~ Keeping it Natural ~

Chris Wilson: A Farmer on a Mission

Chris Wilson grew up on a cattle farm in Scott County, Va., where her mother milked twice a day, made her own buttermilk, and life and work developed naturally, organically. With the exception of two years during which Wilson lived in a subdivision, she has been working a farm from sun up to sun down.

“After we were married, we lived in a subdivision for about two years,” says Wilson, who now looks out from her orange Kubota across 50 acres in Washington County, Tenn., that she and husband Ray call home. “We had a one-plus-acre lot and had a large garden and a few chickens. I quickly found out that was not the life for me, or the family I wanted to have. I felt lost and out of place. Farming is very important to me. Being a good steward of the land and creatures God made is a great mission in life.”

While Ray worked a day-job at Eastman in Kingsport, Chris tended her flocks and family, which includes two now-grown children, Jonathan, and a daughter, Sarah; almost a dozen border collies and friendly, blond Akbash guardian dogs; about 200 sheep; laying hens; guinea hens to keep pests down; an “assisted living” kennel of dogs; and a couple horses. The Wilsons moved from the subdivision to a 25-acre farm in Rock Springs and then, about 20 years ago, to the farm on Harmony Road, where Chris – approved by Animal Welfare – raises free range hair sheep and chickens to sell their meat and eggs through the online and summer Jonesborough Farmers Market and a couple online sites.

“I still feel that you are what you eat,” she says. “My lambs are all grass finished. They don’t have any grain because they are ruminants. Ruminants were designed to live on grass not grains. It’s healthier. It’s more difficult because they finish slower. They finish naturally and I don’t wean my lambs. I let them stay with their mothers and they wean them so they don’t go through a stress period.”

To make a living as a farmer, Chris says nowadays, “you really have to be diversified. If you’re going to make a living on a farm, you have to do a lot of things.”

In addition to what she calls her “green eggs and lamb,” Chris also sells breeding stock and runs a kennel. For some years, she groomed as well as boarded cats and dogs, but neck surgery made that too difficult for her. “So all of that together makes a living,” she says. “It depends on your standard of living. That makes the difference. We don’t go on vacations. We don’t eat out. We don’t belong to a country club except this country … It’s a different lifestyle. It’s more of a lifestyle than a living.”

It’s the lifestyle Chris loves and, despite the investment of time, energy and daylight, she loves the daily fulfilling of her mission in life. She started the farm on Harmony Road, Clover Creek Farm, to be a registered Charolais cattle farm, and had a herd of 25, but she found that sheep were a more practical business, especially for a one-woman farm. She can move an ornery sheep – not so a stubborn Charolais. “I just kind of fell in love with the sheep. It was a real heartbreaking decision but I said, ‘I’m going to sell my cows and I did.’ I cried the day [the cattle] went out but I got over it and I love my sheep.”

Chris was meant to nurture. She helps bring the lambs into the world when necessary, then she and Ray bottle-feed the twins and triplets when the ewes don’t have enough to nurse, sheltered in a barn with their mothers until they are big enough to go to a protected pasture and, later, into a pasture with the other ewes and younglings.

Taking them to be processed into meat to sell is the hardest part of her life as a farmer, she says, and tears trickle down her tanned face as she thinks of that part of the cycle. “The place I process them had to be approved by Animal Welfare which means humane handling facilities and humane harvest, so there’s no beating, banging, shoving, screaming, shocking – none of that. My lambs gently walk off the trailer.”

But she is practical. “If we didn’t eat them, they would have no purpose,” she says, wiping away the tears. “What would you do with them? Everything can’t be a pet. To keep the breed alive, it has to have a purpose. If it nourishes you, that’s its purpose.

“People ask, ‘How can you eat a lamb?’ Well, how can you eat a hamburger? That was once a little tiny calf. How can you eat chicken? Look at those little diddles up there. That’s why they were put here and man put to oversee them.

“I feel I provide the best life possible for these animals until they are harvested. They are never neglected. They are never abused – and I love them.”

And that’s all part of the mission.