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WOOF: Rin Tin Tin and the Hero Dogs  

My interest in Rin Tin Tin was caused by Susan Orlean’s book of course I knew who RTT was. Unlike my students I know who Hopalong Cassidy was and I know who Roy Rogers was. I owned a full coonskin chat (Davy Crockett) And I remember Sergeant Preston of the Yukon and his wonder dog, King. With an asthmatic father I grew up dog less but like Susan I had a plastic German Shepherd statuette, only mine was Roy Rogers” Bullet nit RTT.  

This paper is a logical continuation of my previous work on Albert Payson Terhune and the collies of Sunnybank. Orlean Came to RTT as a journalist, a reporter, and an observer of a phenomenon. What you come away with is her vision of participants in a vision, a product and in fact, an industry. As Lee Duncan, RTT’s owner, trainer, companion and father observed. “There will always be a RTT.”  

There are three phases to the RTT story: the Lee Duncan RTT I and following phase, which is the motion picture phase, the Bert Leonard phase, which was the television phase, envisioned by Leonard in 1953 and birthed as “The Adventures Of RTT” in 1956. (It rose through the TV ratings faster than any show in television history.) and the Daphne Hereford phase which began around 2000 and continues to the present day. There will always be a RTT.  

The story of RTT begins with Lee Duncan who grew up fatherless with orphanage stints in California. Duncan carried his orphanage admission papers on his person till the day he died.  

RTT like Duncan was a foundling, a puppy discovered in a shelled out German posiition in the Meuse Valley in France.  

More so than today, there were plenty of animals in WWI: cavalry horses, draft horses, mules and dogs, dogs, dogs. The Germans alone had 30,000 dogs in military service; cargo dogs carrying medicine, cadavar dogs, ratters for the trenches, cigarette dogs, messenger dogs and even “demolition wolves” dogs with explosives strapped to them and sent against enemy lines as suicide bombers.  

From the beginning Lee Duncan was a dog man. I have haunted many a dog show myself. Just before WWI Airedales were a very popular breed and I have owned two of them simply because my father spoke so fondly of them as family dogs and guardians. But I am not a dog man; one who eats, sleeps and thinks dogs. I bought one of my dogs from an eccentric on Cape Cod known as Captain Hart and I have met other dog people as I have stood by the terrier ring by the hour at numerous dog shows: that is their defining interest.
Orlean on RTT:

“The dog embodies a rich, mythic sort of heroics, an empathy that is broader and deeper and more pure than what an ordinary human would be capable of. This is the quality that lifted RTT from the world of novelty into something classical.”

Duncan eventually took RTT to dog shows but RTT was no pin up dog. He was to shine in the agility competition. At 85 pounds he was able to clear a 12-foot wall.

There were dogs in early films. One might argue that Rescue by Rover (1905) was the first motion picture to actually tell a story. Rover, a collie, senses where a kidnapped child is being kept and leads people to her rescue.

The first of a flock of German Shepherd heroes was a dog named Etzel whose name was changed to Strongheart. His first film was in 1921. Strongheart died prematurely but you can still find his likeness on canned dog food. (Google.)

Orlean and me on the appeal of films; Films are not life but they seem to be and they like music work with the concept of time. Films freeze time. (Donna Reed and Jimmy Stewart forever young and in love in It’s A Wonderful Life.) RTT came along at a time when animals were certainly becoming less central in our lives. Films then are both a new world and a reminder of a lost world of our lives with animals. This is all the more important as 1920 was the year when we officially crossed over from being a rural to being an urban nation. In a city it often seems as if we live in a stockyard but a stockyard bereft of animals.

RTT made 23 silent films. RTT was one of the early first stars of Warner Bros. There were at least 25 German Shepherd movie stars in the 1920’s but none as famous and adored as RTT. Of course in 1925 Balto led the sled with the diphtheria antitoxin to Nome.

Lee Duncan’s job was to serve the dog and present him to the public.

Orlean again:
Dogs are accessible. Egoless and strong. They are plastic. They project the quality of caring about humans without being human.

RTT pups went O W. K. Kellogg, Greta Garbo and Jean Harlow.

A young screenwriter named Darryl F. Zanuck worked on 6 RTT film scripts.

RTT earned the equivalent of $5 million.

What could he do?
He could leap chasms (Remember his 12 foot jump.)
He could gnaw through doors.
He could climb trees.
He could untie knots.
He could feed a lamb from a bottle.
He could crash through countless plate glass windows.
He could extend a rope to a drowning man.
He could answer the phone and bark for help.
He could defeat bad guys, bad dogs and wolves.

RTT was brave enterprising, bold and always an individual. (Orlean)
RTT was a world star as silent films travelled the world well.

I suspect that the story lines that are most appealing with animal stars like RTT involve some variation of the Gelert legend: the wrongly accused dog that saves the baby from a wolf only to die at the hands of a mistaken master. Innocence and nobility, wronged but faithful to the last. And the other theme is the tale of a furry Odysseus, the quest for the father, the quest for home.

RTT made 22 silent films and 8 talkies in 8 years.
Talkies were a problem. Warner Brothers dropped RTT as the one thing he couldn’t do was talk!
RTT went on to make multi part serials and even took to the Broadway stage.
RTT missed out on the Oscar because it was finally deemed inappropriate to give an Oscar to a dog but the idea had garnered serious consideration. Instead the Best Actor Award went to Emil Jannings.

RTT died in 1932 and radio stations across the country noted his passing. He was the subject of a one-hour profile/tribute program that was nationally broadcast.

But of course RTT never really died.

1934 marked the start of the career of RTT Jr. And the theatre in the 1930’s would be an air-conditioned refuge from depression, war and strife.

There will always be a RTT!

The 1930’s marked the development of the dog training industry. RTT was never really a pet. Dogs have gradually lost the jobs for which they were created until in the words of the good people at PETCO “where the pets go”) and PET SMART, we have become “dog parents.”

I recently viewed the film from the 30’s Skull and Crown starring RTT 2. RTT picks a bouquet of flowers and then, unasked, brings a bucket of water to fill up the flower vase. He concludes this scene by planting a doggie kiss on the picture of the hero’s sister Now adorned with the flowers.
By the time we are talking about RTT 3 we are talking about dogs other than those sired directly by RTT. They are only related in the way that all pure bred dogs of the same breed are related.

RTT3 would be a recruiter for military dogs in World War II. The German Shepherd was named the official dog of the United States Army and the Doberman Pinscher was to be named the official dog of the United States Marines.

1943 would see the publication of Eric Knight’s Lassie Come home with a film following shortly thereafter.

In 1946 a poll would find that more people could identify RTT than any other film star.

In 1949 there were 250,000 television sets in the country. Bert Leonard, who had worked with Lee Duncan on several film projects, is principally responsible for the nest phase, The Adventures of Rin Tin Tin which became a big winner for the new network called ABC which was only 1/3 the size of the other networks and which had only three big shows: Lawrence Welk, something called Disneyland and The Adventures of Rin Tin Tin.

TRR ran from 1954 till 1959, some 164 episodes. It debuted at the same time as Lassie, the tales of a female collie and her disaster-prone master, little Timmy.

Audiences would spend five years with the frontier cavalry, with the red-haired little orphan, Rusty, the gallant lieutenant and the friendly bumpkin sergeant.

And goodness, and this written by a man who wore his Hopalong Cassidy shirt to pieces and had a full raccoon coonskin cap, the merchandise!

It is estimated that 9 million of the 30 million sets in the country were regularly tuned to RTT.

In 1957 a RTT puppy was obtained by Janetta Props Brodsgaard whose granddaughter is Daphne Hereford which brings us to the current (and final?) phase.

You can have RTT 10 come to your party or restaurant opening or other event. You can go to the RTT website for RTT books and totes and coffee mugs. As Clayton Moore did with his character of The Lone Ranger, RTT roams the country, website, merchandise anal.

There will always be a RIN TIN TIN!