

THE SUFFOLK TRINITY: A Reunion in Rural America

by C. Nelson Hoy, Forester, Rancher and Conservationist

Editor's note: The following essay was originally published in "Red Poll Beef Journal", the flagship newsletter of the American Red Poll Association. The goal of this essay is to create awareness among students, citizens and officials of the critical need to live into a conservation ethic, to ensure the genetics of our heritage livestock breeds and to stimulate interest in progressive stewardship.

WILLIAMSVILLE – Small family farms in the Norfolk and Suffolk Counties of Great Britain during the sixteen, seventeen and eighteen hundreds developed three fine breeds of livestock now renown in English agricultural history as the Suffolk Trinity – Suffolk draft horses, Red Poll cattle and Suffolk sheep. All three livestock breeds were exported to the United States primarily in the eighteen hundreds.

Red Poll Cattle – Red “muley” cattle, a cross between English Norfolk and Suffolk cattle, were common in colonial Virginia in the early seventeen hundreds. The modern Red Poll breed was developed in the early eighteen hundreds by breeding the same two relatively pure landrace strains. Suffolk Dun cattle were a polled dairy breed well-regarded for producing a plentiful supply of milk that was high in protein and butterfat. Norfolk cattle were recognized by butchers and connoisseurs throughout the British Isles for easy grass-fed marbling and the highest quality meat. Red Poll cattle were recognized in Great Britain as a separate breed in 1846 and subsequently imported into New York State in 1873.

The Livestock Conservancy judges the Red Poll cattle breed as “threatened” because its numbers are declining in Great Britain, North America and globally. With the Holstein milk cow dominance of the dairy industry since the 1960s, Red Poll cattle have been used less and less for milk production except, perhaps, in specialized and small-scale cheese manufacturing. Black Angus and Hereford cattle, in the same time frame, achieved dominance over Red Poll cattle in the corn-fed and commercial beef industry. Because Red Poll maternal genetics are distantly related to most other breeds, cross-breeding Red Poll cows with bulls from other breeds benefits the farmer in the short-term with off-spring calves demonstrating a considerable hybrid vigor. But cross-breeding dilutes the Red Poll breed genetics because the same farmer does not have the incentive to raise pure-bred stock.

Because Red Poll genetics sprang over 200 years ago from two relatively pure landrace strains and because Red Poll breeders for two centuries since did not mix in other bloodlines; Red Poll cattle today throw several characteristics that make their genetics well worth saving, including: a docile temperament (ideal on a small family farm), superior feed efficiency (as measured by the U.S. Meat Agricultural Research Center), renown in Great Britain for producing a well-marbled carcass on native grasses and legumes (the Queen of England owns the largest herd in the world), easy calving with strong maternal traits and an abundant supply of butterfat-rich milk.



Berriedale Farm's Red Poll Bull "Lakota"

Suffolk Draft Horses – One hundred years ago there were millions of draft horses working in the forests, on farms and ranches, and in cities and towns throughout North America. Today there are comparatively few draft horses in harness and even fewer knowledgeable, experienced and skilled draft horsemen.

The Suffolk draft horse is the oldest breed of heavy work horse in the United States and Great Britain. The breed was originally developed by small family farms in East Anglia region of England during the seventeen and eighteen hundreds. In those days, Norfolk and Suffolk Counties were relatively isolated by the North Sea on three sides and a huge fenland or marsh on the west side making commerce difficult with other English farms. Suffolk farmers bred these draft horses for heavy farm work with well-muscled shoulders and necks, large hearts and lungs, short legs with thick bones and strong joints, broad and strong backs and hind-quarters. Because these draft horses were used for the most basic and essential of farm work, Suffolk County farmers had few or none to sell and thereby, helped to preserve the breed without outside influences. Suffolk draft horses stand on average between 16 and 17 hands

and weigh in fit condition between 1,700 and 1,900 pounds. The breed is well known for being docile and even-tempered, hugely willing to please and doing so with “heart”, a powerful and energetic low-to-the-ground gait, and being work horses of good health and with longevity. Suffolk draft horses are always a beautiful and rich chestnut color.



Bonnie & Dolly Pulling Timothy Hay to Berriedale Red Poll Cows

Berriedale Farms is making a stewardship commitment to the critically threatened Suffolk draft horse. Also known as the Suffolk Punch, this rare breed was bred by small family farms in England for use in heavy farming and forestry work and during war time for hauling field artillery pieces. Suffolk draft horses were never bred for road haulage or for show. At Berriedale Farms these Suffolk draft horses haul 700 pound bales of timothy hay to our Red Poll cattle in the late fall, winter and early spring, drag pastures with a three hundred pound chain harrow that sports 5/8 inch tangs, spread clover and orchard grass seed on the farm's pastures, carry guests and visitors on wagon rides in the spring, summer and fall, and skid firewood and timber from our Appalachian hardwood forests. Other small farms in rural America employ Suffolk draft horses in mowing, raking and baling hay. Berriedale Farms has joined the ranks of at the most a dozen farms in the United States that use Suffolk draft horses for farm work on a daily basis. And Berriedale is most likely the only farm in the United States that conserves both

Red Poll cattle and Suffolk draft horses -- two pillars of the "Suffolk Trinity".

Suffolk Sheep – Suffolk sheep were developed in England during the later 1700s by crossing Southdown rams with Blackface Norfolk Horned ewes. Old-breed Southdown Sheep were relatively large dual purpose sheep with broad loins and thick thighs. Blackface Norfolk Horned sheep were a muscular and hardy breed, adapted to thriving on poor forage in rugged terrain. Small family farms in Norfolk and Suffolk Counties perfected the Suffolk sheep breed primarily for meat production and secondarily for wool. Suffolk sheep were recognized in Great Britain as a separate breed as early as 1810 and introduced into New York State in 1888.



Suffolk Sheep in Snow, Highland County, Virginia
Photographic Credit Hereby Given to Martin & Julie Macqueen
of Covington, Virginia

In the British Isles, Suffolk sheep became prized as a fine meat-producing breed. Mature Suffolk rams weigh between 250 and 350 pounds. Mature ewes weigh between 180 and 250 pounds. Suffolk lambs grow rapidly both before and after weaning. In America, research sponsored by the U.S. Sheep Experiment Station in Dubois, Idaho and conducted in collaboration with the Department of Animal and Poultry Science of Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, Virginia shows that Suffolk rams used in cross-breeding programs produce equal or superior lamb survival rates, lamb feed efficiency, lamb growth rates, lamb muscle mass, and lamb carcass leanness compared with several other breeds. Suffolk ewe genetics are valued for easy lambing, generous milk production, wide pelvic dimensions and hard hoofs. Suffolk lamb meat is fine-grained, relatively lean and superbly flavored.

Suffolk sheep produce a medium-grade wool. A mature Suffolk ewe produces between five and eight pounds of fleece with a yield of 50% and perhaps, 60% plus. The wool fiber is 25 to 33 micrometers in diameter and 51 to 89 millimeters in length. The spinning count is between 48 and 58 hanks per pound. Suffolk wool is primarily used for blankets and quilt stuffing. Skilled fiber artists, however, find that Suffolk sheep, depending upon the animal's age produce a versatile wool that has a moderate amount of lanolin, an excellent crimp, good loft and memory. Applications for graded wool include scarves,

shawls, sweaters, mittens, blankets and quilt stuffing.

Berriedale Farms – In the Cowpasture River Valley of Virginia, Berriedale Farms has re-established the historic partnership between Suffolk draft horses and Red Poll cattle. Nelson's and Lizzie's stewardship commitment to work a small family farm with two Suffolk draft horses and to care for its herd of Red Poll cattle with these draft horses was a life-changing decision. It created an opportunity to bond with our grandfathers grandmothers in memory and spirit, and to drive a team of two-in-hand while running a ranch and raising cattle.

Further Information Sources:

- American Red Poll Association See: <http://www.americanredpolls.com/>
- American Suffolk Horse Association See: <http://www.suffolkpunch.com/>
- United Suffolk Sheep Association See: <http://www.u-s-s-a.org/>
- Livestock Conservancy See: <https://livestockconservancy.org/>