

One man's collection a breed apart

Bulldogs: Lovable testaments to tenacity

By Charles Leroux

"DROOLS, WHEEZES and snores." No, madam, we're not talking about your husband, just quoting some of what a book called "Choosing the Right Dog" has to say about the English bulldog.

The bulldog has legs that bow, jowls that hang, a fierce underbite and the look of one who has seen it all and liked none of it. Yet, despite all that, or perhaps because of it, and possibly not unlike your husband, madam, the bulldog is loved, loved with a devotion that comelier breeds might well envy.

Here is what one bulldog owner wrote: "Once you have experienced the joy of his companionship, once you have been the recipient of his never-dying love and affection coupled with his true sense of loyalty, you will grow to love that big broad wrinkled head and massive body. . . ."

The author of those lines was Dr. Edward Vardon, surgeon, dog show judge and bulldog fancier of Southfield, Mich. Before his death in 1970, Vardon kept some 40 bulldogs in a kennel near his home and had, over the years, more than 90 champions, including the legendary Vardona Frosty Snowman, winner of 38 Best in Show ribbons. If you look in a confirmation book, the book that shows what each breed ideally is supposed to look like, the illustration for bulldog is a photo of Frosty, the platonic form of bulldog-ness.

AS MUCH AS Frosty was admired by judges, he was feared by competing bulldogs (or at least their owners).

"They'd try to figure out which show he was going to so they could go elsewhere," Ed Vardon, the doctor's son, said. "If there was a show in Philadelphia on a Saturday and in Toronto on Sunday, and they knew Dad was going to Philadelphia, they'd think Toronto was safe because it was far enough away, but, by gosh, Dad would be at both of them. We'd drive all night [the doctor, his wife, Joyce, also a show judge; and sons Ed and Jim] to Philly, all the next night to Toronto and maybe all the next night to someplace else. We went to shows every weekend."

That meant loading the car not only with family and dogs but also with oxygen bottles, water and ice. The bulldog is prone to heat prostration, and, in hot weather, the Vardons sometimes had to ask at a stranger's house if they could fill the bathtub with cold water and toss in an ailing dog.

On the return trips, the car would be even more loaded. In addition to collecting blue ribbons, Vardon collected bulldogabilia. The car stopped at every antiques shop in hopes of finding a bronze bulldog, a bulldog pipe, a painting of bulldogs, bulldog this or bulldog that. Mrs. Vardon recalled 40 years of collecting. "Anything that looked like a bulldog, he picked it up," she said. "If he wanted it, he got it, didn't care about the price. We found things all over the country and in England, too. We had a dealer there looking for things for us."

The collection grew to 1,500 pieces and filled the large Vardon home. There were bulldog paintings on the walls, bulldog figurines in cabinets, bulldog books on the shelves. The collection, valued at roughly half a million dollars, ranged from fine art objects, such as the bronzes and Staffordshire ceramic pieces, to carved wooden dogs on skis, from dog-shaped snuff boxes to dog-shaped knife rests, from a dog whose head rotates to dispense cigars with match storage space in the pups to the once-popular Cecil Aldin paintings of dogs playing poker.

"But," Ed Jr. said, "it was never offensive. There was other art there, too. It wasn't just a bulldog house." Vardon was wearing a gold ring depicting a bulldog's head with diamonds for eyes.

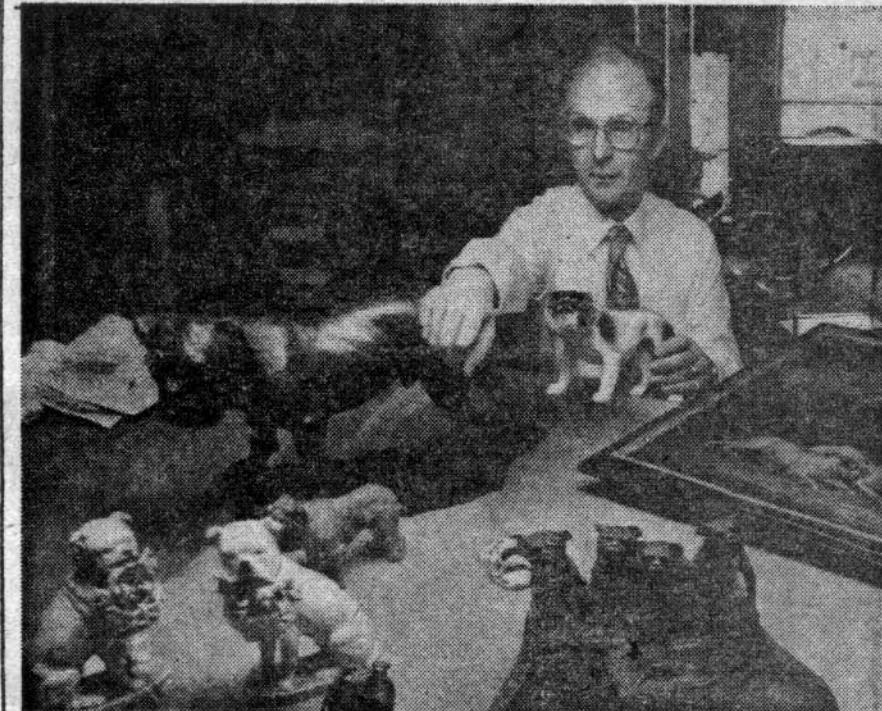
THE OLDEST PIECE is a 1683 print showing a bull-baiting scene on the frozen surface of the Thames River. The bulldog got its name through its use in that "sport," in which a bull was staked and several dogs were loosed on it. Because of its flat face and enormously powerful jaws and upper body strength, the bulldog could grab hold of the bull's head and hang on as though glued in place. The contest ended when the bull was brought to the ground. A variation substituted a bear for the bull. Individual

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Bronze bust of the bulldog, one of many in the collection of Ed Vardon Jr. It has the look of one who has seen it all and liked none of it.

Tempo



Tribune photo by Ron Bailey

Ed Vardon Jr. with some of the bulldogs destined for the Dog Museum.

English bulldog: Pip of a pooch

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dogs were known to the crowds by name and cheered for. Sometimes contests would be arranged between a dog and a monkey trained to fight.

"The breed," noted Ed Jr. [who has three dogs, none of them bulls because "my wife thinks they slobber too much"], "has become quite docile now. My father used to say you could trace the whole history of England through bulldogs. We have, for instance, the collar from Lord Byron's dog. The collar says, 'The Right Honorable Lord Byron.' We also have Teddy Roosevelt's dog's collar."

After their father died, Ed and Jim Vardon crated the collection and moved

it to Chicago, where it has remained mostly crated and unseen for 12 years. Now, however, the bulldog statues and paintings and all are headed for New York, where, as a gift from the Vardon family, they will be part of the Dog Museum of America. The museum, at the headquarters of the American Kennel Club, will open this fall.

Some of the Vardon collection will be on display Saturday and Sunday at the International Kennel Club Dog Show, in the Amphitheatre. There will also be live bulldogs there, and, as you look at them, recall Vardon's seven reasons "Why you will like a bulldog": The dogs are Brave, Unusual, Lovable, Loyal, Dauntless, Obedient, Grand. Put them all together, and they spell. . . .