

# Black to the Future

By Kris Savage and Judy Lewman

“Every sheep has colored genes back there somewhere, since it is a given fact that that’s where they came from in the beginning. In some breeds it just pops up more often.” That remark was once made by renowned judge and all-around black sheep connoisseur, the late Glen Eidman, in a conversation with ABLA Secretary, Di Waibel. We know that some Canadians started breeding natural colored Border Leicesters as early as 1971, and possibly earlier than that. Prince Edward Island, in particular, is well known for its black beauties. We have seen those genetics slowly seep into the ABLA registry, giving us a broad genetic base and a rich natural color history. Of the nearly 8,000 animals now recorded in the ABLA Flock Books, about one fourth are black or black-factored sheep.

The first Border Leicesters registered by ABLA – all of them white – were a group of 22 Canadian importers brought into the U.S. by Dennis Olson of Dawson, Minnesota in late 1972. The Olson shipment had been assembled by Murray Harvey of Enfield, Nova Scotia, from a half dozen flocks – 5 of them in Nova Scotia and 1 on Prince Edward Island. That original flock of 22 consisted of 17 bred ewes and 5 rams, all of them white and carrying Canadian registration papers (ABLA files contain the original Canadian papers for all 22).

These 22 rams and bred ewes traveled by rail from Nova Scotia to Winnipeg, where Olson picked them up. Dennis says that, “...it was very, very cold, in December. As they opened the rail card we saw several white “fluffs” standing in bright yellow straw. And as they puffed, each had a little cloud of air above them. Wish we had taken a picture.” Unbeknownst to him at the time, one of the ewes was carrying a black ram lamb. When ‘Black Sambo’ was born in the spring of 1973, the sheep appeared to be as taken aback as were Dennis and his wife, Joan. Based on the reaction of the flock, it was clear to the Olsons that black lambs were not a common occurrence in this group of sheep. While the dam did care for her single black lamb, the others snubbed him. Having no interest in black sheep, the Olsons sold ‘Sambo’ without papers to the Jones Sheep Farm in Peabody, Kansas.

In the summer of 1973, Henry Swayze of Tunbridge, Vermont, visited the Olsons and purchased 11 ewes and 4 rams from the original group of 22 imports. Swayze then had 450 ewes of several different breed and used the Leicesters in a cross-breeding program. By that time, Dennis Olson had begun the American Border Leicester Association in order to preserve the breeding records of his own Leicesters as well as those from the flock of Canadian imports overseen by the late Merle Light of North Dakota State University. The Olsons at one time sold a group of 30 purebred but unregistered white Border Leicester ewe lambs to Kansas State University for a research project. Dr. Clifford Spaeth of KSU, who at that time was the shepherd for the University flock, recalls that the Olson ewes were evaluated to see how they might fit into an accelerated lambing program....they didn’t.

When Dennis and Joan Olson were forced to disperse their entire flock in 1975 due to a severe drought, the remainder of the Border Leicesters, including all of the original animals not sold to Swayze, were purchased by a large commercial producer, Merlyn Tiede, of Parkston, South Dakota...and the ABLA registry went along with the sheep sold to Tiede.

In 1977, Beverly Tiffany showed up in the ABLA registration records after having purchased several of the original Canadian sheep from Merlyn Tiede. At that time, Merlyn transferred the ABLA registry over to Beverly along with the ewes. She later purchased two more of the original Canadian ewes from Henry Swayze, as well as several Border Leicesters from Merle Light at NDSU. Beverly did not learn of the black ram lamb that had been born into the Olson flock until several years later. So in 1979, when one of the Canadian-bred ewes produced a black ram lamb, she was as surprised as the Olson’s had been when ‘Sambo’ arrived. She named the ram ‘Midnight’ and a few years later, after having followed a strict breeding program, was able to produce two more black lambs. After that it wasn’t long before breeders who wanted colored Border Leicesters could buy breeding stock to get colored lambs, and Beverly began to register black and black-factored Border Leicesters in addition to the whites.

Then followed decades of selection for quality traits in addition to color. Any serious breeder can tell you that the perfect animal doesn’t just pop up every day...sometimes never in an entire lifetime. As Don Grant pointed out in a previous article for the newsletter, natural colored Border Leicesters have seen tremendous improvement over the past 20 years. As colored Border Leicesters continue to increase in popularity, we hope that all breeders will continue strict culling practices so that we can produce animals that take our breath away, whether raised as show stock, market lambs, or for handspinning fleeces.

~ This article was originally printed in the ABLA Winter 1999-2000 Newsletter. We thought it was time to read it again.



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