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What is a Bertillon Card?

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**Greyhounds and
Animal-Assisted Therapy**

The Bertillon Demystified

Story by Shannon Forrest

Photos by Jessica Martin

“Yes, we do have a Greyhound here. Can you describe the dog?” the worker at the animal shelter responds to your inquiry.

“Well, it’s male and brindle,” you say, hoping that your lost dog has been found.

“Ma’am, I’ve got two male brindle Greyhounds here and someone has already claimed one of them. Can you be more specific?”

The question is: Can you?

Aside from using an ear tattoo or microchip, could you identify your Greyhound based on physical characteristics alone? Is that scar on the right leg or the left? Where are the white patches in relation to the brindle? Most people would recognize their animals based on behavior but recalling physical traits from memory might be difficult.

However, if a Greyhound was registered to race, those characteristics have been documented on a Bertillon card.

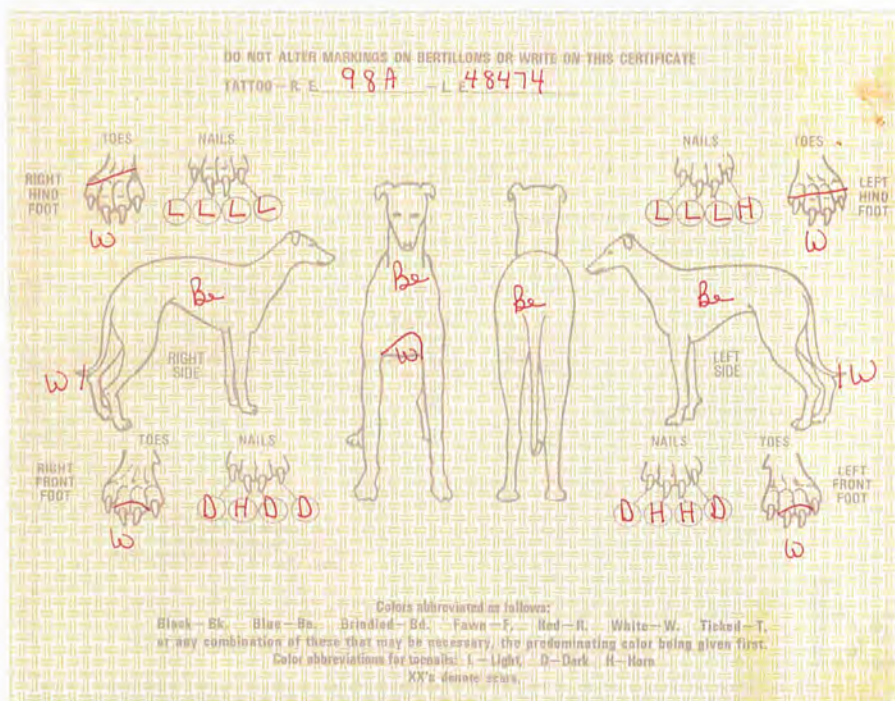
Alphonse Bertillon may not have been aware that his contribution to society would be modified to identify Greyhounds. He died in 1914, not long before the sport of organized dog racing became popular in the United States.



Is this your dog? Shannon Forrest knows this is Wagner, because he has his Bertillon card.

Bertillon’s System

The man behind the card that bears his name was born in France in 1853. At the age of 26, he was hired by the records division of the Paris police department. Bertillon soon became dismayed with the monotonous task of cataloging more than 5 million files. The sheer volume of criminal records made the job daunting and the documents were vague and of poor value. Descriptions of physical features were not sufficiently specific to positively identify a criminal, the names were often phony, and the mug shots were distorted. Disillusioned with the status quo, Bertillon — a statistician at heart with a love for anthropology — sought a new model that would assist the police in establishing a catalog of offenders.



The backside of Wagner's Bertillon card identifies the color of his coat and nails.

Operating under the premise that people have similar but not identical characteristics, Bertillon began to measure the physical attributes of those who had been arrested. Although the probability of finding two people of exactly the same height was likely, he surmised that by recording additional features like arm length and facial dimensions, differences would emerge.

Before long, Bertillon's categories included measurements such as head circumference, arm span, ear length, and finger size in addition to the more conventional characteristics of eye and hair color. This data, along with a front and profile photograph, were recorded on a cardboard card measuring 6.5 inches tall by 5.5 inches wide. The cards were filed in the police department. When processing criminals, officers took measurements, consulted the cards (by 1882, they recorded data in 243 categories), and looked for a match. In this way, the police were able to spot repeat offenders.

Bertillon's system gave rise to an entirely new field of study known as anthropometry — the science of using a person's physical measurements as a means of identification. The Bertillon card was in widespread use in Europe by 1887 and first appeared in the United States in the Illinois prison system the same year.

In 1896 the New York legislature mandated that all inmates incarcerated within the state's penitentiaries be subject to the new system.

Although the method was successful at categorizing and identifying criminals (Bertillon himself claimed that of the 31,849 arrests during the system's lifespan, 2 percent were repeat offenders who could have been identified only through his model), it had shortcomings that ultimately caused its demise.

Variations in measurement techniques among arresting officers produced inconsistent data. Photographing the same person using different lighting or camera position could yield vastly disparate images. Because some physical characteristics change over time, Bertillon measurements were of limited use in identification of criminals whose measurements were taken in their early years. Finally, the sheer volume of cards became nearly impossible to manage in an era before computers; New York accumulated a file of more than 24,000 cards after 24 months in service.

Ultimately, a new discovery would render Bertillon's system obsolete — the fact that each person has a unique series of loops, whorls, and arches at the tips of their fingers that do not change over time.

Bertillon Cards and Greyhound Racing's Early Years

Fortuitously, Greyhounds also have overt, unchanging characteristics that can be used for identification. Exactly when the Bertillon card made its way to Greyhound racing is lost to history. However, one can imagine the early days of match-racing in which farmers in a field in the Midwest argued over whose dog was faster. In the beginning, match racing was a private affair, not a spectator sport. Even if money switched hands, participants did not care what the dog looked like or what he or she was called.

Things changed with the introduction of dog racing to the general public. Most historians agree that the origin of official Greyhound racing coincides with Owen Patrick Smith's invention of the mechanical lure. According to interviews with Smith's son Edward, as recounted by *Sports Illustrated* writer Robert Cantwell in the 1973 article "Run Rabbit Run," Smith envisioned a national Greyhound racing circuit that would be received as entertainment. Ticket sales and concessions would support the business.

Smith surmised that use of a rabbit as a live lure — common in early Greyhound coursing events — would repel potential attendees. The mechanical lure would address this issue. Unfortunately, when Smith built his first Greyhound track in 1919 in Emeryville, California to demonstrate his invention, the United States was recovering from World War I and facing Prohibition. The average citizen lacked the funds to pay for admission to a spectator sport. However, entrepreneurs were looking to make up for alcohol revenue that was about to vanish. If spectators could win money at the track, they might be more likely to open up their wallets for a night at the races.

Smith was not interested in gambling. Betting was not even permitted at the Emeryville track. Nevertheless, Smith took steps to ensure the integrity of each race, including establishing a holding area to prevent pre-race tampering with the dogs — a practice that still exists today. As the popularity of the sport increased, additional visibility could also mean additional scrutiny. It was easy for someone who lost money to



On his Bertillon card, Wagner's front toe nails are identified as either "dark" or "horn" in color.



All four nails on Wagner's right hind foot are identified as "light" on his Bertillon card; and indeed they are.

claim a race was fixed. Combating these accusations meant employing safeguards to ensure the matchups were legitimate. One means of accomplishing this was to verify that the dog listed in the program was in fact the dog that entered the starting box. This was especially important when Florida (then and now the largest venue for Greyhound racing) legalized pari-mutuel betting in 1932.

The state received tax revenues from the sport during a time of national depression and needed to do everything possible to avert cheating to preserve the lucrative income stream. The only practical way to prevent illegal substitutions (the "bait and switch") was to identify dogs based upon permanent physical characteristics using a modified form of Bertillon's original criminal classification system.

Use of the Bertillon Card Today

The Bertillon card, still in use today, can identify up to 56 specific features of a particular Greyhound. The documentation process begins when an owner registers a puppy with the National Greyhound Association (NGA) and completes an application that details the dog's attributes. Sometimes referred to as an "onion skin" because of the color and density of the paper, the document is a canine birth certificate, passport and driver's license, all rolled into one.

Bertillon's original mug shot has been replaced by a front, side, and rear view diagram of a Greyhound. The owner of the dog

uses the diagram to indicate color, pattern, and any visible scars. Officially recognized colors consist of black, blue, brindle, fawn, red, and white. For dogs with multi-colored coats, areas of different colors are outlined and marked with color codes (for example, BE = blue; BR = brindle). In accordance with Bertillon's theory that a greater number of measurements equates to a more accurate identification, all 16 toenail colors are annotated as well. Two Greyhounds may have similar features, but identification of three different nail color varieties (light, dark, and horn) in 16 locations allows for more than 43 million combinations of characteristics. Toe color is also specified, adding an additional layer of differentiation.

Once the application is processed, the NGA issues an official two-sided Bertillon card. Its front contains the dog's name, date of birth, sex, owner's name, and a two-generation pedigree. The back side contains the diagram of the dog and the ear tattoos — a practice that began in 1961.

The official Bertillon follows a racing Greyhound throughout his life and is always checked before the start of a race. Upon arrival at the track, each dog gets a tag clipped to his collar that notes the number of the race and his box position within that race. Officials verify that the dog's weight is within limits and sequester him in a kennel coinciding with the numbers on the tag. Approximately 15 minutes before walking out on the track for the scheduled race, the

dog receives a final weigh-in and is suited up with a numbered blanket. At this point, the track officials compare the dog to the Bertillon to verify identity. If everything checks out, the dog parades out and is off to the races.

When a Greyhound's career ends several things can happen to the Bertillon. It may get filed away by the dog's owner or become lost during a transition to adoption. It is not uncommon for an owner to relinquish the Bertillon to an adoption group along with the dog. Subsequently, an adoption group may decide to keep the Bertillon in its own records. Adopters who are interested in obtaining a Bertillon of their pet Greyhound can submit a pet-transfer form through the NGA. The applicant will receive a certificate specifying that the dog is officially a retired racer (of whom the applicant is the new owner) along with a complete Bertillon profile.

The certificate can be used as official documentation if the dog's ownership is ever in question. A lost Greyhound can turn up at an animal shelter without tags or a microchip. Many shelters will contact a local Greyhound adoption group when a Greyhound shows up at the door. Without any leads, finding the owner can be a difficult process. Ear tattoos can fade over time and become illegible as the dog ages. Shelter employees may have neither the knowledge nor the time to look up the tattoos. The shelter may hand off the dog to a local Greyhound adoption group, who places the dog in a new home; all while the true owner frantically searches for their lost dog. If the error comes to light, the Bertillon may be the only way to prove that the dog belongs to the original adopter.

How ironic that a technique developed more than 130 years ago to put criminals behind bars may get a Greyhound released in the future. ■

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