

## COLORED FINNSHEEP IN FINLAND

by Sandy De Master

Finn wool is soft and lustrous. This characteristic makes Finn wool unique because luster is very rare in medium grade wools and is most often found in the longwooled breeds which tend to have a higher micron count and a coarser hand.

My interest in raising Finnsheep grew out of my appreciation for their wool. Upon researching the breed, I learned that Finns are white, black, brown, and gray. In this country I was only familiar with white and a few black Finns and thus decided to make a trip to Finland to learn more about these sheep and determine if I would be able to import semen from colored Finn rams. I contacted a breeder of moorit Finnsheep, Jill von Weymarn, who kindly arranged a week's visit with some of the leading Finnsheep breeders in the country.

First of all, a bit about the history of Finnsheep: The Finnish Landrace Breed developed from original home-bred stock. It had originally existed in the eastern portion of Finland, where it remained "purebred" or not crossed with any other breeds of sheep. These early ancestors of today's Finnsheep were descendants of the Nordic Short-Tailed Breed. It is said that the Vikings were largely responsible for disseminating this breed in their travels. Today's descendants of this breed include Finnsheep, Icelandics, Shetlands, Spelsau, and Gotland sheep. All of these breeds are characterized by a short woolless tail.

Two of these cousins, Shetland and Icelandic sheep, are known for their variety of wool colors. Shetlands have eleven recognized colors and Icelandics seventeen. (For more information see "Colour Inheritance in Icelandic Sheep and Relation between Colour, Fertility, and Fertilization" by Stefan Adalsteinsson).

Interestingly enough, Finnsheep have shared these colors and markings for centuries. In a meeting with a handspinner and owner of Finland's only spinning shop, Satu reported to me that the ancient sheep of Finland were known as "Avenanmaan lammas". These early sheep were dual-coated, badgerfaced (pigmented belly, light dorsal part), and horned. I was actually able to see some of these sheep at a living history museum in Turku. They were smaller than today's

Finns and both sexes were horned. Many of them were piebald (black and white) and they appeared to be dual-coated.

In 1918 the Finnish Sheep Breeders' Association was founded and the systematic improvement of Finnsheep began. Mr. Eino Huatagangas, director of this organization, told me that in the 1920's and 1930's 30% of Finnsheep were colored - mainly black, brown and gray. In 1986 only 7% were colored. Currently the number of colored Finns has increased to 12%. Of these 12 %, 8% are black, 3% brown, and 10% gray.

This renewed interest in colored Finnsheep has been spurred on by the resurgence in handspinning and the quest on the part of handspinners and weavers for quality natural colored wool.

Most of the breeders I met breed like color to like color for the purpose of achieving the purest depth of shade of each particular color. They believe that breeding black to brown, for example, can dilute the outcome in the next generation. They also select away from any white markings even on the face or top of the head. When I met with Marja-Leena Puntila of the Agricultural Research Center, she showed me pictures of spotted and patterned Finnsheep that would have brought a great sum of money in the US.

When I asked her if I could see these sheep, she informed me that they had been culled because their wool was not uniform in color! Thus, the trend today in Finland is to select for solid colors with minimal if any white markings.

Those of you that are familiar with Shetland or Icelandic colors will notice that I have not mentioned the color "fawn" or beige. This color had not been observed in Finland for quite some time. But last year I received a letter from my friend Jill informing me that in breeding for moorit Finns, she had a fawn-colored lamb born! She said the Finnsheep Sheep Breeders' Association was so surprised that they were sending a representative out to her farm to observe the color! She did send me a picture and wool sample of the lamb,

which was indeed fawn. This birth was in keeping with genetic theory as gray/fawn is a "pattern" which is recessive to white but dominant over no pattern (black or brown).

Thus, the introduction of Finnish semen into the US gene pool should provide us with wool that is uniform and a variety of natural colors that have been selected for depth of shade and uniformity. Also, the combination of these new genetics with the existing ones in this country could make for some exciting surprises in the way of possible recessive traits coming to the foreground.

In summary, breeding for wool color and pattern in our Finnsheep should prove to be very exciting! Those of us who have imported semen should keep good notes and document our results. Hopefully, we will soon be introducing some new colors and patterns to our Finnsheep gene pool in the United States.