

Livingston man raises snowcloud shepherds



Phil Burgin's flop-eared snowcloud shepherd puppy hangs out with a toy at Burgin's Livingston home, recently. MT Best Times photos by Hunter D'Antuono

■ **By Samantha Cheney**
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LIVINGSTON — On top of a hill on a warm day in Livingston, Phil Burgin answers the gate, as a white German shepherd puppy with a flopped-over ear hides behind his leg. She immediately scurries away as visitors enter the gate.

"If she doesn't know you, she'll assume she doesn't want to (know you), and leave," Burgin said before sitting down.

The shy puppy is a snowcloud shepherd, a type of German shepherd that Burgin, 67, breeds and raises through Burgin Snowcloud Shepherds. He's been doing it since only 2007, but his care for the animals would make you think he has had them all of his life.

Getting to Montana

Burgin was born in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1948. His father raised dogs for much of his young life, and Burgin learned about the animals from watching him.

The younger Burgin started getting the urge to raise snowclouds after seeing their white, furry faces in Field and Stream magazine ads.

"I always thought the dogs were so beautiful," Burgin said. "I knew I wanted one someday."

Burgin moved out of Arkansas to enter the Marine Corps and was sent to boot camp in San Diego, and then to South Carolina.

He went back to California after his military service, taking odd jobs. In 1972, he joined a crew for a movie set in Roundup, Montana, as a carpenter. He realized after working in Montana he loved the state — even though his first winter was colder than anything he had ever experienced.

"I was wondering why everyone was putting plastic on their windows for winter. That year I swear it got to 60 below," Burgin laughed. "That next year, I put plastic on my windows."

Throughout the years, Burgin moved between California and Montana, finally settling in Livingston after friends helped

him get a job with the railroad. During that time, he never stopped thinking about those white German shepherds he saw as a kid.

Raising snowclouds

In 1972, he began asking for snowcloud breeding rights from Alice Horton, at that time the only snowcloud breeder in the country, Burgin said.

Initially, she would not allow him the rights because of the exclusivity of the breed — they were famous — Burgin said.

Horton received some of the highest pedigree honors from the American Kennel Club. Her predecessor, Dorthy Crider, had the White Shadow Line, which was in movies and TV shows like "The Mickey Mouse Club."

These dogs were original ones to be called "snowcloud" because of their distinct white fur and black noses, although some of the dogs still end up being the traditional black, tan or red color.



Burgin is pictured with Sugar, one of his female snowcloud shepherds, at his home in Livingston.

Burgin was persistent and kept in contact with Horton throughout the years. He moved into his current home and, after over 30 years of seeking the rights, he was successful in 2007 and purchased two snowclouds — Bear and Isi.

Burgin has since retired the two dogs but sent them to good homes. He has picked up four more snowcloud shepherds — three females and one male: Tink,

Shiloh, Sugar and Kato. He bought more females than males to keep them from getting birth fatigue, he said. Like his old dogs, he will also retire these after they get too old or have had enough litters.

The shy puppy was the last remaining dog in her litter. She was 9 weeks old and, although Burgin wanted to keep her, he knew he couldn't.

"I put pretty much everything I have

back into the dogs," Burgin said.

Someday he might get a larger piece of land but will continue to stay in Livingston for the mountains and his dogs, Burgin said.

"I want to keep doing this for the rest of my life," he smiled as he cuddled the flopped puppy.

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