prove it in such a cruel manner, since that God awful ditty will undoubtedly be stuck in your conscious brain for weeks now, rather than lying buried in your subconscious brain where it has been lurking for years, like a genie in a bottle, just waiting for release. Oh well... go lay it on somebody else, it'll make you feel a little better... just hum it while standing in line in the supermarket - everyone will hate you, but then it will be stuck in their heads, too...

Anyhow, what I remember about economics is Market Demand, which is what we have in the Wonderful World of Purebred Dogs right now...

("...barely kept his family fed...")

For some unknown reason, probably having to do with the fact that we are a disgustingly rich and spoiled society, people don't seem to want mutts any more, which is really too bad, since the production of them does not seem to have slowed down one iota, at least, judging from our local shelter...

No, we ("we," here, referring to we Rich and Spoiled Americans) want "name-brand" dogs - Designer Dogs, if you will, to go along with our Designer Clothes, Designer Sheets, Designer

Watches and Designer SUVs. (I'm not denigrating this, mind you, I'm just making an observation, and I'm as guilty as anyone else - why, the SUV in our driveway has Eddie Bauer's very own personal signature on both the driver's and the front passenger's doors, and tastefully embroidered on the leather seats as well, if having someone else's name embroidered on your car seats can by any stretch of the imagination be deemed tasteful... I mean, think about it... in some neighborhoods, guy you don't know from Adam scrawls his name all over your damn car you'd be calling the cops, and yet we pay extra for it - no wonder the rest of the world hates us...

The sad truth is the All-American Mutt has lost his appeal with America. Hell, you don't even see mutts on TV sitcoms any more, or movies. Used to be, Americans (OK, I'm talking the Eisenhower Administration here, so these were pretty naive Americans) could recognize maybe half-a-dozen purebreds tops - Collies (like Lassie). German Shepherds (like Rin Tin Tin) Dalmatians (as in 101 of them) and probably a couple more media darlings whose names I can't remember offhand. Oh, yeah, and Weiner Dogs. Everybody knew what they were, they just couldn't pronounce it.

Now we have Brussels Griffons, Jack Russells, alien Pugs, Dogs de Bordeaux and God knows what else right in our own Media Rooms, (which during the Eisenhower years used to be the "rumpus room," in case you are wondering) to say nothing of actual dog shows on Animal Planet every time you turn around, and the annual Exciting Canine Sports Extravaganza Live From Madison Square Garden on ESPN every year. No wonder everyone wants a purebred. Purebred dogs are the subject of some serious "Moichandising," as Mel Brooks would put it... and this has been accomplished with no master plan, and represents no conspiracy whatsoever. The whole thing has just sort of evolved...

("Then one day he was shootin, at some food...")

Now, unfortunately, right about the time this started happening, or maybe shortly before, another trend was taking hold, and this one has had even more serious implications - namely, the demise of the Breeding Kennel.

When I started in dogs, which was, for the record, when Tricky Dick was still in the White House, there were still a fair number of them around, and some lasted well into the seventies, and maybe even a few into the eighties, although their heyday was long gone. These were Kennel Names, with "lines" of dogs about which dog writers still wax poetic, often with 40-50 dogs of a single breed in them, and they literally churned out puppies, many of them the stuff of legends, but many more of them simply pets or sold to the hunting market, if there was one, because that's the way breeding works - it's an inexact science. Truth is, many of the Famous Kennels in your own breed (I know one jumps immediately to mind in my breed, and dominated it for much of the seventies and eighties), if viewed through today's eyes, would be considered puppy mills. With a Capital P.

The trend away from large breeding kennels was probably inevitable, and is usually blamed on the price of real estate, zoning, and the lack of reliable kennel help, as well as the demise of some very rich people whose hobby it was to own them, but that's not the whole story by a long shot...

There has come a more subtle shift, and it's in "breeding philosophy." For some reason, breeding several - not dozens, but several litters a year is, for the first time since humans started breeding dogs, socially unacceptable, no matter who you are.

There are an alarming number of "breeders" who breed seldom if at all, and honestly believe that anything over a litter every year or two constitutes a puppy mill. (I suspect people like Geraldine R. Dodge would be very surprised to hear themselves referred to as such, but in this current climate they would surely qualify...

The concept of a "breeding program" designed to produce a strain of quality animals that both bears the breeder's stamp (which is no more or less than his own vision of the Standard for his breed in flesh and bone) and that breeds true (which depends upon generations of selective line breeding and therefore generally involves more than two house pets) is entirely foreign to this new generation of dog person, it appears - they honestly can see no difference between the numbers of litters produced in a purely puppies-for-profit enterprise and the numbers required in one that is striving to achieve a goal of consistent quality, whether those pups end up in show homes or as companion dogs on limited registrations.

Pets, to this new generation of "show breeders," are those very few pups (if any) who don't measure up to "show quality," and given the incredible number of dog shows every weekend, and the overall quality of dogs exhibited and finishing, I think those would be the ones born with perhaps only one ear...

("When up from the ground come a-bubblin' crude...")

The term "pet," it appears, (as used in the phrase "Oh, she breeds pets") has about the same connotation in the lexicon of today's breeder as "puppy mill," which absolutely baffles me... we are supposed to be breeding to the Standard, right?

Exactly which Standard describes the function of its breed as a "show dog," anyway?

I've actually heard breeders say "ALL my puppies are show dogs," honest to God... and since when do only people who plan to show deserve a well-bred dog? We have gone seriously astray, I fear... and the worst part is, we've all bought into this crap (which I strongly suspect is the result of subtle machinations on the part of the Animal Rights folks, if you want to know the truth) even those of us who should know better.

Because of this, many breeders, perfectly good ones, are now reticent about actually telling anyone how many dogs they own, as though they kept them under the porch or something, and are paying the rent with the puppy-money, instead of losing their shirts and holding down two jobs to support this passion of theirs. Some simply don't include the pensioners in the head count, or the puppies they may be running on, to make their numbers "more acceptable."

To whom?

Well, to their peers. The people who raise their eyebrows and murmur "puppy mill" at the drop of a hat, and certainly when a dog you've bred goes Best.

And no one uses the word "kennel" any more. What's with that? Why, I remember when the big kennels would register their dogs that way: "Owner: Draherin Kennels, Reg." Right in the catalogue. We were all hoping to reach the point where AKC would register our kennel someday, and now that we've gotten there, we don't want to admit we have one... go figure. It's better to have 37 dogs crated in your basement? Yeah, right, they're "housedogs," I keep forgetting...

And so breeders breed less and less, to

avoid the "puppy mill" stigma.

And that is why we have puppy mills. Real ones.

An entire industry has sprung up over the last few decades to fill a market demand for purebred dogs that breeders are now discouraged from producing.

Now, we can Educate the Public, and a lot of really dedicated people (including AKC) are making an effort there. We tell the public "Buy from a breeder" which we all know means "Buy from a show breeder, who knows the standard of his/her breed, attempts to breed toward it, finishes his/her breeding stock, screens for all known health problems, socializes his/her puppies, and doesn't make any money doing it, although breaking even is always nice."

("Oil, that is. Black gold...")

But to what end? There aren't nearly enough breeders to fill the demand, even if we educate people to wait for a quality pup, and screen out the less than desirable homes. The difference between the supply and the demand is the thousands of purebred pups registered by high-volume kennels, with mediocre quality at best, on an annual basis. Do the math, folks. How long can a potential pet owner be reasonably expected to wait - decades? (That's a rhetorical question, by the way).

Now, we could attack this problem by trying to soften Market Demand, but I doubt it will work, frankly. It's pretty damned hard to convince Americans they don't want something that they do want - I mean, the Surgeon General has been trying to do it for decades, and millions of us still light up. All the exposes in the world about the perils of buying from pet shops hasn't made a dent, as far as I can tell - perfectly intelligent people still pay \$2,000 for a "purebred" of questionable quality and health from pet shops on a daily basis.

Why? Because they can't get one from a breeder, that's why. (Even though they could get a better dog usually for a lot less money if they could only figure out how to do it... The problem has not been improved by the current attitude about advertising - Tsk! How "commercial!" - which forces the potential pet owner to find us only by employing the services of a Psychic) And they want a Shih-Tzu, or a Schnauzer, or a Pug, same as you or I. That's what they want, and they are going to get one. And if good breeders won't produce them, puppy mills can and will.

Now, we could try and convince people to forget all this "purebred" nonsense and that they are actually better off with a mutt, since the shelters are full of them, but this is unlikely to work, either. (You think it's hard to keep people from wanting what they want, try convincing them that they want what they don't want - remember "New Coke"? I don't want a mutt and neither do you. Neither, apparently, do millions of other people just like us...

("Texas Tea...")

Sorry, I can't seem to stop...)

So there's Economics 101. Create a market demand using the media, refuse to produce a product for the demand you've created, and then sit back and watch an industry develop to fill that demand, at inflated prices, with an inferior product and no competition.

Then try to legislate that industry out of existence.

Remember the old line from Pogo?

"We have met the enemy, and he is Us."

(Well, Us and the guy who wrote the damned theme song for the Beverly Hillbillies...)

See you at the shows!

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