

The Inside Story Of "Goodbye My Lady"

by Veronica Tudor-Williams / April 1973 ~The Basenji

It was during the worst days of World War II, in June 1942, that I received a heavily censored letter that resulted in the best publicity that Basenjis have ever had. It was from Mr. James Street, of New York City, and read; "I spent last winter in the Southern part of the United States where I was born, where the Mississippi is more than a mile wide. I had written a story and a movie about a dog called, "The Biscuit Eater." One day I stepped into a bar run by a friend and he showed me a picture in a magazine of a charming young lady with some dogs.



"Swell, eh?" my friend said.

I thought he was talking of the very young lady and agreed she was quite swell. When I learned he was talking of the dogs I almost lost interest.

"Anyway, it was your picture and the dogs were Basenjis. I had never heard of the breed before, I am a Bird Dog, Coonhound and Foxhound man. I was looking for another dog story and began reading about Basenjis"

"I then wrote the story "Weep No More, My Lady". When the story appeared in the Saturday Evening Post, the readers raised such a howl because I dared separate a boy from his dog; I had to write a sequel, "Please Come Home, My Lady." And now I am doing a third, and "My Lady" is being put into a book. Good luck, and thanks for having your picture in an American magazine."



The book was published under the title "Goodbye, My Lady" and was the same as the Saturday Evening Post story, "Weep No More, My Lady," and it rapidly became an American best seller.

It was not until some time after the war that the film, under the same title, was commenced. James Street was going to be the principal advisor, in person, when he suddenly and tragically died of a heart attack. What a great loss this was.

The cast of the film was chosen; Brandon de Wilde, age 13, and already a famous boy star, was to take the lead. I met Brandon on Long Island when the film was finished. He had LADY with him, and I asked his father how he found his son was an actor. He told me that he had a play on Broadway when one of the actors, a golden-haired boy, was suddenly taken ill and there was no under-study, so it was suggested that Brandon should be tried, and it was then found that Brandon was a natural and took to acting like a duck to water. After that he played in Shane, and from memory, I think this was followed by "Goodbye, My Lady." Other famous stars in the film included Walter Brennan, Phil Harris, and Sidney Poitier, all of whom were kind enough to autograph one of the photos published in this article and send it to me in appreciation of "My Lady." But we proceed too fast - their problem was the great difficulty in finding the ideal Basenji to fill the title role of the film. Finally, through the kindness of MARLISE, Basenji breeders in Massa-

chusetts, a long distance call was put through from Hollywood, California to Molesey, England (at 2 A.M. English time) and it was arranged that my best six-month-old bitch puppy, subsequently registered as MY LADY OF THE CONGO, should be supplied.

This was a very happy choice as she proved to be most photogenic. The big question at that time was what would happen to the dog when filming was finished, and this was quickly settled when it was written into the agreement that MY LADY should become the personal property of Brandon de Wilde. The price was not of film-star proportions, but that was a minor matter compared to the thrill of supplying her.

MY LADY was duly flown to Hollywood, to Warner Bros. Studios, and was received with unstinted praise. Then another 2 A.M. call was made to Molesey, asking for four doubles for MY LADY. No suitable bitch puppies were available, so the situation was explained and four dog puppies were offered as the only alternative.

They did not seem very suitable to double for a Lady, but it seemed to present no difficulties, so four young dogs were flown out to join MY LADY, including her litter brother, MY LORD OF THE CONGO. These four dogs also had good homes later on when filming was over. One of them was allocated to Mrs. Sheila Anderson of the Glenairley Basenjis in Canada. This was FLAGEOLET OF THE CONGO, subsequently an International Champion.

Hollywood never does anything by halves, so now the doggy, or rather, the Basenji experts, were laid on. At that time Mrs. Sheila Anderson of Glenairley Basenjis had one of the leading kennels, and possibly the greatest knowledge of the breed of anyone on the West Coast. She was asked to go and advise on the show points, and the treatment and care of the dogs for the duration of the film which was going to be shot in Georgia.

Mr. Walter Philo, then president of The Basenji Club of America, was also invited to be present and to advise. Walter wrote me that his chief criticism was that "an exact duplicate of MY LADY OF THE CONGO had not been shipped over for the president of BCOA."

Mrs. Anderson was doubtful at first whether she had been wise to leave the peace and comfort of her home, but she enjoyed being with the dogs. By that time several more doubles had been laid on, and she was delighted to find that all the people handling the dogs were really kind and were great dog lovers.

She wrote that the doubles were necessary because when cameras were rolling there can be no delays, but she was also very impressed with the anxiety of Mr. Wellman and Batjac (the small film company making the film for Warner Bros.) to see that everything, down to the smallest detail, was authentic.

At the start of the filming it seemed that several doubles would be needed, but many parts which were originally thought would have to be done by doubles, were in fact, done by MY LADY herself due to the very sympathetic and understanding way in which she was treated and with the director very anxious that she should do as much as possible. When not filming with Brandon she spent all her time with him and a real attachment developed between them.

In August 1955, a letter arrived from Brandon that read,
Dear Miss Tudor-Williams,

I am so very sorry not to have written before but I was just too busy. I want to thank you so much for the dog, MY LADY, and for the Basenji book. The book is giving all the information about Basenjis I will ever need.

I love LADY very much, and can't wait till the film is finished so I can take her home and keep her for myself. The picture starts shooting August 8th, and LADY is wonderful in it.

Thanks again, Yours truly, Brandon de Wilde



About nine months later, in 1956, feeling that "Good- bye, My Lady" should soon be released in England, I telephoned Warner Bros. in Soho, London, to ask for information, and I was told the film would shortly be shown in the West end.

I then explained that I had supplied the dog in the film, hence my great interest. I've seldom known a telephone conversation to express such a variety of feelings, incredulity, excitement, and then obvious anticipation, followed by an invitation to call at Warner Bros. offices in Soho as soon as possible, since the dog being English, would give enormous scope for publicity in the newspapers to the benefit of all concerned.

I went along to the offices and I answered numerous questions whilst being pleasantly entertained. I was then invited to the first Press Preview of the film in Warner Bros. own little cinema on the premises- and very comfortable it was, too. It was my own first viewing, and I remember being delighted with the way the whole film had been done. It was a wonderful nature study, besides a most touching story of a boy and his dog. And at the end I had to keep saying to myself, "Now don't be silly, there's no need to cry, you know perfectly well Brandon and MY LADY were never parted from each other."

Even so, I joined in with sniffs and nose-blowings, which went on towards the end among the "tough" reporters, and all of us were a bit pink-eyed when the lights went up.

This preview was followed by several others, all of which I was invited to attend, and to answer questions afterwards. All were for publicity purposes and the results were quite remarkable.

Practically every paper in Britain, especially the dailies and the glossies, carrying photos and stories, with inch-high captions such as "Charmer of the Old Nile," "The New English Lassie", and "My Lady from Britain."



Ch.Fleet Of The Congo
Ch.Carnival Of The Congo
At the premiere of Goodbye My Lady
Warner Bros. Cinema,
Lichester Square, London 1956

Then came the big premiere at Warner Bros. Cinema in Leicester Square, London, to which 400 people, important in the film and social world, had been invited. Included among the invitations were two for CH.FLEET and CH. CARNIVAL OF THE CONGO, to be escorted by me. There was nearly disaster over this followed by an amusing though slightly embarrassing episode.

The day before the premiere, for some unknown and untraced reason, I had a phone call asking me to come to the premiere but that FLEET and CARNIVAL would not be required. I duly appeared in the foyer, where I was joined by Lady Helen Nutting, then president of the Basenji Club of Great Britain, and shortly afterwards, by Warner Bros. publicity manager, whose face was a study of horror as he asked in shocked tones what had happened to the dogs - why weren't they with me as they were an essential part of the publicity. I explained why they had not come, and then I telephoned my Mother in Molesey (about 15 miles from London) to ask if she could help. She was quite wonderful, getting a taxi and driving straight up with the two dogs.

Next came the problem that they would need a walk after the drive, and with the film and a cocktail party ahead of them. They were "curb-trained" but the roaring traffic in Leicester Square was far too dangerous for that.

Finally, in desperation, I took them into the small and perfectly kept Leicester Square Gardens, with velvet green turf, and large notices "Keep off the Grass." We did not keep off the grass, and I doubt if the turf had known such sacrilege for years, if ever. We all three turned to go back to the cinema, very relieved, when the gardener working there spotted what had happened.

He came roaring at us, waving his rake like Mr. MacGregor chasing Peter Rabbit. He insisted on coming back to the cinema to hear if my story was true, and was quickly placated by the publicity manager who explained the situation. Actually, the publicity manager told me he would not have minded a fine and the whole story coming out - "it would have been good publicity," but I had not particularly enjoyed any of it.

CARNIVAL and FLEET were given seats of honor in the stalls. They behaved beautifully and took a great interest in the film, not having been made blasé' with television in those days. They recognized MY LADY by leaning forward in their seats and watched the Basenji shots in interested silence, but when the fight took place between the Basenji (one of the doubles) and the Coonhounds, FLEET growled quite loudly and seemed quite prepared to jump out of his seat and join in.

Afterwards they attended the big cocktail party held for the Press by Warner Bros., many of whom we already knew. The dogs behaved superbly, literally holding court from their armchair seats,

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