

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Dog days in the desert: Dakar's story

Tracy Conrad

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During the raging conflict of the entire world at war, brothers Randall and Cliff Henderson, bumped into each other in North Africa. Both had already served their country during the First World War, but they enlisted again. Cliff reached the rank of colonel and becoming U.S. Air Force Military Commissioner in Dakar. Randall, an aviator like his brother, loved the desert and asked to serve in Africa for the Second World War. The unlikely meeting of the brothers thousands of miles from home was a welcome reunion. The two would dream of life after the conflagration, on a very different desert.

They returned home and created the entire town of Palm Desert. That story is well-documented elsewhere. But there is a lesser-known sidebar, a tail that wags the dog.

The Desert Sun noted in March 1950, "When the name Dakar is mentioned, one associates it with North Africa and World War II, but to those who visit Shadow Mountain Club, Dakar has an entirely different meaning. Dakar is the name of Cliff Henderson's new dog — an oversized pup with a profound expression on its face, who adores his master and follows him faithfully wherever he goes."

Among the movie stars seen in photographs frequenting the swimming pool at the Shadow Mountain Club, is invariably found Cliff's great big Great Dane, Dakar.

"Cliff previously had a champion Dane named Carter Boy. He had been presented to him at the National Air Races in Cleveland by Clayton Bruckner, president of WACO Aircraft."

The National Air Races in 1929 featured the nascent aviation industry on full display and are a whole story unto themselves. But more importantly to Cliff, it was in Cleveland where his first canine companion became part of the family.

"When I was military commissioner at Dakar, Africa,' Cliff Henderson explained, 'I exchanged correspondence with Carter Boy, who was at Chateau Avion, my Brentwood home as my mascot. I told him if he ever had a son, I would call him Dakar.' But Carter Boy



Cliff Henderson and his beloved Great Dane "Dakar" in front of the Palm Desert Corporation sales office circa 1951. COURTESY OF THE PALM DESERT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

never had a son and eventually died of old age ... And Cliff never thought of replacing his old friend until recently Brigadier General Earl Ricks, who raises champion Danes selected the choice pup of one of the champions who had a litter of 16 and flew him down to Cliff at Palm Desert ... and Cliff has named him Dakar."

Among many things, Cliff had a penchant for photography and moving pictures. The Historical Society of Palm Desert has in its collection hundreds of movies taken by Cliff. Recently, the Board of Directors of the Historical Society of Palm Desert wisely invested in digitizing approximately 200 of the most important films and have at their disposal a precious gift to posterity.

Cliff documented on film just about everything ever built in Palm Desert, every party, business opening and civic event. Dakar can be seen romping through it all: Dakar at the pool, Dakar "in da' hat on da' parade float," Dakar at the ribbon-cutting, Dakar in the subdivision advertisement, Dakar following a Dachshund around the garden, Dakar on the golf course.

Cliff, who always did things in a big

way, had a gigantic dog and what seems to be an equally outsized obsession with the pooch.

Dakar featured prominently as a subject in the films from the very moment of his air-mailed arrival as a puppy. In the first of the film clips, Dakar can be seen frolicking around the plane on a dusty air strip and jumping into Cliff's Cadillac with his extra-huge paws and claws spoiling the upholstery. In clip after clip, doggie Dakar is the center of attention. Dakar even sat for a formal portrait each year in iconic Palm Desert locations, to be used for Cliff's Christmas card, annotated by a letter from the dog.

In Palm Desert, Dakar would grow to be an enormous presence, literally.

Cliff penned extensive paeans about the puppy. "Dakar, as you no doubt know, is a natural platinum blond with the manly face of an angel including perpendicular black eyebrows. His countenance reflects great intelligence. ... His daily cuisine includes two meals, namely, standard ground dog food biscuit in the morning, over which warm milk is poured...Frankly, Dakar has developed a private milk run through the Palm Desert community ... various resi-

dents report that Dakar has paid them a visit after which he very smugly sniffs at the icebox and they, in turn, respond with milk, meat or sweets. Dakar definitely has a sweet tooth comparable to his master. His favorite candy is fudge and he has a forceful way of 'hustling' candy when it is being enjoyed by myself or others."

"Dakar's tricks are both interesting and varied ... he understands approximately 40 words ... readily understands such commands as 'sit,' 'stay,' 'shake' ... 'Dinyay tout suite' means food to Dakar ..."

Cliff waxes poetic describing Dakar's playfulness, carrying the newspaper and taking a bath. "You may deduct from this little epistle that I have a great personal prejudice for Danes, and one Dakar in particular ... (who is) more intelligent and more understanding and therefore affords more companionship." He continues, "Dakar reflects great credit to the breed. He possesses great dignity, but with friendliness."

Of Cliff's numerous films, a most delightful clip featured E.W. Stewart, the founder of Catalina swimwear, alongside Dakar, with a bevy of beautiful bathing suit models. Hardly a dog's life.

When looking for a mate, Cliff enumerated more of the dog's fine qualities. "Dakar is a normal young man of maturity, and I would, therefore, appreciate the opportunity to have him meet the right and intelligent, thoroughbred young lady." The tail-wagger ignored the swimsuit models in favor of a pure-bred black Great Dane named Lady Christina von Waldheim. He was mated a second time with a local female named Buff.

And due to his importance to the community, the paper printed an obituary for Dakar. "To say that Dakar was almost human, gives little credit to dogdom. Faithful, friendly, uncomplaining, devoted are not always descriptive of man ... (but always) of dogs ... As befitting a senior resident of the area he was accorded honor, recognition, and privileges. These he understood, respected and never abused." Dakar was not only a Great Dane, but a great dog.

Tracy Conrad is president of the Palm Springs Historical Society. The Thanks for the Memories column appears Sundays in *The Desert Sun*. Write to her at pshstracy@gmail.com.