

The Shropshire Sheep as a Factor in the Mutton and Wool Trade in America.

[Read before the American Shropshire Registry Association at its annual meeting in Chicago, by the Hon. John Dryden, Toronto, Ont.]

Shropshire sheep, so called after the name of the county in which they originated, are descended from a hardy variety found in Shropshire and adjacent counties in England for the past two or three centuries, and formerly known as the "Gray-faced sheep." According to the best authorities now living, these sheep have not been brought to their present state of perfected development by the crossing of other breeds, but by judicious selection from the best of its own species. They were first exhibited as a distinct variety at the Royal Show at Gloucester, England, 1853, since which time they have attracted attention from all quarters of the globe, and are still increasing in popularity. A more marked uniformity was produced by the action of the directors of the Royal Society of England consenting to appoint for several years the same judges, who were among the most prominent breeders, and were thus enabled to establish what in their opinion should be considered the distinctive features of a typical Shropshire sheep.

As seen in the best flocks of to-day, they have deep symmetrical bodies placed on short legs, a genteel appearance, well covered heads, and every part of the body covered with a uniform quality of wool of the most valuable kind. These sheep are adapted, not merely for one particular locality, but do equally well in almost every country in Europe and America. They certainly have the power of thriving where any other sheep can live. In a marked degree they combine all the characteristics which are essential in producing the very best returns in both wool and mutton. They are especially adapted for a country where close confinement is not desirable nor practicable. The open air is their delight. They are not easily affected by storms; and, instead of standing with arched backs shivering from its effects, they are at once ready to "get up and put on a hustle." They are most prolific: 150 per cent. is a common return in lambs, and not unfrequently 200 is reached. The writer knows of an instance near his home where a flock of ten ewes, owned by one man, produced twenty-three lambs, which, when sold in the autumn, realized \$33 for each dam. They have great power of food assimilation, and mature early. The writer has produced lambs this season, dropped early in March, which weighed, on November 1st, from 140 to 160 lbs. Some of these on easy rations gained in weight the last month fully one pound per day. These statements are given, not to prove the great weights reached by Shropshire sheep, but to show that the average weight of Shropshires is reached at a very early age. The quality of the mutton is not excelled by any breed. They are light in offal, and carry a large amount of lean meat in proportion to fat.

The ancestry of these sheep have been noted as wool producers as far back as the history of live stock will take us. In the fourteenth century the market reports show the wool from Shropshire county as commanding the highest price of the lot. It is neither very fine nor very coarse, but of that quality best adapted for general purposes, and most likely to be in continual demand. A flock well cared for will produce annually eight pounds of wool per head. The wool is commended by manufacturers as being strong and tough in its fibre, standing spinning and capable of being twisted tighter than most wools without breaking. One manufacturer declares that in this respect it is the best wool in the world.

Such are some of the characteristics of this popular sheep. We believe that their increasing

popularity is due to their intrinsic merit, their profitable qualities, and their hardy character. Yet their value cannot alone be determined by their own inherent qualities, but will depend largely upon their power to impress these upon inferior grades upon which they are crossed. Among cattle, Shorthorns have not achieved their high position because of their inherent qualities alone, but because they are capable of improving any class with which their blood is mingled. Whether these sheep would improve the ordinary breeds of America could not have been answered a few years ago. Experience alone must decide such a point when the trial has been made. But enough has now been done in testing this to prove that they are now a most potent factor in improving both the wool and mutton product of America. Their power to improve the common stock of the country, of whatever origin is frankly conceded everywhere.

Not long ago I listened to a discussion, at a Farmers' Institute meeting, as to the best cross for mutton purposes. One farmer argued for a Leicester foundation, and the other for a Southdown, but both were decided and emphatic as to the Shropshire sire.

I have taken the trouble to enquire from some of the feeders and dealers in sheep in our large central markets, as to the value of the Shropshire as a cross on other sorts for mutton production, and I now propose to give some of the opinions expressed by these men. I have had difficulty in acquiring information from some quarters, because of the fact that no distinction is made as to what are called "Black-faced" or "Down" sheep of whatever variety; still enough has been learned to indicate the trend of public opinion in favor of this popular breed.

Alderman Frankland, one of the prominent butchers of Toronto, Ontario, and the pioneer exporter of live cattle from American shores, completes a valuable paper on "Sheep Breeding as a Profitable Industry," recently read before a meeting of the Dominion Sheep Breeders' Association, in the following terms:—"What I would recommend would be the establishment of large flocks of ewes, and the use of a Shropshire ram. This would improve the mutton, and give more size than the cross with the Southdown. Shropshire sheep, too, are very hardy and thrive on land that would kill Leicesters or Cotswolds."

Messrs. Williams & Hall, of Bowmanville, Ontario, who are practical butchers and shippers of live stock, in a private communication addressed to me, use the following language:—"We have been thinking of writing to you for some time in order to ask you to use your influence with the farmers in regard to the most suitable sheep which the consuming public require, and which they are willing to pay for if the farmers will produce them. We require sheep that will produce the largest quantity of flesh, and in our experience we have found the Shropshires and Southdowns of the finest quality and selling for the highest prices. Our experience dictates that no breed of sheep gives better results as to lambs, than our common Leicesters as foundation with a Shropshire ram as sire; the lambs are just what we are anxious to buy for the New York markets."

Mr. J. Willett, of North Lewisburg, Ohio, writes as follows:—"I have fed all kinds of mutton sheep and lambs, Shropshires, Oxfords, Southdowns, Leicesters, Cotswolds and Lincolns, and I pronounce Shropshires as the best I have ever fed or handled in any way. I have never fed any sort that would put on the pounds as fast as a Shropshire. I like them for the following reasons: 1st. They are easy fatteners; 2nd. They will feed and fatten at any age; 3rd. They have more high-priced meat to their weight than any other mutton sheep; 4th. Their meat is marbled with fat and lean all through; 5th. They sell the best in eastern markets on account of their even and marbled fattening qualities, and 6th. they are the best dispositioned sheep."

Frank D. Bartlett, of Union Stock Yards, Chicago, writes that his experience with these sheep has been that of a commission salesman only. He says, "A cross of a Shropshire and a Merino, or any moderate woolled sheep, is a good one. The product is smooth, round, evenly fattened and of good selling weight, not too heavy, as when crossed with long-woolled or very heavy-

bodied sheep. A Shropshire buck, crossed with our western sheep of Oregon and Montana gets nice lambs running even in size and quality; and such lambs will sell with the best of our merchant sheep. A few years since I had a deck of lambs which were the produce of fine woolled ewes and Shropshire buck. They were as attractive a bunch as I ever saw on this market; they weighed 95 lbs. and sold for 7c. per pound. The same day another lot of lambs were sold on this market at the same figure. They were the product of long-woolled ewes, crossed by a Shropshire buck. The latter lot were very fat, but uneven as compared with the former, and weighed 113 lbs each. Both lots were sold for the Pittsburgh market, where they attracted considerable attention among butchers, and their killing qualities were closely watched. I was assured that the fine-woolled cross was in every way the most useful to butchers, being very smooth, with the fat evenly distributed, and the carcass of a more saleable weight. On the whole, I am inclined to consider the Shropshire as one of our most useful breeds, considering it from a salesman's standpoint, with which a valuable cross may be made, either with fine-woolled or with our western close-woolled sheep."

Further information has been received from Mr. John Benstead, one of the live stock commission merchants of Buffalo, N. Y. I presume it will be conceded that Buffalo is one of the largest sheep markets in the world. Mr. Benstead, I am told, sells in that market about one third of the entire number disposed of. He and one of his partners have also considerable land outside the city upon which they annually fatten large numbers of sheep. His evidence, therefore, as a breeder and feeder, is valuable. Mr. Benstead writes:—"I advise all my friends to use Shropshire sires entirely to cross with our common sheep, and they seem to knock just right with everything. I never yet saw a Shropshire cross that was not an improvement, and I have frequently said that the Shropshire sheep has done more for this country than anything that has ever been imported from across the water. At the Buffalo Stock Yards we think the full-blooded Shropshire is the best all-round sheep. They are the best for early lambs, the best for mutton, the best shearers, and cross good with everything. One of my partners and myself are feeding, this winter, 3,500 sheep at one time, and we shall procure all the Shropshires possible, as we find that everything which has a little of the Shropshire blood in it will always pay well for the feed. When we cannot get Shropshires we get Southdowns, and next, good coarse-woolled grade; but the best sheep we get to feed are, say half Shropshire and half grade Leicester or Cotswold. They have style, shape and quality, and the mutton is well proportioned with plenty of lean flesh. In later years the demand for good mutton has been rapidly increasing. When people find that they can get that which is good, they will ask for it. The trouble in the past has been that our sheep did not fill the bill; the Merinos were all rind, and the Cotswolds and Leicesters were all fat, but the Shropshires fill the bill and are just what will make our people mutton-eaters, and our farmers sheep-raisers."

In addition to what is thus given by these practical men, I have only to remind this Association of the fact that in 1889 the best carcass of mutton shown at the Great International Fat Stock Show, held in this city of Chicago, was declared to be that produced from a Merino ewe crossed with a Shropshire ram.

What I have thus given is surely sufficient to show how important a place the Shropshire sheep must take in the near future in the mutton and wool product of this great country. No doubt among Shropshire sheep there will be good, better and best, as among all others. Those who insist on procuring and breeding only those of this breed which are inferior, and should be culled out altogether will not succeed in proving to persons who are accustomed to the breed, that they are superior. The practical point to be considered by the breeders here assembled is, How shall we increase the potency of these sheep as impressing their inherent qualities upon the mutton and wool product of this country? I submit that it will not be achieved by rigid laws passed by our own Association, which shall