

## **Adding PEP to a flock with Finnsheep: Performance, Efficiency and Profitability**

*Reflections by Dr. Charles Parker on Finnsheep, their unique genetics and their awesome possibilities By Mary O'Malley, FBA President*

At the May 2017 meeting of the Finnsheep Breeders Association, Dr. Charles Parker, PhD, Professor Emeritus at The Ohio State University was inducted into the Finnsheep Hall of Fame for his outstanding research with, and support of Finnsheep. During his remarks at the presentation, he shared his extensive knowledge of the overall sheep industry and his perception of how Finnsheep fit into the bigger picture of raising sheep in America.

Growing up on a Merino sheep farm, Parker was well aware of the influence the “Merino Craze” had on Ohio’s sheep Industry. Wool prices as high as \$2.75/ lb. were recorded in 1812 at the woolen mill in Steubenville Ohio. In 1867 the Ohio sheep inventory was 7.7 million. Today there are 117,000 sheep in Ohio.

In 1968, Dr. Parker invited Dr. H.P. Donald of Scotland to speak at the Ohio Sheep Day on the benefits of Finnsheep, particularly their unique trait of prolificacy. Having obtained a doctorate in Animal Genetics at Texas A & M and with an interest in genetic selection for reproductive and growth efficiencies of sheep, Parker was intrigued with Dr. Donald’s research. Finnsheep arrived in the United States in 1968 and would be studied at Pipestone, MN; OARC, Illinois; Wooster, Ohio and Dubois, Idaho. Finns were introduced at Ohio Agriculture Research and Development Center, (OARDC) in 1971. More studies have been done with Finnsheep than any other breed.

Dr. Parker noted that the U.S. Sheep industry has had many transitions. Initially raising quality fine wool was the focus which in part explains the Merino sheep craze. Gradually breeders shifted toward dual purpose breeds and later to meat production breeds. Currently hair sheep like the Katahdin are enjoying significant popularity due to their parasite resistance, meat quality and the added bonus of no shearing necessary.

The most profound change in the sheep industry has been the decline in inventory. In 1942 there were 56.7 million sheep in the United States. Currently (2017) there are 5.2 million. This doesn’t make sense, when, as Dr. Parker notes “Sheep are biologically beautiful animals and respond to quality care and management. They are ideal for small rural farm enterprises as they require low investment costs and can efficiently utilize renewable resources for food and fiber production.”

*Dr. Parker's reflections continued:*

According to Dr. Parker, “Our industry’s greatest need is to increase the lbs. of quality lamb produced per ewe per year.” Current lamb meat production stands at 95 -100 %, meaning one marketable lamb produced per ewe. Until the early 1970s, most of the sheep related research identifying issues that affected lamb production focused on management techniques like predator control, nutrition and health care. At OARDC, Parker researched the genetics of resistance for internal parasites and conducted nutritional studies on optimal nutrition for high producing ewes. Dr. Parker noted that overall lamb percentage has increased by only 14 % over the last 35 years and emphasized that lamb meat production can be doubled by using *prolific genetics*. This is where the Finn stands out.

Crossing purebred Finns with a meat production breed can significantly increase production. A 1972 study at the U.S. Meat and Animal Research Center (Nebraska) showed Finn- cross market lambs to have a growth rate equal to other breeds. Breeding a purebred Finn- sheep or 1/2 (F-1) Finn ram to a ewe with no Finnsheep ancestry will result in increased number of lambs born and hybrid vigor which in turn leads to profit. A shepherd raising market lambs can increase the lamb crop percentage by 25% in one generation by introducing an F1 cross ram to the ewes of another breed .

Despite this proven research, Finnsheep have not gained the popularity one might expect from these numbers. Dr. Parker reminded us that the sheep industry in general has challenges competing with beef and chicken, yet marketing opportunities abound. Today, 35% of the U.S. population comes from an ethnic group that *prefers* lamb! These consumers seek a lamb that is in the range of 40 – 100 lbs. at the time of slaughter and provide another excellent opportunity for the small flock owner. Nutritionists encourage their cardiac patients to consume adequate amounts of omega 3 fats as they have been associated with decreased risk of inflammation and heart disease. While a variety of foods are known to contain desirable levels of omega 3, grass-fed lamb has been identified as having an ideal omega-3 to omega 6 fat ratio. According to Parker, “We are hiding “under a bushel,” one of the GREATEST FUNCTIONAL FOOD FEATURES--- ***Lamb could/should become THE RED MEAT HEALTH FOOD!***”

Time at the meeting was also spent discussing options for promoting Finns through advertising and sales. It was acknowledged that breeders not having personal experience with a Finnsheep or Finn-cross may be reluctant to introduce a

purebred or crossbred Finn to their flock. Fear of multiple births can be powerful! Finnsheep breeders can address this concern by sharing management techniques, but also by providing the F-1 cross ram. Dr. Parker challenged the members of the Finnsheep Breeders Association to highlight the Finns' quality genetics: prolificacy. "The epic era of Finns has yet to be!"