



**"The Belles of  
Bridgewater"  
Carmen Kennel's  
100th year!**

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# The BELLES of BRIDGEWATER

Three generations of remarkable women have steered Carmen Kennels through a momentous century for their sport, their sex, and their country. *By Bud Boccone*

Carmen Saint Bernards, of Bridgewater, Massachusetts, this year celebrates its 100th anniversary as an AKC-registered kennel. It is believed to be the oldest such establishment controlled by one family in direct succession.

Mr. T.E.L. Kemp registered the Carmen name on April 22, 1903. The kennel today is operated by Kemp's granddaughter Janice Holmes Myers, who lovingly tends to the family scrapbooks bulging with clippings made brittle and brown by time. They form a patchwork history of one family and one breed. But if you raised a child or bred a dog during the tumultuous 20th century, you may find in these bits of crumbling paper something of yourself.

## OF SAINTED MEMORY

The old house at 434 Elm Street, Bridgewater, is empty now, slated for demolition. It sits forlorn and shuttered in the high grass, a haunted house patrolled by the gentlest of spirits: The ghosts of Saint Bernard champions snooze contentedly in the kennels as spectral dogs of all kinds roam the pasture, among the shadows of horses, cats, chickens, rabbits, boys, and girls who frolicked here in life. Most palpably alive are the spirits of Agnes Kemp and her daughter Rita, who brought vitality and purpose to this now-moribund place for most of the 20th century.

T.E.L. and Agnes Kemp were married in 1905 and spent the next 10 years moving around—Boston, Allston, Dorchester—before settling down on the small farm that would be the last address either would ever have.

Mrs. Kemp was born Agnes Maloney, at Wallingford,

Vermont, in 1879. "My grandmother's people were from Ireland," says Janice, "but her immediate family lived as farmers in Vermont for quite a while."

It is unclear what drew this farmer's daughter to turn-of-the-century Boston—perhaps the natural inclination of an independent-minded young woman with nine siblings, or maybe because Boston was the hub of New England's dog-and-pony circuit—but it was there that she met Thomas

Edward Lewis Kemp.

When Agnes arrived in the big city, T.E.L., only two years her senior, was a fixture on Boston's sporting scene. He was a photographer by trade, but little of his work survives. Likely, T.E.L. spent more time developing deals than photographs.

His first love was horses—buying, selling, trading, and showing horses. But he was game for anything, poultry shows, for instance, and applied the same enthusiasm and horse sense to everything he did.

T.E.L. acquired his first Saint in 1898, was showing the breed in 1899, and by 1901 was the owner of several superior specimens of the rough- and

smooth-coated varieties. Such a meteoric rise in the dog game was not uncommon in an era when imports ruled. In dogs, and in the culture generally, Americans were still slaves to European fashion. Several of the early Kemp champions, including the famous Sea View Abbess and Prince Napoleon, were imported or the get of Euro imports. He even named the kennel after his favorite European opera, whose exotic, sensual melodies must have delighted the earthy T.E.L. as much as they scandalized his prim Boston neighbors.



434 Elm Street, Bridgewater, for 60 years the home of Carmen Kennels.

*Clockwise from right: Carmen matriarch Agnes Kemp in 1908; Janice Holmes Myers with Ch. Carmen's Pathfinder Taz; Rita Kemp Holmes in 1957 with Janice and friends.*



ISA CROFT ELLIOTT

As T.E.L. was courting, wooing, and winning Agnes, he was gaining a reputation as an innovative show superintendent. His new helpmate now installed at Elm Street, running the kennel and tending the horses, T.E.L. was free to help define the role of the modern show super.

With the ballyhoo of his fellow New Englander P.T. Barnum still within living memory, superintendent Kemp began to experiment with flamboyant promotions. At the 1909 New England Kennel Club show in Boston he arranged for a circus, starring "Professor Woodward and his trained bears and monkeys," to entertain the exhibitors' children. He pitched it to the press with all the modesty of a carnival barker:

"This show will be a record-breaker. We have made a number of innovations this year that were never heard of before. When the show opens on Monday we will surprise dog fanciers in this town; we will have on exhibition some of the finest specimens of canines from all over the country."

If some gentleman sportsmen were aghast at T.E.L.'s hard sell, they had to admit: The man delivered the goods. His keen eye for animal flesh and courtly manners made T.E.L. the region's most sought-after super. Typical is this clip from the *Boston Sunday Herald's* coverage of the 1910 Haverhill show: "[T]he event was a splendid success, both in entries and gate, and the committee in charge are delighted with the splendid stewardship of Thomas L. Kemp, who acted as superintendent."

A great showman needs a great rival, and T.E.L. found his in Colonel Jacob Ruppert. Congressman, beer baron, Saint fancier, and future owner of the New York Yankees, Ruppert was a fierce competitor with deep pockets, and the Kemp-Ruppert wars were fought in show rings throughout the Northeast. (Ruppert would serve four terms in Congress, but his most lasting contribution to American life was the distinctive pinstriped uniform he designed for the Yankees, in the vain hope of making Babe Ruth look slimmer.)

While T.E.L. was off superintending, Agnes was at the farm establishing herself as the soul of Carmen Kennels. She was in the right place at the right time.

New England had long been America's conscience in social reform. The temperance, abolition, and woman's suffrage movements that dominated 19th-century politics were born here. Early New England feminists, such as Lucy

Stone and Dorothea Dix, helped raise America's awareness of progressive causes. The celebrated Hutchinson Family Singers, of New Hampshire, toured the country singing songs of suffrage. And in dogs, there were women like Anna Henshaw Whitney, of Lancaster, Massachusetts, who, at Westminster in 1888, became the first woman to judge an American dog show.

The Ladies' Kennel Association of America was formed in 1900, just about the time Agnes arrived in Boston. Many women of the 1900s got their first taste of independence in the show ring. The breeding and showing of dogs was considered a respectable pursuit for ladies—mostly because Queen Victoria, a true dog fanatic, said it was.

And so in their wedding year of 1905, when the AKC passed a bylaw forbidding show supers to exhibit dogs at events they were working, T.E.L. transferred legal ownership of the Carmen Saints to Agnes. From then on, the press would refer to "Mrs. Kemp's Saint Bernards."

Photos of the slender, serious-looking Agnes—perhaps taken by T.E.L. himself—accompany the stories. One is struck by how difficult showing dogs must have been for Agnes, and her female colleagues, in the clothing of the day: long woolen skirts, coats, preposterous hats, starched blouses, not to mention the unmentionables—whalebone corsets, endless layers of petticoats, and who knows what other devices of torture.

Also, one wonders if the creatures that Agnes proudly poses for the camera are really Saint Bernards. "The breed has changed remarkably since my grandparents' day," explains Janice. "They are stockier, much more blocky in type, and not nearly as athletic as they were a hundred years ago."

"In the scrapbooks are photos of

Sea View Abbess. She was *the* dog of the day. But look—she's practically swaybacked! If you trotted her out today, they'd laugh you out of the ring."

But the Kemp champions were no laughing matter in the years before the First World War. The Carmen roster of Agnes's time is an honor roll of early-20th-century Saints: Ch. Alta Guide, Ch. Alta Destiny, Ch. Alta Priscilla, Ch. Princess Joan, Ch. Carmen Victorious, Ch. Carmen Marie, and the massive Ch. King Carmen, tipping the scales at 225 pounds.

Although in his carefree bachelor days T.E.L. was already a successful exhibitor, the sporting press would often chide



Top to bottom: T.E.L. Kemp and Queen Flora II; Rita Kemp, circa 1914; Janice Holmes in the early '70s.



him for showing his dogs out of condition or in bad coat. That all changed when Agnes took the reins. Her dogs were famous for their immaculate grooming and conditioning.

The forward-thinking Agnes was America's first female all-breed judge. "I gather that she didn't let the idea that there were no other women judging stop her," says Janice. She judged at Westminster and was the first woman to judge in Canada. Along the way she found the time to join kennel clubs, judge horse shows, and, oh yes, bear six children: Arthur, Rita, Tom, Ruth, Nellie, and Francis, who died at age 8 after a fall from a horse.

"My grandfather had a show that weekend," says Janice. "It was a 'show must go on' type of thing. He didn't let anybody know until the show was over that his son had died that week."

The surviving five children grew up at Elm Street, happily immersed in their parents' world, even serving as T.E.L.'s show committee on superintendent assignments.

And so it went for 20 years at Carmen Kennels. Through one world war, into the Depression, and despite outbreaks of distemper that ravaged their breeding stock, the Kemps held it together and prospered.

Agnes died of a blood clot in 1936 at age 56. T.E.L. was never again the ebullient showman, but he was a busy superintendent and a sage of the show ring until his final illness in 1944.

As T.E.L. lay in his hospital deathbed, the children could not bear to tell him that distemper was again racing through the kennel, destroying his dearest Agnes's living legacy, the Carmen Saints.

## "NOW WHO'S AT THE DOOR?"

"My mother was a woman you would seek out for help, someone who would always be there for you and just listen. She'd drop whatever she was doing to help."

This is how Janice recalls the woman who would guide Carmen Kennels for 40 years. If Agnes was Carmen's soul, Rita was surely its heart.

She was born in 1913, the oldest daughter of Agnes and T.E.L. All the children had an affinity for animals,

but it was the shy, thoughtful Rita who would stick with it to the end.

Rita had learned the tricks of the kennel trade from her parents before marrying Harold Holmes in 1938 and moving out to Center Street, Bridgewater. A confluence of events—World War II, Agnes's premature death, and the distemper outbreak of '44—had decimated the Carmen stock. If Rita was to revive the kennel's fortunes, she would have to begin almost from scratch. The place on Center Street was too small for her ambitions, so in 1954 she and her growing family returned to 434 Elm Street.



Top: The kennels at 444 Elm Street as they appear today. Above: Janice, Harold, and Rita Holmes with three Carmen champions of the mid-1980s.

"She had six children, just like her mother. Rita was almost 43 by the time I was born—I think I might have been an accident," laughs Janice, the youngest. "But the way I like to look at it, she finally got it right and then stopped."

Rita threw herself into kennel work as a way to earn money without having to leave her children. She ran a boarding kennel and grooming shop on the premises, while she rebuilt the Carmen line of show dogs.

Happily, like her mother, Rita had found the perfect mate. Harold Holmes was perhaps the most unusual dog man of his time in that he wasn't a dog man at all. "He would build any fence my mother wanted built, fix



CHAMPION KING CARMEN



anything that needed fixing. But if you took him outside and asked him which dog was which, he probably couldn't tell you."

Yet Harold was a two-term president of the New England Saint Bernard Club, was chief steward for 20 years, and won the club's first good-sportsmanship award. Harold was also a member of the Hockamock Kennel Club, serving as a board member and treasurer. "He was very organized and dedicated and dependable," says Janice proudly. "He was someone you could count on."

"My father loved people. If you sat next to him on a bus, he might introduce himself and ask, 'So, where are you going?' And he'd be genuinely interested."

When not driving Rita into town, or trucking one of his children's horses to the fairgrounds, or helping a pair of reluctant Saints to "get in the mood," Harold was an A&P supermarket produce manager. It isn't hard to imagine the ever-amiable Harold chatting with customers about his beloved Red Sox or teaching a young housewife how to properly plunk a melon.

The third member of the Rita's team was Margaret Myers (no relation to Janice). The owner of Ox Yoke Kennels of Plainview, Massachusetts, Margaret was a single woman with no children. She partnered with Rita and Harold, operating on a handshake for decades, to breed a string of new Saint champions—among them Ch. Carmen Promise, Ch. Carmen Pandora of Oxyoke, and the influential stud Ch. Carmen President John of Ox Yoke—plus Collies, Chihuahuas, Newfoundlands, and Cocker Spaniels.

"Margaret was the person who did the things my mother couldn't because she had so many kids," says Janice. The unassuming Rita never felt comfortable in the ring, so Margaret "did most of the showing, and often whelped out the puppies, did the driving, got the dogs to the shows, and

handled in the ring." Margaret was outgoing and slightly eccentric. "Her family would call her Dally because she kind of 'dilly-dallied' around, in her own world of dogs. The dogs came first. My mother was more grounded, more in tune with the wider world. They were a good team that way."

After the mid-1950s the old house was again hopping with activity. Janice recalls: "My mother had a million things to do but would drop everything if somebody came by, asking for help. She was always helping people starting a new kennel or with a sick dog.

"People were in and out of the house constantly—somebody picking up their dog, bringing a dog to groom—it was always something. I remember sitting on the living-room sofa with my boyfriend, and he would be frustrated because the doorbell kept ringing. 'Now who's at the door?' and I would say, 'How should I know?' It never occurred to me that everyone else's house wasn't so hectic."

As if rearing six children while running a full-service kennel weren't enough, Rita was co-founder of the New England Saint Bernard

Club and exhibited a shrewd sense for real estate, buying and selling local properties. (T.E.L., the old horse-trader, would have been proud.) The Holmeses also opened their mighty hearts to foster children. Although many proved incorrigible, there were also success stories. Janice tells of one of these former "state kids," grown up with a family of his own, who attended Rita and Harold's 50th anniversary party to thank them for teaching him the meaning of family.

## THE SAINTS GO MARCHING ON

Like Agnes and T.E.L. before her, Rita stamped her children with a deep, abiding respect for animals. And like Rita before her, it would be Janice, born in 1956, who made it a life's avocation.

By age 6 Janice was showing Saints, eventually retiring





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the New England Saint Bernard Club's Junior Showmanship challenge trophy. By the late '70s, she was doing all the ring handling of the Carmen dogs.

Her parents gave Janice the lot next door, at 444 Elm, as a wedding gift. She built a house there and, with Rita, Harold, and Margaret slowing down with age, moved the kennel to 444 in the mid-'80s.

Harold and Margaret both died in 1989. Rita was left without her two best friends in a noisy, cynical world that must have been increasingly alien to her. "My mother never had a lock on the door until after my father passed away," says Janice. "She came from a time when there was trust." Rita became seriously ill soon after her husband's death and succumbed in 1992. A few years later, 434 Elm was sold.

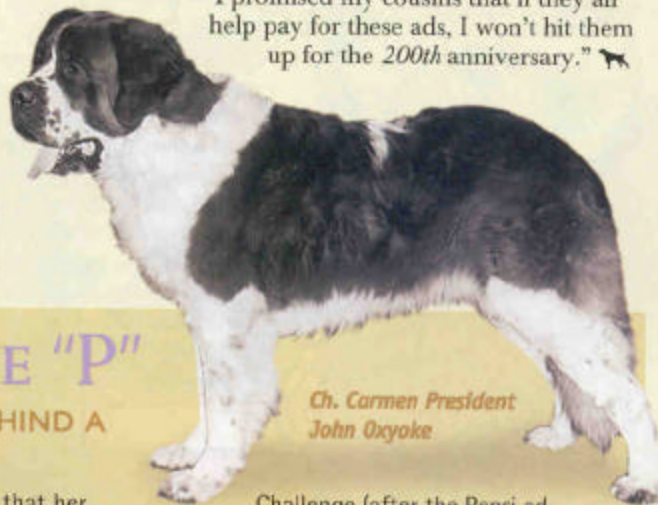
Today, Janice Holmes Myers continues the family tradition. A divorced mother, she runs Carmen Kennels as a one-woman operation, with help from her son, Christopher. Her limited breeding program continues to produce champion Saints, most recently Ch. Carmen's Pathfinder Taz, who goes back 12 generations to Ch. Carmen Promise, Rita and Margaret's first champion, born in 1949. Janice is a past president of the New England Saint Bernard Club, the organization her mother helped found, and she always has room in the kennel for another Saint Bernard rescued from a shelter.

Her extended family is remarkably close-knit, and her siblings and cousins, though not actively involved with show dogs, are proud of the their family's heritage.

"I wanted to celebrate the kennel's 100th anniversary by taking out ads in the show catalogs," she says, "and all of the cousins really came through with contributions to pay for them."

Christopher, 14, is not sure if he wants to inherit the responsibility of the kennel. Either way, Janice is not worried. At 47, she's optimistic that Carmen Kennels will be filling scrapbooks well into its second century.

"I promised my cousins that if they all help pay for these ads, I won't hit them up for the 200th anniversary." 🐾



Ch. Carmen President  
John Oxyoke

## THE PRINCESS AND THE "P"

JANICE HOLMES MYERS TELLS THE STORY BEHIND A LONGSTANDING FAMILY TRADITION.

"Carmen has a tradition more than 50 years old of beginning the names of home-bred dogs with the letter 'P.'

"It began when my mother, Rita, was showing a pony at a fair when she was a girl. The pony was newly acquired by my grandfather, T.E.L., a shrewd horse-trader. Rita was with an animal she didn't know, and went into a class against professionally trained horses and expensively attired grooms. She had no reason to be optimistic, so it was a great thrill when her pony was placed among the best.

"Rita had no idea that her charge was already a trained show pony, so it was quite a surprise when the ribbon was awarded—and the pony bowed to the judge! The pony's name was Promise. In his honor, Rita gave the name to Carmen Promise, who became her first Saint champion. She thereafter used the letter 'P' for good luck.

"It has been fun to come up with 'P' names, often making them timely, like Ch. Carmen President John Oxyoke (after John Kennedy), Pep-Ce's

Challenge (after the Pepsi ad campaign of the '80s) and, more recently, Picabo St. (after the Olympic skier) and Ch. Carmen Pathfinder Taz (after the Mars satellite).

"It has been challenging to continue the tradition without duplicates, even trying the 'double P's,' like Peppermint Patty, Patient Passion, and Pink Panther. Often friends and family get caught up in the challenge and suggest names for a promising prospect. Promising Prospect? Now there's an idea!" ♦