

History of the Katahdin Breed

Katahdin sheep are a breed of hair sheep developed in the United States, a small but growing element of the sheep industry in North America. There are 100 million hair sheep around the world—10% of the world's sheep population—of which 90% are in Africa and 10% are in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The Katahdin breed originated at the Piel Farm in north central Maine where Michael Piel was an innovator and “amateur geneticist” who enjoyed raising livestock. His first intentions related to establishing a sheep enterprise were to use sheep to graze power lines instead of spraying or mowing the vegetation. He then developed other ideas on how to employ sheep for land management.

Barbara Piel wrote: “From the time Michael was in high school and had a small flock of Suffolks, he was fascinated by sheep, their history and management. When he moved to Maine after World War II, he raised Corriedales and Columbias, but the market for wool set him thinking about a meat sheep that wouldn't need shearing. If the grower wanted to concentrate on the lamb market, he had no choice but to grow wool as well; so he began research and correspondence to firm up his ideas on how to produce a meat sheep.”

In 1956 and 1957, Piel began making inquiries about hair sheep after seeing pictures in a National Geographic magazine of West African hair sheep. He eventually made contact with Richard Bond of the U.S. Agricultural Research Service in St. Croix, Virgin Islands who was working with hair sheep flocks on the island.

Piel imported “African Hair Sheep,” as they were called then, to Maine from St. Croix in November 1957. All were less than a year of age, born triplets, unrelated for many generations, and woolless with woolless siblings. One female was tan in color, the others were white.

The ram lamb, “King Tut,” was used for breeding a handful of ewes in December 1957, including Tunis, Southdown, Hampshire, Suffolk, and the “African” ewe lambs. From this point on, crosses of many breed combinations (including Cheviots and other “Down” breeds), were made as Piel tried to determine what would create the type of ewe he was looking for. He was particularly selecting for hair coat, meat-type conformation, high fertility, and flocking instinct.

Excerpts from a Piel letter dated December 28, 1965:

“This season I kept about 120 part-African ewe lambs, so I now have at least 200 part-African ewes. I bred quite a few of them to my old, original African ram, “King Tut” in order to get a bunch of 3/4-breds. I bred another big bunch to another yearling ram which I had selected because of improved conformation as well as relative woollessness. This ram was part-African and part-Suffolk. The rest were bred to miscellaneous part-African ram lambs in hopes that the law of chance would shake up the genes a little bit.

I noticed this fall that I now have three or four part-African ewes that are quite a lot better than average. One is almost pure hair, with just a patch of wool on top of the shoulders and a little bit on the gaskin area. Her conformation is really quite good, I think. It is my hope that I will soon get enough of such outstanding individuals to be able to start a “family” to select from. Then I can cull back the flock drastically and start from scratch.”

In 1963, a pure African Hair ram lamb was provided to John Glenn at Louisiana State University to use in crossbreeding trials with “Louisiana Natives,” a local landrace type of wool sheep that was extremely hardy and adapted to the hot, humid climate. Dr. Glenn saw a great deal of potential in the crosses and offered a ¼-blood Native ram to Piel to reduce inbreeding pressure (though this did not materialize). However, the promising crossbreeding program was dropped abruptly in 1967 when Glenn left LSU, and his supervisor was more inclined to use Suffolks to improve carcass quality.

John Glenn wrote to Michael Piel January 17, 1966:

“We have never had any difficulty with low fertility from the African Hair rams or the crossbred ewes when breeding in April and May, or in fact, in any of the seasons. Almost all of our African Hair-cross ewes bred at the first period in April and produced lambs in September and October. I feel that this possibility of producing lambs

History of the Katahdin Breed, continued

throughout the year, as well as providing sheep that would not have to be sheared, which many of our producers consider a disadvantage since shearers are very difficult to obtain here, might encourage some of the local live-stock men to obtain a flock of sheep along with their beef cattle operation. In fact, I often think that this is the only possibility of establishing a sheep industry in Louisiana within the near future at least."

Michael Piel wrote back in January 22, 1966:

"It occurs to me that it would not be completely out of the question for an Agricultural College such as yours to obtain a financial grant from some such outfit as the DuPont people to pursue the development of a wool-less breed of sheep. After all, they are largely responsible for ruining the wool business, and it would only be to their advantage (for public relations) to demonstrate that sheep production could be profitable without wool production."

In the early 1970s, Piel felt he had come close to his goal of a "meat sheep that did not require shearing." He selected from his large flock approximately 120 of the best ewes and called them "Katahdin" sheep after Mt. Katahdin, the highest peak in the state of Maine.

In October 1975, Piel imported a handful of Wiltshire Horn sheep from Wales via Canada. He intended to improve size and bone by incorporating the Wiltshire into the Katahdins. The first crosses were born in 1976.

Paul and Margaret Jepson of Vermont had become acquainted with Piel while trying to locate Wiltshire Horn stock and decided the newly developed Katahdins would suit them better. They purchased some sheep from Piel in the mid-1970s and established the first satellite flock of Katahdins. The Jepsens then experimented with incorporating St. Croix blood (another hair sheep breed akin to the original "African Hair" type) into their flock in the early 1980s.

Michael Piel died suddenly of a heart attack in December of 1976. The Wiltshire Horn influence in the Piel Farm flock increased in the late 1970s as scale and bone improved somewhat. However, the undesirable presence of horns, decreased prolificacy and flocking instinct, and a flightier disposition resulted from incorporating the Wiltshire Horn. During the early 1980s, under the leadership of Barbara Piel and farm manager Charles Brown, flock selection was against horns, thus diminishing the Wiltshire genetic influence on the Katahdin breed and strengthening maternal traits once again.

Heifer Project International, an international livestock development charity, took an interest in Piel's work and his "improved" hair sheep. Piel accompanied an HPI-sponsored shipment of his sheep to Guatemala in February 1976 and was caught in a devastating earthquake there just after the plane landed—a very stressful experience for him! HPI realized that Katahdins were well-suited to the southern U.S. and built a sizeable flock at their center in Arkansas through the 1980s based on stock from Piel Farm and Jepsens.

Katahdin Hair Sheep International was incorporated in 1985 as a breeders' association and registry by Piel Farm, Heifer Project, and Donald Williams. The first inspection of animals for the original registry flock book was conducted in 1986 by Stan Musgrave, an animal scientist from Maine familiar with the Piel flock. The first KHSI members were accepted in 1987, and twenty-three breeders agreed to join KHSI and register their Katahdin stock.

Interest and enthusiasm for the breed has developed steadily since those early days. Ten years later, at the end of 1997, KHSI has registered over 14650 animals and has a membership of 325 breeders throughout North America. Mandatory inspection of registered Katahdins continued through 1998, strengthening predictability of hair coat and standard of type. Commercial flocks of Katahdin and Katahdin-cross ewes have become more popular for efficient, low-input meat lamb production. Hundreds of Katahdins have been exported to Central and South America, the Caribbean, and Southeast Asia as well. The Katahdin breed has proven to be adaptable, easy to manage and efficient—no wonder it is a "breed whose time has come."

