

SHEEP, THEIR TYPES AND CHARACTERISTICS.

NO. VII.

FINE WOOL—THE FRENCH MERINO.

The French, like all other varieties of the Merino, anchors back upon the Spanish flocks, which attained their highest excellence during the last century. The typical French Merino, since its introduction from Spain in 1786, has been the object of governmental solicitude, and its progress through the stages of change and development has been carefully noted and reported by designated officials. This course has rendered accessible much data that will prove interesting to the student of ovine development and susceptibility to influence from natural and artificial surroundings. A few importations of Merino sheep, of which little is known, were made into France previous to the one that proved the advent of a fine-wool culture that has since attracted the attention, and, in some respects, challenged the emulation of breeders everywhere.

The now celebrated flock of Rambouillet was formed in 1786, by the selection from the ten best Spanish sheep folds, and, as is claimed, the 376 animals—42 rams and 334 ewes—were especially selected by reason of their individual excellencies, under the order of the then King of Spain. At a later date, viz: 1802, another importation of 46 animals—6 rams and 40 ewes—was made; but, as these animals were considered inferior to the descendants of the importation of twenty years previous in those characteristics sought to be developed, they were but little used, and not long kept at Rambouillet.

The object sought by French breeders was increase in size of carcass and lengthening the wool, and so successful were their efforts that the weight of rams with fleece was increased from 50 to 55 kilograms (110 to 121 lbs.) in 1786, to 87 kilograms 500 grams (193 lbs.) in 1867. In the same period the weight of ewes was advanced from 33 to 40 kilograms to 61 kilograms 500 grams, fleece included (from 73 to 88 lbs. to 135 lbs.) During the same period the increase in weight of fleece appears to have been, for the entire

flock, from twenty to thirty per cent. The fibre gave little evidence of improvement. This will be explained by the fact that about 1840 was begun the experiment of producing animals that would at the same time be profitable for their meat and the production of wool. Under this policy the fleece seems to have been a secondary consideration, and not only lost its former percentage to weight of carcass, but deteriorated in other respects. This system of developing carcass was pursued from 1840 to 1850, and was successful in producing, according to official reports, "animals of very great weight, great feeders, but not so robust, and whose fleeces were not in proportion to their weight, either in the quantity or quality of the wool." The sheep at this time showed an absence of the heavy folds and wrinkles characteristic of their earlier history, and to which subsequent breeding has restored them—a peculiarity now quite commonly claimed to be inseparable from that density of fleece so generally deemed desirable by Merino breeders, but not compatible with the greatest meat-producing and fattening propensity.

The policy of enhanced wool production in proportion to gross weight of animal has been followed at Rambouillet for a number of years past. The official weights furnished for information of those attending the Paris Universal Exposition of 1878 showing, for rams, 162½ lbs., and for ewes 125½ lbs. A marked increase in weight of fleece, as given by the manager of the government farm, is noticeable in this connection. Rams' fleeces had increased in weight about seventy-five per cent., and ewes fleeces about sixty-six per cent. in the ninety years intervening since the first introduction into France. The fleece had improved in density and length of fiber—the latter showing an elongation of twenty per cent upon its length in the early history of the flock.

The French breeders were the first to produce a Merino combing wool, from which have developed some of the most interesting and profitable branches of the wool manufacture; though they have subsequently found rivals among the breeders of fine-wool sheep in America, Germany and Australia. So that with the exception of weight of carcass—which is not to be deemed an advantage except under exceptional conditions—the French Merino as found today has nothing to commend it over other varieties of its breed to be found in the countries mentioned. American breeders can find in their own country, in American Merino flocks, animals producing as long fibers, and as fine, as the best samples from the Rambouillet flocks, backed by the additional advantage of thorough acclimation, and a hardness which has not been demonstrated by the Merinos of France.

The first importation into the United States from France was made in 1842, by D. C. Collins, of Connecticut, who purchased what were claimed to be some of the choicest animals of Rambouillet farm. A few years later, a Mr. Taintor, also of Connecticut, brought into the country several invoices of French sheep, not bred on the government farm, and found

for them a ready market among the enterprising flock owners of the United States. Most of these were disappointed in their hopes of permanently improving their flocks. This disappointment resulted not so much from lack of merit in the French Merino, as from the conditions which had surrounded its breeding and manipulation for so many generations. Coincident, as were the importations of the period mentioned, with the changed policy at Rambouillet—1840 to 1850—which sought to develop carcass while neglecting fleece improvement, it is not improbable that the animals brought to the United States were not such fortunate selections as could have been made previous to 1840, or within the past twenty years. To this probability, and to the neglect of American flock owners to provide treatment consonant with its requirements, rather than to the absence of intrinsic merit, it is doubtless to be ascribed much of the prejudice against the French Merino that has marked its history in this country.

As wool growing began to spread into the newer States and Territories, among a people whose views of quantity and size were enlarged by their natural surroundings, and especially so among California ranchmen, the French Merino found ready admirers, who scattered them through most of the wool-producing centers, with apparent benefit to many of the flocks. The climate of California seemed to present conditions well suited to their profitable culture, and their blood was quite generally disseminated through the rapidly-increasing flocks of that phenomenal State; and many ranchmen are now to be found who credit French blood with much of the admitted excellence of California wools. As evidence of what was being done by the admirers of French blood for the fine-wool husbandry of California, in 1873 there was sheared from a six-year-old ram, owned by Robert Blacow, of Calaveras County, a sixteen-months' fleece, which weighed 51½ lbs. This fleece was sent to Illinois in 1874, opened and examined, and weighed by a committee of breeders designated by the State Wool-Growers' Association, and by said committee pronounced "— to be one fleece off from one sheep. Staple short for sixteen months' growth, and also very oily considering the size. It evidently came from a very large sheep—the weight of the animal unknown. No foreign substance was detected, beyond some wild clover burs."

Several members of the Blacow family certified that the same animal, at two years old, sheared a fleece weighing 46 lbs., at twelve-months' growth. In this connection it should be remembered that in the dry climate of California a sheep is enabled to carry a large percentage of oil, which would be washed from the fleece by the frequent rains of other localities.

In the hands of intelligent and enterprising breeders such animals as this would not fail to leave the impress of improvement upon the flocks in which they were used; and when the true history of the rise and success of California sheep husbandry is written, the French blood that has been in-

fused through the flocks of that State will have to be credited with more excellencies than the admirers of some other varieties are disposed to concede to it.

While it may not ultimately prove the superior in any instance, and the peer under but few of the conditions that are to be found surrounding sheep husbandry in the United States, there are, probably, about the French type, peculiarities that will commend it to some breeders who have not been attracted to the more popular American Merino; and in the hands of such men, who are doubtless to be found in many of the Southern and Western States, the future of French blood sheep can be left with full assurance that their merits will be brought more prominently to the attention of sheep breeders than hitherto, as they become more thoroughly Americanized by the development of recognized merits and the elimination of characteristics not popular with American breeders.
