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The Colonial Williamsburg

ANIMAL NEWS



PAMPHLET FILE

MINOR BREEDS CONVENTION COMING JUNE 3-5

by Elaine Shirley

Colonial Williamsburg is a favorite spot for conventions and so there will be a convention coming to town that our animals will be attending. The American Minor Breeds Conservancy (AMBC) will be here for their annual convention June 3-5, 1988.

The AMBC is loosely patterned after a British group called the Rare Breeds Survival Trust. Both groups are concerned with the dramatic decline in population of some domesticated breeds of animals. There have been groups concerned about wild animal populations for several decades, but it has only been very recently that people have begun to worry about our old breeds of livestock.

Modern farming techniques demand fertilizers, special types of plants and certain breeds of livestock for high efficiency and to achieve the type of product the modern consumer wants. Many old breeds of livestock, the Devon cattle, the English Leicester sheep, the Dominique chicken, the Lincoln curly hog and others, are extinct or existing in very low numbers because they are not considered important for today's "modern" farming. AMBC members believe these old breeds must be preserved because of their historic significance and because they may possess traits which could be important in future farming. In some places these minor breeds are indeed becoming useful again in today's agriculture. For instance, the Tamsworth hog is doing very well in Australia because its dark skin prevents sunburn.

The AMBC members are a very diverse and interesting group of individuals, museum professionals, agriculture professors, scientists, ecologists, farmers, and backyard enthusiasts. Their convention will offer many lectures on a variety of subjects including oxen, Spanish horses, how to furnish the barnyard in a museum setting, poultry in North America, and more. If you are interested in attending any of the lectures and would like to see a complete convention schedule, call us at 2491. The meeting and lectures are open to anyone who is interested.

Colonial Williamsburg has become concerned with minor breeds because we would like to use animals which are correct for our time period and conserve some of these minor breeds for future generations. We believe we can provide a good foundation for several rare breeds, hence our interest in the English Leicester.

Minor breeds can be a challenge to raise. Inbreeding with a small population is always a problem, individual feed requirements may be

different, and just locating certain breeds can send you halfway around the world. However, bringing a population of animals back from low numbers or reintroducing a breed to this country (like we are doing with our English Leicester sheep program) is a very exciting and rewarding task. We are looking forward to having the AMBC here to visit with us. Join in if you can!



ENGLISH LEICESTER SHEEP TO BE ACQUIRED

A long established plan to add Leicester ewes to our flock has finally come to a head. Fund-raising efforts have succeeded in drawing the kind of response needed from many caring people to bring us to the point of making definite plans to import from Australia several top grade English Leicester sheep.

We will select one ram (to replace Willoughby) and five yearling ewes bred to different rams. Sheep from various farms and bloodlines will allow us to establish a pure bred flock of Leicesters who will not be closely related to each other and we will be able to avoid inbreeding in the future. Breeding closely related animals, or inbreeding, enhances weaknesses in the offspring and is therefore highly undesirable.

The reasons these animals must be imported from Australia is they are a rare breed simply unavailable in this hemisphere. There are Leicesters in England, but the quarantine is too severe on sheep imported from the mother country. That leaves us with Australia.

As an alternative to the expense of importing sheep, we considered the possibility of embryo transplants. Russell Dow of Ontario helped resolve this question. His research shows live lambs result from embryo transplants only 50% of the time and the current cost of this procedure to be high. So importing the live animals turned out to be decidedly more practical.

We hope to give you the details of exactly how our new sheep will arrive, where, quarantine situation, etc., in our next issue.

NEW GAME CHICKENS

by Richard Powell

Seven game fowl, a cock and six hens, have come to Colonial Williamsburg through the efforts of a New Kent County native who has spent half a century breeding and improving traditional varieties of poultry. These birds are believed to be descendants of Irish imports which were brought to Virginia for fighting purposes during the eighteenth century. Dark brown and lightly striped about the neck, the hens are sleek, attractive birds, known for their excellent maternal instincts. The cock is brown below, but is distinguished by resplendent auburn feathers on the neck, back, and wings. Some interpreters will be surprised to note that he bears no comb or wattels, these having been surgically removed, or "dubbed," for reasons derived from pit fighting practices.

Of course, game fowl differ from common chickens in many ways which are not visible, but behavioral. Most obvious are the aggressiveness and tenacity which induce them to fight. Related aspects of maturation, defensive movement, and physiology, may also be heritable and distinct from those of the barnyard chicken.

The game cock and hens will go to the windmill site for interpretation by Wayne Randolph and his staff. The birds are particularly well suited for that location because they will permit discussion of two disparate kinds of poultry husbandry. On the one hand, the game fowl exhibit a plumage pattern very similar to that of the primitive jungle fowl, from which domestic chickens probably descended. Since unmanaged birds occasionally revert to this pattern, and to the general body type of the games, they may be credibly presented as a variety of dunghill fowl, and placed within the economic and agricultural scheme of the common "unimproved" farmer's husbandry.

On the other hand, the game fowl can be interpreted as a distinct breed, documented for Williamsburg, through which the expansive topics of eighteenth century sport, gambling, and violence, can be made more meaningful to the visitor. The windmill is a wholly appropriate place for this approach to such topics, as game cocks were commonly put to "walk," that is, to range and diet in isolation from other poultry, at English and American mills between 1600 and 1850. Newly transcribed pages from the notebooks of John Hartwell Cocke, a gentleman of Surry County, reveal that he set birds to walk at two mills in that area. The historical origin of our game fowl is also consistent with that of eighteenth century Tidewater birds, which were based on stock imported from Ireland, England, and Barbados.

Clearly, the birds will not be used for any form of combat, which would be illegal in the presence of ticket-holding guests, and an affront to the sensibilities of many observers. Additional information about game cocks in Virginia is available in Carson's *Colonial Virginians at Play* (pp. 151-64), and Isaac's *Transformation of Virginia* (pp. 101-04).

QUESTIONS ?

Please write to: Animal Editor, MHW. Colonial Williamsburg Animal News is published by Coach and Livestock Operations, Historic Trades Department. Kay Williams, Editor; Richard Nicoll, Manager.

COMMENTS ?



OF WARM SPRING DAYS AND DYING HORSES

by Karen Smith

Ahhh!! Those warm spring days after a cold winter. All you want to do is pull up a lawn chair and watch the flowers bloom. Animals enjoy this change in the weather just as we humans do!

Every spring down at the stable we get calls from concerned people about our animals laying down in the various pastures. The caller is usually upset because they feel the animal is ill and dying.

All our animals enjoy laying out in the sun just as we do. Even horses will lay flat out on their side and take a short nap from time to time. The animals feel safe and secure here at Colonial Williamsburg. They will do things -- such as lie down in daylight -- that they might not do at another facility.

All Colonial Williamsburg animals are checked twice a day, in the morning and late afternoon. At night our security department keeps a close eye on them. But, if you have any reason to feel an animal is ill, please give us a call at extension 2491, and we will be glad to check it out.

LAMB REPORT

All lambs are healthy and doing fine!! Rachal's twins have been named Linsey and Woolsey. Come see them at the Blue Bell pasture!

GEESE GOTTEN TO GOOSE GUESTS

Six fuzzy yellow and gray baby geese were delivered to the main stable by Karen Smith, head groom, just after Easter. The goslings were donated by Betty Dye of Cedar Valley Farm in Lightfoot.

We will eventually graze this gaggle of geese on the public greens so our guests can be goosed before they go home. The little fellows need to grow a bit more first. While here at the stable, they are being handled by everybody so when old enough to encounter the public they will be accustomed to people.