

The Station Dalmatian

A class of grade-school children was playing on the playground when a fire truck roared by, lights flashing and sirens blaring. Every child turned to stare in awe, and they saw the stately Dalmatian sitting next to the officer in the front seat. The kids began musing what the dog might be for and why he was in the truck.

"He's to keep the crowds back," said one child.

"No, he's good luck," said another.

But the discussion stopped when a third child concluded, "They use the dog to find the fire hydrant."

In truth, the three playground kids have it mostly figured out. Dalmatians have found homes in many fire stations around the world and have come to represent the fire service as a friendly mascot that helps endear the rough-and-tumble firefighters to the community. But why a Dalmatian instead of any other kind of dog? Where did this tradition come from?

Researchers can't conclusively prove that the Dalmatian actually originated in Dalmatia, a region in modern-day Croatia on the eastern side of the Adriatic Sea across from Italy. Breeders disagree on its origins because paintings and written accounts of the breed's existence have been found in Greece, Egypt, India and the Far East long before conclusive records were kept. Paintings found in ancient Egyptian tombs show the faithful spotted dog running behind the chariots, nipping at the horses' hooves. These and other records prove the Dalmatian has changed little over the centuries and is among the oldest of established breeds.

It seems the Romani people, often referred to as gypsies, found the same desirable qualities in the dog that the Egyptians did. Due to the breed's voracious appetite for exercise, the Dalmatian made for a great traveling companion. Dalmatians are not fast dogs, but they were bred for endurance and stamina, which made them ideal for the purposes of the Roma. These people lived a nomadic lifestyle, journeying thousands of miles by caravan across a lifetime, and the dogs served their masters in a variety of ways that later proved useful to firefighters.

Firstly, Dalmatians work well with horses, a necessity for people linked so closely to horses for transportation. Unlike other breeds, which are skittish around a horse's hooves, Dalmatians



would run underneath a carriage and prod the horses forward, expediting travel. They also ran alongside the wagons and defended the horses against other dogs or animals that might have otherwise attacked. The horses, in turn, recognized the Dalmatian's protection and guidance by its easily distinguishable coat and knew to follow him, making the horses easier to manage for their owner.

As guard dogs, Dalmatians protected the horses against harassment from other animals, but they also protected the contents of a wagon when the owners were away. Roma have been portrayed as traveling thieves, but that often-undeserved reputation made them easy targets for persecution, and locals would often attempt to loot Romani caravans and steal their horses. Despite the Dalmatian's propensity toward running and exercise, it will remain still for many hours in uncomfortable environments to guard whatever its owner left it to watch. Because Dalmatians are most friendly to their owners and bred to be wary of strangers, the dogs served as excellent deterrents against would-be burglars.

Also, Dalmatians are excellent rat catchers, and they caught and killed most vermin attracted to the Roma camps. Because of these useful characteristics and the breed's friendly nature toward familiar faces, Dalmatians became a staple among many Roma caravans.

As the English aristocracy began to travel beyond the borders of their fair island, they saw the unusual dog running and playing with the Roma people and their horses. Dalmatians quickly became somewhat of a fashion for the upper class, who began to enhance their carriages with the accompanying dog. Far from being afraid of the horses' hooves, Dalmatians would neatly weave in and out of their clip-clopping steps without ever getting trod upon, to the endless amusement of their adopted owners.

The upper class also liked the dogs because their coats stayed white regardless of their dusty occupation. Because Dalmatians constantly shed their fur, their coats are always being replenished with new fur that keeps the dogs looking clean at all times. Before long it became the height of fashion for nobles to match their horses' harnesses with their dog's spots.

However, as shown by their long history with the Roma, Dalmatians were never meant to be simply an upper-class dog. Coach drivers quickly caught onto the breed's bond with horses and began using them in their stagecoach business. Before finding appropriate guard dogs, coach drivers would often sleep in the stable with their horses to make sure robbers didn't make off with them in the night. As you can imagine, this was not the most convenient situation for the coach driver.

Dalmatians allowed the drivers to sleep in real beds in the coach house without having to worry about thieves.

As Dalmatians became more and more common in Britain, English firefighters began to recognize the breed's many useful attributes that the Roma had previously discovered. During the 18th and 19th centuries, London firehouses and stables left without constant use had a major problem with pests, and Dalmatians were used to exterminate the vermin. Once introduced to firehouses as useful rat catchers, the dogs got a chance to prove their worth as a horse companion, a guard dog and a friend to firemen on duty.

Before Dalmatians were common in many firehouses, their natural attraction to horses made them followers of many fire brigades as horse-drawn rescuers rushed to a blaze, and firefighters would often return to their wagons to find the spotted canine keeping the horses in check and fending off attackers and thieves. Time and again, they proved their usefulness, and thus the dogs were easily adopted into many firehouses.

The tradition spread to stations outside of London and into the more rural firehouses dotting the English countryside. Many members of these rural departments immigrated to America and brought the tradition of a Dalmatian in the firehouse with them to the New World.

In the early days of American firefighting, all departments were volunteer and the insurance companies would only pay out to the company that extinguished the blaze. Often, many different companies would arrive at the same incident, and the only way to establish who put the fire out was seeing who had hooked into the hydrant. To expedite response time (and make the most profit for a department), some companies began sending their Dalmatians out ahead of the horse-drawn apparatus to clear the traffic and make way for the wagons.

Today, the horses are gone and there's no practical need for a firehouse dog to help make it to the scene, but the tradition of a Dalmatian in the firehouse lives on. It serves as a friend to firefighters and an emblem to the community, making the station more of a home on those long lulls between calls and bringing to mind the days of a bygone era when horses, carriages, buckets and Dalmatians meant help was on the way. **NF&R**