

The History of Finnsheep in the United States - Nearly 50 years of Enhancing the Sheep Industry

Written by Mary O'Malley

Finnsheep first arrived in North America from their native Finland in 1966 when The University of Manitoba, Canada imported them to study the effect of Finnsheep on their cross-breeding program. Valued in Finland for their ability to produce not only meat, but milk, wool, and hides, Finnsheep are considered a "primitive" or unimproved breed; they descend from the Nordic short-tailed breeds. The breed soon attracted the attention of shepherds in the United States who purchased them for their personal flocks. Since that time, Finnsheep have found homes in commercial market lamb settings and university programs, as well as on small farms. What accounts for the appeal of the Finn? Ask a shepherd and you are likely to get a different answer depending on the goals he or she has for the flock.

When Naomi Smith and her late husband Joe established their farm in 1985, an article by Dr. Charles Parker, a former roommate of her husband's, extolling the virtues of Finnsheep drew Naomi to them. After years of managing Angus cattle for others, Naomi was interested in breeding sheep. It seemed to her that everyone raised Suffolks for market, but she wanted to be a breeder. She recognized that the primitive Finnsheep's ability to forage would be a good fit for their mountainous property. She believes the Finnsheep has a lot to offer the sheep industry with their ability to birth and raise multiples.

Indeed this was the initial appeal of Finnsheep; the ewe's ability to successfully birth and raise multiple lambs. Commercial shepherds, raising large flocks of market lambs incorporated Finnsheep into their production to increase the prolificacy of their flock. The heritage of a sheep and its purebred status are of critical interest to a breeder who is planning to crossbreed as other genetic traits than the ability to birth and raise multiples can present in a ewe when the dam or sire are of mixed genetic heritage. A shepherd planning to crossbreed will seek a purebred ewe to insure that only desired genetic traits, like those related to excellent mothering ability, come forward.

Brian Magee, a New York State Sheep Extension agent and former Cornell University Sheep Farm Manager, has been breeding Finnsheep, Dorset and Finn-Dorset crosses since 1971. He currently serves on the board of the Finnsheep Breeder's Association which was established the same year. He has found that many commercial shepherds desire a medium-size Finn ewe because she can maintain her health and high fertility on good pasture without flushing with grain, as required by some breeds. Finn ewes have long been crossed with other breeds such as Dorset, Texel or Tunis to achieve a the size, muscling

and growth rate in lambs desired by the shepherd's market.

A great deal of research has been done at agricultural universities and by the U.S. Meat Animal Research Center utilizing Finnsheep. Finns have been studied along with Dorsets, Romanovs, Texels and Montadales to evaluate the effects of the ram breed, ewe breed, season of mating and two-way interactions. Lamb survival, growth rate and composition of carcass have also been a focus of study. Finnsheep excelled in survival from birth to weaning and were comparable to the other breeds in their growth rate.

Finnsheep were bred with Dorset, Rambouillet and Targhee to develop the Polypay breed of sheep. The goal was to develop a sheep with the ideal characteristics of prolificacy, excellent lamb survival, short gestation, rapid lamb growth rate and desirable carcass quality. Finns were chosen for their prolificacy, short gestation and early puberty.

Finnsheep are ideal for the small farm. Their size and sweet dispositions make them easy to manage. Many people prefer to handle a smaller sheep and find that Finns, where ewes range in size from 130 to 180 lbs. and rams weigh from 170-240 lbs., are quite manageable. Small farms are often interested in marketing their products locally. For sheep breeders, meat and wool are the most common products. Lamb is the preferred meat for many Muslim, Jewish and Christian holidays, and these customers appreciate the delicious, mild meat of the Finnsheep. But certainly, lamb is not just for holidays, and many people appreciate locally raised, delicious lamb for their dinner table all year round.

The appeal of the Finn has grown well beyond enhancing the commercial sheep industry. Linda Witt received a Finn ewe and her lambs from a friend when she and her husband started Misty Mountain Farm in 1985. The dual purpose nature of the breed, the ability to raise both meat and wool, was an initial attraction. However, it was the wool itself that captured her imagination. Witt noticed that when compared to other sheep breeds, the Finnsheep fleeces did not get coarser over the years. The soft, lustrous Finnsheep wool appealed to fiber artists. Spinners enjoy the silky feel of the wool, while felters appreciate how easily the wool felts.

The natural array of colors of the Finnsheep fleece appeals to spinners, weavers, and those who knit and crochet. Many Finnsheep breeders consider the sheep's natural color when breeding. While white is the most common color seen among Finnsheep, black, brown, fawn and gray breeding stock are now found in great numbers, as are colorful patterns and spotting. When Elizabeth Kinne Gossner, began breeding Finnsheep at her farm in New York in 1994, the piebald coloring, where sheep can look like Holstein cows, Dalmatians or something in between, was rare. The recessive gene for piebald can lurk in purebred Finnsheep for years without appearing in the progeny because it takes both a sire and a dam carrying it for this coloring to show in the lambs. Spots on the face, a speckled belly or udder are all visible clues that a sheep is carrying the piebald gene. Kinne Gossner has seen a definite increase in this unique coloring

over the years. She notes that piebalds are very decorative in a spinner's flock, and if spots are not desired for yarn, the fleeces blend into grey or light brown roving easily.

One place you do not often see Finnsheep is at State and County Fair Sheep Shows and competitions, though they are often part of a breed display. Recognizing that show ring competition can induce shepherds to breed specifically for show ring standards, The Finnsheep Breeders Association made a deliberate decision not to encourage showing or to set standards for the show ring. As Brian Magee wrote back in the 1985 edition of the FBA's newsletter, *Short Tales*, "Lack of flexibility in breed standards is a major problem for many other breeds of sheep and is particularly evident in the strict show ring standard for type, size conformation and condition.The success and acceptance of our breed is one of the

best examples of how a breed of sheep selected for production, not show ring standards, can best meet the needs of the commercial sheep industry." Does that mean Finns are never at shows? Of course not! My children have shown our Finns in the 4-H and open classes. We recognize that the lighter-framed Finn will place below any larger commercial breed sheep in the open class, but, for us, the competition is not as important as introducing fair goats to the sweet natured Finns. They are always popular.

Currently, fans of Finns have 2 registries to utilize when seeking to purchase and register purebred Finnsheep, The Finnsheep Breeders Association and the International Finnsheep Registry. While both promote Finns, each organization has a different focus which is important for the buyer to recognize.

The Finnsheep Breeders Association has been the official registry for USA Finnsheep since 1971 and desires to preserve and enhance the inherent good qualities of this unique, primitive breed. Well over 28,000 Finnsheep have been registered since the organization's inception. The FBA has consistently maintained both a Class 1 Registry for Purebred Finns and a Class 2 category for crossbred, high percentage Finns. The FBA identifies pure lines for breeding purposes, which is why only 100% Finnsheep can be registered in Class 1. It also recognizes the value of high percentage crossbred Finnsheep for strengthening the sheep industry. A wealth of information related to the breed can be found at www.Finnsheep.org, in addition to a breeder's directory and membership information.

The IFR (www.internationalfinnsheepregistry.org), founded in Pennsylvania in 2011 also promotes the Finnsheep breed. The goals of the two United States-based organizations are similar in that both wish to support Finnsheep breeders, provide information and encourage those interested in the breed. The distinction between the organizations is primarily their standards for registration. While the FBA will only register a Finnsheep as purebred if its history of purebred breeding is evident through uninterrupted registration of purebred parent animals, the IFR, according to their Breed Improvement Program, allows registration of a Finnsheep as purebred with 10 percentage Polypay in its lineage. It is important that shepherds new to Finnsheep understand that sheep registered only with IFR cannot be registered with FBA, while FBA animals can be used in IFR breeding programs.

Finnsheep arrived in the United States nearly half a century ago. Their presence in the commercial sheep industry, in university studies and on small farms across America has made them part of the history of sheep in America. Whether your interest in sheep is to raise market lambs or to produce fiber or breeding stock, Finnsheep can be an ideal addition to your flock.

Mary O'Malley raises Finnsheep in Silver Spring, MD. She is a member of the Finnsheep Breeders Association and serves on its board of directors.