



Sheep Farm

A Woman Who Runs With the Sheep

By BL Wiedenbeck

When we moved to our small farm in 1998, we were determined to do something of farming-value with the property, even though my husband and I were city kids with no farm experience between the two of us. After 18 years of marriage, this was quite a lifestyle change for us and our four children! We had a lot to learn.

Initially we wanted to raise beef cattle. My husband had helped with calving at the home of a relative at one point and thought we could ultimately manage a small herd ourselves. But as a hunter, he also wanted to be able to butcher his own animals on occasion and wasn't sure how he would manage the logistics of butchering something as large as a beef cow. So we began investigating sheep and decided their size would work well for us and we imagined the fun we could have with the wool.

Six years after we purchased our first handful of ewes, we now have over 40 sheep in our flock at our peak time of the year. How far we've come in such a short time! Of course six years and a growing flock have also brought us plenty of animal experiences that we didn't hope for! Dealing with clostridium, mastitis, pneumonia, sore mouth and even a C-section were somehow not in our ideal plan. Even today, lambing time tends to become overwhelming at some point, but the satisfaction of successful births and a healthy flock will always overrule the problems.

Our children have learned more than they ever hoped to as well. Ranging in age from eight to 17 when we left the city, they haven't gotten quite as much experience as they might have if we'd started shepherding earlier. But they know how to be just the right amount of aggressive when holding a sheep for hoof trimming, know what three things must be done soon after a lamb is born (clip, dip and strip) and know the best method for shepherding a flock from place to place. Our kids have bottle-fed lambies, hauled hay in 100-degree weather, dug thistles for hours on end and helped catch lambs that jumped the fence!

Our sheep are a Scottish breed, North Country Cheviots, one that we chose for its heartiness, knowing that with our lack of experience it would be helpful to have a breed that was super-tough! We look for Scottish names for the lambs that we keep, names like Baird an Aili and Davina and Catriona. We chose the name "Sonsie" for our farm, a Scottish word that means all kinds of good things, like pleasant, comfortable, plentiful and thriving. We also have a llama now, who came free with a sheep deal, but because llamas are Peruvian, his name is Carlo.

Farming doesn't pay very well if you're a newbie who has a lot to learn. We are finally beginning to break even and we know that doing as much of our own animal care as possible will avoid the vet bills that will suck so much out of a farm budget. One of the first times we had a veterinarian out, he made my husband and me give the injections. I told him "I thought YOU'D give the shots!" hoping that he'd handle the needle while my husband held the sheep. But he assured me that we did not want to call him for such mundane things, and he was right!

My success with the wool has also not met my ideal. I tried to learn to knit for an entire semester and finally gave up, telling my poor teacher she'd be better off teaching monkeys at the zoo! To date I've had the majority of our fleeces made into quilt batts, which I then cover and use in our home or give as gifts. This year we will also have a lot of our wool made into mattress pads for our beds, which should be incredibly comfortable. Friends that we've given our quilts to—with the names of the sheep that the batt came from attached to it—are always amazed at how warm they are. Some day soon I plan on selling or trading the wool to others as well.

It's taken awhile to learn day-to-day animal care, to get up enough fencing and fares, and to build the interior of the barn to suit our needs, but now we can look to the future a bit. We continue to add new blood to our flock, as well as keeping some of our own lambs for future breedings. We also want to expand our pasture area so that we have more options for rotating our sheep around, especially when the weather gets dry. We would like to add chickens to our place soon as well, as we figure that a few birds should be comparatively easy to care for now that we're used to sheep!

Recently another shepherd came by our place to choose a ram lamb to purchase from us for his breeding flock. He said that we have some of the healthiest sheep he's ever seen, which is a huge compliment to us! Should everyone try farming life? You bet! And farming with sheep is the best way to farm of all!