

Stan & Sharon Heitz

Illinois

Stan had a very meager beginning with Suffolk sheep. Two bred ewes of lower than average quality produced a single ewe lamb for his first 4-H show in 1951. With the help of his father, Stan sought out people with experience in breeding and raising purebred sheep. Everett and Libby Glasgow became longtime friends and mentors. W.J. "Jack" Hampton shepherd at the U of I shared his many years of knowledge. Stan's interest in Suffolk sheep grew exponentially as did his ability to raise and show Suffolk sheep. In 1958 one of Stan's yearling ewes was champion in the Illinois State Fair Junior show.

By the time Stan graduated from high school the 4-H and FFA project had become a business. Stan's home farm was 20 miles from the U of I campus. He lived at home all four years and commuted. This gave him the opportunity to work on his business plan of being a seedstock producer and expanding his flock to help other breeders get started raising Suffolk Sheep.

Stan's business plan was coming together and in 1969 he had his first Suffolk production sale which was held at the farm with Rollie Rosenboom as the auctioneer. It was a fast paced sale and Rollie sold 17 yearling rams, 12 ram lambs, 37 yearling ewes, and 9 ewe lambs in one hour and 15 minutes.

Karen Johnson of Gotebo, OK exhibited the first Suffolk wether to be named Grand Champion at the Oklahoma Spring Show. Karen's winning lamb was sired by a Heitz Suffolk ram purchased at the Midwest Stud Ram Sale. The 1970s had a tremendous demand for Heitz show lambs. Stan also showed a few wether lambs in the 1970s and had the Grand Champion sale lamb at the 1974 and 1976 Illinois State Fair and the 1975 Grand Champion sale lamb at the International Livestock Expo.

Stan and Sharon were married in 1979 and continued to build on the success of previous years. Sharon accepted the job of managing the promotional booth for the Illinois Lamb and Wool Producers Assn. She enjoyed the interaction with people interested in the sheep industry. Providing educational resources as well as selling products were her greatest areas of expertise. Sharon was elected president of the Illinois Lamb and Wool Producers and worked with all things promoting the industry. Following her term as president the directors hired Sharon as their Executive Secretary. Sharon continued in that position well into the 90s. Sharon managed the business of the Illinois Lamb and Wool Producers and was their liaison with ASI. During this time Sharon was on the Illinois Department of Agriculture's Humane Care for Animals committee. The committee wrote a new Human Care for Animals Act that was written into Illinois Law.

Stan and Sharon helped with the National Suffolk Junior Show that was held in Springfield, IL in 1996. Following the junior show, they made the trip with their Suffolks to Edmonton, Alberta Canada to participate in the First Sheep and Wool Congress. There were Suffolks competing in the show from the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Tasmania Stan and Sharon had the first place fall ram which was named Grand Champion Suffolk Ram, the Reserve Grand Champion Suffolk Ewe, the first place flock and The Good Shepherd Award. The international exhibitors and visitors at the congress open the door for the export market. Stan and Sharon continued to exhibit their Suffolks with great success until their dispersal sale in 1991.

Stan started working full time exporting livestock working as a representative for international customers. Sharon continued to work for the Illinois Lamb and Wool Producers. One of Stan's first international trips was to the National Suffolk Show in Brazil. There was a warm welcome from breeders, some of whom had visited their farm. It was a great learning experience with an open exchange of information. The Brazilians asked if Stan could sponsor a US judge for their national show the following year. He had the ideal person in mind for the job and the following year he took Jaime Farao to judge the show. The national language in Brazil is Portuguese and he knew Jaime could speak Portuguese. Jaime gave reasons on the classes without a translator and could speak directly to the judging committee.

As a partner in their export company, Sharon soon became the travel agent, concierge, and hostess for international customers and veterinarians. Some people stayed with Stan and Sharon in their home. One of their guests even referred to having stayed in the Heitz Hilton.

Stan exported Suffolks to "Suffolk Land Shibetsu" located on the north island of Hokkaido, Japan. As well as a group of Suffolks to the UAE. The ewes came from multiple flocks with small numbers so he needed to find a good set of rams with strong pedigrees. Given their destination, the first breeder he called was Bob Kimm. He told Bob what he was looking for. Bob said he had just had his annual sale and the only rams he had left were those that were too big to be wether sires. He told Bob that was exactly what was looking for. All of the Suffolk rams sent the UAE were Kimm Suffolks. A popular ram was TG Eclipse, that was exported to Brazil. The Brazilian buyers came to the Heitz farm to select him and he was well received in Brazil.

Stan and Sharon feel exporting livestock is much like domestic sales. It is a people- to-people business. There is a worldwide need for high quality US livestock genetics. Animal health issues and geopolitical issues have been the biggest obstacles when working with international sales.