

It all started with BCOA member, Laura Gilchrist's email to a chat list, asking a simple question, "Does anyone know why the BCOA was picketing, Jack Griffin, Sun-Times writer, and the Sun-Times Building on February 27, 1964. I saw some photos on eBay from the picket."

Chicago Sun-Times BCOA Picket History Detective

By Linda Daves Siekert, CVT

Curious, I visited eBay and ended up buying some of the featured negatives; at twelve bucks a pop who could resist owning a little, and seemingly unique, piece of basenji history? Not me. But what story were they telling? No one seemed to know. An avid fan of the PBS show History Detectives, I set out on a personal quest to find out about the Great Basenji Picket of 1964.

My first thought, how hard could it be? We're talking the *Chicago Sun-Times*; a major newspaper, in a major city. This should take just a few minutes, maybe a few dollars, and voila; famous last words. I "googled" every variation, every combination I could think of using the words Jack Griffin, Sun-Times, and basenji, to no avail. I tried to find Sun-Times archival records online; they didn't go back far enough. Desperate, I contacted the 2011 Sun-Times Photo Editor for ideas; another dead end despite a nice reply saying "Sorry;" and "Good luck."

Now what? I went back to Google and tried another 101 variations of Jack Griffin, basenji, picket. Nothing. I contacted a few BCOA members who were members in 1964. Nothing. Deflated, I went back to the chat list Laura originally posted and discovered a few members of the BCOA fancy were throwing out some ideas as to what the picket could pertain to and who the people in the photographs might be. One name kept coming up, a name I was familiar with, whom I had contact with in 1999 when I was planning my first litter, Alice Bair of Sashalia basenjies. Now I just needed to find her.

A hoarder of emails, I queried my computer and was able to locate an email address, albeit 11 years old. I had nothing to lose so I sent her an email. Nothing. So back to Google where I was able to find what I hoped was a current mailing address; I printed the email, snail mailed it and waited.

Hello, I have purchased some old 2x2 photo negatives of the Basenji Dog Club of America picketing Jack Griffin, Sun-Times writer, and the Sun-Times Building on Feb. 27, 1964. Several people thought

they saw you in the pictures. Any chance you could shed some light on the reason why you all were picketing? Thanks.

While waiting, hoping, praying for a reply, I revisited Google once again. This time my focus was in trying to find antique collectors who collect vintage newspapers. After what seemed like hours, I finally emailed a person who I thought might be the most helpful, and he was. While he did not collect the kind of newspaper I was looking for, he turned me on to the Library of Congress, online. A bit intimidating at first, I soon learned for the right price, there are people willing to scour the Library tombs for anything and everything. After a few emails to learn the ropes, I put in an order for one newspaper article featuring basenjies, their owners and some picket signs. It could take up to 8 weeks to see if I scored a hit.

In the meantime, a reply from Alice; while Alice herself was not in attendance due to being out of state, she was notified of the picket. Apparently Mr. Griffin had not been very complimentary towards basenjies, due to their inability to bark, in a previous column. Richard and Helene Butchas, of Willow West basenjies where Alice purchased her first basenji, engineered a picket of the Sun-Times building and the rest, as they say, is history.

Terrific! Thanks to Alice I had another avenue to pursue, which is exactly what I told her in my follow up thank you letter. Back to Google, now I was looking for anything related to Richard and Helen Butchas, Willow West basenjies. Sadly Richard Butchas passed away in 1985, his wife Helene in 2007. The online obituary for Helene did yield a few email addresses for three of their children. Would their email addresses still be valid, four years later? I decided to drop them a line; an hour later a reply.

Linda, I will talk to the other siblings and find out details for you. Since we were all so young at the time, I was just born in 1964, and my eldest sibling in 1961, we will not have very clear memories of the situation, just what was repeated to us.

I do know that my mom and dad were heavily involved in breeding Basenjis at that time, and that they were indeed involved in that picket. We talked about it a lot. They also did a show with the Basenjis to show people how smart they were. One of our Basenjis played the piano on the show. I will look through what I have, but unfortunately a lot of our memories were lost in a fire in 1968.

I would love to get copies of anything that you have.

I myself keep in touch with the Basenji rescue websites. It is my dream to one day own a Basenji again. The timing just hasn't been right until recently.

Incredible! I immediately sent along photo copies of the negatives where Maria was able to identify her parents in several. With promises of actual copies, and updates of anything I learn from the Library of Congress, I once again set about waiting.

A few weeks later, just as I started to forget, pay dirt! The researchers at the Library of Congress were able to locate the article which featured a few of the pictures Laura and I had purchased. Sadly the quality of the reprint was not the best though thankfully it was legible. After taking it all in, I realized there was still one missing piece, hinted at in the reprint; the original piece that set the whole picket into motion.

Hmmm, back to the Library.....

A transcription of the editorial, about the picket, that was printed in the Sun-Times.

EDITORIAL CHICAGO SUN-TIMES, Friday, February 28, 1964

We Were Picketed

The Sun-Times has aroused the passions of a special interest group. We have offended, for mercy's sake, the devoted breeders and lovers of a type of dog known as—hold it now—the “basenji.”

The instrument of this grave offense was one Jack R. Griffin, a gentle sort of man who writes knowingly about ungentle sports, such as hockey, for the Sun-Times. On Tuesday Griffin wrote less than two score lines of mild fun about a man who owns a basenji, an African hunting dog, famous for its inability to bark.

We were picketed.

By the champions of the “Barkless, odorless, intelligent, witty, fun-loving, property-conscious” basenji—(preceding characteristics furnished by basenji owners).

The basenji is an old type of dog. It reputedly did its non-barking in

the palaces of the Pharaohs of ancient Egypt. It has been recently introduced, so our dictionary says, to the United States as a pet. It doesn't bark but it does manage some vocal acrobatics with yipes, yodels and growls.

We regret that the advocates of the terrier-like African dog are angry. But we don't think Griffin's story was unreasonable; he just happens to like a dog that goes RRRUUUFFFF at frequent intervals. Sports writers are apt to be like that. And when a basenji owner claims, as did the one in Griffin's story, that a basenji is a “rare, fine thing because it cannot bark,” Griffin has the right to hold the opinion (as we do) that such a quality would be a good thing in a woman but what is so wonderful about it in a dog?

Picket photos from the negatives purchased on eBay.

(Photos by Gene Pesek)



Joyce Boehm, Ericonji Basenji (woman on right with tri-color basenji)



Jack Griffin (right) with one of the basenjis from the picket.



Joyce Boehm (left w/tri), Jack Griffin (center), Helen Butchas (right). (Photos by Gene Pesek)

Our Jack Barks For The Basenjis

In last Tuesday's column, Jack R. Griffin reflected on the inability of the basenji hound to bark. This touched a tender spot in basenji lovers who descended on The Sun-Times with a picket line Thursday noon. This is Griffin's account or his hour with the basenji pickets.

BY JACK R. GRIFFIN

It's terrifying, I mean all those basenjis just standing there, staring reproachfully at you, and not saying a word.

Look I didn't really...well all I said in last Tuesday's column was basenjis can't bark.

I still insist that's fine quality in a wife, but I had to compound the matter and reflect publicly that it might have a lesser value in a dog. And no matter what else you heard, a basenji is a dog.

That tore the hole in the dike. They took to the quill. And they came from Wisconsin and Indiana and Illinois, basenji lovers had arisen.

And I couldn't get into the Sun-Times and Daily News Building Thursday because there were all these silent, reproachful basenjis marching up and down, dragging basenji lovers behind them.

They carried picket signs proclaiming such retaliatory remarks as "Jack Griffin Is Unfair to Basenjis" and "This Is a Basenji, Not a Doughnut."

Now I never came right out and said...

"Maybe basenjis can't bark," said Mrs. Clyde Sweet of 4045 Marshall, Gary "but they're not mute. They yodel."

They what?

"They yodel," Mrs. Sweet repeated. "When you come home at night they meet you at the door and they yodel."

I suppose after a hard day at the office if you came home and there was basenji yodeling in Congolese at you it might splash up the evening.

"And Amber plays the piano," said someone back in the pack

of pickets.

Who in the world is Amber?

"Amber is a basenji," came the sharp and clear reply, "that plays the piano."

Oh, come on now. Let's try to keep this thing on...

"Basenjis," said Richard Butcha of Willow Springs, "roamed the halls of the Pharaohs of ancient Egypt. They were aristocrats then, as they are aristocrats now."

Nobody suggested that...

"They are one of the oldest breeds of dogs known to man," said Butcha. "Even back to pre-history, they stood by the side of man. And you had to..."

No, I did not. I just made that one crack and now I want...

"They lived for centuries in the darkest of Africa — in the Congo and Sudan," said Butcha. "And they were a friend of man there."

OK, OK. I know about that. I just want to...

"Look at that," said Butcha, and he pointed to 3 year-old Jonathan Carroll of Lyons, who was as reproachful and as silent as the basenji by his side.

Master Carroll was struggling in the cold wind with a sign that poignantly proclaimed: "I Love My Basenji."

"Doesn't that get to you?" said Butcha.

Sure it does. And I want to...

"How can you look at a little fellow like that — the basenji, I mean," said Butcha, "and not have your heart go out to him? How could you do what you did?"

Well I never really ...

"Did you want to say something?" asked Butcha. "Speak up."

Yes, I do. I want to say that I love all the basenjis in the world, including The Congo and the Upper Sudan. And furthermore...

"Did you learn anything about basenjis today?" asked Butcha.

I certainly did. I know one thing surely: Maybe basenjis can't bark, but their owners' sure can.

I accept defeat. I, too, can love a basenji.



Curly-tailed basenjis give the silent treatment to Sun-Times writer Jack Griffin as he explains there was nothing personal in his comments on the non barking species. (Special thanks to BCOA member, Laura Gilchrist for providing this photo to the Bulletin.)



Griffin makes his peace with a basenji as the dogs and their owners picket in front of the Sun-Times and Daily News Building. (Photos by Gene Pesek)

A transcription of Jack Griffin's article about the picket, including the original photos that appeared in it.

THE GREAT OUTDOORS

Dog Without A Bark? You Can Have Him

BY JACK R. GRIFFIN

There was this guy who had a basenji, which is not catching although it is rather rare. A basenji is an African hound which cannot talk.

"No, no," the man said, "you do not understand. Dogs do not talk."

What do you mean dogs don't talk? They had one on television the other night that would have spellbound Zsa Zsa Gabor. Pierre the expensive poodle talks. It's just that I don't understand French and we never get together.

"Talking I'm not talking about," the man said. "A basenji is a rare,

fine thing because it cannot bark."

What's so wonderful about them? Now, that might be a pretty good invention for wives, but I can't see where it has any value for dogs.

Let's look at it this way: You come home and the dog comes out to meet you, and what do you

expect? You expect him to wag his tail and bark, that what you expect. A dog without a bark, is like a doughnut without a hole in the center.

The guy left. I suppose he was angry. What a way to start the day.

A transcription of Jack Griffin's original article - which set the whole thing in motion.

Picket photos from the negatives purchased on eBay. (Photos by Gene Pesek)



Top: Jack Griffin (2nd from right), Richard Butchas, Willow West Basenjis (right of Jack Griffin)

Bottom: Joyce Boehm (far left); Jack Griffin (center); Helen Butchas (right of Jack Griffin)



Top: Joyce Boehm (Ericonji Basenji) center, holding tri-color basenji

Bottom: Jack Griffin (left), Helen Butchas (center), Richard Butchas (right)

