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COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE

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RAMS FOR COMMERCIAL FLOCKS

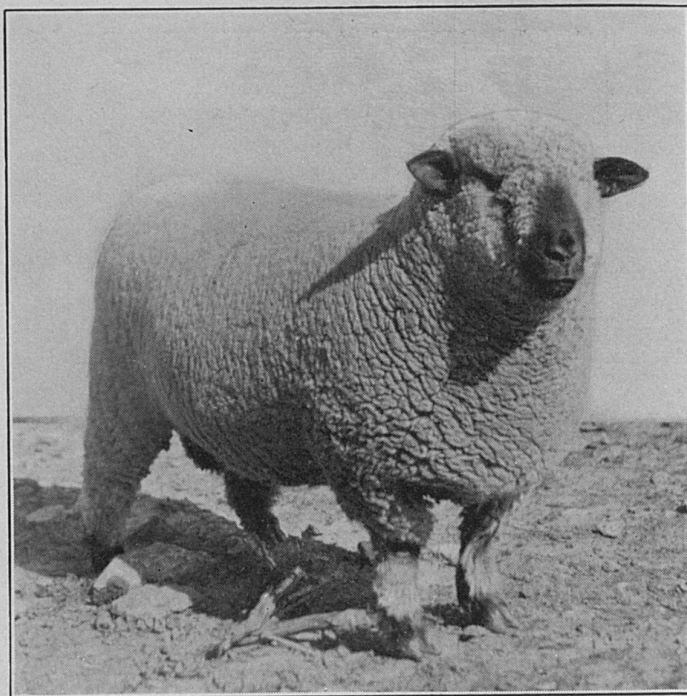


Yearling Southdown rams. The Southdown is a popular breed in Kentucky.

Lexington, Ky.

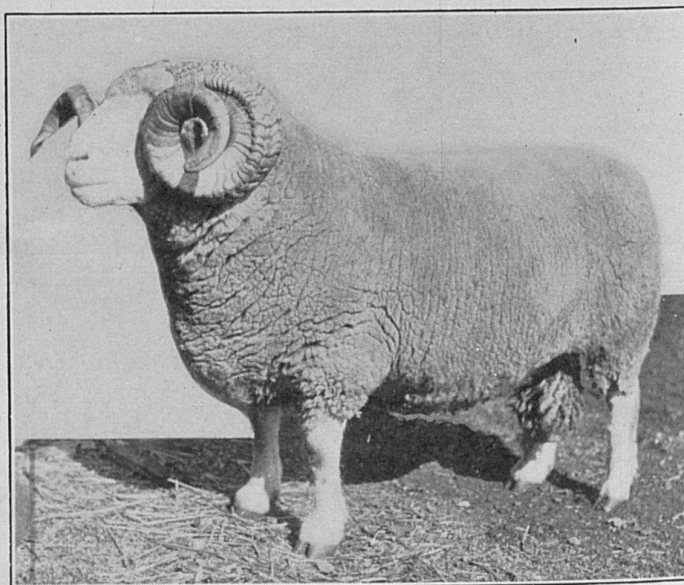
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A yearling Hampshire ram

Kentucky leads all native-lamb states in number of Hampshires. Flocks of the breed are found in all important sheep-raising sections of the State.



An aged Dorset ram

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RAMS FOR COMMERCIAL FLOCKS

By

RICHARD C. MILLER

Kentucky has long been distinguished for the production of lambs of superior quality; nevertheless, she also produces some of the poorest. The contrast in quality of lambs on adjoining farms sometimes is so great as to attract the attention of travellers on the highway. An even more striking contrast appears when the lambs are sent to market. A principal cause of this diversity is the too common use of inferior, grade or scrub rams as sires for market lambs. Lambs of superior quality invariably show the pronounced influence of purebred rams. The property of transmitting his own characteristics to his offspring is so strong in a purebred ram that his lambs inherit superior quality even tho their mothers are not of the best type. The quality of the produce of a grade or scrub ram, however, is uncertain because of his mixed ancestry. The lamb may inherit characteristics from either parent of a grade ram or from some undesirable ancestors of a scrub. This does not happen with a purebred ram because his ancestors, male and female, for many generations, have been bred with the idea of fixing good qualities and eliminating all undesirable characteristics.

Even with the best of ewes and the best of care and management, it is impossible to produce a high percentage of prime and choice lambs when grade or scrub rams are used, regardless of how good the rams may look as individuals. Nevertheless thousands of Kentucky sheep raisers still head their flocks with grade and scrub rams and many others breed to purebred rams of inferior quality. Often a man buys a flock of ewes, picks them carefully, takes the pains to examine the mouth and udder of each, as he should, and then asks the dealer to sell him a ram for the same price as he paid, per head, for the ewes. Many rams that are culled for replacement and sent to the stockyards are purchased by other farmers for breeding; and some traders make a business of buying grade and scrub rams and peddling them to farmers. These farmers evidently do not realize how very expensive these so called "cheap" rams will prove to be. Regardless of the class of ewes a farmer may have, he can make no greater mistake than to mate them to a poor ram.

The man who sacrifices quality in order to save a few dollars on the price of a ram is sure to be the loser in the end.

BREEDS

The question arises as to what breed of ram is the most suitable to Kentucky conditions. The answer is that no one breed is best suited to all conditions under which lambs are produced in this state. Aside from the likes and dislikes of the individual farmer, many factors must be taken into account, such as the kind of ewes in the flock, whether or not some of the ewe lambs are to be kept for breeding, when lambs are to be marketed, the grazing and feed available, whether or not creep feeding is to be practiced, and the equipment for winter shelter and lambing.

Lambs sired by Hampshire, Suffolk, or Dorset rams make much faster gains than those by rams of the smaller breeds of finer bone, like the Southdown. With ewes of good conformation, when lambs are to be pushed rapidly to an early market, rams of the larger breeds are preferred by many Kentucky farmers. These also are good with certain types of western or fine-wool ewes, and especially so if ewe lambs are to be kept for breeding. Rangy, upstanding ewes should never be bred to rams of the larger, more upstanding type. The Southdown makes an ideal cross on such ewes. When the larger breeds are used, it is important to breed for early lambing and to creep feed the lambs, at least until plenty of grazing is available.

Southdown. The Southdown breed of sheep has been bred for many generations with the purpose of developing the best possible mutton type. Kentucky breeders are using this breed extensively. Flocks of Southdown are to be found in the Bluegrass area and, in recent years, in other parts of the State. The Southdown is a compact, symmetrical, low-set type of sheep and the smallest of the Down breeds. Southdown rams are so prepotent that when crossed on ewes of poor conformation they give a larger percentage of prime and choice lambs than do rams of the larger and coarser breeds.

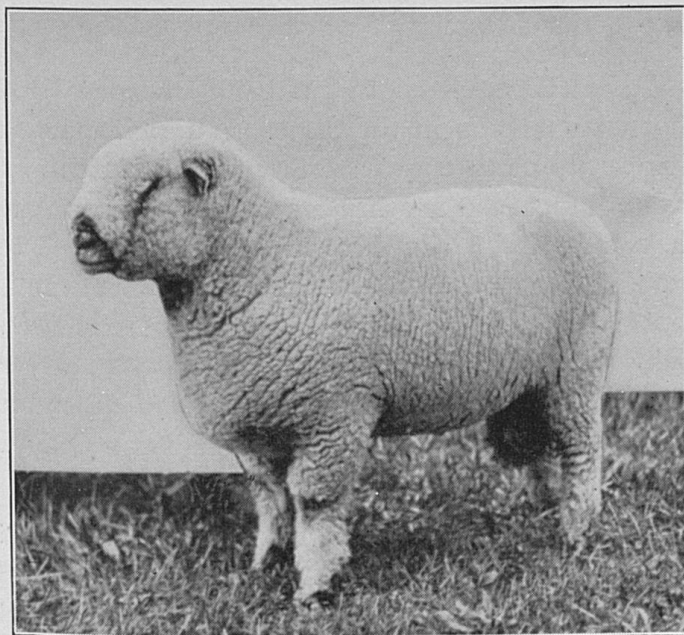
Lambs sired by Southdown rams do not make as rapid gains as lambs sired by rams of the larger, faster-growing breeds, such as the Hampshire and Dorset, but they fatten more readily, hold their condition longer and dress out a larger percentage of high-grade meat. The Southdown rams are not recommended, however, if a farmer wishes to save ewe lambs for breeding. Such ewes will be

small of bone, will yield a comparatively light clip of wool and will not have the milking qualities desired in a good commercial ewe.

Hampshire. The Hampshire is a dark-faced Down breed, much larger than the Southdown and not so compactly built. It is a greedy feeder and capable of making phenomenal gains if properly handled. Lambs of no other breed excel the Hampshire in rate of gain and, as a sire of early market lambs, the Hampshire ram has no superior. Lambs by Hampshire rams, if dropped in February, may be marketed in May, as they should reach marketable weight of 80 pounds in three months, if pushed from birth.

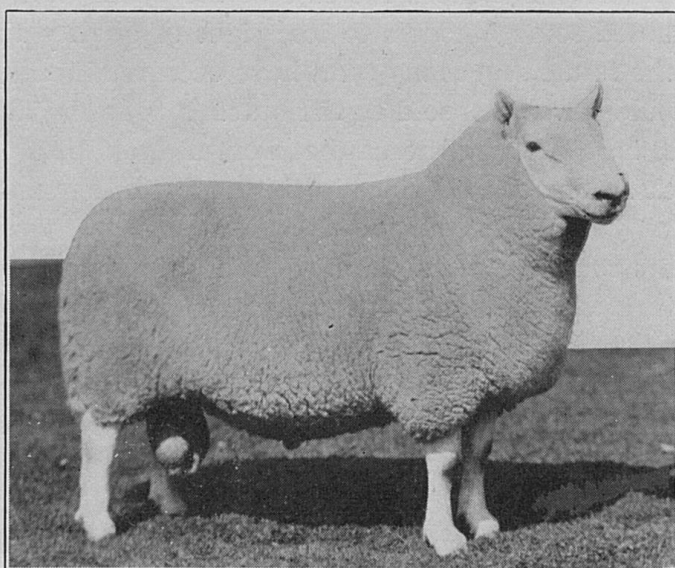
The popularity and rapid increase of the breed during recent years has caused some breeders to lose sight of quality and breed type, with the result that many rams have been retained for breeding that should have been sold to the butcher as lambs, and thousands of ewes have been registered that were fit only for use in commercial flocks. There is no place in this or any other state for the coarse, rangy, big-headed, narrow-chested type of Hampshire that many farmers continue to produce. The low, compact, symmetrical Hampshire with close, even fleece, is the kind in greatest demand by our lamb producers.

Shropshire. The Shropshire is a dark-faced Down breed, intermediate in size between the Southdown and Hampshire. While not numerous in Kentucky, they are popular in many of the native-lamb states, particularly those north of the Ohio where the breed is now numerically the most important. Farmers who save ewe



A yearling Shropshire ram

lambs for breeding frequently prefer Shropshires because they yield a more valuable fleece than do sheep of the other important mutton breeds. The ewes are also noted for high fecundity tho they are not so good in this respect as the Dorset. They do not breed so early as most other Down breeds and are not such good milkers as the Dorset, Hampshire, Suffolk or Ryeland. Lambs by Shropshire rams can be made into choice market lambs if handled properly and for farmers who wish to keep some of the ewe lambs for breeding and, at the same time, produce choice market lambs, the Shropshire deserves consideration.



A yearling Cheviot ram

Cheviot. The Cheviot, a light-faced, hill sheep, is the hardiest, most active mutton breed in the State. While Cheviot lambs are somewhat slower to mature and a little more difficult to finish than lambs by rams of most of the other breeds, they are extremely active from birth, a factor which reduces the death losses. The quality of the carcass is very good and ewe lambs by Cheviot rams and out of close-wool or western ewes make good commercial ewes. There are few flocks of Cheviots in Kentucky.

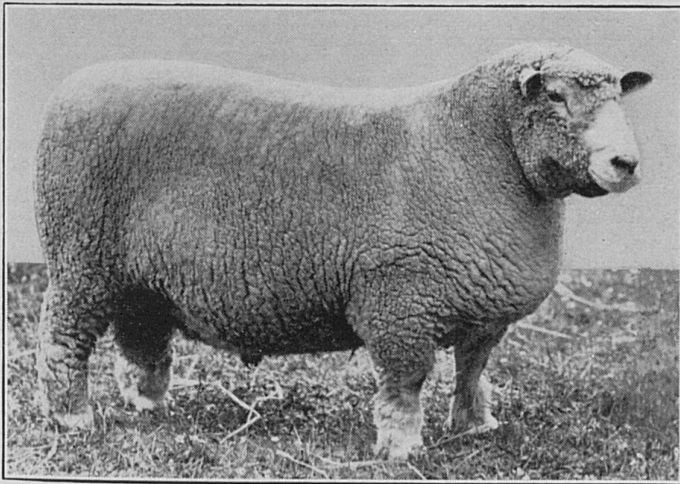
There are in the State a number of flocks of other breeds, the Ryeland and Suffolk especially, and occasionally an Oxford or Corriedale is found.

Dorset. The Dorset is a horned, light-faced sheep and one of the oldest of English breeds. The Dorset ewes are noted for high fecundity, early lambing and good milking qualities. While lambs sired by Dorset rams do not show such high quality as lambs by

rams of some of the other breeds, Dorset lambs grow rapidly and ewe lambs by Dorset rams out of Rambouillet or Delaine ewes or ewes carrying considerable fine-wool blood make excellent breeding ewes for commercial flocks. The farmer who wishes to keep his ewe lambs for breeding makes no mistake in using a Dorset ram. He should plan, however, to have his lambs come early and get his sale lambs on an early market. Creep feeding helps greatly in this regard, especially until plenty of grazing is available.

The Dorset has made considerable headway in Kentucky during the past few years and many new flocks of the breed have been established.

Ryeland. The Ryeland ram offers real possibilities as a sire of early-maturing lambs of good quality. The fleece is fairly heavy and ewe lambs by Ryeland rams out of ewes of fine-wool extraction produce excellent farmers' ewes. The few flocks of the breed in this country are in Kentucky.



An aged Ryeland ram

Suffolk. A number of small Suffolk flocks have recently been established in the State. The Suffolk is a dark-faced Down breed, bare of wool over head and legs. As sires of market lambs the rams compare very favorably with Hampshires. The breed has been greatly improved during recent years.

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF A GOOD RAM

While it is not necessary that a ram intended for use on commercial ewes have all the fine breed points required of a ram to be used on a purebred flock, it is important that he be a good representative of the breed, that he be vigorous and active, with a bold, masculine appearance, low-set, deep-bodied and symmetrical, that

he stand well on all four feet and that his fleece be close and even. Narrow-chested, ewe-necked, weak-headed rams should be avoided by all means, as should overfat or unthrifty rams. While rams should be in good field condition, it is a great mistake to buy rams that have been highly fitted for sale or show. Such rams may prove disappointing, as the fitting often impairs their usefulness either temporarily or permanently.

AGE OF USEFULNESS

While rams are usually at their best from one to three years of age, caution should be exercised in the purchase of rams older than yearlings. These older rams may be offered for sale because they proved disappointing as breeders; non-breeders are discarded after the first year. A growthy ram lamb in good condition may be used on a small number of ewes, usually not more than fifteen. As a rule, it is not advisable to use ram lambs unless they are allowed with the ewes only a short time, morning and evening, and are fed grain daily. The better plan, under average conditions, is to use a good yearling or older ram.

REGISTRATION IS IMPORTANT

While it is not necessary that rams intended for use in commercial flocks be registered, the registry certificate is the best guaranty of the purity of the breeding. Then, too, the man who keeps his registrations up to date usually is a more constructive breeder and has better sheep than one who is negligent in such matters.

Annually hundreds of grade rams are sold to farmers in this State as "purebred unrecorded" rams. "Purebred unrecorded" has become a convenient term that often covers a multitude of defects. While there are some good purebred flocks of unregistered sheep in Kentucky, many so called purebred unregistered sheep are only high grades. The farmer who buys an unregistered ram must run the risk of getting a grade unless he knows the flock from which the ram comes.

AVOID DISEASES

Many troubles in sheep are bought into the flock. Sometimes the purchase of a ram is the means of infecting an entire flock. The sheepman should use every possible precaution to guard against introducing disease into his flock thru the purchase of rams. The best place to buy a ram is on the farm of the man who produced him, where the entire flock can be seen before purchase is made. If the flock is in an unthrifty condition or there is evidence of foot trouble or other disease, it would be wise to buy elsewhere.