

Memories of M'Lady

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"The Basenji" December 1991

After the Basenji profile appeared in the June 1991 issue of "Dog Fancy" magazine, I was surprised and delighted to receive a letter from a lady named Hazel Hall. Ms. Hall has some wonderful memories to share with us about the making of the film "Goodbye, My Lady." She graciously answered my letter pleading for more information and also sent along the photo she had of herself and two of the stars.

Here is a delightful eyewitness account, from a professional writer, of some of what actually went on during the making of this classic film.

Hazel W. Hall

The article about the Basenji dog stirred up some very unusual memories of my introduction to this very unusual breed.

William Wellman, a well-known director in Hollywood, was going to direct a feature film based on the novel by James Street on the Basenji dog. This would be shot in the swamps of Georgia. The cast featured a boy, Brandon DeWilde, and Walter Brennan, Sidney Poitier, Louise Beavers, Phil Harris, and of course, the Basenji.

The cast, director, staff, crew and dog trainers and six dogs were in a chartered plane en route to Albany, Georgia. There were three cages of Basenjies which were stacked in the space between the pilot's cabin and the

galley. Two hound dogs were with us in the passenger section and Frosty, a female toy poodle.

We had been airborne for about one-hour when the stewardess came down the aisle with a cart of refreshments. The big grin on her face prompted Wellman to ask about it. She said that the Basenjies hadn't stopped howling and the pilot was about to turn back or jump out of the plane.

Wellman and I were working on the script and I moved closer to the aisle to hear better when he dictated notes to me to write down. As I did so, I noticed a stream of vomit trickling down toward my seat. The two hound

dogs were very air sick. Those sad eyes looked even sadder as the big jaws opened to spew out more vomit.

Much later, still hard at work, Wellman was still dictating and I noticed a flicker of something out of the corner of my right eye and turned to look out the window. I stiffened in shock and the director yelled at me: "Why don't you answer me?" I turned to look at him and at the look on my face; he rushed over to look out the window. One of the engines was engulfed in flames! I watched the color leave his face and then I WAS TERRIFIED! This man had been a pilot in France during the war and had survived a disastrous air crash. He rang for the stewardess. She came, listened, looked, and then bolted for the pilot's cabin. We made an emergency landing in Texas and were grounded for two hours.

When we registered in the Albany Hotel in Georgia many of our company refused to double up and rooms were not available for so many singles at that particular time. I found I was sharing a small room with two gals, the dog trainer and a trainee assigned to me. A double bed had been exchanged for three cots pushed tight together leaving a foot of space around the beds in which to walk. Our luggage was stacked in one corner and I was absolutely dumbfounded to see the three cages with the Basenjis stacked alongside our luggage. Frosty was yipping and running from one to the other of us.

We couldn't unpack. The closet was too small for the wardrobe of three gals. One chest of drawers could not hold the amount we had packed for a 6-weeks stay. The only good thing about all this was that the Basenjis were quiet. They were fascinated with this comedy routine and watched our movements like spectators at a tennis match. All the dogs had to be fed, watered and walked. Showered and finally bedded down, we turned out the lights and then suddenly a very wet tongue slurped across my face and Frosty walked across my chest to the next

cot. She showed no partiality as she slurped all three faces, then turned around for the return trip. She couldn't make up her mind on the choice of a bed partner. It was hilarious. The Basenjis woke up and we didn't get to sleep until midnight.



This is the photo which appeared with this article.

I suddenly realized that 36 years have passed since I had been associated with the film! I went to the library to get a copy of the book which was not available so I put a request in for it, it took many weeks. When it did arrive, the book was new and had never been opened by anyone before me. I read it at least three times before I returned it.

Several memories returned. One was that of watching Walter Brennan standing hip deep in the river, sawing cypress knees (tree stumps) to earn money to buy

his false teeth. He wore a rubber suit which reached to his armpits to protect him for the deadly water moccasin.

Phil Harris spent his evenings in the hotel rathskeller, the basement night club. He rapped with the local band until the club closed. This didn't leave many hours to sleep and he used to catch forty winks in the limo that drove him to location. I used to dog trot about a half mile down the road to flag down the limo. I would wake Mr. Harris up and rehearse him in his dialogue. Director Wellman wondered how he had the time to learn his lines, but I think I was fooling no one with my routine.

I believe that this film was Sidney Poitier's first feature film in Hollywood. Many years later I worked on a film in which Mr. Poitier co-starred with Bill Cosby. This time Sidney Poitier not only was the star but was also the DIRECTOR of the film. A meteoric career indeed!

The Albany Hotel in which we were housed had to hire extra staff and pay the regular staff overtime to handle our company. The dining room normally opened about 7:00 a.m. but now we were in it at 5:00 a.m. and we kept it open until 10:00 p.m. One thing we could not change, no matter what we tried, was the serving of grits at both meals – breakfast and dinner. We never ate those bowls of grits and the waitress would remove the untouched dishes every day and serve them again the next day.

The chiggers were something new to all of us and every morning we lined up in a long row, covered our faces, and stood still while the property man sprayed us from head to foot with bug repellent.

At the close of shooting each day about 5:00 p.m., we entered our hotel and the staff immediately met with Director Wellman in his suite for a production meeting. This lasted about thirty minutes. Then we went to our rooms and bathed and dressed for dinner. As soon as dinner was over we went to the projection room (a room set up by the hotel) and looked at the dailies – the film we

had shot the day before. When this was over, a little too early to go to bed, some of us ended up sitting in the high-backed rocking chairs on the porch. A boy would arrive with a carton of bagged peanuts which we would shell, tossing the shells over the railing – our evening's wild entertainment. The boy had eight steady customers every night.



This photo was not with the original article.

The director, the cinematographer and I were scouting special locations for future shooting. They had made staves with forked ends and were poking these into the growth ahead of them as we walked along. I was in the rear carrying my script and a notebook to take Wellman's dictation. He had just asked me a question and when I didn't answer he turned to look at me. I was standing on my left foot with my right foot lifted knee-high. My eyes were glued to a snake – black with pink rings – slowly moving across my path just where I would have

placed that right foot. As we continued, I walked between these two men – believe me!

On location at lunchtime Wellman, his cinematographer, first assistant director and production manager sat at the table spread with a white cloth and napkins. One day as he sat alone after eating, he called me over to take notes on the afternoon shooting. Suddenly I stopped writing and he looked up and said, “You’ve got the look again!” Through stiff lips I said, “There’s a snake slithering across my right foot and it is moving camera right.” We both remained very still until I said, expelling a long breath, “It’s gone!” We looked in the direction I indicated a very large black snake was just slithering out of the tall grass onto the sand. Some yelled “SNAKE” and the flight of all those men was just a blur – they moved so fast.

We had scouted a location on a peanut plantation and the director chose a sharecropper’s house in which lived the husband, his wife and about 9 children. This was to be the home in which Louise Beavers and Sidney Poitier would live. Every member of that family worked in the peanut fields. We arrived a couple of days later to shoot and the whole family came running to meet us. The children were dressed in their very best, their Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes, and Wellman was aghast. He wanted to shot them as they were ever day working in the fields. It took quite a while to undo all this spit and polish.

Whenever a film involves using animals: reptiles, birds, etc. only the wranglers (handlers) and the members of the cast are allowed near these creatures. Even the director stays apart. I have worked with cats, dogs, camels, elephants, seals, chimps, kangaroos, rattle snakes, cows, horses, Brahma bulls, a skunk, a Himalayan bear, 500 rats in the film Willard, pigeons, macaws, owls, falcons and even baby chicks.

I worked on another film with Walter Brennan in which he was the owner of a pregnant beagle, “Who’s

Minding the Mint?” While the Basenji is often called the barkless dog, it has a most blood-curdling howl. The wrinkled forehead makes you think the dog is wrinkling its forehead in deep thought much as humans do. It has extraordinary hearing and sense of smell. It is a hunter. But the most fascinating aspect is its POINT when it scents birds. Other hunting dogs freeze in a standing position with one paw lifted, tail straight out and nose pointing to the hidden prey. But the Basenji does something quite different. It lowers the front portion of its body to the ground and the rear remains up. It freezes in this stance and remains so until the birds are flushed.

The author of the book had been engaged to act as advisor on the film but he died while the film was in the preparatory stage. The director filmed exactly what was written, a most unusual thing to happen in Hollywood and a real tribute to the author.



Another photo from the filming which was not in this article originally.