

Pointers from Award-Winning Shepherds *2000 Sheep Industry Award*

Larry and Emily Meisegeier
River Ridge Stock Farm
Bruce, Wisconsin

Introduction

River Ridge Stock Farm is 218 acres north of Bruce, WI along the Chippewa River. The farm is owned and operated by Larry & Emily Meisegeier and their two teenage sons. River Ridge is a diversified operation including a sheep dairy, commercial lamb production, dairy and meat goats, beef cattle & specialty beef production. On a hobby scale, Emily raises a few llamas and Larry raises several cage birds, ornamental pheasants, pigeons and doves.

Farm History

River Ridge has been in Emily's family since 1910 when her great grandfather Rudolph Lundgren traded his farm in Canada for the 258 acre farmstead. Rudolph sent his twelve year old son Axel on a train from Canada to stake claim of the land and the family joined him sometime later. Ruby, the oldest of Axel's fourteen children, is Emily's mother.

Axle milked sixteen cows in the 32'x50' rock foundation barn that is still part of the operation today. Over the years he also raised hogs & poultry and cash cropped potatoes and cucumbers. Axel retired in 1968 and the farmland was rented to neighbors until 1988 when Emily took over the farm. Larry joined her in 1994 and the operation has grown to its present day form.

Flock History

The original flock of six Rambouillet/Columbia cross ewes were purchased in 1989. Targhee and Dorset rams were used until 1991 when a percentage Romanov ram was purchased from the UW research farm at Hayward, WI.

In 1994, Larry's flock of Registered Suffolk, Registered Southdown and commercial ewes was added. Since 1994 the flock has seen infusions of most every breed available to North America. An interest in tough hardy sheep and specialty wool brought the addition of Clun Forest, Cheviot, Scottish Blackface, Shetland, Jacob, Navajo-Churo, and Black Welsh Mountain. An effort to make the flock more productive brought in purebred Finn sheep, Romanov and Polypay. With the decision to get into the Dairy sheep business in 1996, East Friesian genetics were introduced and today about 60% of the ewes are 12.5% to 80% East Friesian breeding.

Rams used in the last two breeding seasons were percentage and pure bred East Friesian, Blue Face & Border Liecester, and Dorset with Suffolk, Hampshire and Shropshire as terminal sires.

Description of Operation

River Ridge Stock Farm is a diversified farming enterprise. First and foremost the farm is a commercial sheep dairy.

A lean-to addition to the old dairy barn houses a double 12 pit parlor with indexing stalls, six milking units, pipeline and in-line washing system. This facility is capable of handling 120 ewes per hour, and includes a milk room with 300 gal. milk storage tank, a utility room with 180 gal. milk storage tank, and a 10'x12' walk-in commercial type freezer.

In the 2001 season we will milk approximately 230 ewes. Lambs are taken at birth and raised on a mixture of goats milk and milk replacer with a nipple system. Lambs are weaned from milk at approximately 30 days old and placed on free choice grain and high quality alfalfa hay.

Most wether lambs are marketed at 40# to 60# at Zumbrota Livestock Market. Some are marketed through Equity Livestock and a few are finished and direct marketed locally as freezer lambs. Since the flock is currently under expansion, every ewe lamb is a potential keeper.

Sheep milk is marketed through the Wis. Sheep Dairy Co-op.

We will also milk 30 to 40 dairy goats to supply milk for lambs. When lambs and kids are weaned, we purchase beef cross and Jersey calves to use the goats milk until the end of the season. Beef cross calves are marketed as feeders and Jersey calves are grown to about 800 pounds, slaughtered and marketed as specialty beef.

We have introduced Boer goat genetics to our dairy goat herd and are now building a herd of commercial does for meat goat production. We plan to run a herd of about 100 percentage Boer does to help control pasture brush and provide another source of income.

Keys to Success

Diversification - we have never put all of our eggs in one basket. If the market is down in one area, another will usually make up for it.

Keeping an open mind - we have looked at, and tried almost every aspect of sheep production. We were never afraid to try something new, even when others said it wouldn't work.

Determination - we have been determined to make our operation a success, no matter what it took, and it looks like our diligence is paying off.

Accomplishments

In 1992 Emily and a group of others formed the Flambeau Spinning Guild. This group has grown to include weaving and other fiber arts and is now known as the Flambeau Fiber Artists.

1995 - Larry was one of three people who organized and started the Indianhead Sheep Breeders Association. Emily served two years as secretary for the organization, and Larry is serving his third term as President. The ISBA is a sponsor of the UW Madison's annual Spooner Sheep Day, and Larry is part of the planning committee for that event.

In 1996 Emily worked with the UW Madison's Dairy Sheep research project at Spooner, milking sheep, and in 1997 both Larry & Emily milked at the Spooner Station.

In 1997 Larry was given the Extra Mile award by the Indianhead Sheep Breeders Association.

2000 - Larry & Emily were given the Sheep Industry Award at the 2000 Spooner Sheep day.

Nov. 2000 - Larry was part of a group of meat goat producers that formed the Heartland Meat Goat Producers Association and he was elected President of that group.

Philosophy

What works for one person does not always work for everyone. We believe that certain breeds of sheep work best for certain situations and management techniques. We see a lot of people come and go in the sheep industry, mostly because they were unsuccessful doing something the way others have and they were unwilling to try a different approach.

We believe that any form of sheep and goat production holds an important key to saving the family farm in Wisconsin. We are, and will keep doing all we can to promote and support this idea, now and into the future.

Thank you,

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