

Herding Dogs

—Ulf Kintzel

Our farm is on a public road and the sheep are visible from that road. In the fall, I move my flock down this public road to get to my fall and winter pasture. Also, we have a herding trial each fall that is open to the public. Because of all that activity, people notice that I use different dogs than the usual Border collie. “Oh, you use German shepherds to herd your sheep. I didn’t know they do that.” That is perhaps the comment I hear most often from people, assuming a German shepherd dog should be with a police officer, not with a shepherd like me. “Listen to the name, German shepherd dog.” That is my standard reply. The reactions vary from surprised to being embarrassed for not having noticed the obvious. The German shepherd dog, as well as its many varieties of ancestors, and the Old German shepherd dog (*Alteutscher Schäferhund*), not to be confused with a German shepherd dog (with a longstock or longhair coat) are common breeds used in Germany for sheep herding. So, why do Germans not use Border collies like almost the entire rest of the world does? Here is a little history lesson how herding developed in Germany:

The herding style practiced in Germany has its roots in the Middle Ages in Europe. At this time agriculture was not intensive; only two-thirds of the fields were used, with one-third always lying fallow. The shepherds used these fields to graze their sheep. Also, beside the farm roads was enough room to let the sheep eat. (Note: In the USA this is called the long acre. In German this is called the *Wegrand* or *Wegrain*.) Thus, there was no need to contain the flock in narrow grazes. On the other hand, it was an unsafe time. There were wild animals like bears and wolves. There were also thieves and criminals. The dogs had to protect the livestock and the herder. These dogs were big and strong. The only work on sheep they had to do was to drive (“drive” as being defined as pushing the flock from the rear) the flock from the barn or pen to the pastures and water places and back. The sheep herders also walked behind the flock.

Then the 19th century dawned. With it came the farmers’ liberation and the industrial revolution. The population grew. More and more people worked in factory jobs. More food was needed. Therefore, it was necessary to



German shepherd dog Anton is on the border between road and crops

intensify the agriculture. In addition, in certain areas of Germany the fields got smaller and smaller because throughout many generations every farmer's son got a piece of land. Also the traffic started to increase.

Under these slowly developing circumstances, the herding style had to be changed. Now the shepherds had to tend sheep in pastures that had poor soil or were too steep to be used for any other form of agriculture and were just used for sheep. Also, harvested fields were used for the sheep to pick the leftovers. It was now necessary to string out the flock on the small and narrow farm roads to get past the fields with crops when moving from one sheep pasture to another. The sheep herders started to walk in front of the flock in order to lead the sheep. The dogs had to stay on the natural borders between the pasture or the road and the fields with crops. They had to work there, patrolling the border in order to keep the sheep on the road or in the pasture and out of the fields with crops. The dogs became living fences. This process didn't happen overnight. It took many decades. For this job, the shepherds needed nimble, smaller, intelligent, and independently working dogs. They started selecting for these dogs. The dogs being used were the ancestors of today's German shepherd dogs and, after its creation in 1899, German shepherd dogs.

Since then the situation in Germany has changed: the agriculture is even more intensive, the traffic is even heavier, and the flocks are getting larger. However, the basics are still the same. Many sheep are still tended in unfenced pasture often right next to fields with crops; they still are moved on the road to the next pasture. In fact, most of Germany's large flocks are herded this way.

There are several reasons why this system still exists: First, in some areas of Germany they have a sheep farming system called transhumance. This means that during the summer the shepherds graze their sheep in the hills and in the fall they take their flocks to the valley where the climate is milder and thus there is less or even no snow. There they tend their sheep during the winter, coming back to the hills in the spring. On their way to the valley and back to the hills they graze their livestock on harvested fields. The only economical way to do this is to use tending dogs. Secondly, in certain areas the local government is interested in keeping certain landscapes that are attractions for tourists (i.e. the juniper heath land in southern Germany called *Wachholderheide*) or there are animals or plants worth protecting that need a certain biotope. Sheep



The author is moving the flock along a field with winter wheat while German shepherd dog Fiona is keeping them out of the crops.

farmers often get paid some money to graze their sheep in these areas managed by the government or nature conservancies in order to keep the landscape from overgrowing and therefore open. It is called landscape care. Again, the only economical way to do this is to use tending dogs.

In many ways I have retained the German ways of sheep herding. It enables me to do things that are more challenging with a different breed of dogs. Besides, I am not a Border collie man. My German shepherd dogs allow me to string out the flock when I pass fields with crops with the dog patrolling along the edge of the field, disallowing the sheep to stray into the crops. It allows me to walk down a public road and make room for a car that needs to pass. It also allows me to tend the sheep here and there in a harvested field that doesn't yield enough to be fenced in with my portable electric nettings. Other management applications such as getting the sheep through the chute for de-worming or separating pregnant sheep or market lambs work well with my German shepherds. Of course, these are special bloodlines with many generations of herding dogs among their ancestors. There are indeed bloodlines among German shepherd dogs that are most unsuitable for the purpose of tending sheep. They have been bred for many generations for a different purpose such as sport, protection, or police work. They will not herd, but will hurt your sheep instead. 🐾



The author in 1986 with his Old German shepherd dogs. The vest and the bandalier (dog leashes) are part of the shepherd guild's additional clothing.

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