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Letters from the Farm

OCTOBER 2008

Settling In and Fixing UP

If I had to pick one word to describe this month's activities, it would have to be CHAOS. If I was allowed two words, I'd go with CONTROLLED CHAOS. We accomplished some major repairs, initiated a few more, and discovered why a handling system is critical with large numbers of sheep.

UNITED WE...OH, FORGET IT

When we owned 15 ewes, all of whom had grown up together, moving them around was easy. They saw themselves as one flock, and obediently followed a grain bucket. If one or two didn't come immediately, they quickly found themselves separated from the group and came running.

Not so with 70 sheep from 4 different flocks. The colored Coopworths don't hang out with the white Coopworths. The Dorsets stick together. The Katahdins claim one half of the field for themselves. Sure, they look unified as you gaze upon the pasture- but try moving them! The splinter groups run off in different directions, leaving me with a bucket of grain and a few tame Dorsets. And driving sheep from behind, well--- let's just say it looks easy in movies.

This has been our challenge this month. We needed to bring the sheep in for certain tasks such as worming, hoof trimming, and separating the two breeding groups. With a combination of bait, my daughter on her horse, and patiently waiting for the stragglers to join the party, we eventually got everyone in and our jobs accomplished- but very, very inefficiently.

Fortunately, we had anticipated this problem and invested in a handling system. A series of funnel-shaped pens and narrow chutes controls the flock so we can access them. It's amazing how well it works. However, there is still the problem of getting them from the 100+ acres of pasture into those small pens.

That is how we came to own Gail The Wonderdog. We had been looking for just the right Border Collie for quite a while. We needed an experienced dog. There are three elements to working sheep with dogs: the dog, the sheep, and the handler. Sheep need to learn how to respond to a working dog. It's called being 'dog-broke'. The shepherd needs to learn how to command the dog (I don't know what that's called!). The dog must have natural talent, the right attitude, and years of training. With both our sheep and ourselves being novices, the burden fell on the dog to know what to do.

We lucked out with Gail. She is an experienced sheep dog just past the prime of life. Her owners were looking for a farm situation for her to eventually retire in. As an added bonus, they are also professional dog trainers who are helping us get started.

THIS OLDE FARM AND HOUSE

We celebrated two big accomplishments this month: putting a new roof on the Big Red Barn, and insulating the house. The barn roof was very important because it was leaking in several places. There is nothing more damaging than water inside a barn. Now that's its' weather-tight, we can work on prettying it up at our leisure. We won't cringe with every rainstorm while rot spreads through the old wood.

The house, like many old farmhouses, had virtually no insulation in the walls. The owners had warned us that it was cold and drafty all the time they lived there. We used the method called "blown-in" insulation. A crew with a large truck and flexible pipe spent two days drilling holes in the walls and spraying in a fiberglass foam. The house doesn't look any different, but it really does feel warmer. The old windows will be replaced next, and we'll be ready for winter.

HAY, EWE!

Speaking of winter, it's not until the hay is in that a livestock farmer is truly ready for winter. We harvested our hay in late August, and stacked it in the field. With a flock this size, we don't use small square bales. One of those would feed five sheep. We feed 500 lb round bales to the sheep, cows, and horses. The sheep eat one of those bales in 3 days. The cows can make one last about a week.

THE GREAT HOG ESCAPE

We hit a snag in our plans for pasturing the hogs, but we're working our way through it. In August, we had acquired 2 gilts (females) and a boar (male) Tamworth hogs for breeding. We also bought two pigs for meat, and had these 2 groups housed separately behind electric fencing. One morning, we woke up to find our front yard filled with pigs. The feeder pigs had escaped, and their joy was so contagious that the others joined them. For 24 hours I feared all was lost. They would run off to the woods to live like feral pigs. All that money down the drain, and hey- what about our family's bacon?

Things looked up the next morning, when they turned themselves in looking for breakfast. They are now back in solid fencing and being re-trained to electric. The reason that electric fencing is so important is that we can move it. A permanent pigpen always becomes a quagmire. Frequent moves are the key to keeping pastured pigs clean.

APPLES AND PEARS GALORE

What a surprise awaited us as fall rolled in! The previous owners had planted many different varieties of apples and pears, all of which ripened over the last few weeks. We've been taste tasting, cooking, and in some cases giving the pigs the fruit which didn't make it for human consumption.

BREEDING SEASON BEGINS IN NOVEMBER

Next month is when we turn the rams in with the ewes to get lambs in March-April!

Sincerely,

Caroline Owens