
Australian Shepherds of the Mountain West

Kris Toft



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Cover Photos: (left) One of the earliest known photos of Jay Sisler, Shorty, and Stub. Photo courtesy of Les Burlile. (right) Silverledge Slide Me To Da Bar, CD, STDs. Photo courtesy of Jean Taylor.

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Foreword

Since this book is being published posthumously it seems important for the reader to know something about the author as well as the purpose and original intent for writing it.

Kris had a passion for animals since she was two-years old and it became her life when she purchased her first horse and subsequently her first dog, an Australian Shepherd named Hannah. As was typical of Kris, she jumped right into that world with both feet. She showed dogs, learned what was important about breeding and whelping litters, and ultimately became an AKC judge for instinct. She traveled around the country for a time. She remained involved in the breed in many ways till the end of her life.

Her 'day job' as a medical research assistant in the Department of Surgery at the University of Missouri Medical School was a natural for her. Her patients were animals and it was then that research became so important and interesting to her. With her rapidly increasing interest in the breed, she began to keep records about dogs both hers and others. As a result of that passion she self-published three pedigree books, as well as numerous articles for Australian Shepherd magazines through the years. She had an uncanny understanding and communication with dogs and mentored many dog owners, including me. Her ability to recognize and understand behavior in these animals was legendary. And her deep

interest in genetics enabled her to seek out good breeding dog partners. It commanded her interest for the rest of her life.

But the real reason for the research and writing of this book was her concern, along with the concern of other people, that the history along with myriads of pictures of the early western working Aussies and their owners and breeders was soon to be lost to time and human lifespans. To Kris, right was right and wrong was wrong, and her mission was to set the record straight. I once heard her speaking to someone who asked why she wrote about the western mountain dogs and her reply was “they were rough and tough and excellent working dogs with great intelligence.” In addition, her respect and awe of the Wood’s line of dogs has carried her far in her breeding and genetic research.

With this in mind Kris set out to contact, personally, as many survivors of those early days as possible. Many of them such as Jay Sisler and Fletcher Woods are now deceased but she found surviving family members who still had stories to tell and pictures to lend so the history could be told. She contacted many fellow Aussie dog owners who had kept their own records, pictures, stories and were even keepers of records of deceased dog owners of note. She searched newspaper archives, museums and even the Cowboy Hall of Fame for any bits of information to help her weave it all together. To know Kris is to know that she would not give up until she found the answers and the people who could provide them.

It was a definite labor of love when you realize she was fighting cancer the whole time. But she persevered, declared it finished, and sent it off to the publisher. Her disease made it difficult for her to edit but she was able to see it through with the help of family and friends. Kris died on October 27, 2013, and left us this legacy. She wrote it in her own words and that becomes the treasure of this book. She could back up everything she wrote and that makes it timeless.

Kris didn’t get to see it published but she knew it was done and that it would eventually be made public and besides, she was already moving on to the next book. Only time will tell if that book will reach publication. We’ll see...

Her loving and proud Mother,
Kay Toft

Acknowledgments

As you will notice throughout this book, the hand of the Creator was busy intervening at many points in the history of the mountain-type Aussie. Good, sound dogs were placed into the hands of the right people at the right moments over and over again. You will also find His fingerprints throughout this book, continuously giving me the right words to tell the story of this stellar family of Australian Shepherds. He has also blessed me with contacts to a wonderful family of foundation breeders who have graciously consented to tell me their stories for preservation in this volume. You will never know how grateful I am for their generosity.

Those without whom this book would have been impossible:

Casey Masterson Newman—My very good friend who provided motivation when I needed it most, contacts with fascinating people who likely would never have talked to me alone, and most of all gave me my start with these unique dogs.

Jean Taylor—The other person who greeted my proposal for this project with unbridled enthusiasm and who provided wonderful historical details and gorgeous photos. I am forever in her debt for “loaning” the dog of a lifetime—Tigger—to me.

Les Burlile—Jay Sisler’s nephew and a gold mine of first hand knowledge about Jay’s life and his foundation dogs. Thank you for your generosity to a total stranger.

Jerry and Sharon Rowe—The people everyone told me HAD to be included. “Everyone” was more right than they could have guessed.

Dick and Leslie Sorensen—Leslie’s Virgo tendencies (like mine!) for recording history in wonderful photographic detail and “packratting” every piece of paper about Aussies she could get her hands on provided a wealth of content for this book. Dick’s memory and amusing storytelling added so much personal detail and color to this book.

Melissa Couch—Old friends are the best friends. Melissa rescued much of Cathy Jones’ priceless memorabilia after her death and, even though it was painful, shared her memories for this book.

Mary Wood—Fletcher Wood’s spicy widow who welcomed Casey and me into her home and shared her vivid memories for preservation in this book.

Leila Green—A fine pioneer lady of sharp mind and steel resolve.

Raymie Jones-Brown—Cathy Jones’ daughter who graciously shared her mother’s records, photos, and memories for this book.

Ruth McGuire—Another hardy breed pioneer of great character and big heart.

Linda Rorem—For encouragement and for sharing her wealth of knowledge on herding dogs. The puzzle pieces really came together with your help.

Kyle Trumbull-Clark—My “partner-in-crime” for editing and always great advice.

All praise goes to God for planting the desire to write this book in my head and heart, inspiring me often with enthusiasm from my friends, and guiding me to the right people for information and photos. It was a fun project. I hope you enjoy the reading as much as I enjoyed the writing.

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Introduction

Since 1978, I've loved, owned, and trained Australian Shepherds of several bloodlines. My fascination with the foundation dogs was fed by the pages of the *Aussie Times*. My eyes were drawn over and over to dogs of a particular type within the breed. The type is now known generically as the "Woods" type after the man who concentrated it into an early strain or bloodline in the 1950s and early 1960s, Fletcher Wood. Mention of dogs called "Australian shepherds (or sheep dogs)" are found in public records of mountain and coastal areas of the west beginning around the mid-1800s. Descendants of these dogs founded the breed we now call Australian Shepherd.

The family now called "Woods" has survived as a remnant of these original dogs. The term "Woods" has expanded over the years to refer to dogs of a general type which may not have been bred by Mr. Wood nor even encompass dogs of his breeding. For the sake of this book, this designation will be used to represent a type of Aussie rather than just the Wood bloodline. It might even be more correctly called the Sisler-type because the foundation of the Wood dogs, themselves, was none other than a son of the famed Sisler's Shorty—Wood's Jay. The Sisler dog type was common in the mountainous livestock producing areas of this country.

Many breed books are touted as “complete” works on the breed, but nearly always gloss over this particular type of dog. So, I make no apologies for the bias of this book. The purpose is to describe as best I can, with the help of others personally familiar with this family of dogs, the background, lineage, type, and character of this special group of dogs within the Aussie breed.

Every effort has been made to accurately document the pedigrees and legacy of the dogs discussed in this book. In some cases, misspellings may creep in due to various spellings found in old records. In many cases, the original owners of the dogs in question are no longer available to provide the correct information. In addition, incorrect pedigree information abounds and, where possible, the correct information has been verified by the actual owner of the dog and is included in this volume.

In some cases an intelligent and sensible theory has to be formed regarding the background of some dogs. These theories are explored and the evidence presented in order to allow the reader to make their own informed decision about the origin of a dog. Accurate records were hard to obtain or do not exist about many of the earliest dogs and we must observe the context of the breed and the early breeders in order to reach a logical conclusion regarding the heritage of these dogs. Even “official” records from various registries are rife with verifiable errors. Finding the truth has been a difficult and elusive process.

Kris Toft