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The Border Collie in the United States

By 1850, farm collies were common in the northern United States, and three varieties became breeds in America: the McNab (California, 1858), the English shepherd (East Coast and Midwest, 1890s) and the Australian shepherd (West, early twentieth century).

The first American sheepdog trial was held in Philadelphia in 1888.

Arthur Allen was the only expert, articulate dog man who knew both the nineteenth-century stockdog and the modern Border Collie. As he wrote in his *Lifetime with the Working Collie*, the nineteenth-century dogs “were large and more stern than the Border Collie of today and were used for working all kinds of livestock. A descendant of these dogs that my Father owned was Old Cast and was so stern a dog that you never could pet him, but was as reliable and faithful in his work as any dog he ever owned.”

In 1900, when Allen’s father and Old Cast were hired to drive mules to Tennessee, his “dogs were used to contain the

mules and were also very important as guard dogs because there were many highwaymen waiting to prey on travelers.”

In 1908, plant breeder W. A. Burpee sold farm collies from his Fordhook Kennels to farmers served by railway express. You could pick up your new working partner at the station along with your baby chicks and garden seeds. Though disparaged by show breeders, these farm collies were wonderful, intelligent, useful dogs.

Early American sheepmen were rough, practical agriculturalists. Most respected their dogs, and some admitted spiritual kinship with them. But first and foremost their dogs were tools, and useless dogs were driven off or shot.

In the twenties, Scottish shepherds like Sam Stoddard and Tom Bradburn brought Border Collies with them to America and were soon putting on sheepdog demonstrations at livestock exhibitions and rodeos. Arthur Allen did demonstrations, handled his dogs in two Disney movies (*The Arizona Sheepdog* and *Nick, A Sheepdog*) and for many years traveled with the Roy Rogers rodeo. Unless they'd been hired to do a demonstration at a dog show (as Carl Shaffner once did at the Westminster Kennel Club Show) few handlers had ever seen a dog show and I know none who'd ever showed at one.

Sheepdog culture in America shared the mores of rodeos and livestock exhibitions. The constitution and bylaws for the United States Border Collie Handler's Association, founded in 1979, were based on the bylaws of the Rodeo Cowboys Association, and the traditional farewell at the end of a sheepdog trial is the cowboy's "See you on down the road."

Because early handlers owned and trained their own dogs, the professional handler who kept and showed dogs for rich absentee owners never found a niche in sheepdog culture. Achievement other than achievement with the dogs was devalued, and I couldn't guess at the occupations of many handlers I've known for years. In this proletarian culture wealthy handlers often conceal their affluence. Because training and handling skills were (and are) revered, no person can aspire to any position within sheepdog organizations unless he (or she) has demonstrated uncommon skill with the dogs. Imagine an NBA where every owner was a great player, an Olympic Committee comprised entirely of gold medal athletes, and you'll understand the advantages (and disadvantages) of such an arrangement. Meetings of these organizations were held in conjunction with trials, because that is the only way to get a quorum. (George and Topsy Conboy celebrated their fiftieth anniversary with a sheepdog trial, and if I die during the prime fall trialing season, I hope my executor will have the good sense to put on a Funeral Trial.)

In sheepdog culture speech is laconic, and praise for man or dog understated. It can be funny to watch the newly sheepdog obsessed adapt to that culture that nurtures their dogs. As his (her) dogs improve, many a previously garrulous suburbanite starts to mutter like John Wayne.



In the 1960s, there were two North American registries, Arthur Allen's North American Sheep Dog Society (NASDS)

and Dewey Jontz's American International Border Collie registry (AIBC, an offshoot of the NASDS). When I say "Arthur Allen's" and "Dewey Jontz's," I mean it. These registries were operated by and for their owners. Though each had Directors, the Boards were self-perpetuating and largely honorific, and no "member" had much say. Dog registries whose services are keeping a studbook and exchanging pieces of paper for money are lovely rural businesses.

The United States Border Collie Handler's Association was an ad hoc group of handlers who met at sheepdog trials. The Pulfer brothers, Topsy and George Conboy, David Rogers, E. B. and Francis Raley, Bud Boudreau, and John Bauserman were its most active members. Their first National Finals, hosted by a man who'd never run a dog and judged by men who hadn't trialed in years, was a far less important trial than the North American (Arthur's trial) or the Kentucky Bluegrass, held at Lexington's Walnut Hall.

There were a handful of other Border Collie Associations: Virginia, Texas, Oregon, the idiosyncratic Redwood Empire, Alabama, and the New England (now North East) Border Collie Association (NEBCA).



Trials in these early days were few and far between. There were ranch trials in Texas, state fair trials in New England and Virginia. On the West Coast, the Redwood Empire Club held three or four fairground trials. There were a few trials in

the deep South. Maybe, in all, forty sheepdog trials in North America. The standard of work was poor. Most trials were “timed” trials (based on speed rather than on accurate and correct work), in which the sheep were contained in a wire enclosure which was collapsed or opened when the dog arrived to work them. Most trials didn’t have a shed (in which one sheep is separated off from a group), because few handlers knew how to shed.

Many Brits saw us as a high dollar market for their culls, and the American handler who imported dogs was sometimes favored by the Brit who judged that handler’s trial.

Unless you were lucky enough to neighbor a good handler, there was no practical way to learn how to train or handle a dog. You’d buy a pup from the big hat who did a demonstration at your county fair, and six months later when your pup started to work the big hat was halfway across the country. There was no Border Collie magazine. In Britain, Matt Mundell published a short-lived mimeographed sheet, and Sheila Grew began publishing the *Working Sheepdog News*. Richard Karrasch, Chuck O’Reilly, Carl Shaffner, Pope Robertson, and Foy Evans had written training guides (available from the authors or the Raleys’ mail order bookstore, which also carried Longton and Hart’s *The Sheepdog: Its Work and Training* and John Holmes’s *The Farmer’s Dog*).

Women competitors were barely tolerated: Betty Levin, Inez Schroeder, Lena Bailey, Ethel Conrad, and Ada Karrasch (who wore a bright red western jumpsuit and cowboy hat onto the field because the Good Old Boys hated female flamboyance).

Border Collies were starting to be popular in AKC obedience, but few dog fanciers and most Americans had never heard of the dog. In 1978, with little opposition from the ISDS, the Kennel Club (UK) had “recognized” the Border Collie for conformation showing. The Australian National Kennel Club had recognized the breed in 1963.



Arthur Allen was a huge presence. The only man in America making a living from Border Collies, he’d won the North American Championship many years in a row and did sheepdog demonstrations at the major stock shows, including the San Francisco Cow Palace. Although I never saw Arthur work, I have seen his Disney short, *The Arizona Sheepdog*. He’d be a hard handler to beat today. Scottish handlers told me, “Oh, he’d come over for the International and he’d take notes on every dog, and God help the man who went up to Arthur Allen during a run.”

Allen was not known for kindnesses to his competitors. When one rival announced a trial, Arthur went to the man’s sheep supplier, bought the sheep, and held his own trial.

In 1981, Arthur began tangling with another Border Collie giant – on the surface of it, an unlikely one. Bill Dillard was a bachelor retired teacher. Bill was no great handler, but he had time, brains, and a passion for the Border Collie. David Rogers says that if anyone came to Bill “talking like they *might* even be interested in hosting a trial, Bill would talk them into it.” Bill was responsible for a new circuit of trials through Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia, and he encour-

aged trial hosts in Tennessee. He published *The Southern Stockdog Journal*, North America's first stockdog magazine, and got on the board of Allen's NASDS, where he pestered Arthur seeking a more democratic registry.

Everybody was hoping the AIBC and NASDS would merge. Fred Bahnson came from Winston-Salem money, had been a North Carolina State Senator, loved sheepdogs, and had sponsored Jack Knox's immigration to America. President of the NASDS, Fred was as tough and wily as Arthur,

The 1982 NASDS Board of Directors meeting was held at the Bluegrass trial. Most of the Directors had sent proxies to Arthur, including Fred Bahnson, who was vacationing in Italy. News reached the trial that Fred had had a serious stroke and had to be flown home in a hospital plane. Arthur held the Board meeting anyway, and with his proxies, drummed the dissidents off the Board.

Shortly afterwards, rumors started that a new registry was being formed. We wondered: "Why do we need a *third* registry?" Nobody quite knew who was promoting this registry, and until Bill Dillard published the American Border Collie Association's bylaws in the *Southern Stockdog*, nobody knew what it stood for.

It stood for a democratic, member-owned registry: one member – one vote. Leroy Boyd, Bill Dillard, and Ralph Pulfer were officers, and working at night after her full-time job, Patty Rogers was the ABCA Secretary.

That 1982 Bluegrass had another important consequence: the young, talented handler Bruce Fogt won with his bitch Hope. More and more, younger handlers were entering trials and doing well. Friday afternoons, Bill Berhow would put his

bitch Scarlet on the back of his motorcycle and drive eight hours from Florida to Bill Dillard's, where they'd work dogs until Sunday night. Kent Kuykendahl decided he was more interested in sheep dogs than the sheep his family was famous for. Cheryl Jagger, who'd grown up with her father Walt's Border Collies, started giving clinics.

These keen, competitive younger handlers started beating men who'd previously been unbeatable. Their clinics taught hundreds of new handlers.

They raised the bar.

In 1984 my *Nop's Trials* was published. While there'd been many fine children's and young adult books about Border Collies, there'd never been an adult novel. Heavily promoted, Nop introduced several hundred thousand readers to Border Collies. Its virtue was the warning on the last page that "Border Collies do not make good pets," a warning the community has repeated often enough it has reached the general public.

Trials and clinics exploded. One January, Jack Knox gave a demo at Montana's Winter Livestock Show. He was invited to return in the spring for a clinic. That fall, the Montana Stockdog Association formed and had its first fun trial.

Most trials were now judged, most new trials were on national-style courses, and many had dog food sponsorship. Purina sponsored important trials, a circuit championship, and the National Finals. The AIBC had suffered when Dewey Jontz died and when Dewey's heir, Dean Kaster, died, its members flocked to the ABCA. By 1991, the premier North American trial was the National Finals, and the best U.S.

handlers were as good as the best handlers in the UK. Some of those top handlers were women.



Sheepdog trials are not self-referential: they are designed to produce dogs useful in the practical world. Nor are they rule bound. The ISDS *Rules for Sheepdog Trials* covers one side of a piece of paper, and the principal catechism (J. M. Wilson's *Notes for Judges*) covers the other side. I can hire anyone to judge my sheepdog trial and lay out the course however I wish.

The impetus is toward greater difficulty. When sheep were penning too easily at New York State's Leatherstocking Trial, judge Tommy Wilson drove a stake fifteen feet away from the pen where the handler had to stand, just to make everything harder. But if I were to include a pet trick in my trial—like fetching a frisbee or rolling over and playing dead—my peers would be appalled.

I can't remember when I last petted someone else's dog at a sheepdog trial. Barking dogs are culturally offensive, and when one does bark (usually recognizing its owner's whistles on the field), people wince. Dogs coming on or off the field are rarely leashed, nor are those dogs behind the fence watching the action. Before and after the trial, gangs of Border Collies run around and play. In a quarter century, I have never seen a dog fight at a sheepdog trial.

Sheepdog trialing does not attract many young people, but handlers in their seventies are unexceptional. Several men have suffered fatal heart attacks at the handler's post and I

wouldn't mind going that way myself, though it must baffle the dog.



While I was busy doing everything else life requires, Pip got old. He'd learned all there is to know about sheep and too much about me. When push came to shove, he'd ignore my commands (suggestions?) and get on with the job he understood perfectly, thank you so much.

The Seclusival Trial is two hours drive from our farm, and I'd left home late. As soon as I arrived, I jumped Pip out. Nobody was at the handler's post, so I asked Lyle Boyer who was up.

"You are," she said.

Since trial sheep behave differently throughout the day, running order is decided by lot. At smaller trials, if you arrive late, the trial director may accommodate you, but at a big trial if you miss your turn, you won't get a second chance. I jogged toward the course asking Lyle about the judge's instructions.

"Left-hand drive," Lyle said. "Pen before you shed."

"Sorry," I called to the judge as I walked onto the field. I sent Pip casually, before I had even reached the handler's post.

Although there must have been informal competitions earlier, the first modern sheepdog trial was held at Bala, Wales, in 1873. The historian and sheepdog handler Albion Urdank notes that this trial was intended as a country entertainment – aristocrats enjoying bumpkins at play. But sheep-

dog trials were swiftly appropriated by the bumpkins and their patrons, agricultural improvers who decided that trials should not seek friendly, pretty, aristocratic, or even competitive dogs. Instead, they sought dogs that would make it possible for a man on foot to handle a thousand sheep on mountainous, unfenced ground, dogs that could work on their own, take whistled instructions from over a mile away, and travel a hundred miles a day in the foulest weather without complaint. That's what trials are for: to choose the sires and dams of the next generation of sheepdogs. They are a paradigm of the dogs' daily work, made more difficult.

As a tool of genetic selection, the sheepdog trial has done exactly what its creators had hoped. Very few Border Collie pups won't work stock. That's not to say that all Border Collie pups will grow into first-class dogs, or even that they'll all make trial dogs. There are timid pups and stupid pups and neurotic pups and pups too fey or willful to take training. But, for all that, given the slightest chance, most Border Collies will work stock. And that's why people remember old Shep, "He just trained himself."

Since the sheepdog trial functions as a winnowing device, it would be counterproductive to restrict entries. Any dog can enter an Open trial, any age, any registration (or none), any breed – although if you bring your wolfhound to my trial I shall ask to see him work a few sheep in a small paddock before I turn him loose on my sheep in a big open field. After twenty years and several hundred sheepdog trials, I have seen three bearded collies (crosses?), one Australian cattle dog and one Shetland sheepdog run in a sheepdog trial. I am told there was an Australian shepherd (cross?) out West who

was competitive, and in 1996 and 1997 Butch Larson qualified a Kelpie to run at the National Handler's Finals. All the other dogs at the trials were Border Collies, and though most were registered, some were of unknown parentage from the animal shelter.

"This dog over here – what is it?"

"Border Collie."

"And this one, with all the funny colored splotches and – look, it's got a blue eye."

"Border Collie."

"If they're all the same breed, why do they look so different?"

This question is so persistent most sheepdog handlers have a stock answer. When a reporter asks me what Border Collies are supposed to look like, I reply, "What does a reporter look like?"

They don't look alike, they're alike in what they do, and the sheepdog trial serves as the Border Collie licensing board, review committee, law board, tenure committee, FAA, FCC, and admissions committee for sheepdogs.

As Gerard Manley Hopkins put it: "For what I do is me! For that I came!"

That day in May, when Pip and I walked onto the course at Seclusival, we had a hundred points. As Pip ran, the judge would deduct points for every mistake. The judge cannot award points for style or cheerfulness or suitability as a family pet. The dog who does his job with dour professionalism is at no disadvantage to the dog who is having a whale of a time. Dogs too shy to approach a judge, or dogs you

wouldn't trust with children, are judged no differently from the agreeable beast who'll let tykes crawl all over him.

Many of the handlers will have judged trials themselves, and after the first scores are posted, they are quick to identify a judge's idiosyncrasies: "He wants a tight turn." Or, "He's quick to call the shed."

A judge can judge a dog of his own breeding, the dog he sold yesterday, the handler who gave him such an unfair score two weeks ago in Tucson. He can judge his own wife. In such circumstances, some wives and husbands choose to run "noncompetitively," but there's no rule about it. After all, as George Conboy liked to say, "It's just a bunch of black and white dogs chasing sheep around. No reason to get excited about it."

When Pip and I finished, we had a respectable score just out of the money. At the gate I thanked Lyle for passing on the judge's instructions, and the judge turned to say, "She didn't give you all of them."

At the handler's meeting that morning, before the first dog ran, the judge said he didn't want any dog sent before the handler reached the post, so I'd lost five points for that simple fault. Like George Conboy said, no reason to get excited about it.