Article by Kim Capps and Dolores Best

On October 1, 1987, our cultural journalism group from BCCC--students Kim Capps and Dolores Best and advisors Roy Armstrong and Tim Mattimoe--visited Mr.
Jim Cox, an electrician for National Spinning in Washington, at his home in Bath. Mr. Cox has a strong interest in pit bulldogs. We wanted to talk to him about his dogs, the history of the pit bulldog, and the recent notoriety of the pit bulldogs that we've heard and read about, especially the cover story in Sports Illustrated a few months ago.

On a warm and breezy Wednesday afternoon, we decided to venture to Bath to visit Mr. Jim Cox and his "ferocious pit bulls." The drive was short because we were really anxious to see these dogs, especially to see if they were as mean as we had heard. When we drove up, there was no one in sight. Then a husky-looking dog started barking from across the street. To our surprise, the husky red dog, the mama pit bull we found out, walked up to us, curiously smelled us and, then, promptly plopped down on her belly to rest. Ferocious? Hardly.

As Mr. Cox crossed the street, following him were four beautiful pit bull pups. They were so cute! Three of them were black with white markings and one was red. One of the three black ones was a runt. The other two black ones were normal sized. But the red pup was very husky and a little more mean-looking—really so ugly he was cute.

Belying popular belief, these dogs were very friendly. The mother stayed close to her puppies, as mothers usually do. And while the puppies frolicked around the yard, she lay there napping. Not only did Mr. Cox have pit bulldogs, but he had a couple of dogs of indeterminate breeds and a cat that roamed around. Believe it or not, they all got along fine. As the puppies started to settle down for an afternoon nap, we talked to Mr. Cox.

Life: You mentioned that the AKC [American Kennel Club] doesn't sanction the breed?

Mr. Cox: Right, they don't sanction the breed.

Life: What other breeds, generally speaking, go into making up what is known as the pit bull?

Mr. Cox: The ancestor of the pit bull variety of dog goes back to the very early 19th century, possibly as far back as late 18th century. Let me go a little further back, and I'll explain the whole thing. Back as far as, say, about the 11th century, possibly the 12th century we'll say, one of the diversions in England at the time was bear-baiting and bull-baiting. Especially when a butcher was going to kill a bull or cow and he wanted everybody in town to know that he was going to have fresh meat, sometime he would stage a show. He would tie the bull to a stake in the middle of town and set the dogs on him. That drew everybody's attention to him. Well, the butcher's going to have fresh meat tonight. From that grew the sport—if you want to call it that—of bull-baiting and sometimes bear-baiting. They set the dogs on the bull or bear or whatever it was.

Life: Would they kill the bull or the bear?
Mr. Cox: They had to tether the bears, of course. They would muzzle them as a rule because if they ever got hold of a dog, they'd kill him. With bulls they would usually tether his head to a pole and set the dogs on him. They'd get him by the ears or by the nose and hold him down and drive him to his knees. For that purpose it took a dog with a short snout so he could breathe while he was holding on to the bull. From that, as time went on, what evolved is what is known as the English bulldog. Now, the English bulldog that we have today is a short, squat animal that generally weighs now not more than about 55 pounds. In those days, we're talking about 100 pounds plus, and as time went on, they began to breed the dog down till he was 100 pounds, bigger than a big boxer today.

Life: Pit bulls look a lot like boxers, don't they?

Mr. Cox: Right. The boxer was a German breed. I'll explain that in a minute. As bull- and bear-baiting fell out of favor, dog fighting came to take its place. And it was found that they needed a faster, more agile dog than the ancient bulldog. So they crossed the bulldog, which was by that time anywhere from 60-80 pounds in weight, with a black and tan, broken-haired terrier, which looked, nearly as we could pin down, like a Welsh terrier today. He might have been a little bit bigger. And that was the first half 'n' half, he was called, or bull and terrier. By that time it was the early 19th century.

That went on for quite some time. Dog fighting was very popular for a long time. Even after it was outlawed, dog fighting was very popular. In these little out-of-the-way glens and valleys and forests all over England, dog fighting was a big thing. Dog fighting is like cock fighting. Cock fighting has been outlawed for years, but people still do it right here in North Carolina. You'd be surprised how much there is going on, so I'm told, anyway.

Life: Cock fighting is right popular up in Ohio, too, I believe.

Mr. Cox: Yes. All throughout the Appalachian Mountain country you'll find it. And you'll find dog fighting, too.

Anyway, about the middle of the 19th century in Staffordshire, England, the progenitor of the type was pretty well established. About 1860 a man named Sikes, Bill or Hill Sikes I believe his first name was, took the what he called now the old Staffordshire bull terrier or Staffordshire terrier, crossed it with the old and now extinct English white terrier, and added one or two other breeds, we think, to give a little size. And, therefore, you have the white bull terrier; that's the Spuds McKenzie dog. Okay, that's the white bull terrier. He's not the same thing as a pit bull, but he's first cousin. That's about as close as you can get to being the real thing. Okay, that was about 1860.

By about 1890 or 1900, the white pit bull was crossed back into the original bull and terrier string that produced a colored bull terrier. You'll
find that he has a rod-shaped head, almost no stock between the eyes where the muzzle begins, has a flat head, wedge-shaped with a kind of slanted eyes. That's a bull terrier, not to be confused with the pit bull terrier. Sometime in the late 19th century somebody brought some bull terriers or some bull and terriers over here. We began to breed the dog. Evidently he was bred a little more promiscuously than was done in England. And we have what we call the American pit bull. And that's why you find so many different lines within the pit bull string.

The AKC won't recognize that because they're not bred to a breed standard. You find several varieties. I have been told that there's a variety of pit bull specimens that weight up to 105 pounds, which is a tremendous pit bull. That's a big dog!
Life: Yes, by any standard.

Mr. Cox: Yes, by any standards, that's true. But it's a tremendous pit bull. I wouldn't have one because I couldn't feed him. There's no way I could feed a dog like that. As a rule, of most of the pit bulls you'll see, a big male will run 70-75 pounds. Females will quite often run 55 to 60 pounds, somewhere in there. That's a big one. And then there's a smaller variety; these small ones that I have will be about that size. The grandmother of these dogs only weighed 40 pounds and was 17 inches at the shoulders.

There is one more thing I could tell you. Did you read in the Sports Illustrated where they could not define pit bull? Okay, to further complicate an already confusing situation, the original bull and terrier of England, his standards have been set and codified by the English Kennel Club. That dog is now known as the Staffordshire bull terrier. In America, we have one almost identically the same but he usually runs five, maybe 10 pounds, heavier, and we call that one the American Staffordshire. And yet all these dogs are not the same as what we generally call the pit bull because of all these other dogs that are AKC registerable, the pit bull is not. But you can generally recognize the type anyway if you can't pin him down specifically.

Life: The mother here really looks more like a boxer.

Mr. Cox: Yes, they favor a boxer. And speaking of the boxer, that dog was
developed back in the 19th century from a bull fighting type that was [a cross between] a German dog and an English bulldog. From that you have the modern-day German breed boxer. So we have a whole family of dogs. As a matter of fact, all these dogs, these bull fighting types, go back to the original mastiff, the English mastiff. So they're all kin.

Life: The mastiff is an AKC dog, isn't it?

Mr. Cox: That's an AKC dog. We also have a bull mastiff that's a cross between a 19th century bulldog and the English mastiff, which is, again, a 110-120 pound specimen. That is not at all unusual in a bull mastiff. And a true mastiff is even bigger. They'll run 150-160 pounds or more. They're huge dogs. They're as big as any St. Bernard.

Life: Yes, I've seen a full-grown mastiff. The one I saw was jet black.

Mr. Cox: They look like a Shetland pony, and, yes, you can even find black ones nowadays. It used to be very rare to find a black mastiff. They were usually tan or brindle. But there were very few black ones.

Life: You mentioned the Sports Illustrated article, the cover story a few months ago on the pit bull. I have talked to you about this kind of dog, and I agree with you that they are really little different from other dogs. But what about all this publicity about
them, the charges that they're vicious dogs?

Mr. Cox: I wouldn't say that they're vicious dogs. I would say that the majority of them are what you would term as assertive in people. They are very territorial. If you've ever read Kober Harvey's The Territorial Imperative, you know what I mean by that; a dog or any animal, including humans, is very protective of territory. Harvey states the thesis much better than I can in two minutes' time. But dogs are very territorial. Pit bulls will fight other dogs, maybe quicker than some other breeds, but almost always it's when the dog is on their territory. That's not a hard and fast rule anymore than you can say German shepherds make great pets because Roy Rogers had one. There are

Two pit bull pups

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more German shepherd bites than any other single breed in the U. S. You just don't hear as much about it.

That reminds me of a few weeks ago when the [Beaufort] County Commissioners were talking to [county animal control authorities] about an ordinance [against pit bulls]. They asked them how many dog bites they [investigated] per year. They said from 300-400 a year. The commissioners asked how many were pit bull bites. They answered maybe one in the last 10 years. And that one was in Belhaven several years ago.

They had a little boy that was about 13 years old, and he went by this pen everyday and threw rocks at the dogs. The boy's granddaddy told him to leave those dogs alone, they were going to get him. He didn't believe him. So one day he went by and the gate was open and they got him.

Life: I guess any dog will get mad if someone throws rocks at him.

Mr. Cox: Well, sure he will! Wouldn't you get mad?

Life: Yes!

Mr. Cox: Think about it. These dogs are smart dogs. They're like children. If you do them wrong, they're going to remember it. Any dog will.

Life: How are they with other dogs, particularly small ones. Say, if you owned some small dogs like a dachshund or something like that?

Mr. Cox: Oh, they get along with the other dogs. If they can get along with the cat around here, they can get along with anything.

Life: If they realize this is the home of the cat, then they're okay?

Mr. Cox: Yes.

Life: How about if you bring them into a home in which you already have a dog?

Mr. Cox: As a matter of fact, a man that just bought two of them from me Monday already has an Eskimo spitz. He took them home. His wife was kind of skitterish of them; she was afraid the spitz wouldn't like them or the puppies wouldn't like the spitz or what have you. He told me the next day at work that they were getting along fine, playing and having a good time. He said they're getting along just great.

My brother Steele had one; he lives in that house over there [pointing]. He had a big black one that's the daddy to that red one over there [the mother of the pups]. His mother was red just like that. When Steele got the puppy, he was a little fellow, and he was 13-14 months old. When I brought my dog home, she was eight months old. And when I brought her home, I took her out of the back of the truck and crossed the road and Simba [Steele's dog] came up, and he saw a strange dog in our midst. He didn't ask questions; he made for the dog and intended to do something about it. She started towards him, and I snatched my dog and threw her into the back of the truck. I took her down to the barn and locked her up but left it
open so they could smell each other. In a couple of days time, he got so he wasn't so territorial, and I opened the door and set her on the ground. They looked at each other and they jumped at each other and from that time on, they were inseparable.

Life: Is that right?

Mr. Cox: Yes. Never a fight. But he saw a strange dog. He didn't know if it was male or female. Most of the time a dog of any breed will not attack a female. They won't attack, but they might fight back when they've been attacked. But as a rule they won't attack a female. Now, that's not hard and fast either. That will happen. Hound dogs will jump on a female, too. After they got acquainted and realized that there was space left for both of them, I turned around and I never had to discipline either dog about fighting. They got along fine.

Life: What do you think caused this adverse publicity about these dogs in the last couple of years?

Mr. Cox: Well, one of [the factors], if not probably the largest contributing factor in recent years, has been the great influence of drugs and the money that goes with it. And a lot of people have been buying pit bulls because now they were selling drugs and they had plenty of money to buy the dogs, plenty of money to bet, and plenty of money to stage the fights. There's a lot of [fighting], as I understand, goes on in Dade County, Florida. A lot of it. If people have got money, they're going to bet. They're going to buy something with a pedigree that's got a bad reputation. It makes them feel better. Also, another thing is they are used as guard dogs.

Life: By drug dealers?

Mr. Cox: Yes! What did Sports Illustrated say? That three out of every four that they busted were using pit bulls for guard dogs.

Life: Yes. And also the street gangs are apparently using them. It seems that when you see a street gang, they always have a great, big, old husky dog that really looks bad.

Mr. Cox: I've heard for years "mean as a junkyard dog," but that was really before pit bulls got so popular. And I think they've adapted pit bulls to fit their needs.

Life: It's really kind of a sad irony, isn't it, that the dog is strong to start with. I mean, there's nothing wrong with being strong. But if you want to get a watchdog or some dog to intimidate people or impress people with, you're not going to get a dachshund. You're going to get something that's got an image.

Mr. Cox: That's right. These dogs have something to fit the image. For example, right here are the Belhaven Bulldogs. The bulldog is a symbol of tenacity. If you're familiar with the dogs, they are tenacious dogs. But the bull-
dog, also, is one of the friendliest of animals, believe it or not. The blood hound is not a bloody killer, but he has a great nose that is actually allowable in court to corroborate as a witness.

Life: Talking about junkyard dogs, the University of Georgia is known as the Bulldogs. But a couple of years ago, when they had a really outstanding defense, they called their defense the "Junkyard Dogs."

Mr. Cox: Yes. ECU called theirs the "Mad Dog Defense" about 10-15 years ago.

Life: What about the unpleasant subject like you read about in Sports Illustrated where people brutalize the dogs in training them to be vicious?

Pit bull mama.
Mr. Cox: Throwing live kittens in there with them so they'll get the taste of blood and all that is just sick. That's not the dog's fault; that's just sick on the human's part. A friend of mine, who does right much hunting in the western part of the state, was telling me that a lot of the people up there fight these dogs. And to make them mean, they will tie them up around their shoulders to keep their front feet off the ground and leave them that way for days at a time before a fight and then give them raw meet and such as that. You know, all the traditional things like feeding them gun powder to make them mean. In other words, the dogs are mistreated. By the time fighting day comes, they're mad enough to kill anything that moves!

Life: And it's not just because they're pit bulls, is it? Any dog would be like that after that kind of treatment.

Mr. Cox: That's right. I mean, if you cut a dog and put salt in the wound to make him ill-tempered; you hang him up so his feet don't touch the ground--it's like hanging a man by his thumbs so his toes just touch the ground. People do this sort of thing. And then the dogs are blamed, and that's not right.

Life: Jim looked at the big male pup.

Mr. Cox: He's gonna be a big one. He's gonna push 80 pounds if he grows like he should.

Life: You were telling me you hadn't had any trouble with them biting people.
Mr. Cox: No. Sometimes people ride horses down here going to the creek; they don't like the horses. They think they're big dogs. That's really what they think. They go out there and charge at their horses, and, of course, the people don't like it. But all I can say is go around the other way. You can get to the creek in the other direction. They're supposed to be yard dogs. I've got them for a purpose.

Life: After we took a few pictures of the mama dog, she lay down. It must be nap time.

Mr. Cox: Most anytime is nap time unless you just woke them up, and then you can't stand it!

Life: Jim pointed out that one reason for ill-tempered and vicious dogs is inbreeding. The more popular the dogs become, the more inbreeding goes on in the "puppy mills." The result often is unstable, dumb, and sometimes vicious dogs.

Mr. Cox: When German shepherds first became popular in the '20s, breeders just started turning out puppies, and they would crossbreed the dog incessantly. Well, one generation incest cross is not that damaging, but several generations of it and you get crazy dogs. Well, German shepherds got so popular that puppy mills were turning out cheap puppies, and they got a reputation as fighting dogs. Chowchows were real popular at one time. Puppy mills started turning them out; you got bad dogs out of it. Irish setters, that's one of my pet peeves; Irish setters are beautiful animals. They have been cross-bred and interbred and not taken care of until they don't have enough sense to come in out of the rain. They have been ruined!

The Saint Bernard is another breed. Up until about 15 years ago, it was next to impossible to find a vicious Saint Bernard. You can ask a vet now, and every once in a while you'll see a vicious Saint Bernard. In fact, I used to do some door-to-door selling when I was in college, and I found some vicious Saint Bernards the hard way! They look like lions coming down the hill. But you're right; you can inbreed or select certain characteristics [such as viciousness and assertiveness], and they can become dominant. Dogs are famous for their genetic plasticity, anyway. If they weren't, we wouldn't have 180 pound English mastiffs and one pound toy dogs. But they're all the same species. All exactly the same thing.

Life: We asked Jim about the ideal environment for the pit bulls, if they would be good pets.

Mr. Cox: They're good pets as long as they've got plenty of room to work off that energy. They're athletes, born athletes, and they've got to have room to work off that energy. I wouldn't want one for an apartment dog because it wouldn't be fair to the dog. A good friend of mine brought one up here he had gotten from a woman in Charlotte. Beautiful animal! It was an American Staffordshire. Beautiful animal, but she was fat. She had never been turned
loose to run. I don't like to see that.

Life: That's sad.

Mr. Cox: She took care of the dog; she never mistreated the dog. I'm not saying that. But the dog was fat!

Life: How far do they roam around here?

Mr. Cox: Females generally don't roam too far. Males are like any other dog. He'll go as far as he wants if he can get away with it.

Life: Do the females just stay in your yard pretty much?

Mr. Cox: Well, the one I've got roams. I don't know where she goes. I assume she goes in the woods. She got that from her daddy. He ran a lot, and she went with him. But her mother didn't roam. Oh, she might go a little ways, but she wasn't gone all night because I'd know she was here. I could hear her walking at all hours. The red one doesn't leave until after midnight after everyone has gone to bed.

Life: Finally, Jim told us that he'd been raising pit bulls for several years. And as far as he's concerned, they're fine dogs.

Mr. Cox: They're good dogs. But you've just got to treat them right!

CONCLUSION

Mr. Jim Cox gave our group an interesting and insightful look at the
history of the pit bulldog and helped calm the fears that have recently been associated with the dog. After actually holding one of these puppies and listening to Mr. Cox, we realize that any dog can be trained to be vicious. It is not the dog, but the trainer who can encourage this violent behavior. It was not what we expected to see: typical puppies playing and the mama asleep on the ground. To our group, it was a pleasant experience to be able to spend an afternoon playing with these cute pets. Mr. Cox was a tremendous help to us, and we will always appreciate his willingness to give us the true story of the pit bulldog.

Bumper Sticker on Jim Cox's Truck