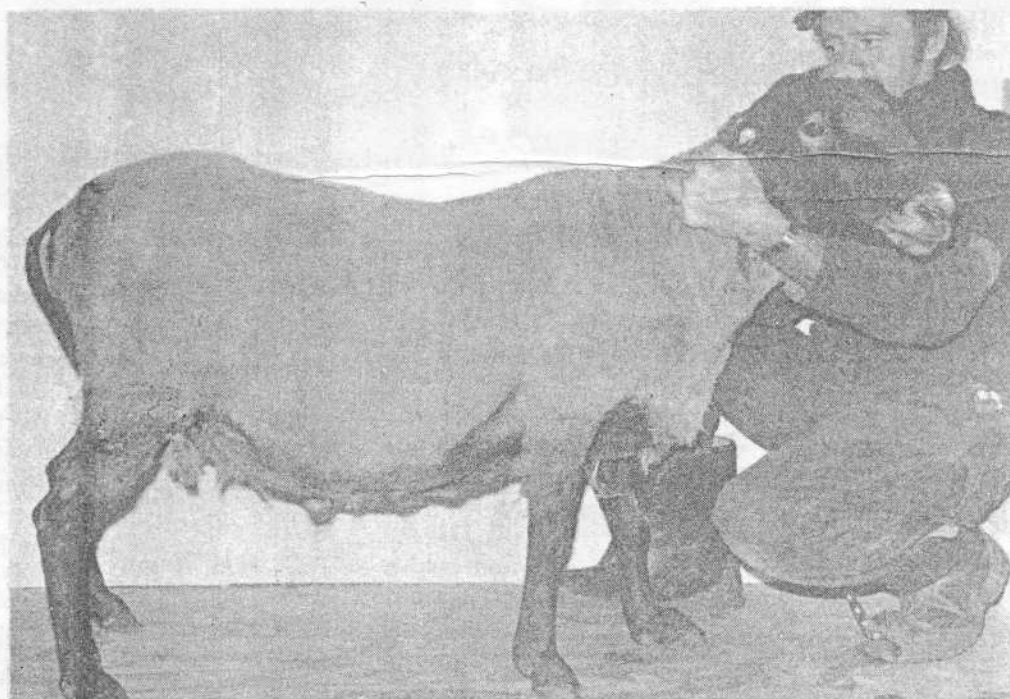


ROMANOV

A New Medicine For The American Sheep Industry



The Russians are invading the United States quietly and steadily and no one is objecting; on the contrary, they are welcomed everywhere with open arms. The invading force is Romanov sheep, the second-best thing to come out of Russia, after vodka of course. They have made a complete sweep of Canada from the Atlantic to the Pacific and now are heading South, to the U.S.A., Cuba, Mexico and South America. The exporting agents in Canada cannot meet the demand; fortunately, the Romanov ewes are cooperating and producing what they are famous for, large litters. Yes, we are talking about sheep, not pigs. The word "litter" is no longer used only for pigs, dogs and cats, it now applies to sheep as well. After all, some Romanov ewes can produce more young than some pigs can. Interested? Then let me give you more information about that remarkable sheep breed.

Anyone familiar with Finnsheep? Well, Romanovs are their Russian cousins. While Finnsheep are usually white in color, the Romanovs are always born completely black. As they grow older, the color on their body changes to gray as a result of a mixture of the black, hairy over-coat and soft, white under-coat. Some Romanov stay black, and some are "whiter" than others, depending on the combination of these two types of wool fibers. One thing is very common though, the head and legs stay black, and a white spot on the forehead is present in the majority of Romanovs. One other thing characterizes the Romanovs: Like Finnsheep, they have a short, pointed tail. Male Romanovs have a mane of black hair on the neck reaching their brisket. As mentioned earlier Finnsheep and Romanov are cousins because they come from the same geographic area. Finnsheep are from Finland, of course,

while Romanovs are from the Volga Valley, northwest of Moscow, not very far from Finland. As a matter of fact, Finnsheep sometimes are born black and look very much like Romanovs.

As you all know, Finnsheep are famous for their prolificacy, early maturity and length of their breeding season. These are the same strong points of the Romanovs. What they excel in more is their remarkable prolificacy.

Prolificacy is by far their strongest asset. The highest record is nine lambs alive in one litter and 64 lambs in a lifetime (12 lambings). Remember, I am still talking about sheep not rabbits. You want a practical example how these sheep multiply? We imported 14 ewes in 1980, and by 1986 we had over 500, not counting the lambs we lost only because our herdsmen work from 8 to 5; these lambs are usually saved in private farms. In 1987 and 1988 our flock

averaged 3.65 lambs born. Many breeders who bought sheep from us had similar results, while a few surpassed us. Even yearlings exceed two lambs in their first lambing.

With high prolificacy comes the problem which each sheep breeder would like to have, that of feeding all these lambs. The Romanov ewes are such good milkers that they can feed three lambs easily, and those with exceptional milk production can feed up to four lambs. It is not recommended, however, to leave more than two lambs with yearlings. Extra lambs should be fed artificially, not by bottle, because you would spend your entire day doing only that, but rather with automatic feeding machines which mix the formula and maintain a continuous supply for the lambs. Artificially fed lambs grow fast and adapt well to the system.

All breeders who raise Romanov agree on one thing, the remarkable vigor and desire to survive shown by the lambs after birth. Lambs are on their feet chasing their mothers moments after birth. They seem to never tire, and the ewes seem not to mind their pursuit.

One thing which I witnessed once in France and probably will never forget was the scene of ewes and lambs uniting for feeding. Ewes looked for all their lambs before they allowed any to start suckling. I saw the ewes searching around with one or two lambs running behind them until they found their remaining lambs, then they calmed down and let the lambs enjoy their meal. The Romanov is probably the only breed in which ewes would never abandon their lambs when feeding is not adequate; they continue feeding them using their body reserve until they die. You talk about devotion? That is the best example.

You'll probably wonder about lamb mortality in a breed which can average over three lambs. My impression is that lamb mortality is determined by the breeder himself, not by the ewe or the lamb. The relation is positive: Put more time and effort, get more lambs alive. Romanovs lamb easily, but sometimes they need the extra help, especially when they lamb large litters. In our experimental flock we lost about 27% of the lambs before weaning. However, in 1986 and 1987 when we made extra effort to save the lambs, mortality was

no more than 10%. I was told by many breeders in Canada that they experienced less than 5% lamb losses.

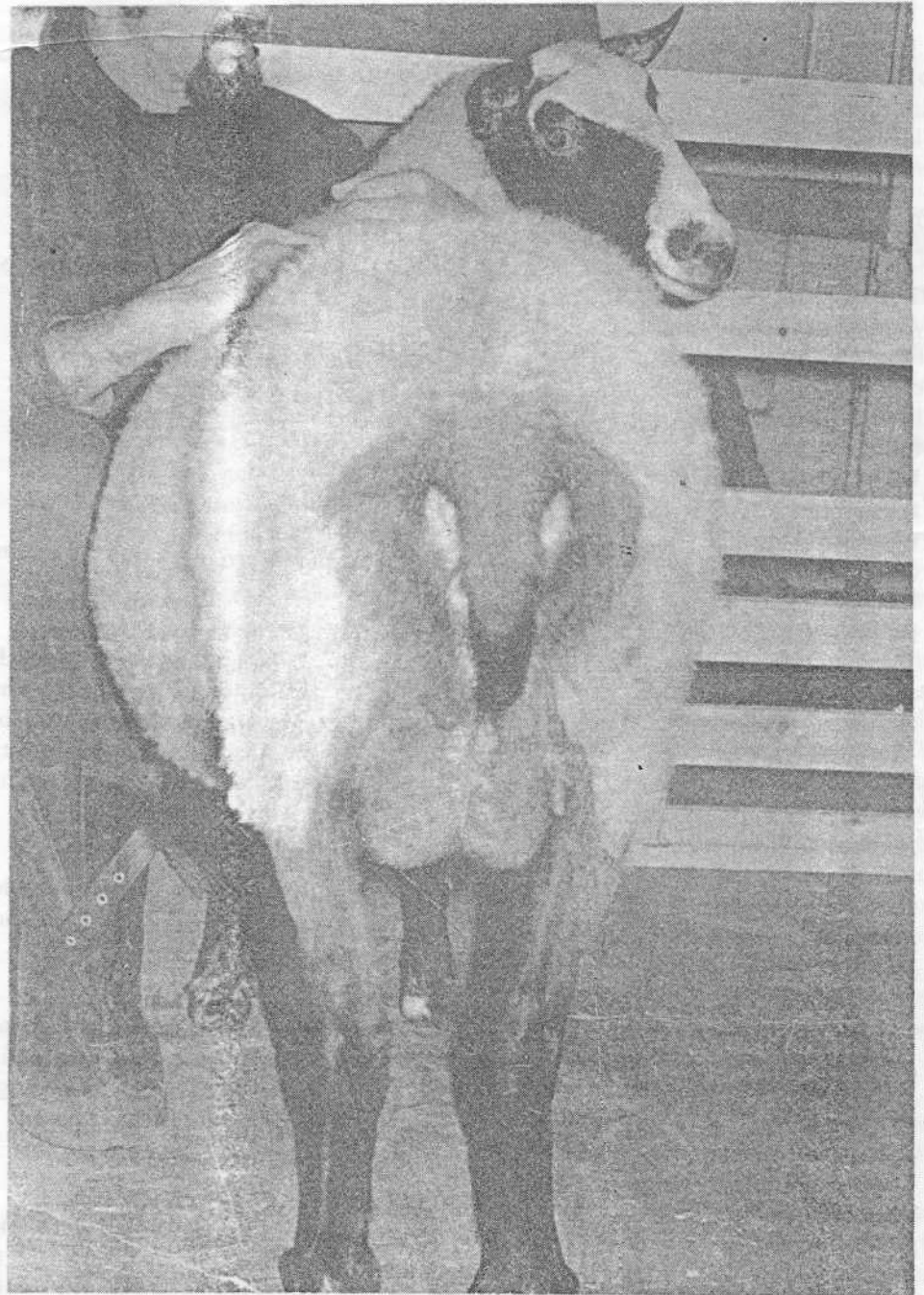
Romanov lambs are fast growers. Given good feeding, they can put on weight at the rate of a pound a day. In our Canadian recording system measuring growth from 50 to 100 days, Romanov lambs averaged .62 lb. compared to .73 lb. for Suffolks and Hampshires. Not bad for mostly twin, triplet and quad lambs.

Romanov carcasses are comparable to carcasses of other breeds, but they are slightly heavier in the front. Unlike Finnsheep, Romanovs deposit less fat

around the kidneys and usually have a good cover over the body. Some people claim that the meat has a special flavor. We are presently investigating this aspect.

Lambs between seven and nine months shear around 2.4 lbs., yearlings shear 4.2 lbs. while adult ewes shear between 4.8 and 5.5 lbs. Wool is of inferior quality and has limited use in the industry. In Russia, the pelts of the lambs just after birth are used in making coats since they look like Karakul pelts. This aspect of production has not been investigated or utilized in the West.

What lies ahead for Romanovs in



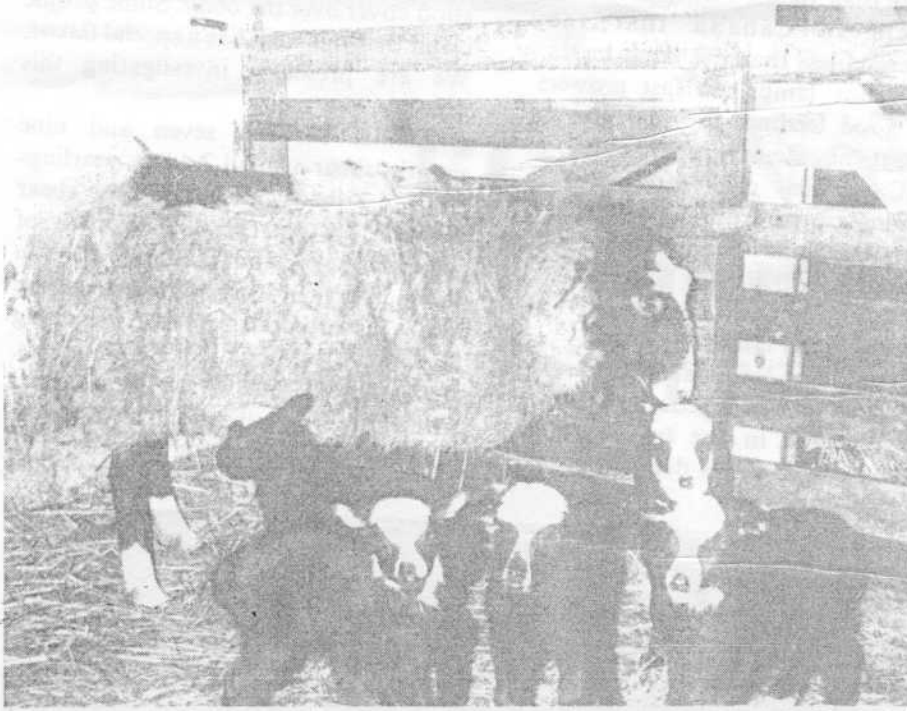


Photo courtesy of Jackie Schram, Schram & Quiggle Sheep Farm, Box 313, Cartwright, MB, Canada R0K 0L0.

the U.S.A. is as certain as taxes. They will expand like mushrooms, as purebreds, and will be used intensively in cross-breeding. Actually the invasion has already started with a group going to the Clay Center in Nebraska and the University of Minnesota. We now count about 10 American breeders in Virginia, Ohio, North Dakota, Pennsylvania, and Indiana. Other states are coming fast.

Romanov rams will eventually mate females from other breeds, and the crosses will fill American farms as they did in Canada, France, Spain and almost every country they went into. In Canada, they were crossed with Suffolks, Dorsets, Rambouillets, Leicesters, just to list a few of the breeds which came to my attention. The breeders are impressed with the crosses the same way they have been with the purebreds. The crossbred females gave over 200% continuously, and most are white (except the Suffolk crosses). They maintained the good traits of the Romanov and lost some of the bad ones. Most breeders are now using a three breed system of mating crossbred Romanov ewes to a third breed and sending all progeny to market. We are presently accumulating information on the crosses and we'll make the findings available in the near future.

Breeders interested in acquiring Romanov sheep can obtain a list of names and addresses of Romanov

breeders in North America by writing to the author.

Romanov Characteristics And Standards

Color

Lambs are born black and later turn gray.

Head

Small and angular, the poll is round, the ears are upright and mobile. The eyes are voluminous. Males with or without horns have a more convex forehead than females and a wider and shorter head.

Neck

Long and narrow, covered in males with a hairy black mane which extends to the brisket.

Body

Of medium size and the ribs are rounded. Romanov sheep are carried high on their legs. Average body weight of mature ewes is 110-120 lbs. and of mature rams 150-160 lbs.

Legs

Long and fine, covered with short hair.

Tail

Short and very characteristically pointed.

Sexual Maturity

Extremely early, at about 4 months of age.

Longevity

About 7 to 8 years, less under intensive management.

Breeding Season

Long and many ewes have no anoestrous period at all. Ewes return to estrus 30 to 40 days after lambing.

Gestation Length

Few days shorter than other breeds averaging 144 days.

Age at First Lambing

Most ewes can lamb at 12 months of age.

Fertility

High, over 95% in season reduced to about 50% in summer.

Prolificacy

Yearlings average between 1.8 and 2.2, mature ewes between 2.8 and 3.5 lambs per litter.

Lamb Mortality

Varies with management but averages between 13 and 18%.

Lamb Weight at Birth

Varies with litter size, averages 5.3 to 5.8 lbs.

Lamb Weight at 70 Days

Male lambs weigh about 45 lbs., females about 40 lbs.

Carcass

Shoulder represent 38-40% of the carcass compared to 33% for leg and 27-29% for loin rack cuts. Internal fat is about 5%.

Milk Production

About 40 litters in 130 days of lactation. Milk contains 6.4% fat, 6.1% protein and 4.8% lactose. Some lines of Romanov possess four or more functioning teats.

Wool Production

Ranges between 4 and 6 lbs. of wool.

Flocking Tendency

Well developed, animals on pasture tend to stay together.

Temperament

Some animals are extremely nervous, but the majority are calm. Romanov sheep can jump high and require higher fences.