

**Florida Cracker Sheep**  
**A Forgotten Part of Florida's History**  
**By Ralph Michael Wright**

Until recently, historians have focused their attention on the Churra sheep that were introduced in the 1500's by Spanish missionaries and explorers through Mexico, into the Southwestern United States, describing them as the first European sheep in America.

This paper seeks to correct the mistakes and misconceptions offered by previous writers and historians, relying on facts, not assumptions. And while it is impossible to say with certainty that any current breed of sheep was the first, or is the oldest breed of sheep in the United States, it is safe to say, that based on historical records, Florida Cracker Sheep are one of the oldest breeds of sheep in North America.

### **The Sheep and Their Origins**

The origin of Spanish sheep is known to be very complex since they are the result of different influences of livestock accompanying the multiple invasions that reached the Iberian Peninsula throughout history. It is thought that the first sheep reached Spain with Phoenician traders, who introduced sheep both overland routes across Europe from Asia Minor into North Africa, and by maritime colonization through what would later become the port of Cadiz, Spain, and.

Constant hostilities by invading immigrants caused farm animals to be valued more than land. Farm animals had to have the endurance to move vast distances at a moment's notice. The early settlers of what is now Spain often had to leave their weaker animals and relatives behind, thus leaving the stronger Iberian people and animals to pass on their genetics to future generations. These people lived in harsh rugged climate and terrain, which forced the survivors to develop a strength and endurance equal to the challenges of the land.

Sheep remains found in primitive Iberian excavations, dated circa 300 BC, show a similar morphology to that of modern Churra sheep and support the idea of the very early presence of these sheep in the Iberian Peninsula. The presence of haplotype C in the Iberian Peninsula might have its origin in the Arab influence (from 711 AD onward). However, the peculiarity of the Iberian breeds in which haplotype C was identified suggest a different scenario with a much earlier arrival of this type to the Peninsula. Altogether, these introductions resulted in a breed that shows a much higher degree of within-breed genetic diversity with an average breed haplotype diversity substantially above that observed in central European breeds, as well as the presence of maternal lineages until now only found in the Middle East and Asia.

As early as the 1200's, Churra sheep were confined to the estuarine marshes that the Spanish rulers considered as a wasteland, while Merino sheep, so valued by the Spanish royalty, had access to the best pastures in the mountains in summer and the lush valleys in the winter. The salinity levels in these estuarine marshes were high enough to kill off the subaquatic vegetation in mid-summer, while even the soils of the freshwater equivalent are slightly saline. Although partly submerged between mid-winter and early May, the freshwater marsh provided prime, seasonal pastures in the form of islands within the marsh.

Churra sheep have always been able to survive under difficult circumstances and are prized even today by the Spanish for its remarkable hardiness, adaptability and reproduction rate. Churra sheep represent the most ancient Iberian sheep type originating from the first sheep populations that reached the Iberian Peninsula. As the weather warms, the wool fleece on their bellies is shed, leaving only the hair behind. This is a practical adaptation to their environment, and by growing both hair and wool, some scientists have even considered the Churra to be a link between wool sheep and those first domesticated wild hair sheep.

When we think of the Churra sheep, we think of the breed that was the ancestor of our

Florida Cracker Sheep. It might surprise you to know that there was not one Churra breed, but many. Even today, there are nine Churra breeds in Portugal, and four in Spain. Churra is Spanish for scrub sheep, which seems appropriate, since at one time the Florida Cracker Sheep were referred to as Florida Scrub Sheep.

And of these various Churra breeds, the Churra Lebrijana Sheep is considered the most primitive breed of sheep of the Iberian Peninsula. It is well known for its robustness and adaptability to harsh environments. They were originally raised in large areas of the valley of the Guadalquivir River. The high degree of variability point to the Churra Lebrijana as being a rich reservoir of genetic diversity, and some researchers consider the Churra Lebrijana as the most extreme of all breeds.

The Churra Lebrijana (also known as Churra Marisma Sheep, or Churra Marsh Sheep). of today looks much different than Churra Lebrijana of five hundred years ago. The remnants of this critically endangered breed (it is thought that only 200 Churra Lebrijana exist today) now survive in the areas around small towns in the provinces of Huelva and Seville, and the Algarve region of Portugal. Today they are considered primarily a dairy breed, and their milk is used in the manufacturing of cheese, that are either local (Villalón, Burgos), or Queso Zamorano, which is made from the milk of both Churra and Castellana sheep, and is the most famous of Spanish cheeses.

### **Coming to America**

There are a number of websites which state that Merino sheep were the first sheep brought to America. However, that could not have been possible. Spain had gained its massive wealth from the wool trade. This trade was based upon Merino wool and was instrumental in financing the voyages of Columbus and the conquistadors. They were the source of the country's wealth, thus Spain made it illegal to export any Merino sheep under penalty of death. This law was not changed until 1787.

On September 24, 1493, Columbus set sail from Cadiz, Spain for a large scale voyage of

colonization and exploration of the New World. The Spanish rulers had given Columbus 17 ships and about 1200 men, along with the funds to purchase livestock to set up a foothold in the New World. Listed in the manifest of this first load of goods and livestock were 24 stallions, 10 mares, eight pigs, and an unspecified number of cattle, sheep, goats, and chickens. These sheep would most probably have been the Churra Lebrijana, which was the predominant breed in the area around the port of Cadiz and would have been the most easily obtained for the journey.

Columbus's father was a respected weaver. And in his early life Christopher Columbus himself worked in his father's business as a "lanerio," or wool weaver and was registered as a member of the weaver's guild. Even though he gave up his occupation as a wool weaver to be a sailor, it is thought that he would have chosen sheep with good quality the wool to accompany him to the New World.

An important, but often overlooked consideration in transporting livestock via ship over vast spans of ocean, is that they tend to get sick and die. Additionally, the feed and water it takes to support them is immense. To offset these issues, Spanish livestock was moved from the mainland of the Iberian Peninsula to the Canary Islands. This allowed them to get used to the being transported by ship. As the needs of the colonizers were drawn down from the islands, the animals were replenished from Spain. However, there is something in this story that has been overlooked by most historians:

The Canary Islands had been settled in the distant past by a people who raised, among other livestock, hair sheep. These sheep were described by colonists as white in color, large in size, with the rams having horns. By 1404, the Canary Islands had been permanently occupied by Spain, and these islands became a way station for many exploration and colonization voyages, as a crossroads between Europe and North Africa, and eventually between Spain and America.

It is thought by some historians, that when Columbus sailed from the Canary Islands, some of these Canary Island hair sheep would have been taken aboard his ships to the Americas.

It stands to reason that because of the limited space on the small ships, these hair sheep would have been penned up with the goats and Churra Lebrijana. If that was the case, they would have interbred with the Churra Lebrijana on their journey and interbred after arriving in the New World.

## **Into Florida**

On this second voyage of Columbus, in 1493, there was a Spanish noble by the name of Juan Ponce de Leon. He started farms and built settlements in Hispaniola, selling produce and livestock to Spanish ships. In 1513, Ponce de Leon was granted permission by Spain to explore the islands of the Caribbean, and in doing so discovered Florida.

Ponce de Leon returned to Florida in 1521 to start a Spanish Colony. He brought seeds to plant and livestock (cattle, pigs, horses, sheep, and goats) to support the 200 Spanish colonists he had with him to set up this agricultural community. He is thought to have landed on the west coast of Florida, in an area between Charlotte Harbor and Estero Bay. After his men off loaded their livestock, they were attacked by the Calusa Indians. The men fled to their ships, leaving the animals behind. It is not known if any of the sheep, cattle, horses, goats or hogs survived long in the wilderness. But these were the first documented European livestock in North America.

In 1540, Don Diego Maldonado brought large herds of livestock; sheep, cattle, and horses to the Pensacola Bay area to supply Hernando De Soto's ongoing exploration of the Spanish Southeast. Maldonado was unable to find De Soto's expedition and many animals were left to run wild or given to local tribes

The next attempt to create a settlement came in 1565, when Pedro Menendez de Aviles founded St. Augustine as the first permanent settlement in North America. Aviles had a contract with King Phillip II that was issued March 20, 1565. This contract stated in part, that Menendez was to sail in May of 1565, with ten vessels, carrying arms and supplies, and five hundred men, one hundred of whom were to be capable of cultivating the soil.

He was to take provisions to maintain the whole force for a year and was to conquer and settle Florida within three years; explore and map the coast, transport settlers, and to introduce horses, black cattle, sheep, and swine for the two or three distinct settlements.

Many of the early settlers with Menendez had some sort of relationship to the rearing of livestock, worked in one form or another in the field, or simply having come from regions of Spain that were traditionally pastoral. They would have been familiar with sheep and their uses and brought knowledge of sheep farming with them. And while we may think of Spanish colonizers as invariably in search of gold, a great many were hoping to possess land and livestock, the traditional source of wealth in their homeland.

Florida held the earliest and largest group of Christian missions at approximately 100 sites. Ranching was born when Jesuit and Franciscan Friars set up this system of missions across north and north-central Florida. Their objective was to convert Indians to Christianity, but the Friars also used Indian labor to tend livestock and crops. These were the first established ranches in North America. As these Spanish missions were established, shepherds were sent from Spain to raise and care for the mission's sheep, and to teach the Native American converts how to care for them.

As time went on, Florida passed from Spanish leadership, to British, to Spanish again, and finally into American hands. During all of this political turmoil, Spanish missions were abandoned for one reason or another. The sheep that had been raised at those missions were left to fend for themselves.

The sheep that survived in this hostile environment were the sheep that were able to adapt to their environment. Their genetics allowed them to be very hardy, disease resistant, pest resistant, and low maintenance, with no problems lambing.

Predators were the biggest obstacle to their survival. This was most obvious during the lambing season, which occurred in the late Winter and early Spring. It was recorded that each year, only 70 % (and in some cases as few as 40%) survived the onslaught of alligators, bears, foxes, dogs, eagles, bobcats, panthers, black buzzards, hogs, and in some

cases, men.

Among natural predators not normally considered were mosquitoes. It is well documented that cowhunters covered their faces and the muzzles of their horses, while taking cattle across the St. Johns River during the Civil War to protect themselves. Cowhunters lost many cattle to the hordes of mosquitoes that would fill the cattle's nostrils and suffocate them. Even today, there are still tracts of land in Central Florida that lose cattle and wild hogs every year to mosquitoes.

It was recorded that in the 1800's, The sheep were almost feral, running free and surviving on their own, without the aid of man. The sheep ranged in groups during the day over an area of many miles and came together at night in a bedding place where they slept. When winter approached, the rams separated from the ewes and flocked together in bunches of 10 to 50 and fed by themselves. On the other hand, the ewes would normally divide up in groups of 2 to 5, keeping within sight of each other and other groups of ewes, and usually came together at night.

Each Spring, Cowhunters on horseback, with whips and dogs rounded up the sheep and drove them to a holding area where each man's sheep were separated by their earmark or whatever other mark the owner might have used. The lambs were allowed to stay with their mothers. Lambs without mothers were divided among all of the owners. The best and most vigorous ram lambs were set apart as sires, and the remaining ram lambs were castrated for market. When the marking, castrating and shearing were done, the sheep that were not retained for meat or market were turned loose again and left to survive on their own until the next Spring. During the summer and fall great flocks of these sheep roamed unattended through the pine woods, feeding on what they could find.

While there were problems at times with cattle rustlers and horse thieves, sheep could not be stolen in large numbers because it was difficult to round them up and drive them away. Florida proved to be the ideal environment for these sheep, and they not only survived, but increased dramatically. Prior to the Civil War, Florida was the leading sheep

producing state, and during the war, Florida Cracker wool was used in most Confederate uniforms. Later, Florida Cracker sheep provided most of the wool in the South prior to World War II.

### **Florida Cracker Sheep Today**

Florida Cracker Sheep, as previously described, have a high degree of genetic variability (i.e. more diverse genes in their genetic code). They generally possess more diverse phenotypes and genotypes than other breeds. This genetic variability is easily seen, as some animals are taller, some shorter, some have rat-tails, while others have full tails, etc. They possess relict characteristics or genetic variants that are either absent in most modern domestic stock or exist only in rare breeds. But there are also a number of unseen, non-visible traits that have allowed them to survive.

Florida Cracker Sheep are often more adaptable to a wider variety of climates and environments, because the genetics are there. Through hundreds of years, they have grown and adapted to the changes in the ever-changing environment in Florida. The sheep with the genetics best suited for survival in Florida passed on those traits to future generations, adapting to new changes and challenges as they were encountered. The end result is seen in the Florida Cracker Sheep of today, that still possess primitive genetics that allow them, as the need arises, to adapt to cold or hot temperatures, high wind, poor forage, minimal water, etc.

Modern breeds have intentionally lost this genetic variability as they have been bred toward uniformity. While they are ideally suited for a single situation, if that situation changes, they are at a disadvantage.

Formerly called Florida Native sheep, the name was changed to Florida Cracker sheep to better reflect their heritage and to differentiate them from other breeds using the name “native”. A statewide census was done to locate and document flocks that might still exist. This census included contacting every county extension office and state laboratory, as well

as colleges and universities throughout the state. During the census, one previously undocumented flock was discovered. That flock had existed on a large ranch in South Florida since at least the 1870s. When unforeseen events created the possibility of these sheep being sold for slaughter at a livestock market, association members stepped in and purchased the flock.

The breed was initially placed in the “Study Category” by the Livestock Conservancy, and when DNA results proved that Florida Cracker Sheep were a distinct breed, they were moved to the “Critically Endangered Category.” The Florida Cracker Sheep Association was formed in 2007. Today, breeders, wool enthusiasts, conservationists and historians are all working to ensure this living part of Florida's agricultural heritage is not lost.

We are now secure in the knowledge that Florida Cracker sheep are in the hands of members who are dedicated to the conservation of this important part of Florida's agricultural heritage. They have survived under the most difficult of circumstances for almost 500 years in Florida because of their unique genetics, and it is these genetics that are the key to Florida Cracker Sheep surviving into the next century.

When asked what the advantages of raising Florida Cracker Sheep are as compared to other breeds of sheep, this list will provide some answers:

- Parasite resistance
- Fine-grained, low-fat meat
- Heat and cold tolerant
- Good temperament
- Excellent lamb production
- Year-round breeding
- Good mothers
- Foot Rot resistance
- Non-selective grazers
- Good flocking instinct
- Early puberty
- High lambing percentage
- Lamb at 12 months or earlier
- High survivability

- Good milk production