Karakul Sheep
By Deborah Y. Hunter

The Karakul Homeland

Karakul sheep are considered to be one of the oldest domesticated breeds. There is archaeological evidence of the existence of Persian lambskin as early as 1,400 B.C., and carvings of a Karakul type have been found on Babylonian temples. From their ancient homeland of Mesopotamia (modern Iraq) Karakul shepherding spread through Central Asia, staying within those areas until the 20th century.

Nine hundred to a thousand miles northwest of Kabul, Afghanistan, lies the desert of Uzbekistan. Sandwiched between Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, with capital Tashkent far to the east, this parched region is just south of the Aral Sea. Karakul sheep in traditional farming systems in Uzbekistan were described in 2007.

Here, Karakuls for pelt are kept in arid zones, while those raised for meat and wool are kept on the foothills among zones of irrigated farming. Lambs born to ewes living in the desert have thinner skin, making the pelts more valuable. Single lambs are the desert norm. The better pastures are grazed by the two dual-purpose Uzbek breeds of sheep. The habitat of Karakuls is mostly natural grazing on shrub grass, salty grass, or the ephemeral pastures (of the other breeds). Karakul sheep forage up to 20 miles each day and are the only sheep capable of drinking the very salty water found in ordinary fields there.

Karakul sheep are the main source of livelihood for more than two million people in Uzbekistan. Sheep milk, important for feeding young children, is also made into butter and cheese, meat is dried, fat is processed into tallow. Wool is used for pullovers, carpets, and ropes; dung is used for heating. In this country Karakul sheep can have 15 different colors, 30 shades, four wool wave types, and more than 20 wave forms. Karakul sheep are the family’s savings, sold when cash is needed and exchanged for other goods.

Maurice Shelton, Professor Emeritus, Texas A&M University, offered his view of fat-tail sheep like the Karakul: “...this may be the most important type of sheep in the world in terms of their contribution to mankind....[They are] multi-purpose animals and many people are near self-sufficient based on products obtained from these sheep.”

Karakuls in the 20th Century

A little over a hundred years ago, ancestors of these Central Asian Karakuls were introduced to the United States. Also in the early 20th century Karakul sheep were imported to Germany, and from there to the German colony of South West Africa. SWA (now Namibia) became a major Karakul-producing country after World War I, with the USSR heavily involved in pelt marketing at the same time.

Karakul sheep came to the U.S. in four importations between 1908 and 1929, a total of 87 head (48 rams and 39 ewes); 53 from their native land and 34 from other countries. Not only were the imported numbers small, but there existed additional pressure to quickly develop a ewe flock for Persian lamb pelt production. As such, there was much crossbreeding done in the teens and 1920s. The American Karakul was born.

Dr. C.C. Young, a Russian-born, American-educated physician, is credited with the first three imports, 1908 to 1914, from the Bokhara Province of Central Asia. The USDA in Beltsville, Maryland conducted research on Karakuls, intending to quickly build the Persian lamb pelt-producing flock. Dr. Young advocated crossbreeding with good (coarse-wool) pelt producers such as Lincoln, Navajo and Cotswold sheep; but he kept his own Karakuls purebred. We may never know why, but C.C. Young moved around quite a bit, taking descendants of his imported sheep with him, and farming in Texas, Coahuila, Mexico (along the Texas border), California, and Colorado.

Alex Albright, of Dundee, Texas, had Lincoln sheep for about a decade before C.C. Young moved 13 miles up the road to the town of Holliday, near Wichita Falls in 1909 and got him involved with Karakuls. In February 1927, Albright advertised that he had “sent breeding stock to South America, Nova Scotia, Canada, South Manchuria, Japan, and a third of the States.” Alex was responsible for the final 1929 importation of Karakuls from Germany, and increased his flock to 1,500 even during the Depression. After Alex died in 1937, his wife, Marie, remained in the Karakul business until 1949. The Albright family had struck black Karakul gold.

Charles de Bremond of Roswell, New Mexico, had ranched over 6,000 head of Shropshire sheep when he financed Young’s 1912 importation. A year earlier, in December 1911, with 100 head of Alex Albright’s Karalinc crosses and a Karakul ram purchased for $1,080, Charles was already well on his way to having the second largest U.S. Karakul flock. (For
perspective, a 1911 Ford Model T was priced at $725.) The story continues – de Bremond’s oldest daughter, Marie, married Lowry Hagerman, who inherited and embraced these exotic sheep when Charles died prematurely after World War I. Lowry went on to author the landmark Karakul Handbook, dedicated to his father-in-law, and at one point had 4,000 head of Karakul sheep.

Karakuls are unique in the sheep world because of their association with the fashion industry. They have always been bred for variable traits in order to adapt quickly to fashion changes. In the late 1940s white furs, and therefore white Karakuls, were all the rage.

In 1943, there were approximately 1,000 U.S. Karakul breeders, 10,000 registered head, and 20,000 grades and commercials, producing about 10,000 merchantable pelts per year, all consumed in this country. In 30 years of American Karakul sheep, there had been some bad marketing practices, a few exploiters, and a bit too much competition at times, but American breeders worked through, until fashion dealt a critical blow. The Persian lamb pelt market collapsed. Prices had been low since at least 1949 and the market for fine ladies coats slipped further. The market for Karakul sheep evaporated. Lowry Hagerman’s Karakul Handbook was published in 1951. The Fur Farming Journal, which started as the Karakul Journal in 1947, published its last issue mid-1954. Karakul shepherds had to come to terms with the fashion economy of boom and bust. The breed went through a metamorphosis in the 1960s and 1970s, kept alive by pockets of dedicated shepherds.

Back to the Hagerman flock – down to a few hundred, it remained in existence until dispersal by son Bud Hagerman in 1996. Still ranged in New Mexico, the descendants of this pioneer flock played a couple of significant roles between the 1950s and 1980s. One was the role of Karakul sheep in movies with settings in the Near or Middle East. “...the best suited of any breed found in the U.S.” stated Maurice Shelton of Texas A&M.

Owning Karakuls has spanned generations in more than one family. The pioneer de Bremond/Hagerman family is the longest, 85 years (1911-1996), but they are not alone in long-term admiration of this breed. A few current breeders are at

Karakuls are the only breed of sheep that can have wattles. Photo by Julia DeVlieg.

34 years and counting. When Karakuls captivate you, it is tough to let go.

Unique and Special Sheep

Karakuls, the fashionista sheep – first furs, then movies. And more, Karakuls have been studied for a longer period of time and in more countries than just about any other breed of sheep.

However, after reading this bit of history, some skeptics may still be asking “Why this sheep? The fur history is thought-provoking, but doesn’t really interest me. And the breed’s worldwide numbers seem to be doing okay. So they’re an old, desert breed of sheep; what’s in it for me?”

In one word – easy. Karakul sheep are unique and amazing animals that can take care of themselves. They:

- are rugged, disease and parasite-resistant. Karakuls are tough sheep. They can take what nature throws out, then take some more.
- have great lamb survival. Karakul ewes are some of the most protective mothers on the planet.
- are very lean and superior in flavor with mild, almost sweet meat; even aged animals.
- have distinctive wool to braid, spin, weave, knit, and felt, in a myriad of natural colors.
- are productive foragers and grazers.
- breed out of season.
- are beautiful, classy-looking sheep.

Karakuls are the only breed of sheep that can have wattles. They are one of the few breeds that can have variable ear sizes, ranging from very long to elf size, about one to two inches.

They have fat-tails. Ah, unsightly, you (may) say. Think again, though, of the benefits.

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It is not unusual to see American Karakuls in good condition with foot-wide tails filled with over ten pounds of fat. Ewes go into their lactation with plenty of fat-rich milk to successfully wean big twin lambs and remain in decent condition themselves. This is a major advantage of fat-tail sheep.

Karakuls are one of three fat-tail breeds of sheep in the U.S. Tunis sheep are second, but with much smaller fat sacks, four to five inches. Awassi sheep, new to the U.S., are third, with twin ewe lambs born March 2012 via embryo transfer from Australia.

Here is the skinny on breeding fat-tail sheep: rare is the ewe who fails to breed because her tail is too large. I have seen undocked ewes lift their tail for the ram using a lower appendage muscle. Karakul rams get the job done, lambs are born. Twinning in American Karakuls is common in some bloodlines, with occasional triplets.

A final reference back to the Hagerman flock again by Shelton: “[Karakul] breeding stock from [Hagerman] has been exported to other countries, specifically Australia, for potential use in developing flocks of fat-tail sheep to serve Middle East markets.” Because of their fat-tails, Karakul sheep have a large ethnic following, unique to the cultures of Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia. This brings us back full circle, to homeland. Karakul sheep are inherently independent and self-sufficient. Low-maintenance and reasonably isolated from other flocks are typical of farm systems that have characterized Karakul breeding for centuries.

Karakuls in the 21st Century

A group of longtime breeders have initiated a project, Karakul Shepherds Alliance (KSA), hoping to counter and reverse what we see as a declining trend in U.S. Karakul flocks. However, because of the easy-care nature of these sheep, we suspect there are currently unknown flocks. This could be good news for U.S. Karakul breeders—locating isolated, older bloodlines would diversify our current genepool.

A core group of concerned enthusiasts got the notion that a website could serve Karakul breeders by providing an easy way to find each other, share information, and advertise. From there we had to decide how to bring the pureblood, but uncertified Karakul sheep into the registry. Some breeders would need or want registration certificates. Although KSA is planning to engage with DNA testing for Karakul sheep and their bloodlines in the future, we looked for a faster, more cost-effective solution than flock evaluations or peer-review visits.

A landrace is an isolated, locally developed population that has been improved by traditional agricultural methods. In planning how to evaluate landrace flocks to bring unregistered Karakuls into the fold, it became clear to the KSA Advisory Board that a benefit exists to us. As Karakul shepherds we believe there is not much advantage in out-crossing Karakuls with other breeds of sheep, and if done is easily discernible. If you want to retain the two unique Asiatic features, fat-tails and lamb pelts, you have to keep the breed pure.

American Karakul lambs are born with the traditional pelt curls and patterns that were so sought after for Persian lamb garments. These are immensely attractive but fade quickly. This quality of the breed is visu- ally enjoyable, but transient. The life-long, defining characteristic of Karakul sheep is the fat-tail.

People who breed Karakul sheep want fat-tails, the bigger the better. There is little benefit to crossing Karakuls with another sheep breed; their uniqueness disappears. Fat-tails are easily distinguished, no breed misidentification is possible. Therefore, KSA settled, for now, on the time-tested method of using pictures and fleece samples for individual Karakul sheep that need registrations. One photo has to be a rear view. Another should be a lamb photo showing the pelt or photos of progeny showing that the sheep has the genetics to produce Persian lamb pelts.

KSA wants to establish closer contact with Karakul shepherds, and all types of breeders are welcomed. We would like breeders to connect with us and tell us about their sheep. The first Karakul Census is now on karakulshepherds.org. Our goal is to establish a network of conservation-minded Karakul breeders with whom to exchange information and ideas, buy and sell sheep, trade rams. It will be a 21st century marketplace for an ancient breed of sheep.

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