

History of the Rosecomb

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Author's note: This paper was written for an Introduction to Poultry Science class

On February 2, 1992, I bought my first trio of Black Rosecomb Bantams. I had felt the need to diversify my flock, since I only raised one variety of Old English Game Bantam, so I settled upon the beautiful breed called Rosecomb. On the way home from picking them up at the breeder's ranch, I named them. There was a time in my life when I named every bird I owned... I called the cock Charlie because it was my tradition to name birds after the people I bought them from. The bigger hen I named Rose, since it seemed necessary to have Rosecomb named Rose. The other hen, a smaller, more active bird, struck me as looking extremely arrogant, with her dark eyes and proud carriage. I named her Madeline, or Maddie as she soon became known, a name befitting her high and mighty looks. I found in years to come that she embodied the type and personality desired in a Rosecomb, a proud little bird with a short back, arched neck, and prominent white ear lobes.

Like many other breeds, the origin of the Rosecomb is widely disputed. Some argue that the Rosecomb may be the original bantam, such as Bejach (1992), who states, "The Rosecomb Bantam may justly claim descent from the first pair of Bantams ever in the world." Others also support this theory, such as McGrew (1905), who claims that "the Nankin and the Rosecomb Bantams, were the early day Bantams, known to the fanciers of the world." He also presents the idea that the Rosecomb is no more than a miniaturized Hamburg. Robinson (1924) also supports this notion, explaining that both White and Black Rosecombs are miniature Hamburgs, and most likely originated in Holland. Still others claim that "The original Bantam [the Rosecomb] is native of Java" (Bejach, 1992). Both in the Black and White varieties of the Rosecomb Bantam were originally shown as Africans, as early as 1849, and even in 1904 at the St. Louis World's Fair Show (Ibid.). However, despite having the name Africans, no information has any indication that the Rosecomb is from Africa. The most widely accepted place of origin, or at least that which the American Bantam Association puts forth in the Bantam Standard, is that the Rosecomb is of British origin, possibly as early as 1493.

The word "rosecomb" originally referred not to any specific breed, but rather was a generic name for a number of breeds that all had the same comb type. The rose comb was originally described as a "double comb," in contrast to the "single comb" of many breeds. The earliest specimens of the Rosecomb breed tended to have imperfect combs and far too much red in their ear lobes, and "it was said on good authority, that more specimens were manufactured than bred" (Bejach, 1992). It was not uncommon for exhibitors to alter the red defects in the ear lobes with some type of artificial white coloration. Some early fanciers of the breed used to "carve" the comb into the appropriate shape. I have heard stories of unspecified breeders of the "olden days" doing this very thing, much to the chagrin of anyone who bought these perfect looking birds, only to discover that the heads of the offspring were very different from what the breeder expected.

Obviously, the Rosecomb Bantam has undergone numerous improvements since its earliest days in the showroom. Much of this can be attributed to several men from England, who often receive credit for perfecting the breed. Enoch Hutton worked with Rosecombs for over forty years, and made significant progress in improving them. He crossed the Black and White varieties together to obtain the best qualities of each variety. He also used small Black Hamburg males in his breeding program, to improve both the type and feather quality of the Rosecomb. Likewise, G.H. Pickering improved the Rosecomb by crossing White females with Black Hamburg males. He chose to use Hamburg males instead of Rosecombs

because at the time the Hamburgs had better feather and lobe quality than most Rosecombs (Bejach, 1992). Another man, John Buckton, also deserves acknowledgment for the popularity of the Rosecomb. In 1483, he owned an inn in England where he kept a small flock of Rosecombs. Supposedly, King Richard III often stayed at this inn, where he took notice of the birds with the prominent ear lobes and began to raise a few. This, of course, made them quite popular with the English gentlemen of the time, and that popularity still remains today (Ahiers, 1992). Though the reason for the development of the breed is unclear, one can assume it was certainly not for any commercial purpose. Most likely people bred them for exhibition, or as a “decorative” feature to have around the house.

Rosecombs have a relatively long history in the showroom. Fanciers first exhibited them as far back as the First Boston Show of 1849, (Bejach, 1992) and they continue to appear in shows today. The number of Rosecombs shown continues to increase as the breed gains popularity, although numbers vary from one show to another, and from one part of the country to another. According to Jeffrey (1979), twenty-two Rosecombs were shown at the 1893 New York show, whereas sixty were shown at the 1903 New York show. Modern day shows might have anywhere from half a dozen to several hundred Rosecombs, depending on the size of the show. The Rosecomb is now and most certainly always has been purely an exhibition bird. Fanciers show them, and others raise them simply because they enjoy the way the birds look. The Bantam Standard lists Rosecombs as one of the ten most popular breeds in the United States. They are gradually becoming more popular, but it seems more breeders raise them in the eastern United States than do in the western United States.

In the United States, the Rosecomb appeared in the first American Standard of Perfection, published in 1874. The American Poultry Association accepted both the Black and White varieties into the 1874 American Standard of Perfection, but the Blue variety did not gain acceptance until nearly one hundred years later, in 1960. The Bantam Standard has a particular allotment of points for each breed and variety of bantam chicken. Of the one hundred points each bird may earn, certain breeds or colors have more emphasis in one area than in others. The Rosecomb has an emphasis on perfection of the comb and earlobes, the most distinctive features of the breed, than does any other breed in the recognized by the American Bantam Association.

One of the most important considerations when breeding or judging Rosecombs is the necessity to have a balanced bird. No one part of the bird should overpower any other part of the bird. For example, a huge tail that drags on the ground, while it may look impressive, is not in proportion to the rest of the bird, and therefore throws it off balance. According to the American Standard of Perfection, the comb should have a square front, a central area covered in small points or protuberances, and a long, tapering spike. The lobes are round, velvety white, and free from any red markings. The lobes on a Rosecomb are unusually large and distinctive, and in older cocks the lobes are often as big as his entire head! The back of a Rosecomb is short and sweeping, with no breaking point between the back and tail. In the male, the tail carriage is approximately 40° above the horizontal, whereas in the female the tail is carried at 35°. The tail should be well spread, with great importance placed on wide feathers. Wing carriage is low, but not so low as to cover the hocks of the bird. The overall appearance should be that of dignity and pride.

The American Poultry Association only recognizes three varieties of Rosecombs in the American Standard of Perfection: Black, White, and Blue. However, the American Bantam Association recognizes a total of twenty-six varieties in the Bantam Standard. Unfortunately, most of these varieties are never seen and some probably do not even exist. Black is the most popular variety, and consistently has the best quality. Whites often do not have the feather quality of the Blacks, lacking especially in the width of the tail feathers. The Blue variety tends to be high quality, but because they do not breed true some people find them

too difficult to work with. When Blues are bred to Blues, they produce fifty percent Blues, twenty-five percent Blacks (not true Blacks), and twenty-five percent Splashes. The biggest problem faced with the Blue variety is brassiness or red coloration in the hackles of the males. Throughout the country, a few breeders do raise some of the other varieties of Rosecomb, but none of these ever appear in large numbers.

Many people have trouble breeding Rosecombs, and there are several reasons that may be the cause of this. Fertility tends to be unusually low among Rosecombs, and much of this results from severe inbreeding in most strains in an attempt to preserve type. Within the last several years most the Rosecomb breeders I know have made an outcross to another bloodline, having gotten fed up with only hatching two or three chicks per year (that was my experience). So far for me, the outcross has produced amazing results, to say the least!

Hatchability also tends to be low in Rosecombs and the only reason I have heard for this is that the embryos are especially sensitive to humidity. I have heard of several people with this problem: embryos dying around the eighteenth or nineteenth day of incubation. Supposedly the problem is too much humidity in the incubator, especially around the critical hatching period, which causes the chicks to essentially drown in the shell. Assuming that chicks really do hatch, I find it best to hatch them early in the season because they need an unusually long duration of time to mature and feather out fully.

People who show Rosecombs will tell you they're the best birds around, and well, maybe they're right. 😊

If you haven't already, perhaps it's time you try your hand at the beautiful breed with the mysterious past. Keep on raising those Beautiful Little Aristocrats!

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