The magnificent animal pictured above is Knowsie Boomerang, the current British breed leader bred by John Bell and Sally Guild whom John and I met twelve years ago on our first trip to the UK. On a mission to locate a suitable Border Leicester ram from which to collect semen, we covered 2,400 miles while visiting flocks throughout England, Scotland and Wales. Though we didn’t find our ram on that trip it was an invaluable learning experience, especially since several of the breeders we met were also judges.

Two years later, having studied pedigrees and connected with even more breeders, we returned for the Builth Wells Ram Sale in Wales. With more than 300 Border Leicester rams from all over Britain gathered in one large tent the prospects seemed good but disappointment set in as I parted the fleece of several. Drawing stares while working the long rows of pens (women were scarce, and no one else was inspecting fleece) I realized that none of the rams would work with our flock as the wool was far too different.

Not ready to give up, we then drove far into the Scottish Highlands—to where the main highway becomes a pair of tire tracks with grass growing between them—and there we finally found someone who understood what I was searching for. A second generation Border Leicester breeder in his ‘70s, and a former president of the British breed society, this man recognized my fleece sample as similar to those produced by UK Border Leicesters in the early 1900s. He also equated our lustrous, more open fleece with superior milk production, a trait for which he felt the (then) current British Border Leicesters needed improvement.

Back home, I started having second thoughts about mixing UK genetics with ours. In addition to the fleece discrepancies we’d begun to hear of lambing difficulties from a few others who had already tried British semen. These sheep from across the pond were massive, much larger than ours, and different enough from their North American counterparts to be considered an entirely separate breed. John and I were extremely impressed with what we’d seen, however, and if Foot-and-Mouth Disease hadn’t hit Britain a year later I might have established a second flock of pure British Border Leicesters. Hopefully someone younger will do just that.

Since the UK is the birthplace of the breed, how come our sheep are so different—and why should we care? The answers to both questions are multifaceted. I’ll share here my observations and musings and invite others to join the discussion. First, let’s take a look at how the breed evolved . . .

**Early development of the Border Leicester beyond the UK.**
The breed was fully established in Britain by about 1850, was exported to New Zealand and Canada shortly afterward, and then to Australia in 1871. About 25 years later a major importation of Border Leicesters from New Zealand arrived in Australia. The Aussies continued to bring in animals from both Britain and New Zealand over the following 20 years, and (from the Australian Border Leicester website) “There was much discussion on which of the two were the better type.” So we see that a difference in style between the British and New Zealand animals had already become apparent by the early 1900s.

**How did the British get those ears?**
According to the British breed association’s website, Cheviot blood was in fact introduced while the breed was being developed. The extreme ears seen today are no doubt the result of that influence paired with 70-80 years of selective breeding for long, erect ears to meet the demands of the UK markets. Border Leicester-sired commercial ewes in the UK have traditionally sold at auction in lots of 20. A group circling the ring with heads high, long ears waving, catches the eye and is more likely to fetch a premium price.
Where did ABLA Border Leicesters come from?

ABLAs foundation animals, all from Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island, arrived in MN and ND in 1972. Soon after, the Waibel/Mist-O-Morn and Harward/Windfall flocks (both in OR) began using rams from New Zealand, as did McPeck/Argyll (MI) in the ‘80s. The Canadian flock records database notes additional imports from New Zealand as well as from the UK, and Lewman/Spring Creek used a Canadian-bred 50% New Zealand ram in the ‘80s. Russell/Black Stump (WI) introduced a Canadian-bred 50% British ram in the late ‘80s and later imported semen from the UK, as did others. More recently, semen has also been brought in from New Zealand and Australia. As an aside, the ram in our ABLA logo is a Kiwi, undefeated on the North Island.

How is British Border Leicester fleece different from ours?

British Border Leicester fleece in the mid-1900s was reported to fall in the “Longwool” category at 48-44 Bradford Count (31-36 micron fiber diameter), well within ABLA’s standard which is 30-38 micron. In contrast, today’s finer diameter British Border Leicester fleece (29-32 micron) is similar to what we expect to find on a Cheviot, Dorset, or Suffolk (all “Medium” wools in the 26-33 micron range). A British Border Leicester fleece of today typically exhibits little if any luster, is more dense and shorter stapled than ours, and feels spongey when grasped in the hand. I’d be happy to mail a small sample to anyone who sends a SASE.

How did it get that way?

By the mid-1800s demand for meat had surpassed that for wool and breeders began to select accordingly. Also, the trait for extreme ears was likely paired with a different type of fleece, i.e. more Cheviot-like. Regardless, the introduction of inexpensive synthetic carpet fibers in the mid-1900s was a major setback for Longwool breeds, and though handspinning was enjoying a robust revival in New Zealand as well as North America—thereby helping to retain fleece quality in breeds such as the Border Leicester—the passage of the British Wool Marketing Act in 1950 mandated that farmers in the UK sell only through a national pool. (English handspinning guru and author Elsie Davenport noted the difficulty of obtaining a suitable fleece “without incurring the displeasure of the ‘authorities’.”) With this wall between shepherd and hand crafter, some began ordering fleece from the US and New Zealand. Today the British Wool Marketing Board offers 17 different categories of fleece for handspinning, none of them Border Leicester.

Why all the fuss about wool quality?

Contrary to what some may believe, there really are excellent markets for our fleeces and wool quality is a high priority for many seedstock buyers. Those not into the time and hassle of selling premium wool to individuals at $12-14 per pound could supply a retailer on a wholesale basis. (Our former mail order business imported New Zealand Border Leicester fleeces by the ton in the ‘70s and ‘80s, and we were only one of several.) Kerry and Kit Phelps, in Iowa, have done just that. Kit says, “We may not get top dollar for our fleece, but we also don’t have to market it!” Newer ABLA members Jerry and Elizabeth Wigglesworth selected Border Leicesters in part because of the long, lustrous fleece. Though the flock is kept on their farm in the Flint Hills of Kansas, Elizabeth maintains a state-of-the-art production studio in Connecticut plus a showroom in Manhattan (www.elizabetheakins.com). Marketing options abound. Just this summer, a group of New Zealanders signed contracts to provide certified, sustainably-raised wool to US manufacturers of high-end carpets. And Michael’s craft stores sell packages of wavy, curly fleece similar to ours, from England!

Commercial producers don’t care about wool, do they?

More and more do each year, at least in the Midwest. We’ve been pleasantly surprised to learn of full-time farmers adding sheep as a sideline to their operations. Some of these are organic growers, others practice sustainable methods, and all are serious producers—not starry-eyed dreamers—with strong farming backgrounds and a sharp eye on the bottom line. In addition to the good mothering and carcass traits apparent in the first cross, their Border Leicester-sired ewes produce a nice Romney-type fleece which is also popular with handspinners. Dr Dave Notter of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, a top Animal Science Geneticist who does the evaluations for NSIP, predicts that “ . . . the backbone of America’s future commercial flock will be a ewe with parasite resistance, low maintenance costs, high fertility/prolificacy, good mothering ability, and one that produces either no wool at all or the highest quality wool.” I believe Dr Notter was addressing a group of hairsheep producers, but still good food for thought. There’s no lack of opportunity, but fleece quality is easily lost—and once it’s gone, it’s gone. Another trait to watch is size.

How big are British Border Leicesters?

Really big, with rams now nearing 400#. British Border Leicesters are selected and judged primarily on meat traits, and a consequence of heavy selection for rapid post-weaning growth is larger animals at maturity. Renowned UK Border Leicester breeder and judge Archie Smith-Maxwell, addressing colleagues on the 100th anniversary of the Society of Border Leicester Sheep Breeders in 1996, wrote that, “ . . . Fashion is a fickle friend . . . I wonder whether we will want such a big ewe in the next century. Listen to the debate . . . and act in time. The key to the coffers comes from the commercial attributes. Unfortunately we are allowing the showing to elude our judgement . . . we must stay a working breed.” That warning apparently fell on deaf ears. When we last
visited in 1999 their breed standard listed ram weights up to 330#. Now, only 10 years later, this has been increased to 385#. If allowed to continue at that rate British Border Leicester rams will be pushing 450# in another 10 years.

How big are ABLA Border Leicesters supposed to be?
Weights per our ABLA website were recently revised upward by 30% and are now stated at: Ewes, 150-225#; Rams, 225-300#. Adjustments were in order as our animals have become larger over the last 3 decades—stronger boned and more heavily muscled—but the currently posted Canadian standard, at 22% above ABLA's old guideline, may be more typical: Ewes, 154-198#; Rams, 198-275#. Regarding height, ABLA's suggestion that rams be “about 32 inches at the shoulder” was lifted verbatim from UK info and may in fact be correct for the heavier weights, but it seems to me that a ram 32” tall—even at 300#—would be either short bodied or lack depth; 30” may be more typical for the stated weights. Historically, breeds have adapted to fit markets, but now might be a good time for us to think about putting on the brakes. We are fortunate to have exactly the right product at a time when low-input sustainable agriculture has come into its own. Now we must be very careful to avoid outgrowing our markets (pun intended).

So what’s wrong with big sheep?
Big is not inherently bad. Mammoth sheep may be fine for the show ring—those UK Border Leicesters would give Suffolks and Columbias a run for the money. But we need to remember that our rams are primarily sought out by commercial producers as sires of replacement ewes, and those guys don’t want huge sheep (nor do those with handspinning flocks). Though purebred Border Leicester lamb is excellent eating and our rams can certainly be used as terminal sires, the world really doesn’t need another giant breed with ordinary wool. Rather than chasing the yardstick, we need to be selecting for maternal traits—such as number of lambs born and total pounds weaned—along with a good head, strong topline, long body and an excellent, heavy shearing fleece.

What do we risk if our sheep are allowed to become much larger?
Consider the recent shift in the UK, where Border Leicesters have lost out to the Bluefaced Leicester as the most popular crossing sire throughout the British Isles. In 1998 a UK Border Leicester ram sold for more than $11,000, but in a search of several 2009 UK sale reports the highest selling Border Leicester appears to have been $1,900 while the top Bluefaced ram sold for a record of nearly $32,000. And at the Builth Wells Ram Sale—where we could chose from 300+ rams just 10 years ago—only 97 Border Leicesters were offered this year compared to 555 Bluefaced. The UK Bluefaced website does not specify ram and ewe weights but they do collaborate closely with the US breed association which notes 300# as the max for rams, so it appears that the Brits are trying to keep size in check while also retaining a desirable, though lightweight, fleece. (Bluefaced Leicester wool is presently sold out as a handspinning fleece through the British Wool Marketing Board.) Also of note: Archie Smith-Maxwell, the UK show ring judge who cautioned his fellow Border Leicester breeders against big sheep more than 10 years ago, has switched to white and natural colored Bluefaced Leicesters and is exporting semen to the US. And Bluefaced numbers in the US have increased 6-fold since 1999.

Producing good Border Leicesters of moderate size, with a meaty carcass as well as great wool, is a constant balancing act and that’s what makes the breed so much fun, at least for me. But there’s room for all of us, and I still admire those big UK Border Leicesters. Most of us would go weak in the knees when coming face-to-face with them for the first time. They’re that impressive. So those of you who love big sheep, and are younger and stronger than I am, why not consider grading up with UK semen as has already been done with Wensleydales in the US? It would take time and commitment but the resulting sheep would be guaranteed show stoppers. An ABLA-sanctioned branch of the registry could be set up for the UK animals—along with separate breed standards and show categories for the two different Border Leicester types.

Just dreaming now. What do the rest of you think?

(Article first appeared in Fall 2009 ABLA newsletter.)