

THE HISTORY OF THE BERKSHIRE BREED

Three hundred years ago – so legend has it – the Berkshire hog was discovered by Oliver Cromwell’s army, while in winter quarters at Reading, the county seat of the shire of Berks in England. After the war, these veterans carried the news of the wonderful hogs of Berks to the outside world; larger than any other swine of that time and producing hams and bacon of rare quality and flavor. This is said to have been the beginning of the fame of the Reading Fair as a market place for pork products.

The excellent carcass quality of the Berkshire hog made it an early favorite with the upper class of English farmers. For years the Royal Family kept a large Berkshire herd at Windsor Castle. A famous Berkshire of a century ago was named Windsor Castle, having been farrowed and raised within sight of the towers of the royal residence. This boar was imported to the United States in 1841. It created a stir in the rural press, which has seldom been equaled. From these writings, it appears that he must have weighed around 1,000 pounds at maturity. His offspring were praised for their increased size, along with their ability to finish at any age.

According to the best available records, the first Berkshires were brought to the United States in 1823. They were quickly absorbed into the general hog population because of the marked improvement they created when crossed with common stock.

In 1875, a group of United States Berkshire breeders and importers met in Springfield, Illinois, to establish a way of keeping the Berkshire breed pure. These agricultural leaders of the day felt the Berkshire should stay pure for improvement of swine already present in the United States rather than letting it become only a portion of the “Common Hog” of the day. On February 25 of the same year, the American Berkshire Association was founded, becoming the first Swine Registry to be established in the world. This society drew forth an enthusiastic response from those working with the breed both in this country and in England. The first hog ever recorded was the boar, Ace of Spades, bred by Queen Victoria of England.

The American Berkshire Association in West Lafayette, Indiana maintains the records and registry of the most influential breed of swine in the history of the world. Berkshires have had great influence upon the swine industry for the past 125 years, and the American Berkshire Association has made people aware of the importance of purebred animals.

In 1875 most of the leading herds in the United States were using some breeding animals imported from England. Therefore, it was agreed upon when the society was established, that only hogs directly imported from established English herds, or hogs tracing directly back to such imported animals, would be accepted for registration. The breed today is descended from these animals recorded

at the time or from breeding animals later imported. The most recent importation of English Berkshires to the United States was in 2000.

The Berkshire Breed paved the way for better swine production and improvement in the United States, Japan and Europe, as well.

Japanese hog breeders imported Berkshire breeding animals from England in the 1800’s and recognized the superior quality of ‘black pork’. Since then Japanese breeders have imported Berkshire breeding animals from England and the United States. The use of artificial insemination and improved semen storage methods has allowed breeders in England, Japan, and the United States to continue to share pure Berkshire genetics. Currently, some Japanese breeders import Berkshire semen from the United States every month. Berkshire semen from the United States has also been used in England.

In 1876, in the first US Berkshire Breed Publication, the following was printed, “The Berkshire meat is better marbled than that of any other breed of swine. That is it has a greater proportion of lean freely intermixed with small, fine streaks of fat making the hams, loins, and shoulders sweet, tender, and juicy. This renders the whole carcass not only the more palatable to persons in general, but are unquestionably the most healthy food. Considering these facts, the Berkshire, above all others, should be the favorite swine among United States. We ought to take all possible pains in breeding Berkshires in such a manner as to enhance this superior quality, not only for the home use but also for the foreign market.”

Today, when many in the pork industry have emphasized carcass leanness while sacrificing meat quality it is important that we re-emphasize what the founders of the American Berkshire Association knew in 1875. Berkshires produce a whole carcass that is well marbled. It is consistently sweet, tender, juicy and palatable. When consumers want pork that tastes good the Berkshire above all others is their favorite, not only in the United States but also in the foreign market.

This is the background of the modern Berkshire hog. This history is important because it explains why the Berkshire is such a true breeder for superior meat quality. Berkshire characteristics have been established and purified over a very long period of time. Breeders around the world have been working at the task of maintaining and improving Berkshires as far back as any record goes.

