

THE SHEPHERD

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FOCUS

ST. CROIX SHEEP: *The Future is the Past in the Present*

By Eddie Martin, President, St. Croix Hair Sheep Breeders, Inc.

Photos by Matt Morgan, Grace & Joy Farms, Bloomfield, KY (www.graceandjoyfarms.com)

More than 40 years ago, a major step was made in the path leading to the creation of the St. Croix hair sheep breed. In 1975, there was an importation of selected white hair sheep from the island of St. Croix to Utah State University (USU) involving 22 ewes and 3 rams. These sheep from the Caribbean were commonly called Virgin Island White sheep, even though there were colored sheep in the island flocks.

In that same decade, the U.S. government wanted to give a gift to the Shah of Iran and a separate flock of Virgin Island White sheep from St. Croix was imported into Florida. However, the Shah was deposed in 1979 before the sheep could be flown to their new home in the Middle East. The Florida flock was saved by a few individuals in the U.S. and were dispersed to farms and used to start other research flocks. Additional sheep have been imported at various times since 1975. Just to clarify: the sheep that look like St. Croix sheep on the islands are called Virgin Island White sheep, even though they are not necessarily white in color. After a few generations in the U.S., the flocks had changed a bit from those original imported sheep. They were renamed St. Croix hair sheep, resulting in a breed that is truly an American original.

A non-breed link was Michael Piel's importation of Virgin Island White sheep in the late 1950s. Some documentation says that Mr. Piel



used three Virgin Island White sheep and Suffolk sheep to form the basis of what became the Katahdin breed. One more recent breed created from St. Croix sheep is the Royal White breed. As we consider both of these other breeds, it is amazing to see the prepotency of the Island sheep/St. Croix sheep in the influences for either breed's quality or characteristics.

Formation

Some years after the 1975 importation, interested parties formed a St. Croix Hair Sheep registry when USU began to sell sheep so individuals could develop private flocks. Early members were aware of the unique abilities in the breed for natural parasite resistance, year-round breeding and hardiness. A few early breeders used selection pres-

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tures for better sheep within their own flocks and some of those flocks are noteworthy even today in pedigrees: Gibson, Simpson and such.

Some of the original plans for St. Croix sheep in university research were studies in crossbreeding and fit into the U.S. sheep industry. But the breed went for decades as merely a “rare breed” that had some interesting traits such as strong parasite resistance and aseasonal breeding. The St. Croix were not strongly tested for commercial use as planned. Repeated university and USDA-ARS station studies did prove the breed was indeed highly parasite resistant, prolific and pre-potent. Later studies proved the advantages of F1 St. Croix ewes in commercial flocks, but not much push or interest emerged from the St. Croix breed association even through the recent turn of the century.

Fortunately, I had the honor of meeting the late Clinton Hodges from Texas in 2013. I am forever indebted to him for sharing his knowledge of the breed with me. He bought “original St. Croix” sheep early on from USU to cross with his West Texas range sheep for his shift from wool production to the meat market. Over the decades, Clinton and his family came to own and promote many unique and value-added sheep products under the Hodges Sterling Meats brand. At that meeting, I asked Mr. Hodges a few questions as I was fascinated by his first-hand history with the breed and his vision for business and lamb products. He was my link to the knowledge current breeders did not seem to have.

During that 2013 presentation, he had made some references to the “original sheep” being different than the St. Croix sheep he had seen in recent years. He said that the original sheep were bigger than most current sheep in the breed. Those sheep had scale and length. The ewes were not typically attractive sheep, but excellent mothers. Market lambs could easily be 100 pounds or more in a year or less. Clinton Hodges’ main regret: He did not keep a flock of his pure St. Croix to still have that option for cross in his commercial flocks. His wish: To find some of the “original St. Croix sheep” quality again. Mr. Hodges inspired me – I wanted to raise “original St. Croix sheep.” Now that’s where I’m headed.

Back to origins

Not long after that, the St. Croix Hair Sheep Breeders, Inc. (SCHSB) kicked into high gear to regenerate the “original sheep” of the breed. No longer would superior pure sheep be culled for the merely cosmetic traits of color and scurs. Those sheep that excelled in growth and exhibited strong production traits known in the breed would stay in the gene pool. However, if breeders want to raise “polled and white St. Croix sheep” the registration forms were modified to indicate those



traits so flock owners had documentation for those specific characteristics in all registered sheep.

To balance out, members would no longer let inferior sheep be considered as breeders regardless of flock sources, show-ring winnings, or cosmetic selection. Our flock owners are no longer using “the ram next door” because he is nearby. They are seeking out quality sheep across the nation to improve and solidify productive traits in their own programs. Even owners of small flocks are getting educated about breeding for quality. Known communicable sheep diseases would not be tolerated in source flocks associated with SCHSB.

The SCHSB focuses on bringing the St. Croix sheep breed back to its productive origin as described by people who had known the breed and its usefulness. Directors and our progressive members are currently using selection tools, linebreeding, performance testing, educational opportunities, proper selection, and heavy culling to return the breed to the original greatness of 1975.

SCHSB

SCHSB has become the most innovative and progressive of any association identity in the breed’s history. Based in an understanding of breed genetics and genetic study, the board of directors has quickly moved the SCHSB St. Croix sheep into the 21st Century. We have more of the healthy, productive sheep we strive for to prove this statement and back up our reputation. The SCHSB recognizes the valuable, unique heritage of the breed and is a proud member of American Livestock Conservancy. Our St. Croix sheep enjoy the recognition of Slow Food USA.

What’s in the future? An odd answer; it starts in the present. St. Croix Hair Sheep Breeders, Inc. currently sports a well-received, informative website and Facebook page; a lively, educational Facebook group; a private registrar dedicated to security and correctness of records; and a

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professional publisher for the News and Views newsletter.

2017 brings a new online registration option and a SCHSB-wide data collection process for the members so the St. Croix producers can improve their flocks, thus standardizing sheep across the breed. This database will provide the first steps for St. Croix information to be available for use in NSIP and much more. There will be an addition of a St. Croix part-bred registry so the value of St. Croix cross, or "St. Cross" as I call them, can be measured and documented for the commercial flock owner to see.

Here is a breed that is a dream come true for the modern USA sheep industry with prepotency, easy keeping traits, the strongest documented parasite resistance, excellent mothering ability, moderate-sized ewes to hold down feed costs, and lambs that are a direct competitor with imported lamb in meeting the demands of ethnic markets – all with less labor or input costs. Are you concerned with old stories of thin muscling, small bones and low yield? We have rams siring market lambs that will hang hot carcasses that are over 50% of live weights.

What enthuses me more than anything is the success commercial breeders are having with "St. Cross" ewes or St. Croix-sired market lambs, especially in the hot and humid southern USA. These sheep will revitalize the industry in areas where parasites have caused so many to sell out commercial flocks. F1 females from a St. Croix ram bred to any other breed of ewe are a replacement ewe dream-come-true for commercial breeders, adding the very heritable qualities St. Croix have to offer. F1 lambs from the low maintenance St. Croix ewes under a heavy meat-breed ram grow to market weight much more rapidly due to hybrid vigor and parasite resistance. If you want

proof, please contact us. We have current flock success stories and research data from University of Illinois research flocks, as well as other research and educational information. The past is now present. The future is in the present. The future of the American sheep industry is the presence and influence of St. Croix sheep in commercial flocks. Join us for a better, easier and more profitable tomorrow.

