

Randall Cattle FAQ

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What are Randall cattle?

Randall cattle are a critically rare breed of cattle native to the United States. They were historically used as a dairy breed under subsistence farm conditions in their native Vermont. Today, Randalls are considered to be a triple purpose breed. While their primary function remains milk production, they are also used for meat and draft power. Randall steers are in increasing demand to be trained as oxen, due to their high intelligence, calm disposition, and ability to accept and retain their training. The Randalls possess functional attributes passed down from their landrace progenitors, and are considered to be a living genetic time capsule surviving to the present day through their long isolation as a closed herd.

Randalls are adapted to cool climate areas and forage oriented farming systems. They have strong maternal and survival instincts, high intelligence, and are very docile when handled regularly. With an occasional exception, bulls are calm and non-aggressive, and remain so as adults. Calving difficulties are rare, and metabolic disorders have not been seen.

Where did Randalls come from?

Randall cattle originated on the farm of Samuel J. Randall and his son Everett in Sunderland, Vermont. Genetic isolation, subsistence farm management and selection on that farm resulted in the Randall breed we have today. Blood typing, anecdotal evidence and careful observation yield a general overview of the breed’s unique ancestry. The most likely scenario is that Randalls are based on Southwestern Vermont’s native landrace cattle population, with additional inputs from more organized pure breeds in the early to mid 1900’s.

Blood Typing: Blood typing done in the early days of the rescue show the Randalls to be a distinct, unique breed. Evidence of Scandinavian and other blood types seem to be consistent with historical importations that would have contributed to localized landrace breeds.

Anecdotal Evidence: Local and family accounts of the cattle and their management and isolation, along with knowledge of other herds in the area contribute to what is known of the breed's history.

Careful Observation: Long time Randall breeders who have interacted daily with their animals for a decade or more observe that different family lines seem to correlate with different body types. Some of these types are recognizable as consistent with more modern breeds, suggesting their inclusion in the Randall's makeup, while other families and types defy description, suggesting that they may show their genetic roots in the older landrace bloodlines.

Are Randall cattle “Linebacks”?

Randall cattle do have a “coloursided” lineback color pattern, but this pattern is not unique to Randalls, nor does it define them genetically. The term “Lineback” is more traditionally used to describe American Linebacks, a breed heavily influenced by Holstein blood and often found on commercial dairies around New England and elsewhere. There is no evidence that Randalls are related to American Linebacks, and their development on the Randall farm followed an evolutionary path that is inconsistent with the genetics of the typical American Lineback of today. The lineback color pattern does not define Randalls, it is simply one of their many characteristics. What makes the Randalls different from other breeds is their history and their genetic constitution and functionality, genetically referred to as “genotype”. Their outward appearance, or “phenotype” also contributes somewhat to their character in the form of conformation, but their lineback color pattern is likely the result simply of the preferences of the Randall family, and is a dominant pattern also possessed by several other cattle breeds unrelated to Randalls.

How big and of what type are Randall cattle?

Size of Randall cattle: While Randalls are often described as being medium in size, the real answer is “it depends”. Largely due to their landrace roots, Randalls are highly variable in size. There seems to be a correlation between family lines, body type, and size. A mature female of the “landrace” type may have a mature weight of 600 lbs. or less, while a female of a type loosely resembling a grade Holstein may weigh 1100 lbs. or more. Other families and types have been observed which seem to have Channel Island or Shorthorn type conformation which may weigh somewhere in between. Bulls may weigh from 1000 lbs. to 1800 lbs. or more.

Type of Randall cattle: Dairy type seems to predominate with dairy type udders and conformation while beefier animals do occur. Some animals exhibit a type which seems to have no counterpart among modern breeds and is tentatively presumed to be expressing the breed's landrace heritage.

How much milk do Randalls give?

We have avoided publishing production figures along with our components testing results due to the almost universal tendency for such numbers to be held up against those of commercial dairy cattle in intensive management situations, even though high input production numbers have no relevance to the sort of low input management that today's Randalls receive. Other than 4 or 5 Randalls that have been tried out in modern systems, Randalls have no history of such management. Since the rescue, animal numbers have been too low to select for milk production, and it is unclear what selection criteria the Randall family used when the cattle were on their farm.

Most Randall breeders who milk do so under the subsistence farm type conditions that the Randalls are suited for, some feeding no concentrates whatsoever. Under these conditions Randalls prove their worth with few health or breeding problems, long life, and lower feed costs. The numbers that we are aware of range from around 8 lbs/day with once a day milking on hay only in the dead of winter, 20-35 lbs. on average grass pasture or second cutting hay and twice daily milking, and up through 50+ lbs/day with twice a day milking with grain fed. With the limited milking data available, it is still unknown what Randalls may produce on dairy quality pasture and Management Intensive Grazing.

What is the official name of the breed?

The official name of our breed is "**Randall**". This is the *only* name used by the Registry since its inception.

History: Since the rescue of the Randalls from the Randall farm in 1985, and the re-rescue by Cynthia Creech in 1987, several names have been applied to the cattle, "Randall Lineback", "Randall Blue", "Randall Blue Lineback", and "Randall". In the early days there was no Randall "authority", just Cynthia, who owned most of the animals, and ALBC represented by Phil Sponenberg who was supplying breeding advice for her fledgling herd. Several names were tried out during that period but none was applied to the breed by any sort of organized process involving the interested parties.

In the mid 1990's, when for several years the only Randall breeders were Cynthia Creech and Phil and Dianne Lang, serious talk began about the breed name. Around 1997 the consensus was that the breed would be called "Randall", and this was what they were called in a 1999 article in the Small Farmer's Journal titled "Randall Cattle". This was further codified in the writing of bylaws for a breed Registry in 2000, and its subsequent incorporation in early 2001.

Why the name is “Randall”: It was apparent very early on that the use of the words “Blue” or “Lineback” in the breed name was a source of great confusion. Very few of the Randalls were actually blue, (and the word “blue” evoked unintended connections to the unrelated Belgian Blue breed), and the word lineback created almost universal associations with the American Lineback and other lineback patterned breeds. Also clouding the issue was the inference that “Lineback” was a “definition” of the Randall breed when in fact their color pattern was only one characteristic of an otherwise distinct and unique breed.

Why Should Randall cattle be preserved?

Randall cattle represent a unique and irreplaceable gene pool that should be preserved not only for its ability to contribute to the present trend towards local, small scale, low input agriculture, but as with all rare livestock breeds, for unknown benefits to human generations yet unborn. Many functional characteristics possessed by the Randalls have been lost in production breeds, and are eroding even in some of the rare livestock breeds. Randalls also represent an historical treasure, a living link to landrace cattle populations of centuries past.

What is the Registry’s position on Embryo Transfer and Cloning?

Animals that are produced using Embryo Transfer (ET) and Cloning are not eligible for inclusion in the herdbook. Although such technologies can be effectively used in a thoughtful conservation plan with carefully selected matings, indiscriminate use can have a disastrous effect on a gene pool as tenuous as the Randalls’. Over nearly two decades, Randall breeders have been following a breeding protocol proscribed by Dr. Phil Sponenberg. This protocol is designed to increase the influence of underrepresented family (founder) lines, while decreasing the influence of individual animals that are overrepresented. Following this plan has brought success with increased animal numbers with more distant relationships and the expression of formerly suppressed genetic attributes. The work is far from done, however, with some lines still underrepresented.

The duty of the Registry is first and foremost to protect the integrity and diversity of the Randall cattle gene pool. The Registry’s inability to regulate matings by individual breeders, or to prevent the use of the aforementioned technologies merely to rapidly increase individual herd numbers at the expense of the breed’s overall diversity, make it prudent at this time to avoid the pitfalls of using technologies that have the ability to erase years of genetic work in a single animal generation. The Randall breed, although still classified as “critical”, has come a long way from the fewer than 20 animals that existed in 1987, and present herd numbers are several times greater than at any previous time in the breed’s history. Preservation efforts must still be focused on the maintaining and increasing the diversity of the gene pool, not simply on multiplying the number of individual animals.

What about Artificial Insemination and “grading up”?

Artificial Insemination is allowed to be used as a breeding tool for animals that will be included in the Randall herdbook. The Registry encourages the use of live bulls to the extent possible as a means of increasing the number of sires used and thereby protecting the diversity of the gene pool, however AI can accomplish specific breeding objectives and may be the only option for breeders who are unable to keep a bull. Semen availability is limited at the present time, but increasing the supply is a priority.

The subject of “grading up” has been discussed at length by Registry officers. It is possible that in the future the Registry will establish a separate herdbook to keep track of animals in grading up programs. At present it is not known that anyone has undertaken such a project, so there is as yet no demonstrated need to generate a new herdbook.

What is the “Breed Standard”?

The Registry has no formal “breed standard”, other than the requirement that animals registered be free from defects or disease, possess reliable documentation, and be the product of two animals that are registered in the herdbook. The Randall Cattle Registry, Inc. is a “fullblood” (100% pure) registry.

How many Randalls are there?

Assessing current numbers requires an educated guess, as not all breeders are current with paperwork and there are a number of purebred animals not yet in the herdbook. There are likely more than 200 breeding females.

What agricultural niches are Randalls suited for?

One of the cornerstones of livestock genetic conservation is to use the animals in an environment consistent with the one in which they were created in the first place. With Randall cattle, that environment is low input farming systems, especially dairy, which allow their strengths as functional, subsistence farm type animals to be fully utilized. We at the Registry see opportunities opening up for our breed as demand for local, high quality dairy products and meats, especially those from grass fed animals, continues to rise. Randalls also can be an asset to the home economy of homesteaders, and respect for Randalls as a superior breed for oxen continues to grow.

What is required to be a Randall cattle breeder?

There are no hard and fast requirements for becoming a Randall cattle owner and breeder, however breeding stock is presently difficult to find as most breeders are building their herds. As with all critically rare livestock breeds, there is an implied

expectation of stewardship associated with ownership. Good record keeping, well planned matings and pure breeding in an environment that is appropriate to the animal's history and unique makeup is a fundamental principle guiding stewards of all endangered livestock species and breeds. For those who wish to become a part of the Randall recovery and conservation effort, the initial patience that is required in locating breeding stock will be rewarded by the day to day ownership of, and interaction with, these beautiful animals. A copy of the Registry's Breeders List can be obtained by emailing the Registry at randallcattleregistry@gmail.com.