



FOCUS

American Finnsheep

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Photos by Teresa Fallon, Ironwood Hill Farm (Newark Valley, New York)

*F*innsheep were introduced to North America with importation to Canada in 1966. The Finnsheep breed originated in Finland where they are called Finnish Landrace. They are an ancient breed thought to have descended from the Mouflin fat-tailed sheep of central Asia. They are members of several related breeds of short-tailed sheep originating in Russia and Scandinavia. Through the efforts of Dr. William Boylan and Dr. Clair Terrill, Chief of the Sheep and Fur Animal Research Branch of USDA, Beltsville, MD, Finnsheep from Ireland were introduced to the University of Minnesota in 1968.

The original organizational meeting of the Finnsheep Breeders Association took place in Hastings, Nebraska in 1971. Eleven persons attended that meeting, including five producers. The other six were researchers involved with the original importation of registered Finns. John Redding of North Carolina holds the distinction of receiving FBA "Membership Number 1." In addition to Redding, early presidents and directors include Dwight Holloway of Minnesota; Dr. Hudson Glimp of Kentucky; Ladd Mitchell of Washington; Art Christensen of Montana; Claire Carter of Indiana; Erling Martinson of Wisconsin; Joe David Ross of Texas;

Robert Thurman of Ohio; Larry Arehart of Kansas; Bob Dayland of Minnesota; Jack Bonham of Indiana; Dick Blaxham of Idaho; Leroy Carr of Ohio; Brian Magee of New York; Dennis Dodson of Missouri, and Hugh Thorne of Michigan. These interested breeders established the standards for the FBA that are in effect today.

Interest was widespread across the United States because of the ability of the Finnsheep to birth and raise multiple lambs. The potential for the commercial breeder to increase his lamb production through the introduction of Finnsheep had great appeal. The original directors of the FBA recommended the breeding up program that was subsequently closed by the membership in 1991. From the beginning, the directors stressed breed performance; that rams should be at least triplets; that Finnsheep would not be

shown; and single rams, while useful for crossbreeding, were not to be registered.

Early researchers were interested in the many attributes of the Finn-



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sheep breed. Economically, the increase in production had and continues to have an impact on the commercial sheep industry in the United States. Some commercial breeders prefer a 50% or 25% Finn-cross ewe. Finn-cross ewes are capable of breeding at six or seven months of age. Viability and lambing ease are excellent in lambs from Finn-cross ewes.

During the first 15 years in the United States, more research and data was compiled involving Finnsheep and their crosses than any other breed of sheep. That research resulted in the development of the Polypay breed at Dubois, Idaho.

Registered and purebred Finn ewes are medium-sized, docile, and uniquely prolific. In addition, they are excellent mothers and many will breed out of season. Some ewes have proven to be outstanding producers on the STAR system developed at Cornell University, breeding repeatedly on a more frequent than 12-month interval. Finns are unequalled in prolificacy, averaging 3.2 lambs. It is not unusual for a mother Finn ewe, bred twice in one year, to produce 8-10 lambs per year. Another valuable trait of the purebred Finn is the early maturity of the ewe lambs, breeding at six to seven months with a 200% lamb crop. It is rare that a ewe lamb will walk away from her lambs and have to be placed in a stanchion. Contrarily they will often collect other lambs to nurse in addition to their own. Finnsheep ewes will "count" their lambs if they are nursing quads, quintos or more. In spite of prolificacy the breed has exceptional longevity, producing into their teens.

Finn rams are docile, medium-sized and easily managed by "urban farmers." Finn ram lambs are early maturing and capable of siring lambs by a year of age.

Finn lambs are vigorous at birth and have a lower than average mortality. Their short tails require no docking. Undocked, uncastrated purebred and crossbred Finns weighing 70-90 pounds are in great demand in the ethnic market. Lamb from Finnsheep is tender with a delicate flavor. Small carcasses lacking in abundance of external fat work well for the freezer lamb business.

The Finnish Sheep Breeders Association was established in 1918 and



has directed the improvement of the breed with emphasis on litter size, mothering ability, milk production, growth rate, and wool production. Finnsheep are highly adapted to a rugged climate and high roughage feeds. On pasture, they prefer browse if it is available and perform well on unimproved pasture. Shepherds in Finland harvest bundles of twigs which they provide to their ewes during the winter.

During the late 1990s, American Finnsheep breeders imported semen from registered Finn rams from Finland. The resulting offspring incorporated those genetics into the American Finnsheep. Breeders in the United States are currently discussing importation from Australia to add new genetics to the American flock.

Finnsheep wool has been selected for hand processing qualities for centuries. Finn wool is fine, unusually lustrous, and available in every color (including white, pie-bald, black and various natural color shades that are much in demand by hand spinners). The fleece grows fast and Finnsheep are often sheared twice a year. A local processor processed 25 pounds of my white Finn wool and commented, "This is the best wool I have ever processed and worked with." Finn wool appeals to fiber fans whether their interest is spinning, weaving, felting, knitting or crocheting.

A small flock of Finnsheep will provide income from many sources: breeding stock; and lambs for the ethnic market as well as freezer lambs; white or natural colored shades of wool; and pelts. Lambs may be weaned at five weeks and the ewes can be milked to produce sheep milk cheese. On the farm, Finnsheep will mow the pasture and spread natural fertilizer. Finnsheep are an ideal choice for anyone interested in raising sheep.

Naomi Leith Smith has been raising Finnsheep for more than 30 years. A 1953 graduate of Cornell University, her degree in animal husbandry led her first to managing Angus steers. She had her late husband were able to make the switch to Finnsheep in 1985 and she continues to be an enthusiastic promoter of purebred Finnsheep. She is a past president of the FBA as well as a current director.

