

Greyhound Adoption Pioneers

by Joan Dillon

While living in England in 1973, I got to see Greyhounds race at Wembley, White City, and Catford (now that's a misnomer if I ever heard one) stadiums. The races in England were different than those in the United States since there were only six dogs in a race — eight. In addition, a couple of the races each night were hurdle races — a sort of Greyhound steeplechase. Although I enjoyed watching these sleek athletes perform, it never occurred to me that these dogs had pet potential. Yet, even then, years before Americans began to accept the notion that retired racing Greyhounds could make a career switch from athlete to couch potato, Greyhound adoption was already a *fait accompli* in England.

As early as 1956, Ann Shannon started placing Greyhounds as pets while operating a sanctuary for retired racing dogs under the auspices of the British Union for the Abolishment of Vivisection. She also developed a network of contacts across the country. Another homefinder (British term for placement representative), was a teacher, Johanna Beumer, who began placing Greyhounds from the Walthamstow track in London back in 1965. Then, with the formation of the NGRC (National Greyhound Racing Club) Retired Greyhound Trust in 1974, the responsibility for Greyhound adoption passed to the NGRC.

Organized as a registered charity, the Trust had its headquarters in the offices of the NGRC. It provided administrative and secretarial staff to acknowledge donations, handled general questions and correspondence, and placed ads for retired Greyhounds in British pet magazines and on television. It also supplied funds obtained in part from a percentage of the first-time registration fee for a Greyhound, as well as legacies and charity race meetings for the purpose of kenneling Greyhounds pending home placement. The Trust relied heavily on groups of regional volunteers — many of them owners of racing Greyhounds — to do the actual homefinding and to organize advertising campaigns and media coverage to help locate suitable homes. The regional representatives met several times a year at the office of the Trust with representatives of racetrack management and veterinarians.

Another early British homefinder was Gee Lebon, who found homes for Greyhounds retired from the Southend stadium. A Greyhound owner and prolific writer, Gee had a regular column in U.S.-published Turnout magazine as well as a number of articles in the U.S. all-breed magazine, Dog World. She corresponded regularly with many early American placement representatives generously sharing her fundraising ideas and her knowledge of Greyhounds as pets.

In the United States prior to 1982, it was highly unusual to see a Greyhound anywhere other than the side of a Greyhound Bus or at a racetrack. Although there were AKC Greyhounds, the breed was never popular and yearly registrations totaled only 100-200. Even then, before the establishment of organized adoption groups, there were a few individuals scattered across the country who were finding homes for Greyhounds. These folks usually had Greyhounds themselves or were connected with or had contacts within the Greyhound industry from whom they received Greyhounds.

One Maine woman, Cora Eisenzimer, adopted a Greyhound back in 1957 when it was unheard of. Cora was living in Taunton, Massachusetts at the time and heard about Boozer's predicament from her neighbor, "the Greyhound man," when he brought her a basket of tomatoes from his garden. One thing led to another and Cora and her young son Mark became Boozer's proud owners and the Greyhound lived the happy life of a pet for eight years.

Eileen McCaughern of Connecticut first became active in finding homes for Greyhounds in 1974 while horseback riding in Seabrook, New Hampshire with a group that included a dog handler from the Seabrook track. The conversation turned to what became of Greyhounds when their racing career ends and, upon learning that many were put to sleep, Eileen adopted her first Greyhound, "Terry Canary," a 2-year old fawn female, directly from the Seabrook kennel compound the very next day. In addition to adopting a few other Greyhounds directly from Seabrook and from Plainfield Greyhound Park when it opened in 1976, Eileen became active in placing other retired racers find homes and continues doing so to this day as REGAP of CT.

The first track to promote Greyhounds as pets may have been Seabrook Greyhound Park in New Hampshire. In an issue of Post Time, a newspaper distributed by the track to its patrons, dated February 12, 1981, there appeared two articles promoting Greyhounds as pets. The first one titled, "Looking for a Pet? How About a Greyhound" by Elaine Tarmy stated "Many a former

Seabrook racer has found a happy home with a family. I, myself, have one I acquired five years ago, and he is a wonderful pet." The second article, "Greyhounds Pampered Says Pauline O'Donnell" stated as follows: "Despite propaganda from anti-Greyhound forces they are very affectionate and love people, especially children. They make good house pets too and owners have become so attached to some of their dogs, they have made them housepets. Such was the case of Yellow Printer, the great Irish/English racer and stud dog whom Mrs. O'Donnell took into her Hialeah, Florida home after his racing days were over. He remained there until the day he died at 12 years of age and was buried under the tree in the backyard." There were also two photos of Greyhounds and children with captions promoting Greyhounds as pets.

I needed no convincing as to the "petability" of Greyhounds. After returning to the United States I fell in love with my Topaz during a visit to a Massachusetts Greyhound farm in 1979. It was love at first sight for both of us and even though it meant buying her, I had to have her. She cost me \$800, but it was a purchase I never regretted. It's said that every dog owner has one special dog in his or her lifetime; Topaz was mine. She died in 1991, a month shy of her fourteenth birthday.

The American Greyhound adoption movement, however, is really considered to have started in 1982 when Ron Walsek of St. Petersburg, Florida, who worked on a Greyhound farm and at a local track, started REGAP (Retired Greyhounds As Pets). This first all-volunteer non-profit Greyhound placement organization in the United States was formed to educate the public about the true nature of the Greyhound and to find homes for Greyhounds that retired from or failed to qualify for the racetrack. The idea caught on and other adoption groups started forming across the country.

I first got involved in the actual placement of Greyhounds in the fall of 1982. A chance meeting at my veterinarian's office introduced me to Millie Merritt. I was sitting in the waiting room with Topaz waiting my turn when Millie walked into the room with a leashed Greyhound. We both looked at each other and said, "Greyhound!"

Millie's husband, Jim, was a kennel owner at the Belmont, New Hampshire track and had a couple of young female Greyhounds in his kennel that he thought might make good pets. I contacted Ron Walsek in Florida to see if I could help place them and he referred me to John

Furbush, a Maine Greyhound breeder who was actively placing Greyhounds in New England. John didn't have any homes available for them, but he offered some suggestions that included the use of posters. I put a notice on the bulletin board at work and another at the local supermarket. Both resulted in homes and both Greyhounds made wonderful pets.

The following summer the Seabrook track contacted John seeking a pet Greyhound exhibit for the Fourth of July weekend. John called me and asked if Millie or I could help. I brought my Topaz. At one point they had me bring her out on the track to participate in a cake-cutting ceremony. I bet they used at least two rolls of film trying to get a picture of her eating a piece of cake. Although Topaz never did eat their cake, that weekend saw the birth of New England REGAP (later GPA/Massachusetts.) with the first members being John, Millie, and myself. I continued to be active in Greyhound placement until the fall of 1995.

Some other early Greyhound adoption pioneers included: Gloria Sanders and Cathy Feltych of Iowa; Joan Headland and Carol Osborne of California; Roger Garland of Oregon; Lou Batdorf of Ohio; Lori Graham of Virginia; Betty Rosen of Maryland, Ruth Klastow of New Jersey; June Bazar of Rhode Island, John and Robin Hern of Idaho; Jewell Waldrip of Arizona, Aleithia Bower of Texas; Gretchen von Schreiner and Jenny Eddy of Vermont; Linda Nordstrom, Janet Gillman, Barri Lambert and Ann Tepper of New Hampshire; Sandy Brosnan, Arthur and Leona Lamotte, Debbie Horrocks, Jane Klorer, Kathy Hopper, Marja Robinson, Hugh Geoghegan and Louise Coleman of Massachusetts; Andrea Starling of North Carolina; and Emily and Wally Griffin of Florida. Many of these folks continue placing Greyhounds today.

During the 1980's, the Greyhound racing industry was booming. National Greyhound Association membership climbed and more and more Greyhounds were being bred to meet the anticipated demand of new states and new tracks. Since racing Greyhounds always seemed to be pictured wearing muzzles, placing them as pets was not only uncommon, it was news!

As the adoption movement began to spread, newspapers and magazines published a plethora of articles on the subject. Yet, in the early 1980's Greyhounds were always pictured wearing muzzles and, quite naturally, the public assumed them vicious. Not only did Greyhounds have an image problem to overcome but some of those most outspoken against making pets out of former racing Greyhounds included Greyhound industry employees and owners. They were afraid

of liability issues, veterinarians, animal rights movers and shakers, members of the media, and even the general public.

An October 1980 issue of *Animals*, a magazine published by the Massachusetts Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (MSPCA), carried an article titled "Greyhounds, Racing to Nowhere." A handler was quoted as saying, "Yeah, look at that, that's a Greyhound. Bred to be killers," he brags, "One of these is better than a Doberman."

In the same article, Dr. Richard Rogers of Harvard University's research lab, an experimental facility in Southborough, Massachusetts reported that as many as 60 Greyhounds had been donated for cardiovascular research the previous year. Dr. Rogers went on to state that the dogs were confined to small cages in groups of two or three and wore muzzles as, "without them, competitive conditioning results in fights and serious injuries." Dr. Rogers would later testify at a hearing held at the Massachusetts State House that Greyhounds were aggressive towards each other and were unsuitable as pets. This was in connection with a bill proposed by the New England Anti-Vivisection Society which unsuccessfully sought to ban the use of Greyhounds in research. "Although they are friendly to people, racing Greyhounds seldom make good pets," the *Animals* article further stated. "Training has ruined their tolerance for every day life with people or other animals."

In an interview with *Turnout* magazine in January 1983, John Hoyt, president of the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), made the following interesting statements: "I don't think the humane movement would be quick to condemn the humane destruction of these Greyhounds, though we would certainly insist that it be done humanely. We would rather object to their having been bred for a purpose that was so short-lived it was necessary to destroy them. We would much rather see them humanely destroyed than to see someone attempt to perpetuate them on a farm for retired Greyhounds for years and years to come." He went on to say, "We're not in the business of trying to help legitimate industries out of business. We're in the business of trying to help legitimate industries perfect their uses of animals. Once the training of live animals was eliminated and we felt that everything possible was being done to assure that the Greyhounds were being humanely disposed of both prior to and after they had lived out their usefulness, Greyhound racing would effectively no longer be targeted for any major actions or endeavors by an animal welfare organization."

The supposed viciousness of Greyhounds was played up in a big way in a January 1983 Revere, Mass. newspaper advertisement paid for by a Vera Curcio of Revere. The ¼ page ad reprinted a front-page article from the August 20, 1935 Evening Item headed "Saugus Man Saves Girl Attacked by Six Greyhounds." The ad in big letters stated "DISASTROUS HISTORY AT WONDERLAND – MUST IT REPEAT AGAIN?? Read the tragic story below and most importantly, attend the Public Hearing on Monday, January 24th at 7 PM at the Revere City Hall and let Your Voice Be Heard to 'your' elected councilors that they not create a law allowing Vicious Dogs to be boarded in our City!"

The article in question told of an incident in which an eighteen-year-old girl fell "screaming" into a pack of seven unmuzzled Greyhounds which were being walked on leashes by an eighteen-year-old boy and she was bitten by two of them. A garage operator heard her screams, came to the rescue, and was acclaimed a hero as "it took plenty of nerve and courage to battle the savage animals."

In fact, as late as April 24, 1984 Red Hoffman, a publicist at Wonderland for 17 years and a respected sportswriter for the Lynn Item, was quoted in an article in the Worcester Gazette (Mass.), cautioning people against "buying" Greyhounds for pets. In the article he states, "Some people do, but they're trained to kill. Some trainers even feed them live rabbits to try to pump them up before a race." He then went on to say, "They're treacherous and suddenly turn on owners."

During the early eighties television interviews of adoption representatives and adopters with their Greyhounds slowly began to change the public's perception. Tracks began to permit adoption groups to distribute information and have on-track pet exhibits in their lobbies allowing the public to actually meet a Greyhound. It became popular to present a donation check to the group since it generated positive publicity for the track in the local newspaper. Articles told what to expect when adopting a Greyhound and how to go about it. They provided general and historical information about the breed as well as racing information. Success stories in which adopters were interviewed proved especially popular.

By the end of 1986, in addition to Ron Walsek's original REGAP in Florida, REGAP clones existed in a number of other states. In early 1987, REGAP groups in Massachusetts, Iowa, and Ohio

called a meeting to form a national organization with one board member per chapter and democratically elected officers and policies. Representatives from Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Virginia, Ohio, Iowa, and California participated in this meeting on April 4, 1987 in Oxford, Massachusetts and Greyhound Pets of America was formed. By the end of that year, most of the then-known adoption groups with the exception of Ron Walsek's original REGAP in Florida, REGAP of Arizona, and Greyhound Rescue Society, and Greyhound Friends (in Massachusetts) had become part of GPA. REGAP of Connecticut, which was originally interested being part of the new organization, later chose to remain separate. Greyhound Pets of America (GPA) has since grown to become the largest American adoption organization with chapters and sub-chapters extending from coast to coast and representatives covering almost every state.

Most notable about the mid to late eighties, however, was that Greyhounds as pets were no longer considered oddities and more adopters were swelling the ranks of existing Greyhound placement organizations and starting new ones. Until this time, the majority of people placing Greyhounds had direct contact with people in the Greyhound industry. It must be remembered that Greyhounds were extremely uncommon pets at the time and the only way the public was exposed to them at all was through the racing industry.

During the nineties more and more Greyhound adopters became active in promoting and placing retired Greyhounds causing the adoption movement to spread like wildfire to non-racing states. Within a few years it covered virtually every part of the country except Hawaii plus several Canadian provinces. This growth generally came about in one of several ways:

- established groups spun off sub-chapters and/or affiliates that eventually became independent organizations
- adopters in a given area got together and started their own local group;
- people working with an established adoption group split and formed a new group because of differences of opinion, policies, conflicting personalities, or some other reason;
- a number of Greyhound tracks started their own adoption kennels.

For a number of years now GPA volunteers have manned a national 800 adoption referral number (1-800-366-1472) for which they are reimbursed by the American Greyhound Council. This number provides adoption referrals to many different groups in addition to GPA. A second

800 referral number (1-800-4HOUNDS) is manned by volunteers who are loosely affiliated with Susan Netboy's National Greyhound Network. Both numbers have been responsible for connecting prospective adopters with Greyhounds awaiting adoption and have helped increase the number of Greyhounds placed each year. Another factor has also helped to increase the number of Greyhounds being placed as pets. This is the so-called Potato Chip Syndrome. As many adopters have discovered, it is very hard to stop with one once you have adopted that first Greyhound.

The Greyhound adoption movement has grown from one individual placing Greyhounds in 1972 to just a few individuals placing Greyhounds in 1982 when it was commonplace for Greyhounds to be put down when their usefulness was over. There are well over 200 groups that placed more than 18,000 Greyhounds in 1998 (American Greyhound Council estimate). The adoption movement has certainly been a success. With fewer Greyhounds now being bred and the growing number of adoption groups across the country, more and more Greyhounds are now being placed as pets.

This growth has not been limited to the United States and Canada. A number of regional adoption groups have sprung up in England, including Anne Finch's Greyhounds in Need which, along with European affiliates in Spain, Holland and Germany, devotes its efforts to finding homes for Irish Greyhounds in Spain and the native Spanish Galgos. Adoption groups also exist in Ireland, Wales, Germany, and Australia. Greyhound adoption is becoming a worldwide effort and I personally like to think of it as the second miracle of the loaves and fishes. Hopefully someday soon every adoptable Greyhound will find a loving home

Millie Merritt - 25 Years of Devotion to Greyhounds

Millie Merritt loves dogs and all dogs love Millie Merritt. If Millie were standing empty handed in a room full of people holding dog biscuits, the dogs would still head straight for Millie. Aren't greyhounds fortunate she chose to dedicate 25 years of her life to their welfare instead of to some other breed?

Millie is one of the three original founders of REGAP (Retired Greyhounds as Pets) in New England. The others are John Furbush from Maine and the late Joan Dillon from Randolph, Mass. She first heard about REGAP in 1982 when reading an article in a Florida greyhound industry newspaper and immediately sent a donation to Ron Walsek, its founder and president.

She and Joan were attempting to find homes for some dogs that retired from the Belmont, NH track when Ron suggested they contact John to see if he could help. The three of them ended up working together and formed New England REGAP, the first of many REGAP chapters that would follow once the idea of adoption caught on.

In April of 1987, several REGAP chapters, most of which had been started by people connected in some way with the racing industry, regrouped to form Greyhound Pets of America. This new group continued to focus their efforts on greyhound welfare and adoption upon retirement, while remaining neutral towards racing. We felt this neutral stance and being friend, rather than foe, to people in the racing community contributed immensely to the number of greyhounds given up for adoption. Many "old timers" began to see their dogs in a different light. Their visions of loose

greyhounds running around all over the place, killing small pets, or getting hit by cars, were replaced by photos and stories of greyhounds being the perfect family pet.

In New England, that was due in a large part to Millie's efforts as placement coordinator - matching the right dog to the right home situation. That position became especially important when we were supplying dogs to our sub-chapters in Maryland and Virginia.

Through the years, Millie has had a hand in almost every adoption. She is usually an adopter's first contact with our group. She also keeps all the adoption records and the ID tag information, making sure any lost dog gets back to its worried owner. She also sends out all the yearly reports, makes most of the post-adoption follow-up calls, and takes care of mailing out all the newsletters (except this one, of course).

Millie's efforts to promote greyhound adoption over the past 25 years are too numerous to list. She served as GPA, Mass. vice president in 1987, before taking over the position of treasurer. She made several appearances on television in the Boston area and did a weekly spot on Raynham/Taunton's race replay program. She's done meet and greets, race track pet exhibits, yard sales, nursing home visits, walk-a-thons, marched in parades, worked at craft fairs, and always manned our sales tables at each event.