

# Zero, a Boy's Best Friend

*To one lonely boy, she was a dog in a million.*

*By Howard A. Jewell*

“Did you ever consider getting him a dog?” With these eight words spoken to my mother, Miss Riehm, my third-grade teacher, changed my boyhood significantly.

We lived in Martins Ferry, a small Ohio town across the Ohio River from Wheeling, W.Va., where Dad was head of the cost-accounting department of Wheeling-Pittsburgh Steel Corp. I was an only child, shy and not in the least interested in playing sports or participating in other active outdoor activities as most boys my age did.

I was a happy little boy, however, playing indoors with my many toys, taking piano lessons, and making all sorts of things.

There seemed to be something lacking, though, and my parents were concerned, so they took Miss Riehm's advice. Dad knew a man at the office who had a puppy about 3 months old, and so the pup became a part of our family. Her name, Duchess, seemed wrong for the lively little beast, and Mother came up with the name Zero.

Zero was wild, indoors and out, and contrary to what the man at the office had said, she was *not* housebroken. She also enjoyed chewing everything in sight!

We had been told she was an English bulldog, but as the pictures show, except for a wide chest and a somewhat shorter nose and mouth, she appeared to resemble more of a mixed breed.

I loved her dearly, though. I had a playmate and a buddy at

last. She even loved music, and she often lay on my feet at the piano so that using the damper pedal was impossible!

Zero celebrated Christmas right along with the rest of us. Her presents—a box of dog biscuits, assorted dog toys, and so on—were wrapped and placed under the tree with the other gifts. She seemed to be able to tell which ones were hers by



*The author and Zero, circa 1943, when he was 10 years old and she was 2 years old.*

doing a lot of high-powered sniffing! A day or two before Christmas, she would sit by the tree and whine. "Let me open just one, puh-leeze!" she was trying to say.

Zero went to school with me on the last day in the spring for several years. We would report at 1 p.m., just long enough to receive our report cards for the final marking period, and then go home.



The school was just a short walk from our house. When we walked onto the playground, many of the children burst into laughter, saying, "You can't take a dog into school!" But when the bell rang, we all lined up, including the four-footed pupil.

I shared my seat and desk with her. She was as quiet as could be, and she looked straight ahead. Everyone in the class had to come over and pat her. She loved attention, and so she went right along with the idea.

A local department store sponsored a 15-minute program each day on a local radio station during which the announcer would read the names of children who were celebrating birthdays that day. Well, I looked upon Zero as being pretty close to human, so we submitted Zero's name for July 28, which we happened to know was her real birthday.

I had Zero right near the radio when the list was read and, indeed, for several years, the list would include "Little Zero Jewell, who celebrates her birthday today. Happy Birthday, Zero!" They presumed "Zero" was a child's nickname. Zero would prick up her ears and tip her head to one side as if she were thinking, *Who's inside that box calling my name—and I wonder if he has a dog biscuit for me?*

*Zero performs one of the tricks she learned to entertain guests. The author was scheduled to play three piano pieces by Chopin for the Martins Ferry Woman's Club, and a photographer from the local newspaper came to take his picture while he was sitting at the piano. The author notes: "While my mother and the photographer were busy talking, I quickly got Zero's props and got her set in the pose you see here. 'Oh, I simply must have a picture of this too!' This picture is copied from the 8 x 10 she gave me, after both Zero and I had been featured in a photo in the Times-Leader the following week. Zero had other props and poses as well. She would let me fix her up any way I chose, and she'd sit there patiently until I said, 'OK, Zero!' As soon as the photographer snapped the picture, I said, 'OK, Zero!' and she jumped off that stool, letting her props fall to the floor."*



*Above: Howard, 15, his mother and Zero, 1948. This photo was taken at a tourist cabin on Lake Erie. Right: The author is shown with his father and Zero in this circa 1944 photo, when Howard was 11 years old and Zero was 3. This photo was taken at a roadside park in eastern Ohio.*



Zero went just about everywhere our family went, even to Niagara Falls, where she craned her neck out to get a good look at the falls. One year Mother, Dad and I were going somewhere that Zero could not accompany us, so we boarded her at an upscale kennel out in the country, owned and operated by a lady veterinarian who bred champion boxers.

When we returned a week later, the owner of the kennel told us Zero had eaten very little that week, and just slept most of the time. It was summer, and she was in an immaculate enclosure with a big champion boxer in the run on each side of her. But she was pining for her family.

Her head popped up as soon as our car drove in, and she stood and wagged her short tail and entire hindquarters furiously. After we parked the car, the attendant opened the gate to her run. I never saw her move so fast. She ran across the lawn and, with a flying leap, landed on the backseat of our car!

Well, time has a habit of marching on. One year when Zero was about 12 years old, I was down at the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music, majoring in performance on the pipe organ. When

I came home, I could see time had taken a toll. She was showing gray hairs around her eyes and in the brown spots on her body. She had slowed down noticeably. Poor, dear Zero had given us all so much joy over the years, but I could see she was sad, and I believe she knew her time was drawing to an end.

Soon thereafter, Dad made what he said was one of the most difficult decisions he'd ever made. She was buried out in the country, not far from our home in eastern Ohio, on the farm of some dear friends.

When I came home from college that spring, we drove out and they showed me the small grove of trees under which she lay. Zero, my friend, my buddy, my companion, brought much joy and love into the lives of our entire family, but most profoundly to the life of a lonely little boy. ❖

