

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE PANAMA SHEEP
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JANUARY 1, 1952

THE PANAMA

The Panama sheep was originated by Laidlaw and Lindsley in 1912. James Laidlaw came to Idaho from Scotland in 1892 and started out herding sheep. Two years later he started in the range sheep business by taking over a band of sheep on a partnership basis in the Raft River country.

During this period, early shed lambing was proving profitable in Idaho for the production of milk fat lambs. In order to obtain a more productive ewe for this type of production, Lincoln and Cotswalds were crossed with Rambouillets. The resulting ewe when mated to a Shropshire, produced a very desirable milk fat lamb. This type of lamb resulted in a higher net return than that obtained from the straight Rambouillet or Merino. In consideration of this fact, both the United States Department of Agriculture and James Laidlaw decided to establish an adapted breed, thereby eliminating the need for crossbreeding. The early mutton lamb business in Idaho needed a large, rugged, heavy-milking ewe with a good mutton conformation and fleece. With this objective in mind, Laidlaw and Lindsley set about to develop a sheep adapted to the Idaho early-lamb business and to the conditions of the Western Range in general.

The original breeds selected to make the cross were Rambouillet and Lincoln. The first crop of crossbred lambs were dropped at Muldoon, Idaho in the spring of 1912. Laidlaw and Lindsley remained in partnership until 1915, when Lindsley sold out to Robert Brockie. Laidlaw and Brockie continued on from the original crosses and bred the Panama to its present position in the Western sheep industry. When A. J. Butterfield went to the Panama Exposition at San Francisco in 1915, Mr. Laidlaw sent one ewe lamb, one yearling ram and ram lamb. These sheep were very well received and drew a lot of attention. As a result it was decided that "Panama" would be an appropriate name for the breed.¹

FOUNDATION STOCK

The foundation stock consisted of the best Rambouillet rams and Lincoln ewes obtainable. Lincoln ewes were selected from the Butterfield Livestock Company of Weiser, Idaho. Some were registered imported Canadian ewes, and the remainder were of Governor Gooding breeding. A total of 1600 Lincoln ewes were used, and first crosses were continued with them as long as any of them were alive.¹

Large, rugged, registered Rambouillet rams were selected from James Port of Oakley, Idaho.³ Later, after the National Ram Sale came into being, Laidlaw and Brockie bought the top Rambouillet rams from John Seeley, Butterfield, and other prominent breeders of the day. The Rams outlived the ewes, and were shipped to market in 1920.

The first crop of crossbred lambs were very satisfactory; nevertheless, nearly half of the ewe lambs were culled back into the range sheep. In general, about one fourth of the ewe lambs were culled for being too fine, and one fourth were culled for being too coarse. A similar segregation occurred in the rams, with horns and scurs showing on roughly 20 to 25 percent of the male progeny. In view of the emphasis that was placed on mutton conformation in the Idaho lamb business, prime consideration was given to fleshing qualities, conformation, bone, and size. While selection was directed toward a 3/8 blood fleece, some quarter and half-blood occurred.¹

Additional Lincoln blood was not introduced after the first cross, but a few first-cross ewes were bred back to Rambouillet rams.² The remainder of the first-cross ewes were bred to first-cross rams. There has never been any outside breeding introduced since the original crosses. At one time, an attempt was made to introduce Corriedale blood by the use of an outstanding Corriedale ram, but the resulting progeny failed to develop sufficient size. Therefore, all the Corriedale crosses were discarded.¹ Visual selection has been the tool employed to improve the Panama. Mr. Laidlaw selected the ewes in the cutting chute. He culled very heavily, paying strict attention to size, bone, conformation and a dense fleece of good staple. Any sheep not

meeting the general excellence desired was sold for slaughter. A mass system of breeding was employed with no record of individuals or lines.

The Panama was developed primarily on a sagebrush, grass type of range near Muldoon, Idaho. The spring range is the sagebrush plains of the Public Domain, the summer range is the National Forest, and in the fall the sagebrush and ranch pastures are utilized. Hay is fed during late winter and during lambing in February and March.¹ Yearling rams are wintered on hay with a small amount of concentrate. Laidlaw and Brockie's objective was to produce a ram on the range that was adaptable to the range man's needs. Consequently, they never resorted to heavy feeding and fitting.

SALES AND DISTRIBUTION

The sale and distribution of Panamas has been confined largely to rams. Laidlaw and Brockie bred the Panama solely for the range ram business. They never tried to register the Panama, nor did they sell foundation ewe stock. The few breeders who have Panamas from the original stock, secured them by picking up orphan lambs or ewes too old to go out on the range.² In 1920 Laidlaw and Brockie gave the University of Idaho five ewes and one ram.³ Since that time all aged and cull ewe stock were shipped either direct to slaughter or for use on black-face rams. Because the Panama was never registered, they have not enjoyed the advertising and sales promotion of other cross-bred breeds. Nevertheless, though the years Panama rams have sold at prices comparable to other white-faced breeds.

Laidlaw and Brockie were always prominent figures in the Western ram sales, but they sold the bulk of their rams at private treaty in carload lots. Their biggest customer was the Swan Land and Livestock Company of Wyoming, who over a period of years bought 4,000 head.¹ Panama rams have been used in all parts of the West; however, the greatest number have gone to Texas, New Mexico, and Colorado.²

Panamas in general are adapted to a diversity of range conditions, but are best suited to good feed conditions where a heavy milking rugged ewe is desired for the production of lambs of superior conformation and finish. Most of the better fat lamb producing flocks in Idaho are of Panama breeding obtained through the continued use of Panama rams.² Panama ewes cross very well and produce a superior mutton lamb with the use of either Hampshire, Suffolk, or Southdown rams.

PRESENT DAY BREEDERS

Robert Brockie retired in 1947. The firm of Laidlaw and Brockie is now known as James Laidlaw and Sons Inc. They run about 7,000 Panama ewes.⁴ The same standards of excellence and methods of selection are used as were practiced during the Panama development. Some of the present day breeders are the University of Idaho, Moscow, Idaho, Tom Bell, Harry Meulman and Sons, and Joe Horn of Rupert, Idaho, Moore and Nordby, Lewiston, Idaho, and D.L. Sargent, Cedar City, Utah.

PRESENT DAY PANAMA

Even though the Panama has not been bred under the auspice of a registration association it has maintained a high degree of uniformity. In relation to the total number of Panama sheep being bred, the number of breeders is small. The development of the breed has been in the hands of relatively few breeders who have followed similar breeding objectives and standards of excellence. Consequently, the Panama may be considered to be as genetically pure as other comparable breeds.

In recognition of the fact that future promotion of the breed could be aided by the combined efforts of all the present day breeders, The American Panama Registry Association was formed November 8, 1951. The association is founded upon a flock registration system, and individual registration of stud animals. All sheep submitted for registration must be inspected and passed by the official breed inspector. It is the opinion of the Panama breeders that the future of the breed association depends upon close and rigid inspection followed by rejection of any stock that is not acceptable as representative of the breed. The Association is fortunate in having the services of Bob Brockie as official inspector of all foundation stock. Other members of the Association are Fred Laidlaw, President, C.W. Hickman, Vice President, W.G. Priest, Secretary and Treasurer, Joe Horn, D.L. Sargent, Delos Huntsman, Board of Directors.

The present day Panama is a large smooth open-faced sheep well adapted to the purpose for which it was developed. Mature ewes in winter breeding condition at the University of Idaho average 171 pounds, and yearling rams in fall sale condition have been produced weighing up to 285 pounds. A random sampling of the Laidlaw flock during the 1950 shearing season disclosed that the average weight of breeding ewes was 131 pounds.

Table 1.

	Body wt.	Fleece wt.		Fleece Grade	
			1/2	3/8	1/4
Mature ewes	131	13.2	14%	64%	22%
Yearling rams	131	5.3	15%	65%	20%

These ewes had suckled their lambs for approximately two months and the weights were taken after shearing. Yearling rams off the Minidoka Desert Range average 131 pounds also. Table 1. The average fleece weight of the ewes sampled was 13.2 pounds, and the yearling ram fleeces 15.3 pounds. The ewes had been tagged before lambing. An estimate of the fleece grades indicates that the Laidlaw Panama range about 64% 3/8 blood, 22% 1/4 blood, and 14 % 1/2 blood. Selection at the Laidlaw ranch is directed toward a high 3/8 blood, some quarter and half blood naturally occur.⁴

There has been some concern as to the degree of fiber uniformity that would exist in a breed of sheep bred under a system of mass breeding. Cross-sections made from randomized samples indicate that the average Panama fleece exhibit a high degree of uniformity in relation to its respective fleece grade. While the coarser grades show a wider range of fiber diameter than the finer grades, they are probably as uniform as other white-faced breeds of the same grade.

CONCLUSION

A complete history of the Panama sheep should necessarily contain a complete account of James Laidlaw. His foresight, skill, and integrity through good years and bad have provided the Western Sheep Industry with one of its foremost breeds of sheep: The Panama.

REFERENCES

1. Robert Brockie, Rupert, Idaho
2. E.F. Rinehart, Extension Animal Husbandman, Boise, Idaho
3. C.W. Hickman, Head, Department of Animal Husbandry, University of Idaho, Moscow, Idaho
4. Fred Laidlaw, Muldoon, Idaho