

THE TALKING DOG – Family Facts and Fantasies

By Stan Welli

“Oh look, there’s a garage sale–let’s stop,” said my wife, Karen.

We were only three blocks from home and I groaned inwardly at the prospect of looking through more stuff that someone else was all but ready to throw out. Nevertheless, I pulled over and parked. It would be the sixth garage sale in Chicago’s west suburbs for this Saturday. We joined the rather large crowd and were just beginning to look around when a large, muscular, silver-gray dog trotted over to us, wagging his tail.

“It’s a Weimaraner,” said Karen. “You don’t see too many of them around.”

A woman nearby asked if we were familiar with the breed. Karen replied that one of the partners at a law firm where she once worked had one.

The woman told us that she and her husband were moving to an apartment in Chicago, thus the garage sale. They had two other Weimaraners, the parents of this dog, but would be able to have only two dogs in the apartment. Pausing for a moment, she said she needed to find a new home for this dog–Barney she called him. She said that if we agreed to let him live in the house as part of the family, she would be happy to give him to us. Continuing, she told us he was AKC registered and that his full name was Bar-None Barney, further, that he’d already had obedience training and show ring training. In fact, he had placed fourth in an all-breeds dog show the previous month, April 1977, when he was only ten months old.

We quickly accepted her offer. Barney was a beautiful dog and seemed to really like us. And, we reasoned that our daughters Lisa, age ten and Susan, age seven, would enjoy having a pet. The woman was most happy, saying that finding a good home for Barney had been worrying her tremendously. She gathered up his leash, dog dish and the wire crate he used when riding in the car or as a resting place when at a dog show. She suggested I walk him to his new home on the leash and take him around the perimeter of our yard, then give him a similar tour of the house.

I set off with Barney on the leash to our house just three blocks north on Elm Street in Lisle. He relished the walk, sniffing at nearly everything along the way. As recommended, I took him into our fenced back yard and we walked around the entire perimeter. Then I gave him a similar tour of the house. When Karen got home with Barney’s dish and wire crate, we set

them up in a corner of the family room, which was in the lowest level of our three-level house. Barney drank some water and then went into the crate for a nap.

Bill Wheeler, a good friend and frequent visitor on Saturdays, came over. After dinner we sat down to talk and watch television. Barney had remained in his wire crate shortly after arriving at our place and we began wondering whether he felt comfortable in his new home. But after a couple more hours he came out of the crate and walked over to me wagging his tail. Then, he licked my hand and reclined in front of me, his head resting on one of my feet. Bill observed "After that display of affection I think Barney is going to be around for quite a while."

I agreed, adding that it would be fun when people asked where we got a pedigreed, AKC-registered dog to simply reply "Why, we got him at a garage sale."

The Weimaraner breed was developed in Germany and was originally used to hunt large game such as bears, wild boars and deer. Now days they're described in the dog shows as a member of the sporting breed, and an all-purpose gun dog for pointing on dry land and retrieving on both dry land and water. Their web feet and strong muscular build make them especially good in water. Because of their color and stealthy movement, these dogs have earned a unique nickname: "the gray ghost."

It's said that if you want a friend in Washington, get a dog. Many presidents have had one or more dogs and President Dwight Eisenhower had a Weimaraner named Heidi. Actress Grace Kelly had one as did American Bandstand's Dick Clark. The breed became increasingly popular in the 1970s when photographer William Wegman began photographing his Weimaraners in hilarious poses in which they were engaged in human activities. He often dressed them in human clothing to enhance the effect.

One evening the following week, we were enjoying our meal in the dining room. As usual, Barney sat in the kitchen, watching us intently. He had been trained not to come up to the dining table and beg. Lisa paused and nodded toward him saying "Look at Barney—he looks so dignified."

Turning his head slightly to one side, Barney replied "Well of course I'm dignified. I have a pedigree a mile long!" His voice was one part Scooby Doo, the dog who was the girls' favorite television cartoon character, and one part Mr. Ed, the talking horse.

Susan dropped her fork as she and Lisa exclaimed in unison "He talks! We have a talking dog." Then they practically rolled off their chairs laughing. Karen smiled but said nothing.

And so the girls had new entertainment. When not out of town I usually gave them their bedtime snacks in the kitchen. This was always a time for jokes and laughter, and was even

more so with Barney always there. They developed a favorite riddle: What kinds of dogs have long, floppy ears, webbed feet and love pizza? The answer: Barney dogs!

Later that year Lisa and I took Barney to an open area near the Meadows School. It had lots of tall grass and a small creek ran through the area. I took off Barney's leash and marveled at how he instantly changed from a household family companion to a full-fledged hunting dog, trotting through the tall grass, sniffing everything as he went. It was truly a sight to behold. All of a sudden he froze and went on a point. When I approached, a pheasant took flight only a few feet in front of Barney. We moved on down the hill closer to the creek. Suddenly, two ducks took off only a couple of feet ahead of the dog. Barney made a tremendous leap into the air and bit down on the tail of one of the ducks, getting a mouthful of feathers for his effort. Lisa and I roared with laughter.

Susan greeted us when we returned home later in the afternoon. "Did you have a good time, Barney?" she asked.

In his inimitable fashion, Barney tilted his head and replied "I almost got me a duck! I nearly had him but he got away."

Lisa and I filled her in on the rest of the afternoon's activities.

As is typical of Weimaraners, Barney was very protective of the family and the house. When Karen and I went out we always had girls from the neighborhood come in to babysit. Eventually, however, Barney assumed part of the babysitting role. Once Lisa and Susan went to their rooms up on the third level for the night, Barney would go up there to sleep just outside their bedroom doors. If the babysitter came up to check on them later, he'd stand and growl as if to say "I'll handle things up here until Dad and Mom get home." The sitters would quickly go back down to the family room to read or watch television.

Barney loathed delivery people and would charge the front door, barking ferociously every time he heard the mail box rattling or the sound of a delivery truck stopping in front of the house. One week day when off work I heard him barking and ran downstairs. Seeing the UPS delivery truck I hustled out to accept a package requiring a signature.

Apparently Barney took that all in. When Susan came home later, she asked "Barney did you and Dad have fun this afternoon?"

Barney gave her a long look and then replied. "I'm really proud of Dad. When one of those big brown trucks came by, Dad went out and made him stop. Then, he took a package away from the driver. And then, the driver asked Dad for his autograph! Yes, proud I am!"

The years rolled by and things changed as they are wont to do. Karen and my marriage ended in divorce, Lisa and Susan grew up and Barney went to dog heaven.

But memories of our marvelous talking dog remained. One year Lisa made me two refrigerator magnets. Each had a picture of a Weimaraner dressed in human clothes. In 2006 she sent me a postcard showing a Weimaraner dressed up and playing the drums in a Wegman spoof of drummer Buddy Rich. On the card she wrote "Is this Barney Rich?"

Susan sent birthday and father's day cards with pictures of Weimaraners. But in 1996 she sent me a father's day card with a Dalmatian on the front. She wrote "Couldn't find a Barney dog card this year so a Dalmatian will have to do!"

Susan and Lisa both report that, nearly every year, just a few days before Barney's birthday on Flag Day, June 14, they receive strange e-mails. While the grammar and the typing are quite rough, there is always one consistent message: "You better remember my birthday or I'll come back and bite you—right on the leg!"

I live in Aurora, IL and Lisa lives in nearby Joliet. Susan, however, lives in Houston, TX. Consequently, the times when the three of us can get together are limited. But when we do there's a frequent request: "Dad, talk like Barney!"