



Seeing Eyes

School for Seeing Eye dogs founded by Tennessean Morris Frank

Morris Frank was a blind man from Nashville who helped start the first school that trained Seeing Eye dogs. His dog, Buddy, is considered to be the first Seeing Eye dog in America.

This amazing story started on Nov. 5, 1927, when Morris Frank was a 20-year-old student at Vanderbilt University and a man very unhappy about his dependency on others to get around. Frank's father read him an article in the Saturday Evening Post by Dorothy Eustis, an American woman living in

Switzerland. In the article, Eustis talked about how she had seen shepherds there training dogs to lead blind people around.

Excited by the idea, Frank wrote a letter to Eustis and received a response letter 30 days later inviting him to see for himself. Frank then took a ship to Europe and trained extensively with a German shepherd bred specifically to lead a blind person. The training was hard, but after weeks with the dog, Frank could get around the nearby Swiss village of Vevey holding tightly to a harness to which Buddy was strapped.

With Eustis as his financial backer, Morris Frank returned to America with a goal of spreading the word about Seeing Eye dogs. From the day he got off the ship, he was successful. At one point, in front of a group of dumbfounded reporters, Buddy led Frank safely across a busy New York street. "She (Buddy) moved forward into the ear-splitting clangor, stopped, backed up and started again," Frank wrote in a 1957 book called "First Lady of the Seeing Eye." "I lost all sense of direction and surrendered myself entirely to the dog. I shall never forget the next three minutes ... ten-ton trucks rocketing past, cabs blowing their horns in our ears, drivers shouting at us ... When we finally got to the other side and I realized what a really magnificent job she had done, I leaned over and gave Buddy a great big hug and told her what a good, good girl she was."

When Frank returned to Nashville, people were amazed at the sight of the blind man and his dog successfully navigating busy sidewalks and couldn't believe that it was the same blind boy they had so recently taken pity on. "Now strangers spoke freely to me," Frank wrote. "In the old days, at a streetcar stop, for instance, I often envied two sighted persons, who obviously did not know each other, their ease in striking up a conversation ... They did not wish to be rude, leaving me out, but they just did not know how to go about bringing me in without referring to my blindness. With Buddy there, however, it was the easiest and most natural thing in the world for them to say, 'What a lovely dog you have!'"

What amazed people the most was that Buddy had an ability best known as "intelligent disobedience," which means that she would obey Morris except when executing that command would result in harm to her master. If there was a low-hanging branch ahead on the sidewalk, for instance, Buddy knew how to navigate around it to the point where Morris wouldn't hurt his head on it.

About this time, Frank, Eustis and several others co-founded The Seeing Eye, an institution set up to train guide dogs and their blind masters. It operated in Nashville for two years and then moved to Morristown, N.J. (partly for climate reasons; they



Morris Frank with his dog, Buddy, the first Seeing Eye dog in America. Photo courtesy of the Tennessee State Library and Archives.



At right, Buddy leads Morris Frank across the street in front of reporters in New York City. Below is Frank with another Seeing Eye dog. Photos courtesy of The Seeing Eye Inc.

found it to be too hot in Tennessee to train German shepherds year round.)

As Frank and Buddy traveled the nation, they also opened doors for blind people of future generations. In that era there were no laws that required trains, hotels and restaurants to allow Seeing Eye dogs to gain entrance. Almost on a daily basis, Frank would go into an establishment and be told that he couldn't bring his dog in. His canned response: "I'm not bringing her in; she's bringing me in!" On one memorable occasion a railroad porter followed Frank and Buddy to their seats and then preceded to try to drag Buddy back out. However, in the words of Frank, Buddy then showed the porter her "beautiful teeth," convincing the porter that it was best to leave her alone.

Buddy remained a national hero for the rest of her life. When she died in May 1938, the event was noted with a long obituary in *The New York Times*. "Buddy had appeared on hundreds of lecture platforms and barked in



response to applause; she had been received by Presidents Coolidge and Hoover and other notables; and she had been led into the homes of poor among the blind and had given them hope while they patted her and fingered her harness," the obituary said. By that time, The Seeing Eye had trained 350 dogs to lead blind people in America.

Today, the organization reports on its Web site (www.seeingeye.org) that it has, in its 80-year history, trained 14,000 dogs. Buddy is considered the first. And if you go to downtown Morristown, N.J., you will find a statue of Nashvillians Morris Frank and Buddy — in all likelihood the world's only statue of a blind man and his Seeing Eye dog.



Tennessee History for Kids

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