

The Berkshire Breed

Three hundred years ago – so legend has it – the Berkshire hog was discovered by Oliver Cromwell’s army, while in winter quarters at Reading, the county seat of the shire of Berks in England. After the war, these veterans carried the news of the wonderful hogs of Berks to the outside world; larger than any other swine of that time and producing hams and bacon of rare quality and flavor. This is said to have been the beginning of the fame of the Reading Fair as a market place for pork products.

The excellent carcass quality of the Berkshire hog made it an early favorite with the upper class of English farmers. For years the Royal Family kept a large Berkshire herd at Windsor Castle. A famous Berkshire of a century ago was named Windsor Castle, having been farrowed and raised within sight of the towers of the royal residence.

According to the best available records, the first Berkshires were brought to the United States in 1823. They were quickly absorbed into the general hog population because of the marked improvement they created when crossed with common stock.

In 1875, a group of United States Berkshire breeders and importers met in Springfield, Illinois, to establish a way of keeping the Berkshire breed pure. These agricultural leaders of the day felt the Berkshire should stay pure for improvement of swine already present in the United States rather than letting it become only a portion of the “Common Hog” of the day. On February 25 of the same year, the American Berkshire Association was founded, becoming the first Swine Registry to be established in the world.

The American Berkshire Association in West Lafayette, Indiana maintains the records and registry of the most influential breed of swine in the history of the world. Berkshires have had great influence upon the swine industry for more than 125 years. The American Berkshire Association protects pedigree integrity and promotes the importance of purebred animals.

The Berkshire Breed paved the way for better swine production and improvement in the United States, Japan, Australia and Europe.

In 1876, in the first US Berkshire Breed Publication, the following was printed, “The Berkshire meat is better marbled than that of any other breed of swine. That is it has a greater proportion of lean freely intermixed with small, fine streaks of fat making the hams, loins, and shoulders sweet, tender, and juicy. This renders the whole carcass not only more palatable to people in general, but are unquestionably healthier to eat.

Today, when many in the pork industry have emphasized carcass leanness while sacrificing meat quality it is important that we re-emphasize what the founders of the American Berkshire Association knew in 1875. Berkshires produce a whole carcass that is well marbled. It is consistently sweet, tender, juicy and palatable. When consumers want pork that tastes great the Berkshire above all others is their favorite, not only in the United States but also in the foreign market. So next time you eat pork, make it BERKSHIRE!!!