

The History of the Australian Shepherd

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ACCORDING TO THE COLLIE HISTORIAN JAN HILBOM, THIS IS THE CLOSEST SHE HAS TO AN EARLY PHOTO OF WHAT SHE WOULD CALL AN AUSTRALIAN SHEPHERD. CIRCA 1910. PHOTO JAN HILBOM COLLECTION.

"The Australian Shepherd looks toward a sound, hopeful future. In spite of its name, this breed seems to me very much American, an amalgamation of traits from across the seas; intelligence, loyalty and unique beauty combined with a physical agility for ease in doing the job it enjoys so much. Future breeding programs must retain these valuable traits — not a simple task in the light of increasing public interest in the breed."

— Rachel Page Elliott, mid-1970s

We don't have much in the way of a written or documented history of the development of this talented and versatile bob-tailed Herding dog. In fact, no one has the definitive answer as to how the breed even became known as the "Australian Shepherd," although many contrasting theories abound. One fact is clear — the modern development of this dog occurred in the United States, primarily the western United States, coinciding with the mass immigration associated with the California Gold Rush in 1849.

The popular story as to the origin of the name of the breed revolves around the immigration of Basque shepherds from Australia to the U.S. When the shepherds arrived with their sheep, they were observed with their "little blue dogs." Study shows, however, that no one theory serves to uncover the mystique of the breed's name and early development.

One fact does remain clear — the development of this breed in America closely follows the

immigration patterns of cultures from all over the world and as with those immigrants, the dogs quickly became a melting pot of not only cultures, but of canine breeds.

The recently published study (May 2004), *Genetic Structure of the Purebred Domestic Dog*, bears out this hypothesis. In this study the Australian Shepherd is one of four breeds that did not "cluster." Most of the breeds studied form distinct clusters consisting solely of dogs from that breed. A lack of clustering would indicate, according to the scientists, that "the breed barrier (i.e., breed registry) is apparently too recent or insufficiently strict to have resulted in genetic differentiation."

The westward expansion in the United States occurred between 1849 and 1900. It would appear that the Australian Shepherd also came into its own as a distinct breed during this time period. Combining breeds from England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, Spain, France and Germany, the little blue bob-tailed dog emerged as ranchers and farmers bred dogs to

make the livestock work at hand easier. Terrain and weather affected the breed's evolution.

By 1917 we have one of the first records of dogs that would become known as Australian Shepherds, attributed to Earl Cotton of Eastern Oregon by his niece, Mrs. Roy E. Cotton. Mr. Cotton started raising sheep at the beginning of World War I and had a hard time finding the right dog to work with. He traveled to either Montana or Colorado on a sheep-buying trip and returned with "two choice rams and several small, grey merled dogs." Cotton developed his own breeding program over the next few years, even

utilizing Aussie-Border Collie crosses. Sometime around 1924 Cotton imported or purchased two dogs from Australia which "cost him a small fortune!"

"The Australian dogs were absolutely identical to Earl's best Aussies," notes his niece. Cotton

maintained that the "drop-eared, natural bob-tail had come from Australia originally, but that the breed was overly aggressive."

"The Aussies had been crossed with the mostly black-type border collie and then selectively bred to hold the blue merle coloring, and moderately bold and aggressive temperament. Our American version is the result."

Sometime in the 1920s Juanita Ely of Littleton, Colo., acquired her first Aussies. Some data indicate that she purchased a blue merle from a young Basque shepherd from Idaho; other reports tell us that she imported sheep from Australia and with the sheep and the shepherd came the little blue dogs.

Between 1920 and through 1940 the breed enjoyed a marked increase in popularity, and the foundation lines for our modern dogs became established during this time. Included in this roster of notable early breeders are Noel Heard, who ran a feed mill in Ashland, Ore.; his son, Weldon Heard, DVM, of Roseburg, Ore.; Roy Ritter of Nevada, who started breeding Aussies selectively for his cattle operations as early as 1924; Burt Vetier, a Montana rancher, who owned a line of blue merle Aussies

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WORKING A CALF. GLO PHOTO, GAYLE OXFORD.

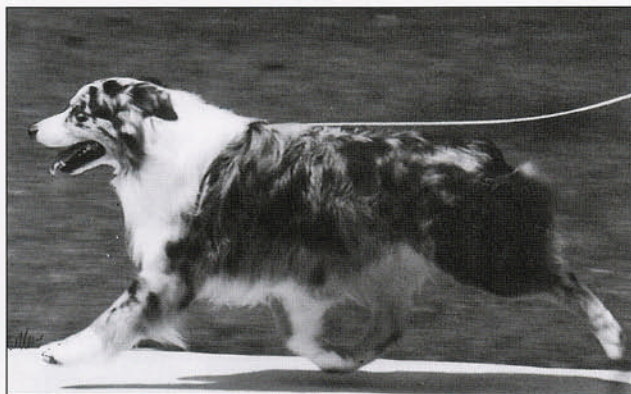
around 1923 which he used for gathering range horses; William Gibson of Omaha, Neb., who had bob-tailed shepherds in 1928; and Don Breazeale of Northern California, who started as an Aussie breeder in 1936 and was the first — in 1959 — to register an Aussie with the Animal Research Foundation.

Perhaps the person most closely associated with springboarding the Australian Shepherd into the public eye and starting to set breed type was Jay Sisler, horse trainer and ranch hand from Emmett, Idaho. Sisler states, "I had my first 'blue dog' about 1939, but Keno (1944 or 1945) was the first *good* dog I ever owned and was the beginning of my good line of dogs." Jay's brother, Gene, also owned an early foundation bitch, bought at a livestock auction in 1947. From this mating came Jay's famous rodeo-trick-act dogs, Shorty and Stub. Jay's rodeo career was launched in 1949 with this pair when a promoter in Star, Idaho, offered Sisler \$10 to perform. Sisler's trick-act career spanned 20 years and included performances on the Ed Sullivan show and tours with Roy Rogers in stadiums throughout the United States and Canada. Stub and Shorty went on to play lead roles in two Walt Disney movies, *Stub, the World's Greatest Cowdog* (1956), and *Run, Appaloosa, Run* (1973). In 2002 Sisler was inducted into the ProRodeo Hall of Fame.

Sisler's dogs went onto to play key roles in many of the early breed bloodlines, including Harold May's Gypsy; Iacovetta's Buck; the Oklahoma Mankers' Turk line; Fletcher Woods of Colorado (his foundation dog, Wood's Jay, was sired by Sisler's Shorty); the Sorensen line; and indirectly the Hartnagle Las Rocosa line. Subsequent lines continued to develop in California, the Pacific Northwest and Arizona during this time.

There were still no registries at this time and breeding relied on dogs that could work, were merled and had a bob-tail. Much breeding occurred during this time that had many dogs of no relation bred to each other in order to produce the ideal ranch or farm dog. Oral history tells us that this practice continued through the late 1960s. It was not entirely unusual for breeders during this time to get an "Aussie" from the local animal shelter; nor was it unusual in California in the late 1960s or early 1970s to have a litter of pups and to dock the merle pups and sell them as Aussies, leaving the tails on the black and white ones and selling those as Border Collies!

In 1950 the Animal Research Foundation originated as the English Shepherd Club of America (ESCOA). By 1953 there were 108



Ch. TRI-IVORY ROQUEFORT OF HIGGINS, CD. PHOTO CALLEA.

members, including Mr. E.G. Emmanuel of Butler, Ind., and Mr. Frederick Preston Search of Carmel Valley, Calif. Mr. Emmanuel later broke off in 1954 and established the International English Shepherd Registry (IESR), which became the National Stock Dog Registry (NSDR).

As early as 1952 Dr. Tom Stodghill of the Animal Research Foundation (ARF), together with Emmanuel and Preston, was researching the history of the Australian Shepherd, and registered the first Australian Shepherd, owned by Don Breazeale of Modesto, Calif., in 1959. Stodghill is adamant in his theory that the Australian Shepherd

developed solely in Australia, based on an interview with one Mr. Rod Berry of New South Wales. Berry contends that the Aussie is an amalgamation of the Smithfield (London meat market) dog and a cross on a merle Scottish collie owned by one family, the Simpsons of Upper Hunter River in New South Wales. The Simpsons apparently emigrated to California during the gold rush era, taking bob-tail merled dogs with them. Stodghill's contention is that as only one family in Australia bred this type of dog and then removed the dog from Australia; the dog was never recognized as a breed in that country.

The first meeting of the Australian Shepherd Club of America, the club that would eventually be the primary parent club of the Aussie, took place in May, 1957, in Tucson, Ariz. The original purpose was to seek AKC recognition for the breed. This stance changed in later years. In the first decade ASCA only published a newsletter; they did not have dog shows, a championship titling program or even a registry. The first owners who registered their dogs utilized the NSDR. ASCA members who were dissatisfied with Emmanuel's NSDR registry began to utilize Stodghill's ARF registry as well. ASCA went on to found its own registry in 1971. That year, Wildhagen's Dutchman of Flintridge became the first ASCA breed champion, as well as the first Australian Shepherd to hold Companion Dog and Companion Dog Excellent titles in ASCA. Dutchman is a foundation sire for many of the

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modern Australian Shepherd show lines. The first ASCA breed specialty show took place in 1974.

The International Australian Shepherd Association (IASA) was formed in 1966, held its first specialty show in 1967 and opened their own registry in 1972. IASA, however, declined to award championships in their competitive program, citing potential conflicts with future AKC titling; this proved to be the eventual undoing of this organization after ASCA introduced its own championship program at a later date.

By the 1970s the Australian Shepherd was firmly enconced as a breed closely associated with rodeos, horse shows, cattle and sheep ranching operations, and the Wild West in general.

In 1991 the Australian Shepherd Association (ASA) was formed with the sole purpose of achieving AKC recognition for the breed. In 1993, the Australian Shepherd became breed #135 to be recognized by the AKC, and the parent club, after a name change, became the United States Australian Shepherd Association (USASA).

The subsequent development of the breed has rested solely on its place in society. As small-scale, family-owned livestock operations have decreased in numbers, the popularity of the breed has not — rather, as a tremendously popular breed it has enjoyed rapid growth, as Australian Shepherds are extremely adaptive to such modern venues as obedience, agility, tracking, search and rescue, therapy and companionship. The original purpose and origin of the breed, however, remains rooted and tied to the development of the American West. DR

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Brittanys

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