

THE ORIGIN AND THE CURRENT PRACTICES OF TENDING SHEEP IN GERMANY

By Ulf Kintzel

Somebody might ask: "What is it - tending? Is it a special kind of herding? Where does it come from?"

To understand this style of herding we have to go back to 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 fallow fields to graze their sheep. Also beside the farm roads was enough room to let the sheep eat. There was no need to keep the sheep in small grazes. Otherwise it was an unsafe time. There were wild animals like bears and wolves, there were thieves and criminals and the dogs had to protect livestock and herder. These dogs were big and tough. The only work those dogs had to do was to drive the sheep from the barn or pen to the pasture and water places and back. The shepherds walked behind the flock.

Because of the farmers' liberation and industrial revolution, the population grew and it was necessary to intensify the agriculture. In addition, in certain areas of Germany the fields got smaller and smaller because every son of every farmer had to get his share of the farm. The traffic started to increase also. All this started taking place at the end of the 18th century.

Under these circumstances, the herding style changed gradually but dramatically. Now the shepherds had to tend their sheep in smaller fields, on harvested fields, and especially in fields that could not be used differently than for sheep. It was also necessary to string out the flock on the narrow roads to be able to pass these fields with crops while moving the sheep from one pasture to another. For this the sheep herders needed nimble, intelligent, and independent dogs. The length of the flock was often 100 yards long. Now the shepherds walked in front leading the sheep while on each side of the flock a dog worked. To keep the sheep in the pastures and out of the crops the dogs had to stay on the borders (the natural line of definition) between what is a field with crops and what is pasture for the sheep and work there independently and patrol these borders. In other words the dogs became "living fences".

The shepherds started to select to get these smaller, nimble, intelligent, and independent working dogs. In other parts of Europe (such as France, Belgium, Poland etc.) the development was very often similar. At this time there was no breed goal. Nobody discussed color, ears, or height. Only the use was important. And so they bred the origins of today's tending breeds: Beaucerons and Briards, Old German Shepherd Dogs and German Shepherd Dogs, Belgian Sheepdogs and German Sheep Poodles. Sometime between the middle and the end of the 19th century breeders (not shepherds!) developed breed standards for some of those breeds.

Since then the situation in Germany has changed. However, the basics are still the same. We still tend sheep in pastures between crops and on harvested fields. We still move sheep on regular roads and farm roads to the next pastures. Most of our large flocks are tended this way.



Shepherd Erwin Niess (Germany) on his way from his summer to his winter pasture. He tends a flock of more than 1,000 sheep.