

KARAKUL SHEEP: THEIR AMERICAN HISTORY

By Deborah Y. Hunter. Reprinted in part from the Livestock Conservancy News, Spring 2015

A little over a hundred years ago, ancestors of Central Asian Karakuls were introduced to the United States. Also in the early 20th Century, Karakul sheep were imported to Germany, and from there to the German colony of South West Africa. SWA (now Namibia) became a major Karakul-producing country after WWI, with the USSR heavily involved in pelt marketing at the same time.

Karakul sheep came to the U.S. in four importations between 1908 and 1929, a total of 87 head (48 rams and 39 ewes); 53 from their native land and 34 from other countries. Not only were the imported numbers small, but there existed additional pressure to quickly develop a ewe flock for Persian lamb pelt production. As such, there was much crossbreeding done in the teens and 1920s. The American Karakul was born.

Dr. C.C. Young, a Russian-born American-educated physician is credited with the first three imports, 1908 to 1914, from the Bokhara Province of Central Asia. USDA research was completed in Beltsville, Maryland, to study Karakuls intending to quickly build Persian lamb pelt producing flocks. Young advocated crossbreeding with good coarse or long-wool pelt producers such as Lincoln, Navajo, and Cotswold sheep, but he kept his Karakuls pure-blooded. We may never know why, but Young moved around quite a bit, and taking descendants of his imported sheep with him, farming in Texas, Coahuila, Mexico (along the Texas border), California, and Colorado.

Alex Albright of Dundee, Texas had Lincoln sheep for about a decade before Young moved 13 miles up the road to the town of Holliday, near Wichita Falls, in 1909. Eighteen years later in February 1927, Albright advertised that he had “sent breeding stock to South America, Nova Scotia, Canada, South Manchuria, Japan, and a third of the States.” Alex was responsible for the final 1929 importation of Karakuls from Germany, and increased his flock to 1,500 even during the Depression. After Alex died in 1937, his wife Marie remained in the Karakul business until 1949. The Albright family had struck black Karakul gold.

Charles de Bremond of Roswell, New Mexico, had ranched over 6,000 head of Shropshire sheep when he financed Young’s 1912



Photo by Julia DeVlieg.

Part of Diane Magden’s 300-head Karakul flock on her ranch in Washington’s south-eastern corner.

importation. A year earlier, December 1911, with 100 head of Alex Albright’s Karalinc crosses and a Karakul ram purchased for \$1,080, Charles was well on his way to the second largest U.S. Karakul flock. For perspective, a 1911 Ford Model T was priced at \$725.

The story continues: de Bremond’s oldest daughter Marie married Lowry Hagerman, who inherited and embraced these exotic sheep when Charles died prematurely after WWI. Lowry went on to author the landmark Karakul Handbook, dedicated to his father-in-law, and at one point had 4,000 head of Karakul sheep.

Karakuls are unique in the sheep world because of their association with the fashion industry. They have always been bred for variable traits in order to adapt quickly to fashion changes. In the late 1940s white furs – and therefore white Karakuls – were all the rage.

In 1943, there were approximately 1,000 U.S. Karakul breeders, 10,000 registered head, 20,000 grades & commercials, producing about 10,000 merchantable pelts per year, all consumed in this country. In 35 years of American Karakul sheep, there had been some bad marketing practices, a few exploiters, and a bit too much competition at times, but American breeders worked through – until fashion dealt a critical blow.

The Persian lamb pelt market collapsed. Prices had been low since at least 1949 and the market for fine ladies coats slipped further. The market for Karakul sheep evaporated. Lowry Hagerman’s Karakul Handbook

was published in 1951. The Fur Farming Journal, which started as the Karakul Journal in 1947, published its last issue mid-1954. Karakuls had been in the U.S. less than 50 years but their shepherds had to come to terms with the fashion economy of boom and bust. The breed went through a metamorphosis in the 1960s and 70s, kept alive by pockets of dedicated breeders.

Back to the Hagerman flock: Down to a few hundred, it remained in existence until dispersal by son Bud Hagerman in 1996. Still ranged in New Mexico, the pioneer flock descendants served a couple of significant roles between the 1950s and 1980s. One was the role of Karakul sheep with movie settings in the Near or Middle East, “the best suited of any breed found in the US” stated Maurice Shelton, Professor Emeritus of Texas A&M University. Second, breeding stock from this flock was exported to other countries, specifically Australia, for potential use in developing flocks of fat-tailed sheep to serve the Middle East markets. In the early 2000s, New Zealand Karakul sheep came back to the United States by way of semen importation, with a few breeders embracing the new bloodline.

Owning Karakuls has spanned generations in more than one family. The pioneer de Bremond/Hagerman family is the longest, at 85 years (1911-1996), but they are not alone in long-term admiration of this breed. A few current breeders are at 35 years and counting. When Karakuls captivate you, it is tough to let go.

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