



~ Part 11 ~

Reflections on a Common Theme Raising Heritage Animals

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CLOUD COUNTY

by Joan Nothern

There must be joy that has to be shared in Madonna and Larry Sorell's experiences on their 40 acre farm outside Glasco.

The Lazy S Farm began as a commercial hog operation but evolved into something else following Larry's retirement. The farm house where they raised nine children was modified into a bed and breakfast, catering especially to hunters who returned annually.

Perhaps their own sense of roots led to an interest in Heritage Foods. During the last ten years they have raised heritage turkeys and heritage pigs. The heritage pigs, to be served in New York City restaurants, were actually visited by the chefs, who made the trip from New York to Kansas to confirm the pigs were in fact happy, free-range heritage pigs!

Madonna and Larry Sorell traveled over 18,000 miles in the U. S., seeking heritage pig breeding stock. The breeds they have are Mulefoot Hogs, Red Wattles, Large Blacks, and Gloucester Old Spots. Larry has assisted fourteen farms in Missouri, Nebraska, and Kansas move into heritage hog operations.

The Sorell's Heritage Animal ventures are a response to consumer interest, and facilitated by distribution organizations such as Heritage Foods, which link suppliers with processors and finally, with upscale restaurants throughout the U.S.

The Heritage Pig operation is labor and time intensive, but it provides the Sorells with a meaningful connection to their farm, their animals, the past, and a supportive clientele. They are creating a legacy for their family to continue.

OSBORNE COUNTY

by Carolyn Williams

Osborne County isn't exactly the mountains in South America, but one of the agricultural enterprises is reminiscent of the Andes Mountains. The North Forty, so named because it is a 40 acre plot of pastureland north of Osborne, is our own resident alpaca farm. Throughout South American history the alpaca has been a measure of a person's wealth for the fleece produced. Since Mitch & Vickie Vandaments had other careers, he ran a service station in nearby Smith Center, wishing to return to a farm-related enterprise; and Vickie worked as a speech pathologist in area nursing homes and hospitals, they were looking to their retirement.

They began reading about raising alpacas in 2003 because the thought of having only 40 acres instead of half the county to make a living was appealing. Vickie simply liked the temperament of the unusual-to- Kansas animal. After attending the Kansas State Fair alpaca show, they connected with a woman in Chapman and toured her farm. It looked good, so they developed a five-year plan to begin their business. Since it's a high-growth industry, it fit the bill for them both.

A year after their first visit in Chapman, Mitch and Vickie bought their first alpacas and erected a barn for the 17 males that came from Colorado. They are into breeding now that the barn for the females has been built. It's fascinating to drive by and watch the herd grow.

Their plan has been successful as they sell the fleece which comes in 22 natural colors, white is the most valuable because it can be dyed. Mitch & Vickie have learned that the industry is based on several factors: the crimp--the wave in the fiber and the luster to density (how tight the fibers are)

and the staple length (length of the fiber). The fleece is the primary emphasis of the alpaca's worth. Some value is also placed on their ability to show them in various shows.

The fleece is sold to the nearby Phillips County business, Shepherd's Mill, where the fleece is skirted and carded, then processed into yarn for knitting. Eventually these products will be marketed at their own North 40 retail store in the female barn up the way. Plans are for educational tours as well as marketing the alpaca product and animals themselves. Vickie has some plans for craft classes as well to teach local people the skill of knitting, etc. Many designers are beginning to use alpaca fleece to increase the durability and quality of wool. Mitch explained, "There is less lanolin in the alpaca fleece than in sheep's wool, so there is less itch." One of the designers using alpaca fleece is Ralph Lauren.

While they give much of their time to the business, they have had to hire more help. One local girl has been employed to help with the daily chores. Even Vickie's retired parents have been brought into the mix as well.

ROOKS COUNTY

by Sherry Brown

Raising deer in western Kansas as a cash crop? More than a few eyebrows have been raised as travelers on Highway 24 seven miles west of Stockton pass what appears to be a deer farm.

Tim Rigel and wife Pam have been thinking about doing more with whitetails for a number of years. So after some research on the Internet, and checking out some other farms in Oklahoma, they decided to become owners of their own farm, Kansas TNT Whitetails, LLC last February.

The main goal of the deer farm is breeding stock. These whitetails are not wild deer. They are born and bred at farms which are strictly monitored by state and federal regulations. Tim said he cannot sell the tagged deer to private individuals, only to licensed parties. Plus he is accountable for each deer on the records he has to keep updated. And there is plenty of paperwork.

The deer raised at the farm are monitored daily. They are fed a very high grade of nutrient rich pellets, as well as fresh alfalfa, supplements and treats. Water for the deer comes from a private well and the tanks have automatic refills. For those hot Kansas days there is a spray shower which the deer thoroughly enjoy.

Approximately 5% of the domesticated deer are used for breeding purposes while the other 95% go to hunting preserves. There is a market for the deer meat, as well as a market for the horns, which shed yearly.

The large, airy pens are built of fences that are eight feet tall. The does and fawns occupy one of the pens so the fawns can be tracked easily. The three bucks are housed in the adjacent pen. It's a family affair and couldn't be possible without the help of Pam's family. The Axelson family has a working interest in the farm. They oversee most of the farm work and build the pens, as well as spray the pens for bugs and keep the feeders full and the fresh water flowing. Pam's parents helped with the leasing of the land needed for the deer.

Even though the breeding and raising of deer is not a new business, it is to this area. Tim said the market for deer is just like it is for cattle, pigs, sheep or buffalo. There are farms all across the United States with the majority of them in Pennsylvania, Oklahoma and Texas. There are only a few deer farms in the state of Kansas and they are located in Topeka and Hays.

The public is always welcome to come and visit whenever Tim and Pam are at home (except in the breeding season in November). He asks that everyone park in the driveway and not along the highway for safety purposes. Tim said that he loves deer more than anybody else, and with this economy, this is a perfect way to turn something he loves into a supplemental income. This new business venture of Tim and Pam's is a wonderful family affair; just ask their granddaughter, Miss Raileigh Heunergarde, who would rather be in the pen with the deer than anywhere else in the world!

GRAHAM COUNTY

by Mike Frakes

At PacLeader Technology, Morland, we use the latest innovations to reduce input costs and maximize yield potential. We now have the ability to change seed and fertilizer rates automatically throughout the field. As we have found, there is a great variance in yield potential; the trick is finding out where those areas are. We use yield maps from combines and also sampling the soil in a

grid pattern to determine what areas of the field we can use our variable rate technology. Once these areas are outlined, we create a prescription, telling the implement how much seed or fertilizer to apply. Sometimes it's not about applying more fertilizer and seed, if an area will not produce, we can back the rates off, thereby conserving seed and fertilizer and making us better stewards of the land, only using the amounts we need instead of over seeding and fertilizing. One of our biggest goals is to utilize our knowledge of technology products to help farmers make decisions based on precise information gathered on a field by field basis.