

Randall Cattle

Milk Production on Grass

by Philip B. Lang

Much has been said lately about breeding cattle with strong genetics for milk production on grass. This is what Randall cattle are all about. For farmers interested in old-time subsistence cattle for a homestead or small grass-based dairy, Randalls may be just the ticket.

Randalls originated in Sunderland, Vermont, on the farm of Everett Randall, who, along with his father before him, kept a closed herd of cattle derived mostly from the landrace hill cattle of the area. This herd is thought to have been totally isolated for over 80 years, surviving virtually unchanged while other landrace herds across New England disappeared by being "graded up" in the first half of the 20th century. Randall cattle have retained the high level of function required of their subsistence farm progenitors.

My wife, Dianne, and I acquired our first Randalls 10 years ago, when there were still only about 60 living animals. Numbers are now up to around 130 breeders, about 30 of which live on our farm. We keep, breed, and milk our Randalls under subsistence farm conditions. Our operation, Howland Homestead Farm, doesn't include much improved pasture or seeded hay fields, and we don't feed grain. Calving is unassisted, and mothers exhibit a strong, sometimes fierce, maternal instinct. Our herd has never had a metabolic disorder, and vet calls are rare.

Although the first thing most people notice about Randalls is their strikingly beautiful "color-sided" lineback color pattern, the breed is unrelated to other linebacked cattle on today's farms. Most

Randalls have black markings on a white base, but as numbers increase, shades of blue, mahogany, gray, and an occasional recessive red have also been observed. Size can vary a great deal, from small to medium, depending on type. We have had mature females that weigh from 600 to over 1,000 pounds.

Despite some very close breeding and low numbers in the past, there are several distinct "families" or "types" within the breed. Even though they are nearly 100 years removed from their original founding group of animals, distinct Channel Island, Shorthorn and other influences can still be seen among the herd members.

Many other individuals show no similarity to modern cattle breeds, leading us to believe that these animals are showing their landrace background.

Randalls have not been selected for milk production for over 30 years, so their potential when used in management-intensive grazing or other high-quality forage feeding systems remains unknown. We have hand-milked quite a few Randalls over the last decade, mostly on mediocre grass pasture and first-cutting wild hay. We have found the Randall breed's output on a par with the dairy/beef crossbreeds we have milked alongside them. We aren't sure of the butterfat content of Randall milk, but we commonly skim off from 1 to 1.5 pints of heavy cream per gallon for our own use. All of our Randalls have produced steadily throughout their lactations.

We have also used Randalls and Randall crosses for beef and veal in our grass-fed meat business. Because of their long isolation from other cattle breeds, the hybrid vigor of Randall crosses on Highland and Hereford females has been phenomenal. Purebred Randalls vary a great deal in their meat characteristics, usually along family lines. Many are beefy and well-marbled with white fat, while others show the leanness and yellow fat of Channel Island cattle. The use of the Randalls for beef needs further exploration and development, but seems to us to have potential



A Randall bull.

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A Randall cow and her newborn calf.

for those looking for a single all-purpose breed.

For those people interested in animal draft power, this is an area where Randalls really shine. There is currently a high demand for Randall bull calves to train as oxen, and in the last few years several teams have been assembled to rave reviews all around. Randalls are highly intelligent and are willing to work, and they

respond quickly to training. They remember their training for life and seem not to experience plateaus in their learning.

Randalls have increased substantially in numbers, but they are still considered quite rare. Like any rare breed of livestock, the best way to keep them going is to put them to work in the environment for which they have been bred. It is our fervent hope that the rumblings we've been

hearing about a return to small, sustainable subsistence-type farms will create more "jobs" for Randall cattle. It is on such farms that the highly functional and self-reliant nature of the breed can reach its fullest potential. More serious breeders are needed to keep the gene pool diverse and provide a safety net against an epizootic or other modern disaster.

Readers who desire more information about Randall cattle or a list of breeders should contact the Randall Cattle Registry, Inc., 175A Geer Mountain Road, South Kent, Connecticut 06785

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