



Icelandic Sheep Breeders of North America

Volume 4, Number 1 Winter 2000
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Leadersheep

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"It warms the heart and gives pleasure to pause for a moment before spreading the morning hay in the manger. The sheep turn their attention to the shepherd. It evokes a feeling of loving kindness to look into these mild, innocent and trusting eyes, full of hope and faith in the shepherd. Those are the eyes of God's children."

Asgeir Jonsson from Gottorp, 1949.

When I was a child in Iceland and throughout my early years I often heard stories about sheep that were referred to as leadersheep. As a person who likes animals I enjoyed these stories. But it was not until I had moved to Canada and had been sheepfarming for a few years that I realized what an unusual and interesting phenomenon the leadersheep are. Even though I have enquired among people of various backgrounds and ethnic origins, nobody seems to be familiar with leadersheep in breeds other than the Icelandic.

As the name implies these sheep were leaders in their flocks. Through the centuries they have played a very important part in survival in Iceland. The geographical location of the country makes habitation difficult, and, especially during winter, the weather is extremely changeable and often dangerous for both humans and animals. With a growing season of only three months, hay was usually in short supply for most farmers until the middle of this century when modern farming methods increased hay yield. Animal and human survival often depended on a considerable amount of winter grazing of the sheep, which often were the only livestock a farmer had. The sheep flocks were usually driven by the shepherds several kilometers from the farm to the pastures where they scraped the snow to find whatever vegetation was available. Often the shepherds were just children from twelve years old and sometimes they had to stay with the sheep during the day. It was a tough live that required both ingenuity and strength.

The leadersheep had many qualities that made them special. Often they were very tame and human loving. But always the other animals in the flock followed them blindly with a complete trust. The shepherd also trusted the instincts of these sheep and that trust often saved humans and sheep from certain death. The leadersheep usually had an acute sense of the weather. They could sense change on the way often a whole day before a deadly blizzard hit. In these instances they often refused to leave the barn to go on pasture. If the weather was good and going to stay that way the leader usually was the first sheep out in the morning. If, on the other hand, the leader stayed way in the barn, not to mention if they refused to leave, it indicated bad weather. Woe the shepherd who ignored the forecast of their leadersheep. Often, when the weather appeared good, the leader and the whole flock was forced out. In these cases the leader usually did his best to stop the flock or at least tried to delay the driving. Then on pasture they usually did not graze but stood alert and at the first sign of weatherchange they rounded up the flock and headed home. The weather in Iceland is

extremely changeable and often it takes less than an hour to change from sunshine to raging blizzard. In many cases when flocks were caught in that kind of a situation the leader found the way home even though the shepherd was totally lost. The shepherd trusted the ability of the sheep to find the way. A good leader would go home as fast as possible, though never faster than a speed which allowed all of the sheep to keep up.

Some of the leaders were exceptionally good at finding ways over treacherous ground where the whole flock could follow. The same applied to finding fording places across rivers. Some were good at finding good places to graze in the winter. But all had an amazing ability to find their way home. Many could be trained to follow signs from the shepherd, not unlike a good dog can. Many stories are told about instances where farmers had difficulty in getting skittish sheep from one place to another. Then the leader was sent off and usually the difficult sheep followed him without hesitation.

The leadership ability runs in bloodlines and is equally in males and females. There were farmers who bred leadership and these were usually priced two or three times over what good sheep traded for. Bloodlines even became famous for their ability and were sought after. I have been told that leadership are often taller than other sheep, and often they do not have what one would call prime meat conformation. That might be the reason why leader rams were often castrated. When in a flock of other sheep they can often be spotted since their heads are raised higher than others. They are usually very alert. Recently, when I was in Iceland buying new stock I did buy a ewe lamb whose mother is a leader. Even though she has not yet had the time to prove herself as a leader, I do have high hopes for her. She certainly carries her head higher than the rest and from the beginning she seems to watch us humans more intensely than the others do. She is also tall and thin.

During the eradication of maedi/visna (OPP) in Iceland earlier this century many feared that the leadership bloodlines would be wiped out. Around that time farming methods were also changing, making winter grazing unnecessary and thereby lessening the need for relying on the leadership. That prompted Asgeir Jonsson, a prominent sheep farmer at that time, to collect stories about leadership. Those stories were published in a book called "Leadership" (Forystufe) in 1953. This book is one of my favorites. With the permission of Mr. Jonsson's daughter I have translated the following two stories.

Svinavatns Surtur (Leadership ram Surtur from Svinavatn)

This happened in the fall roundup in 1884. A large flock of sheep had been gathered deep in the interior and a days drive over a mountain desert was ahead. In the morning, when the drive was to start a snowfall had begun and the weather was very dubious. Shortly after leaving the previous nights resting place a raging blizzard hit. It was so furious that the drivers lost sight of all landmarks and could not find their way over the desert. To put up tents was impossible on the rocks and sand and turning back was questionable. It was known that Surtur, already recognized as a superior leader, was leading the flock. He had led the sheep steadily, but never faster than so that all the sheep could follow. Under these circumstances, the Mountain King (the leader of the men) decided to leave it to Surtur to lead everybody to safety, and firmly instructed his men to stick together.

When about one third of the trek over the desert was completed, Surtur stopped suddenly and came back to the men, who were behind the sheep flock. They immediately saw that Surtur's face was so covered with ice and snow that he could not see. After they had cleared his face he resumed his leading, facing the blizzard.

For hours they moved steadily without any incidents except Surtur came back several times to have his face cleared. Suddenly Surtur stopped and refused to go any further. The men found that grass was under their feet and therefore knew that they were out of the desert, but where they were no one

knew. It was decided to stop there and put up tents, even though it was unpleasant.

At dawn the blizzard abated somewhat and then the men realized that they were at the very spot where they usually stopped after crossing the sands. Every year, since Surtur was a lamb he had stopped there at this stage in the roundup. He had known exactly where to go even when the experienced and seasoned men had lost their way.

When the Mountain King returned Surtur to his owner he said, that had it not been for Surtur's lead over the sands, several men and sheep would likely have died or suffered seriously from exposure. - This is only one of several stories of Surtur.

Kraga (leader ewe named Kraga).

In 1953, when the book "Leadersheep" was published, Kraga was still alive, born in 1944. Ten pages are devoted to several stories of Kraga. She was white, tall and a beautiful ewe. She was a leader right from her first winter.

This story is told by Kraga's owner: "One the 10th of December 1950 one of those North Atlantic blizzards hit. I had not yet taken my sheep in on hay but grazed them on the seashore not far from the farm. The evening before the blizzard I walked to my barn and was surprised to find Kraga standing by herself way back in the barn. Seeing this I decided to just catnap that night and be prepared for a weatherchange. Up to then the weather had been just fine. At five o'clock in the morning I heard the roar from the sea and the blizzard. I rushed out and managed, with difficulty, to get the ewes from the shore. A few minutes later and it would have been too late. I also managed to call my neighbor and warn him, otherwise he would have lost several sheep.

Later that winter, in early March, the weather had been good for a few days so I drove my sheep towards the mountains during the day. In the afternoon Kraga led the whole flock past the farm down to the shore where they spent the nights. One day, I was standing by the barn when Kraga came by with her flock. But instead of running past me as she usually did, she turned off the track and came directly to me. Naturally I stopped the flock and took them in on hay. That night another killer blizzard hit".

Farmers in Iceland do not use winter grazing any more. The need for leadersheep is not the same as it used to be and their economic value has diminished. But a couple of years ago I was leafing through a catalogue from one of the AI stations in Iceland. To my delight I found that this station had a leader ram standing at stud. Even though the leader is not an economic necessity any longer, Icelanders have not discarded the pride and joy of having in their flock the type of animal that with intuition and sense helped the farmer in the struggle with the elements of the far north.

BLESA

For what it may be worth I would like to add my own experience to the Icelandic stories of the Leadersheep. When I was in Iceland in 1990 selecting lambs to bring to Canada, I inquired about buying a leadersheep. Only one of the farmers in the district wherefrom the lambs had to come had a proven leader. She was a spotted black ewe. To my delight she had two ewe lambs and I was welcome to them. The one I took is black with white blaze and white socks on her hindfeet. She was rather thin and light and quick as lightning. I do not, as a general rule, breed lambs so when they were released from quarantine I kept the ewe lambs and the ram lambs in the same barn but separated with a wall made of old thick boards. One of the ram lambs managed three times to break a board in this wall and get in with the ewe lambs. The result was an unexpected crop of lambs. This first winter here in Canada Blesa certainly stood out. She was taller than most of the others and she often stood and seemed to be studying us humans. But she was not particularly friendly. In the

Spring Blesa was one of the ewe lambs that gave birth.

I was not sure what, if any, environmental factors here in Canada would influence Blesa. The Weather Service certainly warns us farmers about changes in the weather. And I keep my sheep home around the barn in the winter where I feed them hay. So I did not really expect that there would be anything special for which Blesa's talents would be of use.

It was on a Thursday in early June 1991 that I noticed that one of the young mothers did not have her lamb with her when she came home from pasture. The next day I looked for it in the pasture but did not find it. On Saturday morning, when I opened the barnyard gates for the ewes to go out Blesa kept running around in the yard bleating. All the ewes went out except Blesa. She kept running around the yard and up on a rock outcropping by the barn where she stood bleating after the flock. I thought that she had lost her lamb, but the lamb was with her. Since we were very busy this day weighing lambs, I did not take the time to find out why Blesa acted in this unusual way. She stayed by the barn all that day. By mid afternoon we were done weighing, and suspecting that Blesa had a reason for her behavior, I went out to the pasture to look around. I found one of the young mothers running frantically around a couple of apple trees bleating constantly. Realizing that something was wrong I got the family to help round up the sheep. The lamb of the bleating mother was not with the flock. When all were home I took the mother out to see if she could lead me to the lamb. She took me right to the apple trees and stood there bleating. There was nothing to be seen so I took her home. After dinner that evening I went out once more to the pasture and as I came over a hill there I met a coyote eye to eye. It turned around and sloped off into the bush and I went home.

On Sunday, when most of the flock went out on pasture, Blesa and all the young mothers stayed around the barn. On Monday I reported the coyote presence and the Government trapper came to set traps. That day and the next Blesa and the other mothers stayed home. On Wednesday Blesa went further out than before. After letting the flock out I went and checked the traps. Sure enough, we had got the coyote. Blesa led the flock out after that. Since then, I always observe Blesa's behavior when letting the flock out on pasture. If Blesa is first or among the first out I feel easy. If she is late or not eager to go I go with the flock to the pasture and check on them once or twice that day. The lamb that we lost on that Saturday in June 1991 is the last sheep we have lost to coyotes to date. However, the coyotes have not left us since the summer of 1991, we caught five more coyotes in traps. And in the wintertime we see their tracks in the snow.

Blesa had her second lambing this summer (1992). While she was nursing her lamb she stayed on our pastures and came home every evening. But as soon as her lamb was weaned she started jumping fences and go over to our various neighbors' properties where the grass was better. Most of the time she took a few ewes with her. First I was alarmed, but after a while, since Blesa always brought all home with her, I stopped worrying. My neighbors rather enjoy looking at my sheep and most have been introduced to Blesa even though she does not hang around to meet them.

I do not take the threat of coyotes lightly since we have had coyote kills every year up till 1992. I must say that I have considerable faith in Blesa. I do believe that she knows when there is danger and that she acts to warn and protect her flock. And I hope that in the future she will give me many good leader sheep.

Note: This article originally ran in two parts with part one published in the Fall 1999 issue and part two in the Winter 2000 issue. For continuity for our readers, the entire article is here. This article was originally printed in The Shepherd in 1991 and was reprinted by ISBONA with their kind permission.

