



SVF FOUNDATION, NEWPORT, RI

BBSAI NEWSLETTER

June 2020

The Barbados Blackbelly Sheep Association International is a non-profit organization, which has defined the following goals as its corporate mission:

- Raise, preserve, improve, promote and publish facts pertaining to American Blackbelly (horned) and Barbados Blackbelly (polled) sheep.
- Register and keep on file all records of registrations and transfers of American Blackbelly and Barbados Blackbelly sheep in the United States.
- Support and promote the interests of American Blackbelly and Barbados Blackbelly sheep breeders.
- Work together and exchange information and ideas that will be helpful in raising and preserving American Blackbelly and Barbados Blackbelly sheep.
- Improve the genetics of each generation of sheep, including artificially inseminated sheep.
- Develop better markets.

Inside this issue:

✓ Update on SVF

✓ Get Acquainted

Knoll Acres Farm

Roman and Elva Miller

Harrisonburg, VA

(Part One of a Two-Part Series)

✓ Welcome to New Members

Update on SVF Foundation germplasm cryopreservation project

Pam Hand, DVM

BBSAI was contacted by SVF Foundation (www.svffoundation.org) in January 2020 to request that we identify at least 20 BB ewes and 6 rams to send to Rhode Island for their germplasm cryopreservation project to be curated by the Smithsonian. In the last 18 years, SVF has collected semen, embryos, and tissue/blood samples from over 26 rare US livestock breeds – and Barbados Blackbelly will be their last addition to the collection. All the other breeds had years to participate in such an amazing opportunity, but because this is the last year of the 20-year non-profit's operation, BBSAI had just five months to accomplish this goal.

A few dedicated members (primarily Bridgett Leslie and Becky Lannon, assisted by myself and others) contacted every member we could by phone and email, sent out a mass email, a newsletter article, and did many follow up contacts to alert breeders to the project. We found fewer than 10 breeders who agreed to sell or loan sheep to the program. We did no selection of the ewes since we barely had the requested number. We were able to do an evaluation of the 15 rams nominated to narrow the list to six, and did so by examining pedigrees, coefficients of inbreeding, conformation photos, and descriptions of health and reproductive history. Since then SVF has agreed to take up to 8 rams (with other breeds they had time to collect from 10 males and 30 females).

Each breeder then had to arrange with a veterinarian to make a farm visit to collect the biosecurity/health tests required by SVF, along with the health certificate for interstate travel. Coordination with a shipper and other breeders was complicated. But I am pleased to report that to date we have accomplished sending one ewe and two rams from Rita Guill in Elma, WA; four ewes and one ram from Sundi Precht in Riverside, CA; and seven ewes and one ram from Elaine Haas in Hillsboro, MO. Lita Hazlett in Cohocton, NY just learned that her tests were all good, and so she will have SVF arrange transportation for her two ewes and one ram in conjunction with Sandy Hession, who has her testing for next week for one ewe and one ram. I will be testing eight ewes and four rams on June 18 so that if the remaining rams do not make it to

Rhode Island due to test results or transportation issues, I can make up some of the desired numbers from my own flock.

SVF is paying for all the testing and transportation, which you know is expensive! Shipping from the west coast was over \$10,000. SVF has agreed to pay \$375 per sheep or to accept the sheep as a free lease for the duration of the collection, possibly six months to two years. At the end of the collection, leased sheep will be transported back to the breeder again at SVF's expense. SVF will also breed the ewes to rams in the program before shipping, which is a wonderful opportunity to spread our limited genetics around. Also some of us are leaning toward 'trading' sheep so that we can also add new genetics to our flock in this way. I believe that sheep which are still in RI at the end of all our trading will be available to BBSAI members for \$375 plus transportation so that you might add to your own flock. We will alert you to that opportunity when it arises. SVF will continue to track the reproductive success of all those placed animals to add that additional information to the collection.

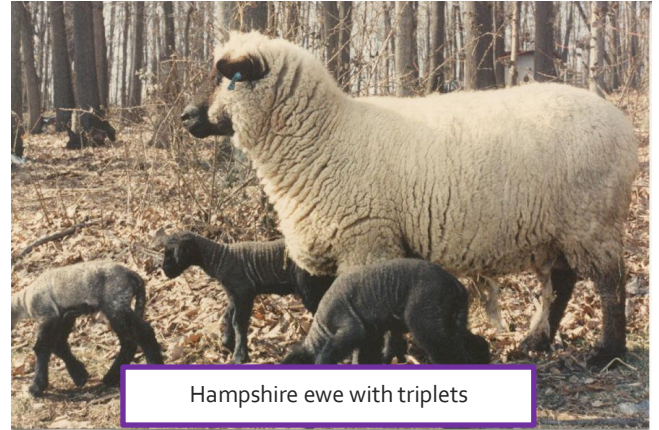
The BBSAI board also voted to donate \$2,000 to the SVF Foundation in appreciation of having this unique opportunity to help preserve Barbados Blackbelly sheep in the future. I hope you all agree that it was a good expenditure of our limited association resources.

Get Acquainted



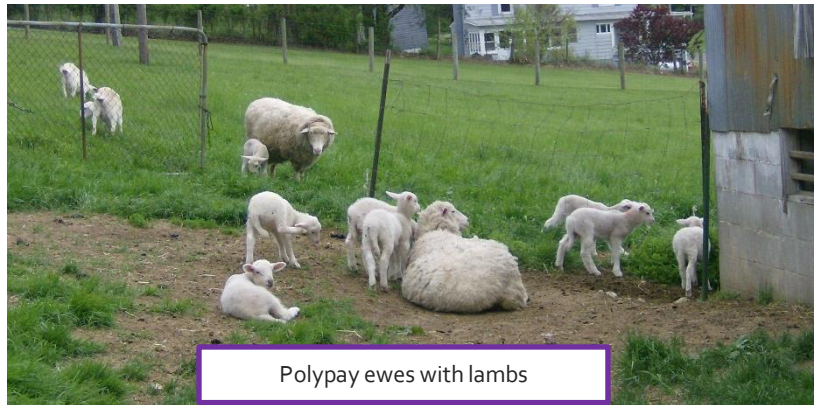
Roman and Elva Miller
Knoll Acres Farm
Harrisonburg, VA

Knoll Acres, located in Rockingham County, Virginia is the name of our farm.¹ My wife Elva and I began raising sheep in 1992, starting with Hampshire sheep² and some mixed breed sheep. Later we decided to switch to Polypay sheep³ for two primary reasons: 1) our Hampshire ewes had trouble birthing their large lambs; and (2) single lambs were most common with occasional twin lambs. We selected the Polypay breed because of their reputation of being prolific breeders – twins and triplets lambs are common; good milking mothers; also, they are a bit smaller than the Hampshires, which made the annual shearing chore a lot easier. Characteristically, they also were gentle and easily handled.



Hampshire ewe with triplets

We liked our Polypay sheep but found out that they were very sensitive to worms, necessitating frequent deworming. When I failed to do that, especially in the summer, I would lose lambs. In addition, finding someone to shear our small flock annually grew more difficult. Also, the wool check was miniscule and did not cover the cost of shearing, especially in the later years.



Polypay ewes with lambs

Our Barbados Blackbelly Sheep Beginnings

After raising woolled sheep for 14 years, we decided to switch to hair sheep and chose Barbados Blackbelly sheep. Since none were available at that time in VA, we purchased three registered Barbados Blackbelly lambs from Mary Swindell in Illinois in 2009. These three lambs (Bellwether Leonardo; Bellwether Clara; and Bellwether Lily) became the foundation stock of our flock.



Our foundation Barbados Blackbelly lambs

Our small five-acre farm, located in Rockingham County, about four miles west of Harrisonburg, Virginia, is the home for our current flock. We have about three acres of pasture, divided into six grazing paddocks, a sheep barn, a ram shed, and two

smaller moveable buildings located in two of the paddocks. During lambing season, we bring all our pregnant ewes to the sheep barn. We can readily form six to seven temporary lambing pens within our barn and still have available barn space.

Our breeding flock of sheep typically consists of eight to ten ewes and two breeding rams. The “queen” of our flock is Bellwether Clara, who in 11 consecutive pregnancies produced a total of 18 lambs. At the time of this writing she is raising a ewe lamb from her 11th gestation. By using two breeding rams, we attempt to create and maintain two breeding lines. This provides the option for people wanting a starter flock to purchase ewe and ram BB lambs from our two lines and thus begin their flocks with some genetic variability.

We try to maintain a closed flock and have minimally introduced new animals or blood lines from outside. Three exceptions to this follow:

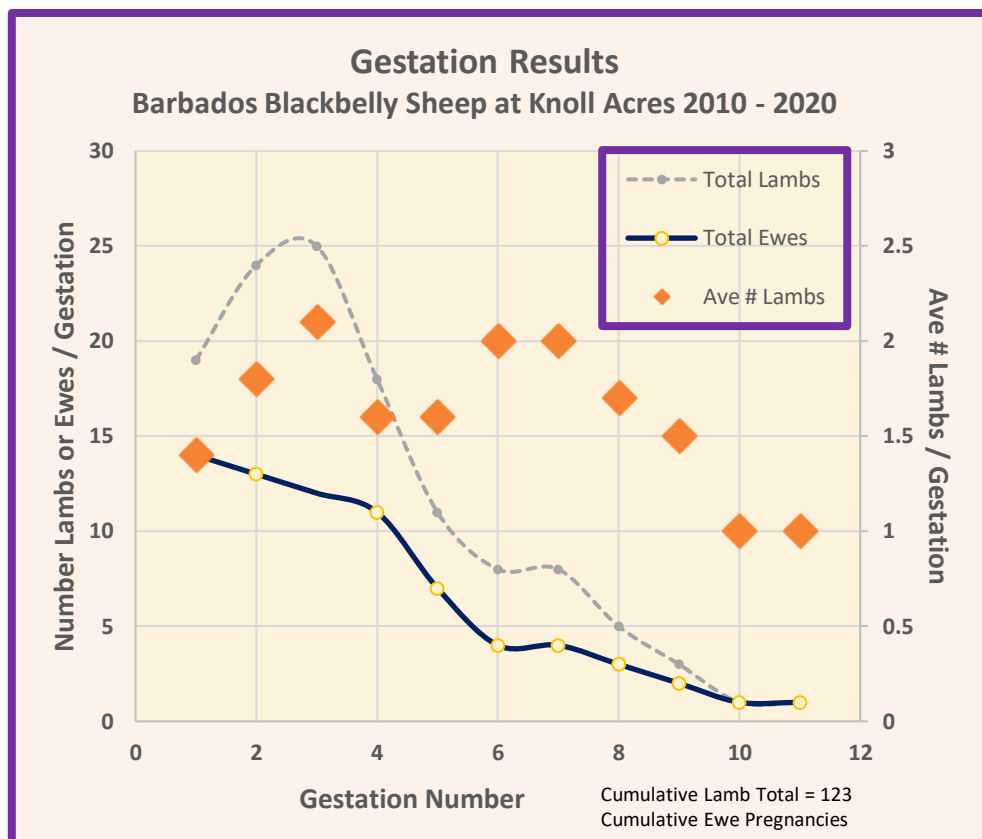
1. In 2013, we purchased a ram lamb (Winston) from another breeder. Using Winston in the following years along with Leonardo provided us with the ability to form two breeding lines with some differing genetics.
2. In 2016, we participated with Virginia State University to artificially inseminate a few ewes with semen from VSU rams. One ewe became pregnant with triplets and we kept one ewe lamb and one ram lamb (Ivan) to replace Leonardo in one of the breeding lines.
3. Then in 2018, we obtained two lambs from another breeder (ram and ewe – each having the RR Scrapie resistant genotype), which provided us with more genetic variety and a shortened path toward creating a Scrapie-resistant flock with two breeding rams. The newest ram, Ebb, replaces Ivan in the second breeding line.

Productivity and Economy

We are not raising Barbados Blackbelly sheep with the intent to make a lot of money. There are other enterprises that require a lot less labor and effort that are more monetarily rewarding. However, we do enjoy raising sheep and want our efforts to create a modest profit. For most years that has been the case if we do not count the time that we spend.

The productivity of birthing ewes is an important element in creating a positive cash flow. This is measured by the number of lambs birthed per ewe per pregnancy as well as the number of birthed lambs that survive past 50 lbs. live weight. We have found consistent twinning by our ewes starts this process off in a grand way. Personally, I like for a ewe to have a single birth the first time followed by twins in subsequent pregnancies. Typically, with a few exceptions, triplets are more troublesome and sometimes require supplemental feeding. One lamb in a triplet set is frequently a bit smaller. One key with triplets is to get the lambs exposed to creep feed as soon as possible.

The graph on the right represents our results over the past 11 years involving our 14 ewes. We typically have averaged about eight birthing ewes in each breeding season. As depicted by the beginning of the solid dark line, this chart represents gestation results from a total of 14 ewes. In each breeding season we have owned a range of three to nine pregnant ewes. Over the years we have sold some of the younger ewes and euthanized a couple of



older ones that were not thriving. The dashed line reflects the total number of lambs birthed at any given gestation season. The solitary diamonds (scale is on the right side of the graph) mark the average number of lambs birthed per ewe in each gestation. So, for example in their sixth gestation, four ewes (black line) birthed an average of two lambs per ewe (blue diamond), producing a total of eight lambs (orange dotted line). Of interest is the dip in the average number of lambs per ewe birth in the fourth and fifth gestation, representing a low of about 1.6 lambs per ewe average, which is down from an average of two lambs per ewe in the third and sixth gestation. A couple of explanations may account for this. First, in this small sample many of the triplets were birthed during the second and third gestation; second, we culled a couple of the less productive ewes following their fourth or fifth gestation, replacing them with younger ewes. Finally, the steady decline of lambs per ewe following the seventh gestation probably represents the impact of aging on ewe fertility. Furthermore, the total number of ewes surveyed following the seventh gestation is very low.

What about lamb survival? Unfortunately, I did not keep early accurate records to document this issue. Although it does happen upon occasion, I do know that post-gestation lamb death has been a rare event. Inadequate deworming is probably the major factor leading to lamb death at Knoll Acres.

Sheep Health and Preventive Measures

The hardiness and disease resistance that characterize Barbados Blackbelly sheep are factors that influenced our selection of this breed. During the first couple of years, I did not vaccinate or deworm the Barbados Blackbelly sheep at all. This was a vivid contrast to the routine way that I

dewormed and vaccinated my Polypay sheep earlier. However, I quickly set up a health maintenance program after I began to see a worm load in the Barbados sheep and lost an early lamb to worms.

Now I typically vaccinate the ewes with Covexin 8⁴ early in the calendar year, typically January or February. I vaccinate lambs at eight or nine weeks with CD & T (Clostridium perfringens type C & D plus tetanus) and then after they are eight or nine months old with Covexin 8, if they have not already been sold. I also deworm the entire flock with a drench medication, twice a year – spring and fall. I alternate from year to year between Ivermectin⁵ and Valbazen⁶. During the summer, I use a treatment of Safeguard, either as a free choice block or as a pellet feed additive⁷.

A couple of comments about dewormers are important: Do not use Valbazen and Safeguard for pregnant ewes; however, Ivermectin is safe for pregnant ewes. Safeguard is approved for goats, but not officially for sheep; but I use it because it is inexpensive and easy to use. The key to effective Safeguard use is to ensure that sheep get adequate doses for three consecutive days. Thus, if I am using the Safeguard pellets, I feed those for three days in a row. If I use the Safeguard mineral block, I remove all other mineral and salt blocks and leave the Safeguard block out for about a week to enhance the probability that all the sheep get access to it. Finally, if an adult sheep or lamb appears off feed or ill, my first response is to check their eyes for anemia and, if too pale, give them a good dose of dewormer as a drench.

When some flocks were experiencing Ovine Progressive Pneumonia (OPP) two years ago, I took blood samples of all our adult sheep to have them tested. Fortunately all were negative. To minimize the potential of OPP, foot rot, or other communicable diseases, I have tried to maintain a closed flock other than the exceptions previously mentioned.

Marketing Strategies

An important consideration in raising sheep is marketing. How will lambs be sold? Who are the prospective buyers? Earlier when we were raising woolled sheep, our emphasis was on developing a 100-110 pound market lamb as efficiently and quickly as possible. We kept an eye out for the scheduling of ethnic holidays and anticipated the increased demand for butcher lambs around those times. We typically took our lambs in small groups to the local livestock auction where they were graded and put into similar market groups for commercial buyers. During our early days of raising sheep (1992-2000), the lamb market was typically less than \$0.90/lb. and sometimes as low as \$0.65/lb. At that time, I thought we could break even if we received at least \$0.75/lb. At that same time, wool had some value; typically, the annual wool check would pay for the shearing as well as a bit left over. Then around 2000 and later, the wool prices became greatly depressed, while simultaneously the market price for lambs rose to \$1.00/lb. or greater. The ten-year average (2010-2019) for slaughter lambs is around \$1.60/lb.

Occasionally, we sell a lamb to a local person for butchering. We have a local slaughterhouse and processing place where, for a reasonable fee, a specific lamb can be butchered and processed with specific meat cuts prepared to a customer's specifications.

When we switched to Barbados Blackbelly sheep, I began with registered sheep and determined to maintain a registered flock. One of the benefits resulting from this approach is the ability to sell many, if not most, of the young lambs for breeding stock rather than for slaughter. Thus, during the last ten years, we have been able to sell all of our available ewe lambs for breeding purposes and many of the ram lambs. However, since we get too many males, some of the ram lambs do end up going to the livestock auction for slaughter.

Advertising is an important key in finding buyers who are interested in registered sheep. Our advertising is based on three approaches: (1) our farm website; (2) on-line digital farm ads; and (3) print ads in sheep/livestock trade magazines.

Our website, Knoll Acres Barbados Blackbelly Sheep⁸ is currently powered by a Word Press program and hosted by Go Daddy⁹. I have been pleased with their hosting, technical assistance, and varied services. Although I am a novice in designing and maintaining websites, I attempted to design our own with moderate success. The challenge of developing an effective website is to keep the website up-to-date and to refresh it occasionally. Fortunately, the WordPress program makes that relatively painless!

A couple of important pages on our website include descriptions of our sheep and our operation and the very important “Sheep for Sale” page. There we post photos of individual sheep or lambs; a designation of which breeding line they represent; hyperlinks to their pedigree records; and their sale prices. Typically, our prices for registered ewe lambs range from \$325-\$375; those for ram lambs range from \$225-\$275.

Using on-line digital classified farm ads is another economically feasible approach to get the word out about sheep for sale. Frequently, digital ads provide the opportunity to include a photo along with a description of the sheep for sale. Probably the most important on-line sale site is Barbados Blackbelly Sheep Association International.¹⁰ A couple of other websites that we consistently use include: Farms.com¹¹ and BestFarmBuys.com¹². I have not found classified print ads in local or regional newspapers to be economically useful due to their cost.

Print ads in trade magazines tend to cost even more than newspaper ads, but I have received numerous phone calls, emails, and some sales in response to either block ads or classified ads in magazines. Over the years *Sheep!* (a magazine which is now closed and folded into *Countryside*) was a good magazine which generated reader response. *Countryside and Small Stock Journal*¹³ is an interesting magazine but unfortunately sheep are practically lost as a feature because of the general articles typically published that deal with a host of other animals and country-style living. More recently I have found *The Shepherd Magazine*¹⁴ to be a better medium to promote sheep, especially given their interest in various breeds of sheep.

Dealing with scam calls and emails is an ongoing struggle. To separate the scammer from the legitimate inquirer, I have resorted to the following guidelines, which I posted on the For Sale page of our website (has helped a lot in filtering out the scammers):

NOTICE to potential buyers: During the past weeks, I have been contacted several times by “scammers” which has been a pain because of the time and effort it takes to deal with them. To guard against this problem during the buying process, I require all potential buyers to share

- Residential address
- Contact information (email and phone number)
- Telephone conversation (tell me about your farm and plans for the sheep)
- Deposit. 50% of cost is required to reserve a specific lamb/sheep (personal check is fine)
- A farm visit by the potential buyer is very desirable and may be required in some cases prior to a sale agreement.

The sheep pickup date (when the balance in cash is due) cannot occur until the deposit check clears the bank. Sales of sheep going outside of the state of Virginia require a health certification by a veterinarian which requires some time to schedule and will cost an additional \$55 dollars for the vet visit.

This is the end of Part One of the Get Acquainted piece by Roman Miller. Part two will appear in the next newsletter, in which he describes his experience exporting sheep to Belize. However, I have included his summary and end notes below which will also be repeated in the next installment.

Summary and Conclusion

I have attempted to describe some highlights that we have experienced in raising Barbados Blackbelly sheep. In my estimation they are a unique and valuable breed. I hope their progeny can continue to increase and spread. I do think it is important to maintain and to incorporate as much genetic diversity as possible since the gene pool is somewhat limited.

Success in raising Barbados Blackbelly sheep requires economic sustainability. Currently in my situation, profitability is heightened by the fact that most of my available lambs are sold for breeding purposes and consequently their sale prices are higher than market sale prices. In the future, other niches will need to be found and utilized for economic sustainability.

In looking forward, I want to continue to develop the Knoll Acres flock using two different breeding rams with Scrapie resistant genotypes (i.e. RR at codon 171).¹⁵ Currently my two breeding rams (Winston and Ebb) are both homozygous for the resistant genotype. Most of my ewes are either

homozygous QQ or heterozygous, QR. During the next several years as my homozygous susceptible ewes age, I intend to replace them with heterozygous or homozygous resistant ewes. In the process, I do not want to lose some of the great phenotypic characteristics of my foundation lambs, who were all homozygous susceptible (QQ). Consequently, a couple of generations of heterozygous ewes will help preserve some of those characteristics.

End Notes

- ¹ Knoll Acres Farm Website. <http://knollacres.us/>
- ² American Hampshire Sheep Association. <https://www.hampshires.org/>
- ³ American Polypay Association. <https://www.polypay.org/>
- ⁴ Covexin 8. <https://www.merck-animal-health-usa.com/product/cattle/Covexin-8/1>
- ⁵ Ivermectin. <https://www.drugs.com/vet/ivermectin-sheep-drench.html>
- ⁶ Valbazen. <https://www.zoetisus.com/products/beef/valbazen.aspx>
- ⁷ Safeguard pellets. <https://www.domyown.com/safeguard-multispecies-pellets-p-18704.html>
- ⁸ Knoll Acres Sheep Website. <http://knollacres.us/>
- ⁹ Go Daddy websites. <https://www.godaddy.com/websites>
- ¹⁰ BBSAI. <https://www.blackbellysheep.org/classifieds/>
- ¹¹ Farms.com. <https://www.farms.com/classifieds/>
- ¹² Best Farm Buys.com.
<https://www.bestfarmbuys.com/classifieds/category.php?category=Sheep>
- ¹³ *Countryside and Small Stock Journal* website: <https://iamcountryside.com/>
- ¹⁴ *The Shepherd Magazine* website: <http://www.theshepherdmagazine.com/>
- ¹⁵ Scott Greiner, Genetics of Scrapie, *Virginia Cooperative Extension Newsletter*, Livestock Update, Va Tech, June 2002, Online:
https://www.sites.ext.vt.edu/newsletter-archive/livestock/aps-02_06/aps-112.html

Welcome to New Members

Eddie Grantham, Jacksboro, TX

Patrick and Wendy Mccullough, Prineville, OR

Rosalina Cruz, Sumterville, FL

Stephen and Lynn Smith, Waynesville, NC

Vickie Palmer, Oregon City, OR

Charles and Lisa Canfield, New Waverly, TX

Charlie Fasano, Prince George, VA

Evin Eubanks, Red Rock, TX

Gary Gribble, Toledo, WA

BBSAI NEWSLETTER

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The BBSAI Newsletter is a benefit of membership in the BBSAI and is published several times per year. Articles, photographs, and business cards that relate to American Blackbelly and Barbados Blackbelly sheep are welcome. Submit your contributions to newsletter@blackbellysheep.org

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