

Finding Our Roots

We've all picked up books about the Weimaraner and breezed through the obligatory history of our breed. Frequently, it's just a few short paragraphs stating that Weimaraners first showed up in the early 1800's in Weimar, Germany at the court of Grand Duke Karl August. He is credited with having them as his most favored hunting companions, and further that their breeding and ownership was limited to only a few socially high-ranking individuals. It was clear that the Duke was not inclined to share his wunderhund with just anybody. In fact, it seems that the court made no effort to popularize the breed and was happy to limit accessibility. The existence of the Weimaraner was held "close to the vest" and you really had to know the right people to get your hands on one.

We've all heard some version of this short history. Did you ever wonder where the first individuals came from? They certainly didn't spontaneously spring into existence. What was the ancestry behind these relatively new, silver gray, super hunters?

The "plot" is about to thicken.

Digging into the origin question I found multiple theories, great disagreements, and a generally murky collection of facts.

To try to go back in time we're limited to written records and dogs depicted in artwork. Art takes us farther back than anything written about the Weimaraner. Looking through artwork for gray hunting dogs, there's France's Chien Gris de St. Louis (the Gray Dog of St. Louis). From the mid 1200's through the 1400's they show up in multiple tapestries and illuminated manuscripts and are depicted as gray, "houndish" critters hunting everything from boar to unicorns. (Unicorns? I warned you things were about to get murky.) Was the Gray Dog of St. Louis the progenitor of the modern Weimaraner?

Looking for Weimaraner-like dogs in paintings results in several examples that if you squint a little and apply a big dollop of imagination, you can say they look like our breed. For example, there's a striking gray dog in a portrait of a young nobleman painted in 1631 by Van Dyke. In this painting the coloration resembles a Weimaraner, and the features are similar to that of a fine boned bitch. Moving toward more modern examples, France in the first half of the 1700's produced a famous, prolific painter of animals by the name of Jean Baptiste Oudrey. He produced many paintings of hunting dogs and depicted several dogs with the same color and general lines of a Weimaraner.

After looking at pages and pages of old artwork and not being confident that I was looking at an ancestor of the Weimaraner, I decided to turn to the written word in hopes of finding more definitive evidence. Most histories of our breed name Karl August, Grand Duke of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach (1757-1828) as the developer of the Weimaraner. Biographers talk about

his passion for hunting. In a book published during the Duke's lifetime, there is mention of his use of black and white hunting dogs and importing Pointers from England. There was no mention of the Weimaraner. Interestingly, books about hunting dogs published in the 1800's do not mention the Weimaraner. Was the court of Weimar keeping their newly developed hunting companion a secret?

At the time of Grand Duke Karl August, the gift of superior sporting dogs between the hunting nobility was as common as when we bring a bottle of wine to a dinner party. The Duke was a bestie of Prince Esterhazy of Bohemia and made many hunting trips there. In one biography of the Duke, it is noted that he was so impressed by the Bohemian hunting dogs that he brought some back to Weimar. You can only imagine that these were used as breeding stock to improve the Duke's dogs and were in the mix in the development of the Weimaraner.

While Weimaraners are not written about during the Duke's lifetime they do get mentioned in later writings. An 1850 obituary for Weimar's Forest Master said that he bred Weimaraners up until the time of his death. A 1928 article in "The German Hunters' Newspaper" noted that Weimaraners were kept by the court of Weimar for 100 years.

Theories abound about the breeds that were used in the development of the Weimaraner. The short list includes: the German Shorthaired Pointer, blue Great Dane, Bloodhound, Red Schweisshund, St. Hubert's Hound, Deutch Kurzhund, Spanish Pointer, English Pointer, Leithund and the Gray Dog of St. Louis. Three breeds keep recurring: the Gray Dog of St. Louis; Red Schweisshung and St. Hubert's Hound.

If it is true that Grand Duke Karl August tried to keep his Weimaraners as his private breed it is not surprising that written documentation of their development is impossible to find. While we'll never know for certain what went into the mix, we're certainly glad that it happened.

Carole Lee Richards

zarasweimaraners@yahoo.com

