

Rare breeds renaissance

Growing our future from the past

by Jane Fowler

From the beginning of the 20th century until 1973, when the Rare Breeds Survival Trust was founded in the UK, the nation lost 26 of its native livestock breeds. Thanks in large part to the group's work, no breeds have become extinct since.

This success story, and the continuing challenges of livestock genetics conservation, featured prominently in a keynote address given by Lawrence Alderson at the Rare Breeds Canada AGM held this June in Nova Scotia. The Northville Farm Heritage Museum and Ross Creek Centre for the Arts, in Canning, hosted the event, which included a full slate of inspiring talks and demonstrations.

Alderson has been involved with this movement for more than 50 years. He was a founder of both the Rare Breeds Survival Trust and Rare Breeds International. Following a similar protocol, Rare Breeds Canada (RBC) was founded in 1987, with the objective of preserving rare breeds of livestock in ways that will enhance their commercial value.

Heritage breeds are rated as "critical," "endangered," "vulnerable," or "at risk,"



A Cotswold sheep is shorn during a presentation on fleece grading by Canadian Co-operative Wool Growers Ltd., in conjunction with the Rare Breeds Canada AGM held this June in Nova Scotia. (Jane Fowler photos)

based on the number of new purebred females registered each year. In Canada, the "critical" list includes Milking Devon

cattle, the Newfoundland Pony, the Shire horse, the Berkshire pig, the Jacob sheep, and the Buff Orpington chicken. RBC is primarily concerned with breeds that have commercial importance, as well as those that originated in Canada, such as the Chantecler chicken, the Canadienne cow, Canadian horse, Lacombe pig, and Newfoundland sheep.

GENETIC DIVERSITY

The success of today's livestock industry is partly attributable to modern, mainstream breeds that are both high-yielding and commercially viable. We now have dairy cows that give vast quantities of milk, hogs that efficiently convert grain into meat in little more than five months, and beef cattle that can meet consumers' demand for burgers. While it would be foolhardy not to recognize and appreciate the commercial importance of these breeds, we should remember that their valuable production traits derived from the careful, selective breeding of our heritage animals. It is vitally impor-



A 12-week-old Berkshire gilt that will be raised to become part of Adam Arenburg's breeding stock on Rocky Creek Farm.

tant for the future of farming that we preserve the genetic diversity that these rare breeds represent, with traits such as disease resistance, mothering abilities, or resilience to harsh weather conditions.

In much the same way as artists will always keep the primary colors in their paint box in order to mix new, exciting colors, the livestock breeder will always need pure genetics in order to produce new, improved animals. Without this base from which to work, the end result becomes muddled and unpredictable. If we are to continue to develop farm livestock capable of meeting the demands of the customer and able to withstand ever-changing conditions, we need the genes of our heritage breeds.

To help rebuild numbers of purebred livestock, RBC assembles small breeding groups and enters into contracts with host farmers to breed and care for them. The offspring are used to build new host flocks, which will eventually be moved onto new farms, where the process is repeated. It is RBC's hope that



Canadian horses from Ross Farm Museum, in New Ross, N.S., were put to work demonstrating their plowing abilities at the recent Rare Breeds Canada conference.

these farmers will become rare breeds champions. Raising the animals creates a bond and fosters an understanding of the breeds' unique qualities.

Many of these breeds are well-suited to small farm holdings, with important attributes that can be capitalized upon. Farms with marginal land may find that



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some of these breeds would work well. How about the North Ronaldsay sheep, which eats seaweed and little else? Abandoned farmland, thick with brush and alders, can be brought back into production with a herd of Tamworth hogs. Then there's the Dexter, known as "the poor man's cow" due to its hardiness, which allows it to thrive in mountainous regions in all climates and pasture types.

In order for these animals to become popular choices for farmers, it is vital that they are commercially viable. RBC is not interested in saving these animals merely for petting farms, and much work has been put into building niche markets that can add a small premium to the price a farmer receives. In the U.K, an "Eat Them to Save Them" campaign during the 1990s was extremely successful in building a market for rare breed meats, such as Berkshire pork and Angus beef. In Canada we have seen butchers, farmers' markets, and restaurants extolling the culinary merits of heritage meats. Artisanal cheese makers have discovered

the unique qualities of milk from heritage dairy animals, and crafters have been exploring the properties of wool from different breeds of sheep. A growing number of consumers are looking for these products, helping to make rare breeds a viable proposition for farmers.

COMMERCIAL PRODUCTION

Another one of the speakers at the conference was Dr. Tom Hutchinson, a rare breeds advocate from Ontario, who spoke about the use of these animals for commercial production. As an example, he described Harley Farms, a successful 4,500-acre farm in Keene, Ont., that includes 2,500 breeding ewes and lambs, 1,000 head of fattening cattle, and an outdoor farrow-to-finish hog operation. The farm chose Belted Galloway cattle for their ability to withstand harsh weather conditions, and Wiltshire Horn sheep, an "easy care" breed of hair sheep that do not require shearing, and also have sturdy legs and good feet suitable for the farm's terrain. The hog opera-

tion uses Tamworths, for their ability to withstand harsh winters as well as for having excellent mothering abilities and natural disease resistance.

To reinforce the key theme of the weekend gathering, and as a fitting tribute to these animals, delegates were treated to five-course tasting menus featuring rare breeds meats. Chefs Mandy Da Costa and Stephane Levac worked their magic preparing dinner on Friday and Saturday evenings respectively, using Berkshire pork, North Cheviot lamb, and White Park beef, all served with locally produced vegetables, breads, wines, and beers. If the talks and demonstrations had not been enough to get the message across, my taste buds certainly affirmed the arguments presented. Returning home to feed my own animals on Sunday evening, I saw my Berkshire pigs and heritage chickens in a different light – one that made me think not only of the tasty meat I will enjoy next winter, but also of what these breeds from the past can offer to the farms of the future. ●

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