

Embracing Modernity – The White Dorper sheep

—Ulf Kintzel

A customer of mine, who looked at my flock when he picked up his ram lamb, asked if Dorper sheep are a heritage breed. I think my unequivocal “no” disappointed him a little. I can understand why. Modern breeding of many specific breeds of domestic animals sacrificed previous breed goals for new ones to fit modern and in some cases, industrialized ways of farming. I think it is fair to say that not all changes were positive improvements. This is arguably true for hogs, dairy cows, beef cattle, and even sheep. Pigs suitable and economical for industrial farming were bred at the expense of flavor. High input, high output dairy cows kept in confinement no longer manage to go out on pasture and still produce well. Beef and sheep were bred for large size and are fattened in feedlots with lots of grain and have lost the ability to thrive on forage. In sheep, the additional breeding goals for sheep shows at fairs and 4-H, still focus on long legs and a tubular body (rather than a deep one), so that they appear to look even taller and larger. Sheep that look that way must have a high grain ration to be productive. Because of these new breed goals, formerly wonderfully productive heritage breeds like Dorset and Hampshire sheep lost much of their

appeal to farmers who followed the bigger-is-better trend. While that is not necessarily true in other countries, it is here in the U.S.

With the recent emerging trend of locally raised, grass-fed, and organic production, done on a smaller scale on smaller farms and often at least in part on pasture, the need for breeds of animals that are suitable for this old way of farming has re-emerged. In some cases, old breeds experienced a revival. In some breeds, bloodlines were developed that reflected older breed goals, i.e. a more moderate size in beef cows.

In sheep, another factor played a big role that influenced which sheep breeds gained new popularity. It was the almost complete collapse of the wool market. Along with this collapse came an increasing scarcity of sheep shearers. That led to an increase in popularity of hair sheep, which shed their hair or wool and need no shearing.

While I understand in part the yearning for ways of living and farming as it once was, I am not at all reflexively rejecting modernity. A freezer to store home-grown vegetables and meats, indoor plumbing, the telephone, and Novocain when the dentists drills a cavity come to mind. Why do I mention this seemingly odd list of items? Because I grew up without

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any of them during my early childhood,, and I am glad they exist in my life today.

With that in mind, let's explore the current trends in sheep. The numbers of the aforementioned hair sheep are on the rise. However, hair sheep aren't modern sheep at all. They existed throughout the history of raising domestic sheep in certain parts of the world. They just never gained popularity decades ago when wool still brought money. Today's most common hair sheep breeds are the result of planned cross breeding with other meatier wool breeds. This was done because most original hair sheep breeds are of smaller size and slimmer build. The goal was to retain the shedding ability but have a sheep that produces more meat. The two most widespread hair sheep breeds in the U.S. are Katahdin and Dorper sheep. Katahdins, named after Mount Katahdin in Maine, are a creation of a U.S. breeder from Maine. Dorper sheep, together with the breed's white version called White Dorsers, are a breed from South Africa. Ironically, this breed first gained popularity because of its ability to produce prime lamb carcasses with less input than many other breeds before its ability to shed became a popular trait here in the US.

The Dorper sheep have two main origins, the Blackhead Persian sheep, which sheds, and the Horned Dorset sheep, which are meaty and produce excellent carcasses. These two are in fact heritage breeds. (In White Dorper sheep, the Van Rooy sheep, which is an all-white hair sheep, also played a role in developing the breed. The Van Rooy sheep is a

major reason for the calm disposition of White Dorsers.) The combination of the breeds used, followed by decades of breeding, gave us a meaty sheep that sheds its wool. And since there has been little time to spoil the breed in the show ring since its introduction to the U.S. in the 1990s, there are still plenty of bloodlines that thrive on grass.

I raised wool sheep in the past and never made any money with the wool. I sheared sheep for more than ten years and know how backbreaking it is. I purchased modern U.S. versions of old sheep breeds in the early days of White Clover Sheep Farm and watched them fall apart under my grazing management. All of that made me fully embrace and appreciate this modern breed of sheep called White Dorper that sheds its hair and wool and thrives on pasture. When it comes to sheep, I embrace the modernity, at least this part of it. And whenever I yearn for things from the past, I devour my wife's homemade old-fashioned bread with her equally old-fashioned and homemade jam. Then my craving for the olden days will be satisfied. ✂️

Ulf owns and operates White Clover Sheep Farm and breeds and raises grass-fed White Dorper sheep and Kiko goats without any grain feeding and offers breeding stock suitable for grazing. He is a native of Germany and lives in the US since 1995. He farms in the Finger Lakes area in upstate New York. His website address is www.whitecloversheepfarm.com. He can be reached by e-mail at ulf@whitecloversheepfarm.com or by phone during "calling hour" indicated on the answering machine at 585-554-3313.

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