

Unforgettable Breeders

who helped build the foundation of the Australian Shepherd breed



PERSONAL INTERVIEW WITH

Phil Wildhagen

Bonnie-Blu

and his history with Dr. Weldon Heard's
Flintridge Australian Shepherds

Paula McDermid



ASCA CH Briar Patch of Bonnie-Blu
CD HOF. Born 1973. By ASCA CH
Wildhagen's Dutchman of Flintridge
CDX PC HOF x Wildhagen's Thistle of
Flintridge HOF. Photo courtesy of Marcia
Hall Bain.

Phil Wildhagen

Bonnie-Blu

Established 1969

Tell me about your first Aussie.

I purchased a dog from the pound, Sam, who was supposedly part Aussie. He was a great dog but I wanted a purebred Aussie. Then I bought "Wildhagen's Bonney Lee" from a breeder in Sylmar, Calif. She was a red tri, and as I learned later, had poor conformation. She was very smart, so I showed her in obedience and she won first place in most of her events. But I wanted a better quality Aussie, so I gave her to a friend who loved her and gave her a good home. That was when I first got into the breed and I had a lot to learn.

Have you had other breeds? Or have you had horses, and how did that knowledge influence you?

I was orphaned when I was three years old and lived in many foster homes. I went through five adoptions that never finalized. In one of those homes I learned to ride horses and I performed in many horse shows and some parades. The family also had two Morgan horse studs and we used them quite often. I never owned any dogs until I bought a home and got Sam. Many of the foster homes I lived in had dogs and I always enjoyed them, but none were show dogs.

How did you get involved with purebred Aussies?

In 1969 I acquired ASCA CH Wildhagen's Dutchman of Flintridge CDX ASCA HOF "Dusty" from Dr. Weldon Heard of Flintridge Kennels. I started to show Dusty and he won almost every time he went into the ring. At one year of age he was awarded Best of Breed at the 1970 International Australian Shepherd Association (IASA) National Specialty.

In 1971 I went back to Dr. Heard and purchased Wildhagen's Thistle of Flintridge ASCA HOF. I didn't show her much but she was excellent. Thistle and Dusty complemented each other and produced three litters of outstanding offspring.

ASCA CH Wildhagen's Dutchman of Flintridge CDX ASCA Hall of Fame "Dusty." Born 1969. ASCA's first Champion of Record, first CD, first CDX. Best of Breed 1970 IASA National Specialty. By The Herdsman of Flintridge x Heard's Savor of Flintridge. Photo credit: Phil Wildhagen.



"The dog that initially spread the influence of the Flintridge line was a blue merle male named Wildhagen's Dutchman of Flintridge, also known as Dusty. Dusty, followed by his brother Sage (Fieldmaster of Flintridge), arrived in California in 1970 and began several years of outstanding show success and ultimately the popularity of this line blossomed." Excerpt from *The Early Aussie Breeders* by Phil Wildhagen.



Foundation bitch of Bonnie-Blu: Wildhagen's Thistle of Flintridge ASCA Hall of Fame "Thistle." Born 1971. By Sisler's John x Heard's Chili of Flintridge. Photo credit: Phil Wildhagen.

Thistle and Dusty were two highly influential dogs in present-day show bloodlines. They had three litters together, producing offspring that redefined Australian Shepherd breed type. Thistle was a remarkable producer. She passed her qualities to her sons and especially to her daughters and granddaughters.

What attracted you to the breed?

The wonderful intelligence of Australian Shepherds, especially my Bonney, stimulated me to find out more about the breed. I did some research and found ASCA, a club started in Arizona, who gave me names of people all over the West who had Aussies. In 1969 I made a two-week vacation traveling around the western United States, which is when and how I met Dr. Heard and his wonderful Flintridge Aussies.

Tell me about that person who had the most impact on your evolution as a breeder.

Without question, Dr. Weldon T. Heard of Flintridge fame gave me motivation to help continue what he had started—developing a beautiful type of dog with the wonderful intelligence that this breed is known for. He had

established good type and I followed in his footsteps. I studied the genetics of dog breeding including color, effects of inbreeding, linebreeding and outcrossing which affect physical and mental traits of dogs. That eventually led to my interest in judging our breed, which I did for over 35 years.

ASCA CH Windermere's
Sunshine of Bonnie-Blu
CDX ASCA Hall of Fame
"Sunny." Born 1972. By
ASCA CH Wildhagen's
Dutchman of Flintridge
CDX HOF x Wildhagen's
Thistle of Flintridge ASCA
HOF. Photo credit: Judy
Williams.



ASCA CH Sunshine of Bonnie-Blu CDX HOF was a handsome dog who moved breed type forward toward a more elegant style. He was a powerhouse sire and the most influential dog from the Dusty x Thistle cross. Of Sunny's many quality offspring, seven became Hall of Fame producers. That was a tremendous record for Aussies in the 1970s.

Did you have a game plan or specific focus for your breeding program?

The focus of my breeding program was to continue the type that Dr. Heard had established in his line. I produced a number of litters over the years and all were either from Thistle or her offspring. I chose sires that had Flintridge type sires with my bitches to continue the breed type that I wanted.



ASCA CH Coppertone's
Cactus of Bonnie-Blu
CD "Cactus." Born
1973. By ASCA CH
Wildhagen's Dutchman
of Flintridge CDX HOF
x Wildhagen's Thistle of
Flintridge HOF. Photo
courtesy of Marcia Hall
Bain.

What was the most important reason you were successful?

I suppose that we were successful because so many of our pups went to people who became breeders and they showed their dogs. Some went to people who had livestock and they also had good results with their dog's herding abilities. Because we were very successful in the show ring in those early years led to others obtaining dogs with Flintridge type (and Dr. Heard wound up putting many more of his dogs in the hands of show families).

What are the three biggest changes you've seen in the breed?

The most significant thing I saw in the breed beginning in the early 70's was more uniformity of type in the show ring. In the early 70's Aussies from a variety of non-related ancestry had notable type variations such as ear set, head type, basic substance and color density. Over the years, these characteristics have become more uniform in show dogs. Many of the dogs that are used only in herding continue some of the early variations. As we now have the Miniature American Shepherd, I do recall that there were some notable size variations in the early years and through selection this new breed evolved.

What is your proudest moment when breeding and showing?

I never dreamed that Dusty would win a National Specialty and he would become such a popular sire in those early years. It's a humbling experience to know the impact that he and Thistle had in moving the breed to the wonderful popularity that it now has world-wide. They both were simply my wonderful pets. I always remember the sight of Dusty's head at my bedside in the morning just before I got up, his rear end wagging. He loved me and I loved him.

What was your greatest disappointment?

I think my only real disappointment was the lack of timely progress by our parent club in seeking recognition of Aussies by the American Kennel Club. In the 1970s and 1980s the Australian Shepherd Club of America focused on maintaining the breed's historical focus as a herding dog and wasn't moving in the direction of gaining AKC recognition. In 1976 I initiated recognition of Aussies with the Mexican kennel club, Federación Canófila Mexicana, and later took a part in validating our breed's name when the Canadian Kennel Club was recognizing Aussies in 1989. The United States Australian Shepherd Association was created in 1990 for the purpose of seeking AKC recognition and also international breed recognition. Aussies were finally recognized by the AKC in 1991, long after I had retired as a breeder.



ASCA CH Robinson's Bonnie-Blu Yankee.
Born 1972. By ASCA CH Wildhagen's
Dutchman of Flintridge CDX PC HOF x
Wildhagen's Thistle of Flintridge. Photo
courtesy of Marcia Hall Bain.

What are the most important lessons you learned that you'd like to pass on to newer fanciers and advice you'd like to give?

I'd like to encourage people who are new in the breed to use the intelligence of these dogs. Train your dogs, give them a good place to live with all the resources that they need. And from there, if you have the interest, put them in some kind of competition where they can excel. If your dogs have the quality, show them and perhaps use them to perpetuate the unique attributes of this breed. If you have livestock, try to learn the basics of how to work stock with your dogs.



Tamishon of Bonnie-Blu. Born 1973. By ASCA CH Wildhagen's Dutchman of Flintridge CDX PC HOF x Wildhagen's Thistle of Flintridge. Photo credit: Dai Leon.

How do you want to be remembered as an Aussie breeder?

I don't know that I need to be remembered but I would like my dogs to be remembered. I see them in today's Aussies and that makes me very happy. Perhaps I did something right and the breed benefited.

Is there anything else you wish I would have asked about?

I'm somewhat emotional because the dogs I discovered so many years ago are included in the *Unforgettable Aussies* books, and they contributed to what our breed has become. I have met so many people that own Aussies and I see how their dogs fill good places in their lives. When I began, very few people even knew about the breed. Now Aussies are known throughout the world! I'm happy that I was able to play a small part in how our breed has blossomed and I hope that it continues to thrive.

Dr. Weldon Heard's Flintridge Australian Shepherds



(Left to right) Savor, Cactus, Scotty (Herdsman), Salt, Spice and Clover.



(Left to right) Cactus, Scotty (Herdsman) and Salt. The Herdsman was the sire of Dusty and Sage.

Dr. Weldon Heard was a veterinarian and a skillful livestock breeder who lived in Colorado. He developed the Flintridge bloodline in the 1960s and 1970s when standardization of breed type was in its infancy. Through very tight linebreeding, he consistently produced Aussies with beauty, quality and high intelligence. He also focused on developing a bloodline with easy-to-live-with temperaments.

Prior to Dusty's entrance onto the show scene in 1970, Dr. Heard's Flintridge dogs had not been exhibited, and people had limited knowledge of his breeding program. There was little consistency in Australian Shepherd breed type because breeders had selected primarily for working ability.

Dr. Heard, who was skillful in breeding horses, cattle, sheep and dogs, had a broad perspective. He wrote, "Some who are more knowledgeable than I feel that beauty is unimportant, but I feel most people will spend more time looking at their dogs than working with them."

Dr. Heard was developing a line of Aussies with consistent, beautiful breed type. Phil Wildhagen, who lived in California, began looking for an attractive, typey Aussie. Phil's journey to meeting Dr. Heard, introducing Flintridge

dogs to the Aussie world, and creating a major impact on the breed took a bit of luck and a lot of perseverance.

This significant chapter of Aussie history began in a rather ordinary way. In 1968, Phil went to the dog pound and adopted a mixed-breed dog. A friend mentioned that the dog looked like it was part Aussie. Phil had no idea what an “Aussie” was, so he researched the breed as best he could. Then he purchased a purebred red tri bitch named “Bonnie,” but he recognized she had poor breed type.

Phil’s interest and enthusiasm for the breed was kindled. He set out on a long road trip to locate Australian Shepherd breeders and to gather knowledge about this fascinating breed. His trip took him to Canada and all over the western part of the United States.

While traveling through Colorado, Phil experienced a moment when effort and perfect timing created very good luck. A friend told him to visit Dr. Heard because he thought Phil might like the Flintridge dogs. Phil met Dr. Heard and was amazed at his dogs. They were by far the best Aussies he had ever seen.



Heard’s Savor of Flintridge. Born 1965. Dam of CH Wildhagen’s Dutchman of Flintridge CDX HOF and CH Fieldmaster of Flintridge HOF.



Heard’s Salt of Flintridge. Born 1964. Grandsire of CH Wildhagen’s Dutchman of Flintridge CDX HOF and CH Fieldmaster of Flintridge HOF.



(Left to right) Salt of Flintridge, The Herdsman of Flintridge and Cactus of Flintridge. Photo courtesy of Marcia Hall Bain.

Phil was introduced to the Flintridge dogs in a memorable way. Dr. Heard let the dogs out one at a time, and each hopped up and balanced on a post. Phil was deeply impressed by the quality and consistency of the breed type in those dogs because it was in stark contrast to other Aussies of that time.

Then, in a second stroke of good fortune, Phil was able to purchase a handsome blue merle puppy from Dr. Heard. That puppy's name was Wildhagen's Dutchman of Flintridge, affectionately known as "Dusty." Phil returned home to California with high hopes for his beautiful new puppy. He began to show Dusty, and the puppy won every time he was in the ring. However, Dusty was criticized for having much more white trim than other Aussies. Phil was new to the breed and sensitive to those remarks. He wanted to understand the concerns about white trim before fully committing to Dusty, so he sent the puppy back to Dr. Heard.

Phil researched the genetics of white trim and learned that in Aussies it was called the "Irish pattern," which is a recessive trait. He also learned that the dominant merle pattern is the gene that restricts the base body color, and doubling up on it can cause excessive white markings and serious defects.

When Phil understood those genetics, he was satisfied that Dusty's white trim was a normal color pattern, and not a cause for concern. Phil paid another visit to see Dr. Heard and Dusty. The seven-month old youngster was gorgeous and Phil took him home again to California.

Handled by Phil, Dusty had a highly successful show career. He won Best of Breed almost every time shown, and at a year of age, he was awarded Best of Breed at the 1970 IASA National Specialty. His success and handsome appearance caught the attention of other Aussie fanciers, and the popularity of the Flintridge breed type blossomed.

Dr. Heard's bloodlines were suddenly in demand. Phil brought Dusty's brother, Fieldmaster of Flintridge "Sage," to California, who also had a very successful career as a show dog and sire. Together, Dusty and Sage had a profound influence on breed type of the modern Australian Shepherd.



Dusty (left) and his brother Fieldmaster of Flintridge "Sage" (right) are shown with some of their trophies and ribbons. They were about one year old in this photo. Photo courtesy of Phil Wildhagen.