

THE INTRODUCTION OF THE KERRY TO AMERICA

By Charles S. Plumb

Comparatively little has been published concerning the Kerry or Dexter breeds of cattle, especially in America. Undoubtedly until recently they were regarded as one and the same breed. The earliest record that the writer has discovered of the introduction of Kerry cattle to America, is a statement by Reuben Haines, of Germantown, Pennsylvania, in the *Memoirs of the Pennsylvania Agricultural Society*, published in 1824, in which he states that he had “imported from Ireland the celebrated Kerry cow.”

Mr. Sanford Howard of Boston, Mass. was probably one of the first importers of the Kerry to America. He visited Ireland in 1858 and 1859, and made an importation for Arthur W. Austin of West Roxbury, Mass. In an address before the Norfolk County Agricultural Society, Mr. Howard in 1859 discussed the subject of cattle breeding. On this occasion interesting reference was made to his observations in Ireland, as applied to the Kerry. Said Mr. Sanford, quoting from the Report of the Mass. Board of Agriculture for 1859:

“The Kerry breed belongs to the county of that name in Ireland, or more especially to the mountainous portion of that county, where they have probably existed coeval with the present race of human inhabitants. They are very different from the cattle, which occupy the lower, and more fertile sections of the island – the latter, as has already been observed, belong to the Longhorn tribe, of larger size, the horns drooping, sometimes crossing each other beneath the lower jaw. The Kerries on the other hand, are small, with horns of medium length, rising, and generally somewhat spreading. The color ranges from black to brindle and red, sometimes with a little white, but black is the prevailing color, and is preferred as denoting the nearest affinity with the original type. The Kerry cow has always been considered remarkable as a milker. Youatt says ‘she is emphatically the poor man’s cow; hardy living everywhere yielding, for her size, abundance of milk of good quality.’ Milburn says, ‘she is a treasure to the cottage farmer – so hardy that she will live where other cattle starve. She is a perfect machine for converting the coarsest cattle-food into rich and nutritious milk and butter.’

“In 1858, and also in 1859, I visited the native country of the Kerry cattle, chiefly for the purpose of learning their characteristics, and purchasing some to send to America. I found the cattle somewhat smaller than I had supposed them to be, but evidently very useful in that locality – living where no other dairy cattle that I have ever seen could live. In several instances they were met with at elevations of 1,500 to 2,000 feet above the sea, sharing with the goat the wild herbage of the mountainside. As illustrating their hardiness, the following incident is given: A man led me up a mountain glen to see a lot of three-year-old heifers he had grazing there. It appeared a mystery to me how the cattle could get round and over the rough rocks, and obtain a subsistence, even in summer. Having noticed that the man had several stacks of hay down in the valley, where was the rude habitation which he called his home, I asked him if he was going to take the Kerry cattle there for the winter. He replied, ‘No, the hay is for the lowland cattle and ponies.’ He had just been telling of the deep snows, which sometimes fall in the mountains, and I

asked what the cattle would do in such cases. He said, 'The snow generally softens after a day or two, and the cattle can *work through it*.'

"It is difficult to estimate the weight of these cattle, compared with others, from what I have seen of them. They are generally large bodied in proportion to their height, their legs being short, and the shank-bone being very small. Their heads are generally handsome and the countenance lively, but with a mild expression. The best of them are decidedly attractive in their appearance. When taken to the low country and supplied with plenty of nutritious food, they become more bulky, but I had no opportunity to see what would be the effect of breeding them for several generations in a milder climate and on a better soil.

"I could not generally obtain reliable statements in regard to yield of milk or butter of these cows. In several instances where they were kept, in the low country, it was stated that they would give, per day, ten imperial quarts of milk, which would afford a pound of butter – certainly a large product, considering the size of the animal. It is stated that Mr. Crosby, of Ardfert Abbey, near Tralee, obtained in his herd, ranging for seven years in succession, from 28-80 cows, mostly Kerries, an average of 1,952 quarts of milk in a year, which yielded a pound of butter to eight quarts – or 244 pounds per cow annually and that one pure Kerry cow in the herd gave 2,725 quarts of milk in ten months.

"I purchased for Arthur W. Austin, Esq., five two-year old Kerry heifers and a bull of the same breed, which arrived here after a long and boisterous passage, in November last. The bull, however, was so much exhausted, that he died a few days after his arrival. The others are at Mr. Austin's farm in West Roxbury and are doing well. Another Kerry bull has been ordered for Mr. Auston, which it is hoped will reach here in June next, so that through Mr. Auston's exertions it is believed the breed will be fairly introduced, and subjected to such thorough trials as will settle the question in regard to their usefulness here."

In 1860, the committee on cattle of the Norfolk County Agricultural Society reported as follows:

He most prominent among the cattle brought to our notice, were those of the Kerry breed – one bull and seven heifers – imported by Arthur W. Austin, of West Roxbury, from the county of Kerry, Ireland. They are probably the first genuine specimens of the breed ever exhibited in this country, and many persons regarded them with curious eyes. In consequence of the loss of the bull first imported by Mr. Austin, he obtained another, 'Mountaineer,' which with two heifers, arrived in July last. The five heifers of the previous importation are believed to be in calf by this bull, and are expected to come to milk in April next. They have gained remarkably since their arrival, averaging an increase in girth of nearly an inch a month for the first year. Their indications for dairy purposes are all that could be expected from the high reputation of the breed. The bull is beautifully shaped – the forehead broad, the eyes large and full, the muzzle open, the upper and lower lines of the body almost straight – while his thick, furry coat and elastic hide, indicate at once an ability to endure a severe climate and to thrive rapidly."

In 1862, Mr. Austin submitted a statement regarding his Kerries, under the date of January 14, this being to the local agricultural society. The report was as follows:

“I often had the milk measured during the past summer, and found it did not go below 60 quarts a day for five heifers of the first importation. On the 31st of May, the five alluded to, having in that month produced their first calves, gave 60 $\frac{1}{3}$ quarts, or an average of 12 quarts each. On the 14th of June the same five gave 62 $\frac{3}{4}$ quarts. The three of them gave a fraction over 14 quarts each. I weighed the morning’s milk and the 31 $\frac{2}{3}$ quarts, wine measure, weighed 67 $\frac{1}{4}$ lbs. Of the two last imported heifers, one is fully equal to either of those of the first importation, in proportion to age, she being a year younger, and having given her first calf over 10 qts. per day during the summer. I do not think the other one comes up to the standard, but she holds out well and gives rich milk. The milk of all of them is of the first quality as to richness. Butter is obtained from the cream in a very short time. Late in October it requires less than five minutes churning, by the clock, to bring butter. A lady who sends for six quarts once a week and who has had much experience, pronounces the production of cream marvelous. She says she skims it several times over. I have had excellent milkers of different breeds, and have always been particular as to the quality more than the *quantity*; but I obtain from these Kerry heifers as large a quantity of milk as could be reasonably be expected, considering their size and age; and the quality certainly surpasses, on the average, any milk it has been my fortune to see. I have now, besides the imported stock, three pure bred bulls, which will be a year old in the spring and summer of 1862, three pure bred heifers and one steer of the same age, one half blood Kerry and Shetland steer, and three half blood Kerry heifers. All have improved wonderfully under my winter regimen. We think all the imported heifers are in calf to Mountaineer, who is in fine condition.”

Mr. Sanford Howard contributed an article on “The Kerry Breed of Cattle” to the Report of the United States Commissioner of Agriculture for the year 1862. This article contains some descriptive matter regarding the breed and conditions under which it is kept in Ireland, rather similar to that above credited to him in the Massachusetts report. He calls attention in this article to two subjects not mentioned by him elsewhere that are of interest. He comments on the increase in size of the cattle kept in America. Their growth for the first year olds was very rapid. When he bought the first five two-year old heifers, their girth was only four feet, five inches to four feet, six inches. He says, “I measured two of them a few days since, and found their girth five feet and five feet, six inches, although, from having been pretty well *milked down* during the season, they are in only middling condition.”

“The purchase of these cattle in Ireland to come to America.” Says Mr. Howard, “attracted considerable attention. The fact was noted in several newspapers and while the cattle were in Liverpool, many persons called to see them. Singular as it may seem, but few people in England had ever seen a specimen of the breed. How much this purchase has had to do in the bringing of Kerries into general notice, I cannot say; but it is certain that attention had, within a year or two, been more turned to them than ever before. English papers state that Baron Rothschild has sent a large number to Australian

possessions, the first lot of 50 heifers having been shipped a little more than a year ago. They are also attracting much more attention in England, as is shown by the special prizes offered for them by the Royal Agricultural Society, and the favorable comment made on those exhibited at its shows.

From the American Kerry and Dexter Herdbook of 1921.