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A Different Look from Across the Ocean



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Romanov Facts and Myths

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It has already been four years since I wrote my article on the Romanov sheep published in the October 1986 issue of The Shepherd. Since then the Romanov sheep have done what I expected them to do, invade the U.S.A. I wrote the enclosed article because I got many calls and letters mainly from U.S.A. from breeders who probably didn't read the 1986 article or who had other questions not addressed in that article. It also came to my attention that some breeders started making some claims which may not be true.

I must admit . . . I am overwhelmed by the success of the Romanov sheep in Canada and United States. It surely surpassed my wildest expectations, and it gave me a great feeling of satisfaction to see the numbers growing and State after State taking part in the action. All this and Romanovs have been in the hands of sheep breeders in Canada and United States less than five years. What lies ahead in another ten or fifteen years? I can't make any intelligent guess, but if progress continues at that rate I wouldn't be surprised to find at least one Romanov ram on each farm in North America.

In Canada, many breeders who first opposed the Romanov invasion became true believers. I may give you the name of one, Mr. M.A. Roy, presently the president of the Quebec Sheep Breeders' Association. He attacked the Romanovs in each Forum he had a chance to talk about sheep. He purchased some Romanov rams only to prove his point of view, that is, of the uselessness of that breed. Last summer, he invited me to his farm to apologize personally for his previous attacks, he said "I proved to myself that I was wrong all the way. . . my crossbred Romanov Suffolk ewes averaged 5 lambs by the time they were 27 months old and the lambs grew faster than what I expected. . . in short my problem now is that I am making too much money and risk losing the financial support I receive." He is presently building a flock of one thousand crossbred ewes with Romanov blood, in addition to a small flock of pure Romanovs to supply the rams.

I haven't found yet a breeder who is not satisfied and wished he never acquired Romanovs. However, I receive numerous calls and letters from breeders who have questions I either never addressed in my articles on the breed, or if I had actually addressed, I was not clear enough. I thought that the best way to deal with that is to write the most frequent questions I was asked and my answers to these questions. I hope this will clarify some of the facts and myths about this remarkable breed.

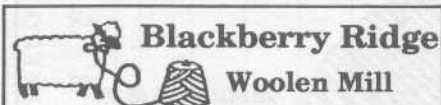
Q: How many animals did Canada import and from where?

A: We imported 16 ewes and 7 rams from France, only 14 ewes and 5 rams passed the quarantine. Shortly after we lost 2 ewes and 1 ram. So, all the progeny in North America came from 12 ewes and 4 rams.

Q: What are these color codes: red, green, orange and white?

A: We also had blue, but we discontinued that color and added the few blue animals to the white line. The color was an artificial mean to help us avoid or let's say delay inbreeding as much as possible. We divided the ewes into 4 groups of 3 ewes, each with a ram. We gave them a colored tag. The original rams and ewes of the same color were always mated together.

Since we could not mate the progeny with their father or sisters to their brothers,



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we took rams from, say green family, to mate females in say, orange family, and rams from orange family to mate ewes in white family etc. All the progeny of the first generation took the color of their mother family (but they were actually a mixture of two colors). In the following generation we repeated the same story, this time we actually mixed 3 colors. Ewes which were coded orange but were actually green X orange were mated to rams which were white, although the progeny remained orange coded, they had the blood of the original 3 rams, orange, green, and white. After the fourth generation all the animals were thoroughly mixed so that the color had no significant meaning.

Q: Are there differences in performance, size, temperament between families of different colors?

A: Definitely no, as shown from the previous question, most of the animals sold were a mixture of the 4 colors (families if you prefer this notation).

Q: What are the strong points of the Romanov?

A: Prolificacy is definitely the strongest point. Flocks averaging between 3.0 and 3.5 lambs are not uncommon. Actually in the Clay Centre flock the mature ewes averaged 3.5 lambs born and 2.9 lambs weaned in 1988; the results in 1989 were even better, 4.1 lambs born and 3.6 lambs weaned. Most of the litters are triplets and quads, larger litters are not rare and also are not that frequent. In Clay Centre they got 7 sets of quintuplets and 1 sextuplets. We, at Lennoxville, never got sextuplets but a few quintuplets. I would not be surprised, though, if some Canadian or American breeders lamb sextuplets. The all-time record of 9 lambs was mentioned in an article published in Russia many years ago.

Romanovs also have breeding seasons longer than most domestic breeds. In Canada, we subjected our herd to a system of 3 lambings in 2 years without use of artificial means of inducing estrus. Fertility was high in fall and winter matings but was about 50% in late spring-summer mating. Prolificacy was also lower following summer mating.

The third strong point of the Romanov is their remarkable precocity. Ewe lambs should be separated before 70 days of age or risk being mated by their male litter-mates. We had that experience at Lennoxville, of 20 lambs left with their male sibs up to 90 days, 11 lambed at 8 months producing 16 lambs.

Q: What are the weak points?

A: The wool of the Romanovs is a mixture of hairy outercoat usually black in color and a fine, white undercoat; this combination gives the gray color of the Romanov and is also a headache for the manufacturing. I was told by many Romanov breeders that they are making good money selling their fleeces to hand-spinners and that they are developing a special market for this type of fleeces.

The other weak point may be the carcass conformation of Romanov lambs sent to market. These carcasses, though, generally acceptable can not compete with mutton-type sheep such as Suffolk, Hampshire, Oxford, Dorsets, etc. Our observation is that the front part is usually heavier than in other breeds and the legs are less developed.

Q: Is it possible that Romanov lambs outgrow Suffolk lambs?

A: Some particular Romanov lambs may grow faster than some particular Suffolk lambs. That does not mean that Romanov lambs outgrow Suffolks. I know of some Romanov lambs gaining about 1 lb. per day on Record of Performance tests; I also know of some barely making 1/4 lb. per day. On average, Romanov lambs gained about 0.60 lb. compared to .80 lb. for Suffolk last year in Canada.

Q: Is there a line of Romanov larger than Suffolks?

A: There is a great variation between animals, some ewes and rams may be as big or bigger than average Suffolks. Concentrating the blood of these large animals together may produce a large line in the future, but it is too early to conclude that such a line has already been developed in that short time, people sometimes exaggerate. Also remember that Romanov is a maternal breed and large animals are not advantageous, they cost more to keep and end giving similar production.

Q: How do Romanov crosses compare to crosses of other breeds?

A: It is too early to give definite conclusions, this can only be done after comparisons are made. However, from my observations and the work I have been doing with Romanov vs. Finnsheep and Booroola crosses and the comparisons made at Lethbridge Research Station, it seems that Romanov crosses have lots to offer. Also, I have been impressed by the overwhelming positive results I have received from Romanov breeders involved in crossbreeding.



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Q: Can we expect more importation in the future?

A: Many breeders are trying, but it is difficult for the following reasons:

A) Animals should come by boat, so we need a big shipment of sheep or cattle importations at the same time to share the cost of the boat and opening of the quarantine.

B) Minimum 5 years of quarantine before any of these animals can be released.

Q: Can we import semen or embryos?

A: As far as I know, semen is not allowed, embryos from certain countries are allowed but these countries do not have Romanovs.

Q: If importing new blood is not possible, will continuous inbreeding harm the performance of the Romanov?

A: Remember that inbreeding is harmful only when the animals are carriers of undesirable genes. So far, very few breeders reported animals with abnormalities which makes me believe that we were lucky with the animals we got from France. However, it takes new blood to keep the Romanov flock in North America healthy and productive and more effort should be made to find ways of importing new genetic material from abroad.

Q: Can we expect future sales of Romanov from Agriculture Canada?

A: Very unlikely, since the flock at La Pocatiere perished in a fire; it is possible, however, that the Lethbridge Station puts some of its surplus sheep for sale in the future.

Q: From where can I get a list of Romanov breeders in North America?

A: The Canadian Sheep Breeders' Association publishes a registry with the names of all registered sheep breeders.

The Romanov breeders are included in this registry. You can get a copy for \$2 by writing to the secretary, Mrs. Reita Widgell at P.O. Box 260, Bordon, Saskatchewan, SOK ONO, or phone (306) 997-4881.

Q: Where are these Romanov breeders located?

A: The numbers of Romanov breeders registered by Province or State are:

Canada

Alberta	4
British Columbia	3
Manitoba	3
New Brunswick	2
Nova Scotia	1
Ontario	19
Quebec	37
Saskatchewan	2

USA

Ohio	2
New York	1
North Dakota	2
Iowa	1
Montana	1
Illinois	1
South Carolina	1
Minnesota	2
Pennsylvania	1
Nebraska	1

Q: Are there any other countries interested in importing Romanovs from Canada and United States.

A: As far as I know Romanovs were exported to Cuba, Mexico, many countries in South America and Japan made some contacts to import Romanovs from Canada. The list is growing.

Q: Where can we get documentation or more information on the Romanov?

A: By writing or phoning the author at P.O. Box 90, Lennoxville, Quebec, J1M 1Z3, CANADA, Tel: (819) 565-9171.

These were my answers to your most frequently asked questions. If you have any others I'll always be glad to answer them.