

Shorthorns In Tasmania

Farm Update: March 2024

The last couple of months have been interesting weather wise. In January we had the worst 10 days of inclement weather in the almost 20 years we have lived on our current farm. Besides the cold temperatures and snow there was a lot of ice which often causes leg injuries in the cows due to slipping. Fortunately all the cows came through it with no problem, once again showing the resilience of the Shorthorn breed. Calving will commence in the next week so optimism is high with all the unique Heritage Shorthorns that will be born this spring at Whispering Hills Farm. There is no question that the opportunity we have to optimize quality old Heritage Shorthorn genetics is rewarding on many different levels.

Historical Notes About Tasmania

This trip to Australia was the first time I have traveled to Tasmania and Western Australia (WA) in over 30 years, so many changes were readily apparent. Since there is a significant difference between the geographic and climatic conditions in Tasmania and WA, I decided to write one Shorthorn Bulletin about Tasmania and another about WA to highlight those differences. Both face additional difficulties raising Shorthorns compared to the rest of Australia.

The uniqueness of Tasmania as an island, separated from mainland Australia, has been embraced by the agricultural community in Tasmania. Distinct promotion of Tasmanian agricultural products is indicated by the “Tasting Trail” and special branding. Using the geographic isolation of Tasmania to advertise provincial agricultural products is a lesson in alternative niche marketing which can be utilized by other agricultural entities (Shorthorns included) that are faced with continual competitive marketing broadsides from social media and large corporations.

Originally Tasmania was known as Van Diemen’s Land and was settled by convicts sent there by England in the early 1800’s. Many of these prisoners turned to farming after their release. The first Shorthorn to arrive in Tasmania was in 1822 and was a grandson of the famous English bull “Comet”. Tasmania and Shorthorns were meant for each other given the lush, pastoral setting throughout much of the year in Tasmania—an

environment that Shorthorns thrive in. Like in many parts of the world, during this time period, Shorthorns quickly became the cattle breed of choice. For those history buffs there is an excellent book “The Beef Shorthorn In Australia” published in 1932, and written by M. H. Ellis, that documents how Shorthorns played an integral role in the development of Australian agriculture. A used copy occasionally comes up for sale on eBay.

Since Tasmania is separated from mainland Australia, all Shorthorn breeders looking to market breeding stock to mainland Australia are faced with increased costs for two reasons: additional transportation costs since they have to be sent by ship to the mainland and quarantine/testing requirements for those animals. Currently those costs are approximately AUS\$1500-AUS\$2000 for each animal—a substantial sum. These limiting factors have caused most Tasmanian Shorthorn breeders to look inward for sales rather than going to major mainland sales or shows, such as the National Show and Sale in Dubbo, New South Wales, Australia. It should also be noted that Tasmanian Shorthorns cannot participate in the JBS sponsored “Thousand Guineas” program that is available to mainland Australian Shorthorn breeders, who receive sale price premiums for Shorthorn beef, because Tasmania lacks a proper JBS processing facility.

Tasmanian Shorthorn Herds: (A discussion of individual herds will be presented in the order my wife and I visited them on our latest trip to Australia, in the interest of fairness.)

Woodlands Farm

Owners: Dr.Carolynn and Darren Evans Location: Legerwood, Tasmania, Australia

The picturesque setting that is Woodlands Farm can only be described as “Shorthorn Heaven”. The lush clover pastures provide optimal grazing conditions for much of the year to maximize growth and minimize stress while the herd, of approximately 150 cows, traverses the 340 acres that encompass the main farm. The herd was started in 1970 by Graeme Walsh and recently registered their 1000th Shorthorn calf. Graeme semi-retired in 2015, and the farm is now run by his daughter Dr. Carolynn Evans, a Veterinarian, and her husband Darren, ably assisted by their enthusiastic young son John, while Graeme takes on an advisory role. Dr. Evans still works part time at a Small Animal Veterinary Clinic in the Launceston area of Tasmania, but her main focus is the Woodlands herd with an intent to both build on her Father’s herd and enlarge it over time.

Having visited a tremendous number of Shorthorn herds around the world in the last 20 years, and coming from a dairy background, I have never seen a large group of Shorthorn cows with better udders. Graeme did a tremendous job in fixating udder quality in the Woodlands herd. Woodlands cows are also large compared to most mainland Australia herds with many weighing in the 750 kg to 850 kg range. Length of body was also a strong point in the Woodlands herd which plays an important role in how Woodlands Shorthorns are marketed. The focus of the Woodlands breeding program is carcass quality and commercial relevance. This is particularly important given the opportunities they have to market grass finished beef in Tasmania.

Dr. Evans' brother, Kenneth Walsh, runs another 1500 acre commercial cattle property where Woodlands Shorthorn bulls are used in a commercial composite beef cow breeding program (Shorthorn, Hereford, and Angus cross cows) to produce top quality calves that meet market guidelines for "Milk Fed Vealers". These calves are marketed directly off the cow at 9-10 months of age with weights of 400kg-500kg (880#-1100#) with a carcass weight of 200-250 kilos (440-550 pounds) with no supplemental feeding—only Mom's milk and pasture. In essence Woodlands Shorthorns have their own testing station to evaluate the growth and carcass quality of the herd which enables them to constantly appraise their Shorthorn bulls to maintain important genetic characteristics and improve their marbling traits.

There is no question that the Woodlands Shorthorn herd has a bright future given the focus on commercial Shorthorn genetics rather than show cattle (compared to most Shorthorn herds especially in the USA where Shorthorn show cattle reign). I would be remiss in not mentioning the "Australian Barbie" BBQ that Darren prepared for us. His barbecue setup is first rate and his skills in food preparation make "delicious" an understatement.

Dunroan Herd

Owners: Loane Family Location: Latrobe, Tasmania, Australia

Shorthorns have been on the Loane property since the late 1800's with M. W. Loane (present owner Phillip Loane's great, great, grandfather), establishing a Dairy Shorthorn herd in 1865. The current herd was established in 1953 by Eric Loane and was featured in the 1990 book "Beef Australia" edited by Ken Edwards and Peter Owen. I

highly recommend this book if a person is interested in the history of the beef industry in Australia. It is periodically available on eBay.

The Dunroan herd is located in the North West corner of Tasmania where there are rolling hills and very fertile cropland as a result of the volcanic basalt soil. It is an ideal setting for raising quality Shorthorns and row cropping. The sons of Eric Loane, Dick and Alec, took over the herd from their father Eric, with the herd eventually passing to the current owners: the Loane Family.

Philip, Richele, and their daughter Emily were our hosts during our visit to the Dunroan herd. Philip's main interest from an early age was mostly row cropping. Row cropping has continued to play a major role in the Dunroan farming operation as there is a Simplot vegetable processing plant in Ulverstone which is only a short distance from the Dunroan farm. Crops currently being produced under contract to Simplot, at different time intervals, include cauliflower, onions, potatoes, peas, and carrots. The Loanes also grow poppies which are used for medicinal purposes under strict government licensing.

The Shorthorn herd numbers about 150 cows. Some of the management of the herd is now under the direction of the Loane's daughter Emily who oversees many of the breeding decisions and helps maintain records. The foundation of the Dunroan herd was Horned Shorthorns. Polled Shorthorns were not introduced into the Dunroan herd until about 1980. This was accomplished through the efforts of Phillip's father, Dick Loane, who foresaw that much of the future of the Shorthorn breed was on the polled side. Both bulls and cows were imported to Tasmania from the mainland to help establish and maintain the quality in the herd as evidenced by the many exceptional females I saw there. Additional genetics were added through AI including several bulls from the USA and Canada. The Loanes want large, thick cows in their herd for the local beef trade and their cows certainly fit that mold. They are quite different than the smaller framed cows currently in vogue in the USA.

Dunroan has a long history of showing Shorthorns in Tasmania as part of their marketing scheme. They have had considerable success over the last several decades showing but have not allowed showing to change their focus on important beef genetic traits that are valuable to the beef trade and to their commercial bull buyers. They send a lot of commercial bulls to King Island, Tasmania. King Island is off the NW coast of Tasmania and has significant commercial beef herds. The Dunroan herd and yearling bulls have outstanding thickness with generally more size than in most herds located on

mainland Australia. Dunroan has a production sale in March (fall season in Australia) that is well supported. Additional breeding stock is sold mostly within Tasmania, with occasional sales to mainland Australia. All of their finished steers go to a domestic Tasmanian processor. The Loanes see a bright future for Shorthorns in Tasmania despite the cost production obstacles they face.

Conclusion:

Based on the Shorthorn herds I visited in Tasmania, the style and size of the cattle I saw were more to my liking than what is presently being bred for the Shorthorn show industry in the USA. Tasmanian Shorthorns have a real utilitarian value and Tasmanian Shorthorn breeders have not been blinded by the trophy/ribbon industry as is seen in the USA. I think any independent thinking, progressive Shorthorn breeder would find much to like in Tasmanian Shorthorns.

Future Topic: Shorthorns In Western Australia