

Martha Jewett Fenn Brill, mastiff breeder

You never wore your best clothes to Aunt Pat's for Sunday night dinner because of the mastiffs. They drooled, or as we children said, they "slobbered." Martha Jewett Fenn Brill, always known as Patty, lived with her husband, John Brill, on their beloved Peachtree Farm in Delaware. She was one of the top American breeders of these beautiful, gentle, and massive dogs. Several outdoor mastiffs roamed free, investigating you with a wet nose pressed on the car window before you had a chance to exit the car. Inside, the three to five mastiffs well behaved enough to be in the house, greeted dinner guests. They roamed drooling from lap to lap while a mynah bird screeched out an imitation of my great aunt's voice calling for Bernard, the ancient butler.

The family story was that Aunt Pat saved the mastiff breed between the two World Wars when England prohibited the feeding of non-working animals causing the mastiff breed to nearly die out. Aunt Pat brought mastiff puppies to the US and her line of mastiffs is noted by the Mastiff Club of America. Her breeding method was sometimes called "scattershot" as the mastiffs could be found roaming the farm—"even in the tennis court," according to one account. In a formal photograph Aunt Pat stands elegant in a full length satin gown next to one of her champion mastiffs. I never learned why she was called Patty, but my mother, Patricia Fenn McGeorge was named for her. Martha Jewett Fenn Brill was born on September 17, 1907 and died on March 7, 1982 at the age of 75, survived by four children, many mastiffs and their offspring.