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In the early years after Capt. George Augustus Graham brought the Irish wolfhound back from extinction, the wolfhound got off to a rocky start in America. Few had heard of the legendary hound and far fewer had ever seen one.

This opened the door to two styles of “wolfhound” in the country until two Gilded Age heiresses stepped up and showed the Wild West what an Irish wolfhound was really all about.

Elizabeth and Martha White, daughters of New York Times and Chicago Tribune owner Horace White, are best known for their charitable work in preserving and promoting Native American art and culture in the Southwest.

Their El Delirio estate in Santa Fe is also renowned — it was a Southwestern party palace where epic galas were thrown for everybody who was anybody in the 1930s — Agatha Christie, D.H. Lawrence, Igor Stravinsky, Andres Segovia, Robert Oppenheimer and Enrico Fermi. The gatherings were legendary.

But it was their Irish wolfhound kennel, Rathmullan, that helped the breed thrive in a day when 75-pound impostors were making the show circuit masquerading as the mythic Irish wolf dog.

The wolfhound's recovery from near-extinction in the mid-1800s had a slow start in America, where a handful of East Coast kennels had descendants of Capt. Augustus Graham's revived hounds, but guarded their breeding stock with a tight fist.

The breed had only recently stabilized as the wolfhound we know today and the American Kennel Club didn't recognize the Irish wolfhound as a distinct breed until 1897.

Meanwhile in the American West, packs of long dogs and lurchers — wolfhound and sighthound mixes — were heavily used by ranchers to keep wolves and coyotes from their herds.

Gen. George Custer kept a pack of 40 Scottish deerhounds, staghounds and lurchers that accompanied him from post to post during this career. One of his deerhounds died with him at the Little Big Horn.

Ironically, the Irish wolfhound was one of the first dogs brought

to America by Europeans way back when. An Irish wolfhound helped Christopher Columbus fight off Indians in his fourth voyage to America. The governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, John Winthrop, imported wolfhounds to his colony in 1633 to save his sheep from wolves.

George Washington *wanted* Irish wolf dogs to help protect the colonies but in the late 1700s, he was too late. Even agents of a former president of the United States were unable to locate pure Irish wolf dogs for sale in England or Ireland. The legendary hound was fading fast.

Irish wolf dogs had for centuries been *the* premiere hunting dog in Europe because of their size, speed, intelligence and fearlessness. Where Washington had been unable to find wolf dogs, later farmers and ranchers secured deerhounds and lurchers to keep local wolf populations at bay and they were especially popular in the West, where the coursing hounds could stretch their legs.

In an Irish Wolfhound club publication in 1926, Mrs. Norwood Smith, breeder of Cragwood Wolfhounds and first president of the IWCA, wrote, “There are two distinct groups of Irish Wolfhounds in America. Both are registered yet they are as different as Collie and Shetland Sheepdog.”

One was a small rough-coated Greyhound weighing 75 to 100 pounds. Mrs. Smith said a number of them were on the books because of less stringent AKC regulations of that era.

“They are apparently produced in great numbers and find a ready market for \$25. They are bought by ranchers for coyote dogs, for which purpose they are well suited.

“However it happened, these weird creatures are masquerading as Irish wolfhounds. The time is not far distant when these little counterfeits will be crowded out.”

In fact, that day had already arrived. Elizabeth and Martha White relocated to Sante Fe in 1923 after discovering the town when they stopped to have their hair done on a cross-country drive. The two were not your typical heiresses. They were active in the Suffragette movement in New York in their teens. When word reached them that their father had died in 1916, they were both serving as Army combat nurses on the Western Front in France.

By 1929 they’s transformed a 250-acre ranch in Sante Fe into a sprawling adobe-style estate, an intellectual, cultural and social epicenter.

And in 1930, they began their Irish wolfhound kennel, which they named Rathmullan in honor of their childhood Irish nanny, a native of County Donegal. The sisters had been in love with wolfhounds since seeing the first one exhibited in America at Westminster.

Estate manager Jack Lambert designed and built a state-of-the-art, three story kennel for the sisters and the 11 hounds they had within a year. Each dog had its own separate room and run, hot and cold water and platform beds.

Their first hounds, Celery and Edain, came from Ambleside Kennel in Michigan and soon bore them a litter of eight. Their Killfree Kilmorac of Halcyon came from Halcyon Kennels in Goshen, N.Y.

Alex Scott was hired as kennel master, and he rose early every morning, got on horseback and took the hounds for a rambling outing for miles through the desert, chasing jackrabbits and building stamina.

The hounds were well-socialized, mingling with the artists and writers who lived on the state and with the scores of guests at parties, who marveled at the gentle giants roaming the compound.

The sisters got their hounds in the show ring as soon as they were ready. Scott used a specialized V-8 Ford truck to hold four or five hounds at a time comfortably. It had a canvas floor packed with several inches of cedar shavings.

In a two-year period, he drove 2,300 miles to shows in Denver, Dallas and California. This feat was accomplished in a day when paved roads were few and far between and maps and signs were not always 100 percent reliable.

Arthur Frederic Jones, who frequently profiled famous kennels of the day for the American Kennel Gazette, said the wild sisters and their giant hounds made a staggering impact at shows in the region.

“The sight of those grand Rathmullan wolfhounds in the ring alongside their hybrid longdog cousins said everything about type. And Rathmullan gave the world an eyeful.”

And the dog world no longer had any question about what was and what was not an Irish wolfhound.

The sisters' wolfhound adventure was short-lived. Martha died of cancer in 1937 and Elizabeth bred the breed no more. The

wolfhounds lived out their days at El Delirio, sometimes going with her into town. Elizabeth went on to raise several generations of Afghan hounds at El Delirium and died in 1972.

Her fortune and the estate went to the School of Advanced Research, which promoted and preserved Southwestern Native American art and culture, and which moved its headquarters to the compound.

There's a curious epilogue to the story found in the book "Spirits Of The Border IV: The History and Mystery of New Mexico," by Ken and Sharo Hudnall.

"There is no question that the White sisters were somewhat eccentric. The bodies of these two wealthy women are buried under a gazebo on the property, as well as the bodies of some twenty rare Afghan Hounds and Irish Wolfhounds raised by the sisters."

"Whatever may be the cause, there is also no question that spirits roam this palatial estate. Some of the staff swears that late in the evenings, they have heard the voices of women talking outside the building.

"However, when they try to find the source of the conversations, there is never anyone found. On another occasion, an employee working late heard the front doorbell ring. She then heard the front door open and footsteps come down the hallway to the very room in which she was working. She heard the footsteps enter the room and then retreat back toward the front door, and the the door open and close. During this entire time she saw no one though the steps came to within a few feet of where she sat."

Maybe it's the sisters and their hounds, keeping a watchful eye  
on things....