A Blast From Our Past
A Visit with Natalie Hodgen

Natalie Hodgen discusses our breed’s history and future, in an exclusive interview with Tricia Till.

Natalie Hodgen, one of our breed’s greatest ambassadors, was not always a “dog person.” Growing up in Massachusetts, Natalie never really had a chance to have pets. All that changed when she married the love of her life, Arthur, and moved to New Hampshire. Natalie claims that the key to their 69 year marriage was patience and love—two traits both practiced on a daily basis with their Alaskan malamutes!

Nat’s love of the Alaskan malamute began shortly after her marriage to Art Hodgen. Art grew up with all kinds of dogs, but had always been fascinated by both sledding and the Alaskan malamute. The newly-married couple visited Chinook Kennels on their honeymoon. Chinook Kennels, owned and operated at that time by two legends in the malamute world, Milton and Eva Seeley, gave the newlyweds a chance to see Alaskan malamutes and Siberian Huskies at work and at play.

Natalie and Arthur toured the kennels, met the dogs, and talked to Eva Seeley at length. An experience that Nat remembers as a “defining moment,” the young couple immediately decided that their first dog would have to be an Alaskan malamute. However, some years would pass before Natalie and Arthur were able to obtain their first dog. Although Art and Nat regularly attended all of the dog sled races in New England, their busy life with a young family came before they could convince anyone to sell them a puppy. A beautiful home was built and babies born, before the Hodgens finally decided that the time was right for an Alaskan malamute.

Natalie and Arthur went to Mrs. Seeley to inquire about purchasing one of her Kotzebue Alaskan malamutes. But Eva Seeley refused to sell the couple a dog. While Nat says that she now understands why (the couple had small children, no fence, and no experience with malamutes), at the time she was heartbroken. She had her sights set on a dog like Short Seeley’s Chinook Kotzebue Gripp, the best-moving sled dog she had ever seen, and she refused to take Mrs. Seeley’s succinct “no” as a final answer. Despite the fact that the Hodgens were very upset at not being able to purchase one of the Kotzebue puppies, they persisted, and Mrs. Seeley put them in touch with a number of people to whom she had sold dogs, who were expecting litters.

Arthur and Natalie traveled to a number of homes, but they kept coming back without a puppy. They had a vision of the dog they wanted, and none of the puppies shown to them met their standards. Finally, a friend put them in touch with Dr. and Mrs. Lawlor. Mrs. Lawlor was willing to sell them both a dog and a bitch, recognizing that this couple—who loved skiing, sledding, hiking and the outdoors—would make an excellent home for an Alaskan malamute. Mrs. Lawlor had originally gotten her dogs from Eva Seeley, and she sold the Hodgens a puppy bitch—Musher Lane Kila—in 1949. Kila (who laid in Nat’s lap all the way home…but didn’t quite make it before having an accident!) began Nat’s journey of raising over 150 Alaskan malamute puppies with her beloved husband, Art.
Sno-Pak Kennel was located on about an acre in Wilton, New Hampshire. Art planted pine trees to provide shade for the dogs 50 years ago (which are very tall now!); Art poses with the very first Sno-Pak litter in August 1952 - Kim is the third pup from the left; Art showing Ch Kim of Sno-Pak, who was Natalie’s favorite mal.

Above and Right: Art and Nat with a litter of pups circa 1965; Nat and friends stand in front of the Sno-Pak sign on Nat’s 90th birthday; Nat and Art with three pups they exported to Switzerland circa 1960.

Below: Ch Sno-Pak Yukon Bandit; Sno-Pak team on the trail; the Hodgen kids Peter and Margaret with Ch Kim of Sno-Pak and his puppies; Art and Kevin Hall sledding the trails; Newspaper clipping circa 1968 of the early Kotzebue breeders - from left David Butler, Nelson Butler, Natalie Hodgen, Eva Seeley, Dr Edward Lawlor, Mrs Lawlor, Arthur Hodgen.
Arthur and Natalie did not show either Kila or the male puppy, and it was not long before Art decided that he would like at least another few dogs to work together on a team. When Kila was three or four years old, they made the decision to breed her. They only wanted to breed her to the best possible stud dog, and being “new” on the dog scene, this was hard to do. Rumor had it that the best stud dog at the time was Ch Toro of Bras Coupe owned by Earl Norris of Alaska. Art and Nat learned that Toro would be in the continental United States for a period of time, even coming to the New England area, and a friend helped them get a note from Mr. Norris stating that they could use Toro for breeding with their female Kila. (Remember, this was before the modern convenience of fresh-chilled and frozen semen!) Although later there was some controversy over the note—Mr. Norris claimed he would not have approved a breeding to a bitch he had never seen—the breeding did finally take place. Four beautiful puppies resulted from this much-anticipated litter, and Art and Natalie had the start of their Sno-Pak kennels. They kept two of the puppies, Kim and Kavik, selling the other two.

Kim of Sno-Pak was the male they kept from this breeding, and he was perhaps Natalie’s favorite dog of all time. Whether he was on the trail or in the show ring, Kim was always a character. Natalie recalls that at his very first match, at the age of six months, Kim won the breed, the Working Group, and Best in Match! Nat and Art were now officially hooked on dogs!

However, this didn’t mean that the Hodgens didn’t still have a lot to learn. Natalie admits that both Art and she were horrible handlers, despite numerous attempts by a good friend and Collie breeder to teach them about grooming and showing. Natalie recalls that showing their dogs became very frustrating. They were constantly in competition with Eva Seeley, known by “Mother” of Alaskan malamutes, and Bob Zoller, a relative newcomer, who had large, impeccably groomed and trained dogs. Natalie remembers that while Mrs. Seeley and Mr. Zoller seemed to groom and show dogs quite differently from each other, they had one thing in common—both easily beat the Hodgens in the show ring!

At one point, a fellow exhibitor told Art that if he wanted to win in the show ring, his best bet would be to put his wife in a short skirt and enter under male judges! Natalie didn’t care much for showing (and Art didn’t care much for the implications of that statement!), so they instead hired a professional handler, Bill Trainer. Since his wife was a vet and he was used to sled dogs, the Hodgens felt comfortable allowing Bill to show their Sno-Pak Kotzebue Alaskan malamutes. They went on to finish numerous champions, and some of their dogs also were used in Operation Deep Freeze, these dogs leaving on an icebreaker from Boston, Massachusetts, headed for Antarctica, with Admiral Byrd.

Natalie says that while she always loved the movement of Eva Seeley’s Gripp, the one thing she faulted him on was his height. He was a short dog, although he was very well-built. Natalie believed that she wanted a slightly heavier-boned dog, who was not too rangy, and who looked like her first homebred boy, Kim. Kim was 25 inches and 85 pounds, which made him a nice compromise in the ring between Short Seeley’s smaller males and Bob Zoller’s larger ones. “Compromise” seems to have defined much of Natalie’s early work in malamutes. With her experience as a legal secretary, Natalie played a key role in gaining AKC recognition for the Alaskan Malamute Club of America. She often served as the peacemaker between the warring factions in the early years of the club.

At 91 years of age, Natalie is still interested in the Alaskan malamute today, and she keeps in touch with a number of people in our club, including Bill and Joyce Matott and Carol Williams. She feels that the dogs have become a bit too large today; that the Alaskan malamute was bred to last all day on the trail, and the smaller dogs have an easier time doing this than the larger ones. She always stayed true to the Kotzebue line of Alaskan malamutes, and while her Kotzebues were bigger, they rarely went over 25 inches at the shoulders. Natalie is known among Kotzebue breeders for having seals and blacks in her line. She claims that she isn’t sure where this came from, but she never had a preference for the darker colors! Natalie believes that today’s breeders need to stay true to breed type, and she is concerned about the amount of coat appearing on a number of the dogs. She also worries about the health of our dogs and hopes that today’s breeders can work together to figure out some answers to the health problems plaging our breed.

Natalie Hodgen, co-founder of Sno-Pak Alaskan malamutes, is a woman to be respected and admired. I thank her for talking with me at length about our breed and her experiences! I also thank Carol Williams, Bill Matott, and Natalie’s daughter Peg Hatfield, for their help piecing this article together. I am constantly reminded by these people how important the history of our breed is today.

About the Author
Tricia Till has been involved in Alaskan malamutes since the day she was born. As a child, she both successfully and unsuccessfully had fun with her malamutes in the Junior Showmanship ring. Her father, Lawrence Till, preferred the Kotzebue type of Alaskan malamute due to their temperament and working attitude, and Tricia spent many a winter doing gymnastics off the back of a dog sled! Now a teacher and guidance counselor for Richmond High School, Tricia maintains a strong interest in both preserving the Kotzebue Alaskan malamute and in helping future juniors in the sport of purebred dogs.

A member of the AMCA Membership Committee, Tricia also serves as Corresponding Secretary of the Great Lakes Alaskan Malamute Club, and on the Boards of the Great Lakes Bearded Collie Club and the Michigan Hound Association.
Photos Top Row: Ch Sno-Pak Tanana, one of Nat's favorite bitches; two lovely Sno-Pak pups, about six months old.

Middle Row: Nat and Art's granddaughter Meredith with a Sno-Pak puppy in 1969; Art and puppy Sno-Pak Togo; Handler Bill Trainer winning Working Group with Ch Sno-Pak Mascara in December 1970.

Bottom Row: 1994 news story about the Hodgens; Art shipping puppy Ch Sno-Pak Kavik's Oopik to California in July 1954; Ch Toro of Bras Coupe sired the very first Sno-Pak litter.

Editor's Note: Special thanks to Peg Hatfield and Mike Chilinski for photographs.

Natalie Hodgen's new address is:
Linsey Landing
40 Bridge St Apt 226
Milford, NH 03055