

About Randall Cattle *By Philip B. Lang*

A Short History

Randall cattle are classified as "Critical" by the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy (ALBC), although their numbers, once fewer than 20 total animals, have increased since they were first rescued from extinction in 1985. Randall cattle originated on the farm of Everett Randall of Sunderland, Vermont, starting with his father, Samuel J. Randall, around the turn of the 20th Century. Much of the breed's history is surmised, based on anecdotal and other evidence, but the common thread seems to be that the Randall family kept, bred, and selected their cattle in virtual isolation for over eighty years. This selection and isolation resulted in the Randall breed of today, a distinct animal uniquely adapted to its environment.

The Randall breed was "discovered" in the early 1980's by Robert Gear. After Everett Randall's death in January of 1985, Everett Randall's widow, who inherited the breed, called Robert. He then helped her sell the herd, finding buyers who were interested in conserving the breed. A few small groups were sold, with a larger number of the cattle going to one owner in Massachusetts. Not long afterward, Robert learned that the larger herd was in trouble, and in desperation placed an ad in *The Country Journal* seeking someone to come forward and "re-rescue" the Randalls.

That someone was Cynthia Creech. Moved by the plea, Cynthia called Robert, and after a difficult negotiation with the owner, fifteen Randall cows, heifers, and bulls in poor physical condition found a new home on Cynthia's Artemis Farm in Jefferson City, Tennessee. Without Cynthia's timely intervention, it is doubtful that the Randall cattle would be here today. Through great personal sacrifice and sheer determination, Cynthia has brought the breed back from a total of fewer than twenty animals to the present total of somewhere around 200.

Meanwhile, back in New England, the smaller groups of animals that had been sold from the Randall farm were disappearing. When my wife Dianne and I became involved in 1993, we located and bought all of the breeding Randalls left outside of Cynthia's herd, by then just three animals.

There has been much speculation regarding the makeup of the Randall cattle. Blood-typing work has been done under the guidance of D. Phillip Sponenberg, Ph.D., D.V.M., a professor of pathology at Virginia-Maryland Regional College of Veterinary Medicine and ALBC's Technical Coordinator, but this testing has produced no conclusive findings other than to affirm the uniqueness of the breed. According to Dr. Sponenberg, writing in a recent issue of *ALBC News*, "Possible sources of these cattle are legion, and include the Netherlands, the Channel Islands, and the British Isles, along with Scandinavia. All of these regions contributed settlers and livestock to the colonies in New England and New York." ALBC classifies the Randalls as a "landrace." According to *A Conservation Breeding Handbook* by D. Phillip Sponenberg and Carolyn Christman, landraces are "local populations of animals that are consistent enough to be considered breeds, but are more variable in appearance than are standardized breeds..." It seems probable that the Randalls are direct descendents of the landrace hill cattle of New England common in the last century. They are likely the only surviving remnant of these cattle, a living time capsule kept intact by their long isolation on the Randall farm.

Physical Characteristics

Randall cattle do in fact have a linebacked color pattern as one of their characteristics, but they are a separate breed unrelated to American Linebacks or other linebacked breeds of cattle. The Randall color pattern is classified as "coloursided", characterized by dark sides, muzzles, ears, eye rings, and usually feet. These dark areas also exhibit brockling (similar to roaning), with the rest of the body being white. (The "lineback" color pattern worn by some other breeds of linebacked cattle tends to have more sharply defined solid areas or color in contrast to the white line, belly, tail, and parts of the legs.) As the numbers grow, we are seeing more and more variety in the colors of the Randalls, although the predominant colors remain black or blue/black over white. Some animals exhibit solid color on their sides with heavy brockling on the face, while others have lightly brockled sides and a nearly white face with the exception of the trademark dark muzzle, ears, and eye rings. Many animals now have mahogany, blue, or gray casts, with some being decidedly blue. An exciting development has been the birth of several red animals, a recessive color trait known to have existed in Everett Randall's herd, but only recently making its reappearance. Some all black animals (with the exception of the white line on the back and some white on the underside) have also appeared.

Randall cattle are medium in size with a somewhat primitive conformation, and all have horns. As a dairy breed, they have well-made and well-attached dairy-type udders, and tend toward a dairy conformation. Sound feet and legs seem to be the rule. As a landrace, however, they do exhibit quite a bit of variability, and despite having been once reduced to very low numbers, still maintain at least three types.

One type consistently shows Channel Island-like characteristics - somewhat fine-boned with a conformation like a Jersey, and tightly curved horns. These are to me the most dairy-like animals, although they don't necessarily give the most milk. A second type, usually the smallest of the types, has more of a dual purpose look. These tend toward a beefier conformation with shorter legs, smaller horns, and a short, wide face with a broad muzzle. A third type is larger, boxier, and has horns that are longer and more open than others. They remind me somewhat of the grade Holsteins that my grandfather in Connecticut used to milk in the 1950's and 1960's. Some animals show characteristics of more than one type.

Breed Character

Having been developed in the hills of Vermont, Randalls are a naturally hardy breed with good resistance to disease and parasites. Although not suited for complete out-wintering in northern climates, they seem only to require minimal shelter from the wind, and like all cattle, appreciate some protection from freezing rains. Access to an open shed seems ideal for wintering Randall cattle. Raised on the forage-based system that we use on our farm, and with a similar climate to their native Vermont, our cattle haven't had any trouble with intestinal parasites and we don't use wormers.

As mothers, the Randalls are second to none. Calves are small to medium-sized at birth, and none of the births we've had here so far have required assistance. The mothers are very attentive and vigorously defend their babies against predators. Many of the lactating females will accept calves that are not theirs and raise them with the same zeal as their own offspring. This fact was well-utilized by Mr. Randall, who from his retirement from dairying until his death in 1985 sometimes used his cattle to suckle veal calves.

Robert Gear, writing in the *Small Farmers' Journal*, described the Randall disposition as one of "feral intelligence". Our experience has shown that this is indeed an apt description. As a breed that has not been subjected to artificially narrow selection standards, much of the natural instincts and intelligence needed by wild bovines has remained intact. This results in their good mothering ability, aggressive foraging, and general self-reliant attitude. Halter training can take a little longer with Randalls, not because they "don't get it", but because I believe they must overcome their natural self-preservation instincts before accepting training. In the long term, this is a great asset, as they retain their training for life, and continue learning when other breeds have reached a plateau. This trait, along with their distinctive appearance, makes them an excellent choice for oxen.

Although Randalls raised on pasture with little human contact can be stand-offish and wary, they are on the whole a very docile breed. With the normal handling received on the average homestead or small dairy farm, they are gentle, trusting, and affectionate. Randall owners routinely keep bulls for breeding as most remain calm and manageable even when fully mature.

Randall cattle display a high rate of fertility. Randalls have historically been bred only by natural service. However, some semen is available and has been successfully used. Occasionally an animal may be delayed coming into heat without the presence of a bull, but this is uncommon and usually not a long term situation. The use of bulls is preferred, but artificial insemination is a viable option.

The Future of the Breed

Since they were adapted for a small commercial dairy without much concentrated feeding, Randall cattle would appear to be an excellent breed for small-scale low-input dairying, an all-purpose homestead herd, or a family cow. We manage our Randalls on average grass pasture in summer and mediocre hay in winter, and milk them in all seasons with no concentrated feeds. Milk production varies from season to season and from cow to cow, but all produce steadily throughout their lactations.

Since Mr. Randall's retirement from dairying, the Randall cattle have not been used for dairying, except for two animals that spent some time in a dairy herd in New Hampshire. While being managed for increasing numbers, Randalls have been used for veal production on pasture, cow/calf feeder steer production, beef production, and as family cows. My wife and I have seen several pairs of Randall steers trained as oxen, magnificent teams, many with a high level of training. One owner, an experienced ox teamster, proclaimed them to be the best yoke he had ever trained. As beef animals, Randalls also excel. They finish well on grass alone, producing a tasty, well marbled carcass that is the equal of many beef breeds. Today's Randall is a true triple purpose breed, an ideal all-purpose animal for forage-based diversified operations.

Breed Stewardship

At present and for the near future, the breeding is being managed according to a "rescue" breeding protocol designed by Dr. Sponenberg. The goal at this time is to increase numbers as quickly as possible while planning matings that will insure that none of the breed's genetic potential is lost. Evidence that this is working includes the increasing variations of color, including the expression of the recessive red gene, greater distance in the relationships between individual members of the breed, growing numbers of animals, and the continued high rate of fertility and vigor. When numbers are higher, a "conservation" protocol will be adopted and some selection can begin to take place.

The Randalls are still at a point where their conservation needs outweigh their owners' needs to make a profit or produce a product. A high expectation of stewardship comes with the ownership of these animals, with pure breeding and well-planned matings in an appropriate environment needed to ensure their future numbers and genetic integrity. If you are looking for an all-purpose breed of cattle for your farm or homestead and are willing to play an active role in the conservation of these unique animals, Randalls may be just the breed for you.