

FARMING

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Years

and counting...





Randall Linebacks at Hamilton Rare Breeds Foundation, Hartland, Vt.

Randall Lineback Cattle

Heritage breed links past and future

by Kathleen Hatt

As she grazes on a Vermont hillside, her marbled black sides and white back stripe gleaming in the sun, a Randall Lineback appears as she is, a visitor from another era. Resembling the blocky cows of primitive paintings, the Randall Lineback is a link with the region's and nation's agricultural past. She may also be a long-term insurance policy.

The Randall Lineback is probably the last survivor of what were once a number of local all-purpose meat, milk and muscle power cows. Called Landrace breeds, a term perhaps derived from the concept of a particular race of

cow on a particular piece of land, they acquired distinct characteristics primarily through isolation from other cattle. There are presently about 200 purebred Randall Linebacks in the world.

On a few New England farms (and a few outside the northeast), dedicated breeders are working to increase the number of Randall Linebacks and to raise awareness about this special breed of cattle. On March 9, 2006, through the efforts of David Randall of Concord, Vt., and others, Randall Linebacks were designated Vermont's first official heritage breed.

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Randall Lineback Cattle

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A blend of bovines

No one knows precisely how or where Randall Lineback cattle originated. According to Joe Henderson and Dr. Phil Sponenberg in "A General History of Randall Lineback Cattle," prepared for The Randall Lineback Breed Association, blood types and lineback patterns point to Europe and to cattle imported to North America in the early 1600s from Normandy and Alderney. They note that a "white backed cow" is mentioned in early Plymouth Plantation reports. Importation of cows from Europe was an expensive and risky undertaking, which ceased by 1700 as cows imported earlier were bred with each other and grew in numbers. Lacking outside contributors to their gene pool, these North America-born cattle began developing and responding to local conditions and breeder preferences. Because the numbers of each Landrace type were limited, and because their casual breeding produced cattle not strictly true to type, they never became standardized or numerous enough to be classed as their own breed.

To the Randall family of Sunderland, Vt., the cattle that had acquired distinctive markings and adapted to the cold northeast were called simply "our Linebacks." Whether the herd was already present on the farm that Samuel Randall purchased in 1912 or whether he brought the linebacks with him is unknown. The advent of farm mechanization in the early 1900s had made the sturdy Randall Lineback's muscle power obsolete. The Randall family's linebacks were primarily a milking herd. Throughout the 75 years that Samuel and his son Everett farmed together, they fiercely protected their cows from interbreeding with other cattle, even castrating bull calves before sending them to slaughter.

The last known Randall Linebacks were cared for by Samuel until his death in 1962, and then by Everett until his death in 1985. When the farm was sold, the herd was dispersed and most of the cows were slaughtered. Today's Randalls are descended from the few that remained.

Why keep an old cow?

As a part of history and of the lives of the people who tended them,

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PHOTO BY PAT HASTINGS

Three Randall Linebacks at Hamilton Rare Breeds Foundation, Hartland, Vt.

Randall Linebacks in Virginia

Having a farm ideally suited to grazing cattle, interested in the conservation of critters and knowing there were breeds in danger of going extinct, Joe Henderson turned to the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy's list of critically endangered cows. There he chose the cow most in danger, the Randall Lineback, for his farm in Berryville, Va. Through artificial insemination and embryo transfer, the herd of 25 he acquired in 2004 has increased to 115.

In order for a breed to survive, says Henderson, there should ideally be 1,000 animals. To mitigate against disease or disaster, the animals should be in five or six locations. There should also be a demand for them, and to create that demand the breed needs a job. For his "pandas of the cow world," Henderson has been working with several well-known Washington, D.C., area chefs who have prepared Randall Lineback tongue, kidney, heart, sausage and the standard rack of veal, and pronounced it fabulous. From their mother's high butterfat milk, lush grass and sweet limestone spring water, the rose veal of Randall Lineback calves is a rare taste of the delicious, low-fat meat known to the colonists of 300 years ago.

In 1.5 to 2 years, Henderson hopes to have a herd of 300 (200 cows plus calves and bulls) and to be able to offer nuclear herds to breeders interested in conserving Randall Lineback cattle.