

# For the dogs

by ANGELA S. VANDENBERG  
Reminder Staff

ORTONVILLE,-Mary Billman has a back yard full of reasons to get up in the morning.

Bearded collies and lowchens have not only filled the walls of her Ortonville home with awards, they also have kept her feeling young and vital. For 38 years, she took care of children as a teacher. For the same amount of time, she has tended to dogs and shown them all over the world.

As a child growing up in Oxford, Billman suffered from a debilitating bone disease. For almost three years, she was barred from doing anything that required much exertion.

Billman had animals as companions, dressing them up and pushing them around in a buggy. She said the animals helped her deal with the downfalls of her illness.

"I think I was born with a comb in my hand," she said.

Always an animal lover, Billman became interested in dogs for the entertainment and friendship they provide. She also thought dogs would keep her busy during her summers off as an educator, and when she finally retired.

"One of the things we always say in dogs is, 'You're never allowed to grow old,'" she said.

Now retired, Billman reflects back on her parents, who didn't retire until they were 70. She said their biggest concern was planning daily meals and looking for passing ambulances.

"They had no purpose in their life," she said. "Within three years, they were both dead."

Billman pledged she would not enter the same type of fate. While still a teacher, she worked with Lassie-type collies. After a while, she searched for a breed to show in summer that kept its coat and stumbled upon a photo of a bearded collie in a Canadian magazine. In 1978, she showed the first bearded collie in Michigan, learning all she could about the history of the breed.

"I am the type of person that if I do something, I'm going to do it right or not at all," she said.

Bearded collies, which are Scottish shepherd dogs, are known for their "herding" instinct. The breed was on the verge of extinction as recently as the end of World War II. One male and female were found, and all bearded collies today trace back to that initial coupling.

Billman began breeding the dogs and also grooms them. She also boards dogs she has bred and will take a dog that is no longer wanted, as long as she was the breeder.

"I don't ever want to find my dogs in a dog pound," she said. "It would break my heart to find them in a dog pound."

After years of breeding bearded collies and much success, Billman went hunting for another breed. She wanted something smaller because of a problem with arthritis. She found what she was looking for in a lowchen, a smaller breed resembling a miniature bearded collie. Partially shaved lowchens were used in castle times to warm the feet of women. Following her own tradition, Billman showed the first lowchen in Michigan in 1999.

"There's no real breed experts in this breed," Billman said. "It's too new in the United States. You have to go to other countries.

"But both of my breeds are similar in their ability to love people," she added.

It was that love that helped Billman when she took the worst fall of her life. Chosen by her peers to judge the 2003 Bearded Collie National Specialty Sweepstakes in Monterey, California, Billman broke her hip four days before the trip.



Photo by ANGELA S. VANDENBERG

**Many awards appear on Billman's enclosed patio walls. She has ribbons, trophies and photos of her winning dogs with herself and judges. Also on the porch is bearded collie and lowchen memorabilia.**

Motivation to work with the dogs helped her get better and back on her feet again. "I was walking with a cane but I showed my dog," she said.

An attendee of over 60 shows per year, Billman has seen much of the world through travel. She went to Germany in 2000 to the World Congress for Lowchen Owners and Breeders. With the help of her motor home, Billman has been able to travel to shows with some of her dogs in tow. Billman has also made many friends through mutual interests in the breeds.

Not only does she attend gatherings, she organizes them. She's currently planning the National Lowchen Club of America Specialty in Southfield as co-chair and working with some smaller regional specialties within the bearded collie club.

Each summer Billman has a picnic for the bearded collies and their owners. She started with the dogs she had bred, but it has expanded into sort of a bearded collie club. Last year there were 120 people and 73 dogs. One of those dogs, a lowchen named Maya, won top place in 1998 for females in the country in group placements at the Lowchen National Specialty.

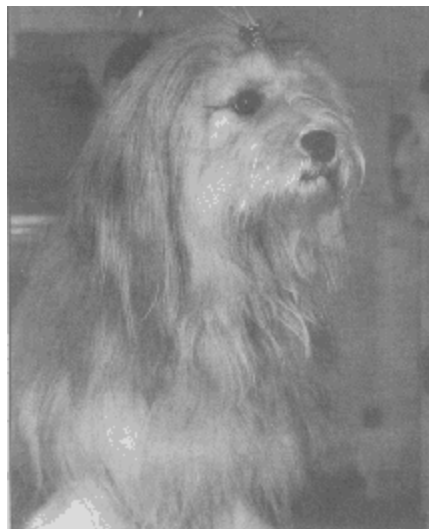
Billman said retirement has given her more money, less responsibility and more time, especially for what she calls "a serious hobby."

"It's a wonderful life," Billman said. "I don't know what I would be doing-probably sitting around getting immensely fat or something."

No chance of that. Once, while at the doctor's office, Billman was lectured for her lack of exercise. A few minutes later, she completed a treadmill test with flying colors.

"He told me I was in great health for my age," she said. "He told me to keep doing whatever I'm doing."

For Billman, there's no choice in the matter: Her dogs are family. "It keeps me young and motivated," she said. "It gives me a reason to get up in the morning. There's always something to do."



**Dog breeder and showperson Mary Billman (above) cuddles with her lowchen Dumplin'. Billman likes to decorate the dog's hair with clips. Maya, also a lowchen (left), takes a seat on Billman's grooming table.**

*Photos by ANGELA S. VANDENBERG*

*This article originally appeared in The County Line Reminder April 6, 2003. A paper published in Lapeer, MI near Ortonville, Michigan where Mary Billman lives that covers the Oakland/Lapeer Counties in Michigan. Thanks to Angela S. Vandenberg for sharing. Scanned and OCR – so there may be some minor typos in our reprint. Maya I believe is a Bearded Collie, so the paper made a misprint there.*