

**FINE WOOL SHEEP HUSBANDRY.
READ BEFORE THE NEW
YORK STATE AGRICULTURAL
SOCIETY, FEBRUARY 12TH, 1862**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649524143

Fine Wool Sheep Husbandry. Read Before the New York State Agricultural Society, February 12th, 1862 by Henry S. Randall

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HENRY S. RANDALL

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FINE WOOL

SHEEP HUSBANDRY.

BY HENRY S. RANDALL LL. D.

OF CORTLAND VILLAGE, N. Y.

READ BEFORE THE



NEW YORK STATE AGRICULTURAL SOCIETY,

FEBRUARY 12th, 1862.

From Transactions New York State Agricultural Society, 1861.

ALBANY:
PRINTED BY C. VAN BENTHUYSEN.
1862.

180. a. 131.
191. a. 110

FINE WOOL SHEEP HUSBANDRY.

In rising to read this paper on the sheep of our country, prepared at the request of your President, I cannot fail to have it forcibly recalled to my memory that twenty-five years ago this very month, at the annual meeting of the old New York State Agricultural Society, in this city, I was appointed chairman of a committee of breeders to draw up a report on the same subject; and that, twenty-four years ago, I read that report before the Society.*

On that occasion I was aided by the far riper experience of some of the most eminent breeders of our State, and might therefore without presumption, embody their knowledge in respect to breeds with which my own acquaintance was limited.

Having no such assistance now, I shall confine my descriptions chiefly to those varieties of which I can speak from an ample personal experience. These include the Merinos which, at various periods, have been imported from Spain, France and Germany into the United States.

The inquiries of your President embraced the following topics: The origin of the Merino; its varieties; its introduction into the United States; the circumstances which have affected its success; the comparative profitableness of its varieties; the expediency of crossing between varieties and the effects of in-and-in breeding; the proper mode of selecting a flock; the art of breeding; the present course of breeding in the United States; and suggestions as to the future of the fine wool husbandry in our country.

* It was published in the *Cultivator* (Albany) March, 1838, and extracts from it in the present Society's Transactions, 1841.

THE SPANISH MERINO.

The origin of this animal is involved in obscurity. The commonly received account is, that Columella, a Roman who resided near Cadiz in the reign of Claudius, coupled fine wool Tarentian (Italian) ewes with wild rams brought from Barbary, and thus laid the foundation of the breed; that some thirteen centuries after, Pedro IV. of Castile, improved it by a fresh importation of rams from the same country; and that two hundred years later still, Cardinal Ximenes a third time repeated this ameliorating cross;—from which period, we are left to infer, the breed became established about as it was found when it first began to attract the special attention of foreign nations in the seventeenth century. All the early varieties of Africa had long, straight, hairy wool, like the present long-wooled sheep of England, and no writer, ancient or modern, has pretended that the rams imported from that country into Spain, were any different in this particular. How recurring crosses between such animals and fine woolled ewes should have commenced, improved, and finally fixed the characteristics of a breed like the Merino, is a problem which admits of no rational solution to a practical sheep breeder.* This pedigree is probably entitled to about as much confidence as that which the Greek poets gave to the wonderful ram which bore the "Golden Fleeca." He, according to this very respectable authority, was got by the sea-god Neptune, dam the nymph Theophane.

The only well settled facts on this subject—and fortunately they are quite sufficient for all practical purposes—are, that at a period anterior to the Christian era, fine woolled sheep abounded in Spain; that they were preserved and made themselves heard of in the channels of trade and the domestic arts through all the conquests, re-conquests, and other sanguinary convulsions of that kingdom; that they were, or gradually ripened into, an exclusive breed unique in its characteristics, and essentially unlike all other breeds in the world.

When the Merinos of Spain first attracted the observation of

* Strabo, who was a contemporary of our Savior, and who consequently lived a generation earlier than Columella, says that the fine cloths worn by the Romans in his time were manufactured from wool brought from Troaditania, in Spain. Pliny, himself Governor of Spain, writing just after Columella's time, describes several fine woolled varieties in that country which must have existed there a long time anterior to Columella. The Barbary crosses undoubtedly were made with, or formed, the Chausah or long-wooled breed of Spain, which is altogether distinct from the Merino.

other nations, they were found scattered over most portions of their native country, divided into provincial varieties which exhibited considerable differences; and these again were separated into great permanent flocks or cabanas, as the Spaniards termed them, which had so long been kept distinct from each other and subjected to special lines of breeding, that they had acquired the character of sub-varieties or families.

VARIETIES AND SUB-VARIETIES IN SPAIN.

The first division recognized in Spain was into Transhumantes or traveling flocks, and Estantes or stationary flocks. The first were regarded as the most valuable. They were mostly owned by the King and some of the principal nobles and clergy, who at an early period fastened on the kingdom a code of regulations which sacrificed every other agricultural interest for the convenience of the proprietors of these sheep.*

The system of Spanish sheep husbandry is a curious and not uninteresting leaf from the records of the past, but does not come within the scope of this paper. It will be found described with sufficient fullness by Mr. Livingston, whose valuable "Essay on Sheep," now recognized authority throughout the world, was laid before the New York State Agricultural Society in 1809.†

* These will be found described in detail by Lesteyrie, Livingston and other writers. The sheep were driven from the southern provinces in April or May, according to the weather, to the mountains in the north of Spain, a distance of about four hundred miles, and driven back again in the autumn, generally leaving the mountains towards the close of September and through the month of October. The Tribunal (Consejo de la Mesta) which both made and administered the laws which regulated their transit, was composed of the rich and powerful flockmasters. The following remarks are from Lesteyrie's most valuable Treatise on Merino Sheep:

"A Spanish writer, Jorvellanes, in a memoir addressed to the King of Spain, says 'the corps of Junadines (proprietors of flocks) enjoy an enormous power, and have, by the force of sophisms and intrigues, not only engrossed all the pastures of the kingdom, but have made the cultivators abandon their most fertile lands: thus they have banished the stationary flocks, ruined agriculture, and depopulated the country.' It is easily conceived that five millions of sheep traversing the kingdom in almost its whole extent, for whom the cultivators are compelled to leave a road through their vineyards and best cultivated lands of not less than ninety yards wide, and for whom, besides, large commons must be left; I say, it is easily conceived that such a flock must greatly contribute to the depopulation of the country, and that the revenue that the King draws by the duty on wool is snatched from the bread of his people."

† I have thus termed the Society, because it will convey a more correct impression to many readers of the present day, than to give it its actual designation, which was, "The Society for the Promotion of Useful Arts." It was the lineal ancestor of our present organization.

Robert R. Livingston, LL. D., Secretary of Foreign Affairs under the American Articles of Confederation, Chancellor of New York, &c. &c., went as American Minister Plenipotentiary

Livingston makes the following territorial classification of the Merinos in Spain at the opening of the present century: "Castile and Leon has the largest with the finest coats. Those of Soria are small, with very fine wool. Those of Valencia, which, like the last, do not travel, have fine wool, but a very short staple."

The Leonese Transhumantes, considered the best sheep of Spain, were the only ones which ever attracted much foreign notice, and they composed the principal importations into the United States. Some of the most esteemed families of them were thus briefly characterized by Lasteurie, one of the best informed* and most reliable writers, early or late, in respect to the Merino:

"The Escorial breed is supposed to possess the finest wool of all the migratory sheep. The Guadeloupe have the most perfect form, and are likewise celebrated for the quantity and quality of their wool. The Paulars bear much wool of a fine quality; but they have a more evident enlargement behind the ears, and a greater degree of throatiness, and their lambs have a coarse, hairy appearance, which is succeeded by excellent wool. The lambs of the Infantados have the same hairy coat when young. The Negretti are the largest and strongest of all the Spanish traveling sheep."†

The Merinos, as they appeared as a race at the opening of this century, are thus described by Livingston:

to France in 1801. He there gave much attention to the Merinos preparatory to an importation of them. He is an able, and in matters of fact, extremely reliable, writer. He was one of the most spirited and influential agricultural improvers in our country, and is never to be forgotten as the patron and coadjutor of Fulton.

* Lasteurie traveled into every country in Europe, where the Merinos had been introduced, to ascertain how the experiment succeeded and to observe the effect of the different climates and systems of management on the animal.

† Livingston's descriptions coincide with these, except that he says that the Paulars have "similar fleeces" with the Guadeloupes, and are "longer bodied."

These celebrated flocks were the property of individuals or of religious orders. The Escorial flock belonged to the King, until Philip II gave it to the friars of a convent attached to the Escorial palace. The Paulars were purchased by the Prince of Peasos of the Carthusian friars of Paular. The Negrettis were owned by the Conde Campo de Alange—the Infantados, Aqueirres, Montarcos, etc., to the nobles of those names.

Hon. William Jarvis, of Vermont, hereafter mentioned as a conspicuous importer of Merino sheep into the United States, in a letter to L. D. Gregory, which was re-published in Morrell's American Shepherd, (pp. 71-78,) describes the Spanish cabanas somewhat differently. But his opportunities for judging, good as they were, were not equal to those of Lasteurie, and Mr. Jarvis wrote some years *after* he had seen any pure bred animals of the separate cabanas. Lasteurie's description is adopted by some eminent writers, familiar with the Spanish sheep near the opening of this century, and I do not remember to have seen it contradicted by any European author of reputation. Like all the descriptions of animals by writers of that day, it is, however, exceedingly meagre and vague. But I do not think the writers of that day considered the distinctions between a few of the best cabanas as of much importance—regarding them as about equal in value.

"The race varies greatly in size and beauty in different parts of Spain. It is commonly rather smaller than the middle sized sheep of America. The body is compact, the legs short, the head long, the forehead arched. The ram generally (but not invariably) carries very large spiral horns, has a fine eye and a bold step. The ewes have generally no horns. The wool of these sheep is so much finer and softer than the common wool, as to bear no sort of comparison with it; it is twisted and drawn together like a cork screw; its length is generally about three inches, but when drawn out it will stretch to nearly double that length. Though the wool is, when cleaned, extremely white, yet on the sheep it appears a yellowish or dirty-brown color, owing to the closeness of the coat, and the condensation of the perspiration on the extremities of the fleece. The wool commonly covers great part of the head, and descends to the hoof of the hind feet, particularly in young sheep; and it is also much more greasy than the wool of other sheep."

To supply data which will enable any one curious on the subject to make some practical comparisons between these sheep and their descendants in the United States, I select the following, from a more extensive table by Petri, who visited Spain in the early part of this century for the express purpose of examining its sheep: and I add similar admeasurements of American Merinos:

NAMES OF FLOCKS.	Weight, including wool.		Length from mouth to horns.		Length from horns to shoulders.		Length from shoulders to tail.		The whole length.		Circumference of the belly.		Height of the fore legs.		Height of hind legs.		Distance of hip bones apart.	
	lbs.	inc.	ft.	in.	ft.	in.	ft.	in.	ft.	in.	ft.	in.	ft.	in.	inc.	inc.		
NEGRETTI.																		
Ram	97	9 $\frac{1}{2}$	1	7	2	2	4	8 $\frac{1}{2}$	4	1 $\frac{1}{2}$	1	3	10	6				
Ewe	67	8 $\frac{1}{2}$	1	5	2	1	4	2 $\frac{1}{2}$	4	1 $\frac{1}{2}$	1	1	9 $\frac{1}{2}$	4 $\frac{1}{2}$				
INFANTADO.																		
Ram	100 $\frac{1}{2}$	10	1	6	2	3	4	7	4	3	1	0	9	6				
Ewe	70	9	1	5 $\frac{1}{2}$	2	1	4	3 $\frac{1}{2}$	3	11	1	0	8 $\frac{1}{2}$	5 $\frac{1}{2}$				
GUADALOUPPE.																		
Ram ..	97 $\frac{1}{2}$	9	1	6	2	2	4	5	4	5 $\frac{1}{2}$	1	0	8	6				
Ewe ..	69	8	1	2	2	1	3	11	3	9	1	1	10 $\frac{1}{2}$	6 $\frac{1}{2}$				
ESTANTES OF SIERRA DE SOMO.																		
Ram ..	96 $\frac{1}{2}$	9 $\frac{1}{2}$	1	6	2	0	4	3 $\frac{1}{2}$	4	2 $\frac{1}{2}$	1	0	8	6				
Ewe ..	62 $\frac{1}{2}$	9	1	2	2	1	4	0	3	10	1	1	7	5				
SMALL ESTANTES.																		
Ram ..	42	7 $\frac{1}{2}$	1	3	1	9	3	7 $\frac{1}{2}$	2	2	10	5 $\frac{1}{2}$	3					
Ewe ..	30	7	1	1	1	6	2	2	2	10	8	0	3					
AMERICAN MERINO.																		
Ram ..	122	9	10	2	4	3	11	4	4 $\frac{1}{2}$	11	9	9						
Ewe ..	114	9 $\frac{1}{2}$	10	2	4	3	11 $\frac{1}{2}$	4	1 $\frac{1}{2}$	11	9	8						
Ewe ..	122	9	10	2	5	4	0	4	3	9	9	8						
Ewe ..	100	9	11	2	8	3	11	4	2	8 $\frac{1}{2}$	8	8						

These weights and measures, except those of the American sheep,* are Austrian. The Austrian pound is equal to 1.037 lbs. avoirdupois; the Austrian foot to 1.234 English feet.

Mr. Livingston, in describing the Spanish Merino of his day as compact and short-legged, took for his standard of comparison, doubtless, the gaunt, tall sheep of America; and Col. Humphreys' description, sent to the Massachusetts Society for promoting Agriculture, requires the same explanation. Most British writers, with their eyes on their own mutton breeds, fall into the opposite extreme. Petri's measurements show that the Spanish sheep were far less compact than their American descendants, though they ran to no extraordinary excess in the opposite direction.

We should gather the impression from Livingston's remarks—and Humphreys expressly says—that they were broad chested.† Compared with other sheep, or their own descendants of the present day, this was quite otherwise. The concurrent testimony of both writers and observers who had more practical acquaintance with the points of an animal's carcass than either of the above distinguished gentlemen, as well as my own observations thirty years ago, when our own Merinos had been bred closely to the original model, show that the Merino of Spain was decidedly

* The American Merino ewes were taken from one of my flocks composed of sheep of good medium size, and I think they were a little heavier than the average of the flock. They were weighed, &c., in Dec. 1861, and had been sheared only five months—so that their weights did not, like the Spanish, include full fleeces. They were in good ordinary condition, and no more. The same is true of the ram. He is a small, short animal for one of his family, but has great substance, and is specially prized for the uniformity of his offspring, for their low, broad, beautiful forms, and for the great length and thickness of their wool. His own fleece has reached to about 31 lbs. In other respects there was nothing unusual in the appearance or form of any of the four; and their shape, &c. would about correspond with that of the flock they were taken from, or that probably of any other prime full blood flock in the country. The ram was 25 inches high on the shoulder, the ewes about 23 inches each. I wish Petri had given the heights of the Spanish sheep. When the difference in weight is taken into account, it is remarkable that there should be no greater difference in the "circumference of the belly" between the Spanish and American sheep in the table; and one would infer that a good portion of the weight of the former must be made up of a belly so disproportioned in size. But I have no doubt that Petri measured their circumference in full fleece and without any compression of the wool. I shall reserve any further comparisons until I describe the improved American Merino.

† "The neck short, the chest broad. The members more compact and thick than those of our former breed of sheep; and the carcass is thought to have smaller bones and to be more rounded in the hinder part."—[Col. Humphreys' Letter to Mass. Society for promoting Agriculture.