

RETIRE

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A year later, the family moved again, to Corvallis. His dad, who had injured his back and could no longer do agricultural labor, took a job as a Spanish teacher. Holderread soon had three sisters, and his family owned a small farm.

Third grade brought Holderread’s first foray into raising ducks.

His teacher brought two yellow Pekin ducklings to school and told the students whoever wrote the best essay about ducks could take them home.

Holderread won. “I have a hard time believing I really wrote the best paper. I think she just knew how much I wanted them,” he said.

With the encouragement and help of his parents, Holderread expanded his flock.

Around age 8, he got his first clients: Jenks Hatchery Inc. in Talent and a local general store both offered to pay him for hatching eggs.

The little geneticist

By age 9, Holderread hungered to know more about genetics.

His dad took him to livestock fairs and got him books on poultry.

Through his readings, Holderread learned that studying pigeons is one of the best ways to learn about genetics. Many geneticists, including Charles Darwin, raised pigeons, widely considered a “model organism” for understanding genetic variations.

Holderread subscribed to three pigeon magazines, which he read cover to cover. Even after his parents said “lights out” at night, he secretly read the magazines by flashlight.

Teen years

As a teen, Holderread continued studying genetics and raising birds.

“If it had feathers, I had it,” he said.

In high school, he got into racing pigeons and using pigeons to send messages.

Historical records show pigeons, which have a strong “homing” instinct and can therefore carry messages home, have been used in communication systems for millennia.

Holderread bred pigeons selected for speed, endurance, feather quality, aerodynamic body shape and homing instinct.

Back to Puerto Rico

As a young man, Holderread considered becoming a pilot or wildlife biologist, but eventually chose to study horticulture, animal science and poultry science at Oregon State University.

Then the Vietnam War disrupted his plans.

Holderread, a Mennonite, applied as a conscientious objector and was sent to do development work as alternative service in Puerto Rico.

He took leave of OSU in 1972. On the island, he served as a vocational poultry instructor and director of a research and breeding center.

In a cut-out of dense jungle on the side of a hill, he raised more than 100 varieties of water and land fowl — ducks, geese, chickens, turkeys, pheasants, guinea fowl, quail and pigeons.

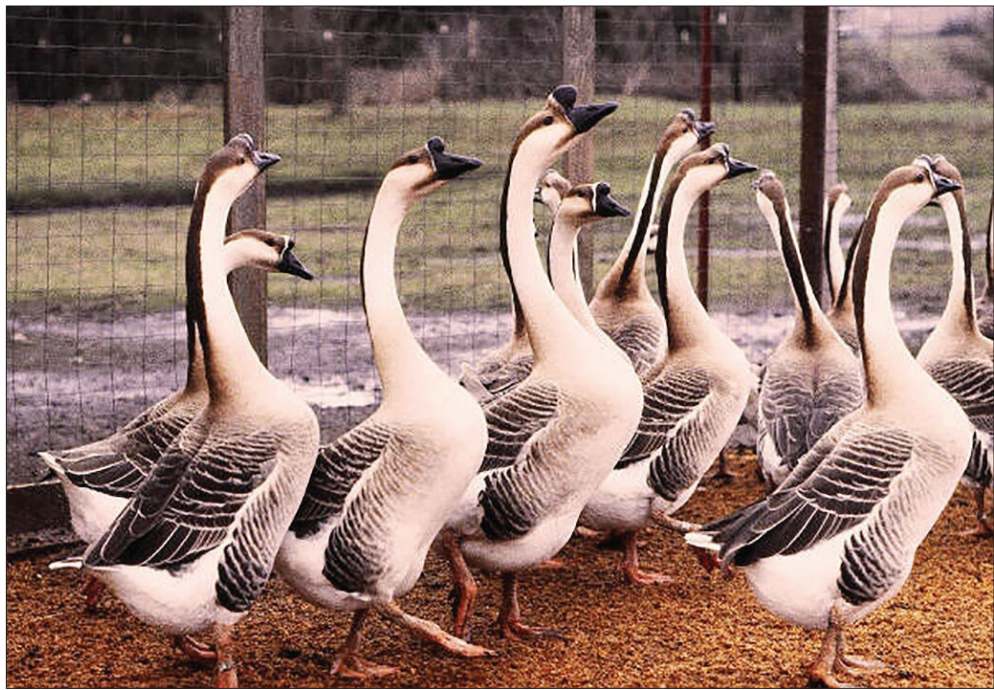
“Ducks and geese performed by far the best,” he said. “That’s what solidified my path.”

He taught people about feed conversion, small-scale poultry management, incubation, how to handle dis-



Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press

Dave Holderread in this undated photo holds a Silver Appleyard duck. Holderread, a world-leading breeder of waterfowl on his operation in Central Oregon, recently retired.



Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press

Brown Chinese geese in this undated photo strut on the Holderread Waterfowl and Preservation Center, Philomath.



Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press

Mini Silver Appleyard ducklings huddle together in this undated photo on the Holderread Waterfowl and Preservation Center, Philomath.

eases and run a business.

His required term of service was two years, but Holderread stayed four.

And that’s where he met Millie.

Millie Miller, originally from Delaware, was in Puerto Rico serving with the Mennonite Voluntary Service Program.

Holderread and Miller were an unlikely couple; he was already engaged to someone in the states, and Miller had promised herself long ago she would never marry a farmer.

But Holderread’s engagement broke off when he and his fiancée realized they didn’t share the same vision for life, and Miller gradually softened to the idea of farm life.

The two fell in love. “As you can see, he changed my mind,” Millie said.

She leaned against him and laughed.

The two married in Delaware and then moved to

Corvallis to build the waterfowl business.

Beginnings

The couple lived with Dave’s parents while they looked for land.

Knowing that they’d make multiple trips to a post office daily during shipping season, they searched for land near one.

At last, they found a parcel in Philomath about 2 miles from the post office.

The property was an abandoned mink farm turned junkyard with waterlogged clay soils, stunted weeds and a few scrawny trees. Several acres were piled with buildings, mink cages, pizza ovens, stacks of old cars.

“My dad was like, ‘No, you don’t want this place.’ But we knew we’d never find another place this close to the post office. So we took it,” he said.

They burned and bulldozed for months.

“Let me tell you, there is no smell as bad as mink urine-soaked wood burning,” Holderread said.

Today on the farm, green pastures grow thick and lush and more than 50 types of fruit, nut, shade, timber and decorative trees adorn the property.

Ducks in a row

The couple also faced challenges with permitting, high feed prices and shipping logistics.

“People thought we were crazy,” Holderread said.

But word about Holderread spread. Soon, commercial farms and homesteads across the nation and world began ordering hatchlings.

Major hatcheries, including Hoover’s Hatchery in Iowa and Metzger Hatchery in California, also bought from the Holderreads.

In a peak year, the Holderreads typically shipped 20,000 to 25,000 birds.

Feathered friends

One of Holderread’s greatest contributions, some experts say, was in educating people about the benefits of “underutilized” and “underappreciated” waterfowl.

Geese, experts say, produce excellent meat, fat for baking and flavoring, huge eggs and soft down. They eat pests, break parasite cycles and are good foragers.

Geese also can serve as sentinels, scaring away hawks and small predators. The birds have been acclaimed as “watch-dogs” as early as 309 B.C., when they were credited with saving Rome from an attempted sneak attack by the Gauls.

Holderread, who also raises horses, said geese are



Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press

A pair of black East Indie ducks waddle about in this undated photo on the Holderread Waterfowl and Preservation Center, Philomath.

similar to horses: powerful, intelligent beasts that must trust and respect you in equal amounts.

“I also enjoy their chatter — and their grace,” he said.

Ducks, too, are efficient meat, egg and down producers, are hardy and require minimal shelter.

They consume flies, mosquito larvae, slugs, snails, fire ants, spiders and weed seeds.

Most important, Holderread said, ducks’ playful antics “bring beauty” to people’s lives.

The Holderreads have produced what many experts consider the best books in the world about ducks and geese. Dave wrote them; Millie illustrated them.

“I would say that they’ve touched thousands and thousands of people with their books,” said John Metzger, owner of the California hatchery.

Rare birds

Holderread has focused his career on preserving rare and endangered breeds. Without his efforts, experts say several species would likely have gone extinct.

At its peak, his farm was full of color and life, including chubby-checked Call Ducks, emerald green East Indies and tall Indian Runners that walk upright like humans.

He even invented a new breed of duck, which Millie named the Golden Cascade.

“He’s a brilliant color geneticist,” said Beranger, the rare breeds expert.

Generosity

The Holderreads, friends said, have been generous with their knowledge.

Millie said Dave gets letters and emails from around the world and has spent countless hours on the phone answering people’s questions.

On one occasion, a 14-year-old boy from Australia who had read Holderread’s books stayed a week with the couple when visiting the U.S.

“He was brilliant. He had memorized the genotypes for every color and he would quiz me,” Holderread said, and laughed.

The boy wanted to breed a color of duck that didn’t exist in Australia. He and Holderread stayed up until midnight diagramming how to make the color.

“When he went home, he tried it. He sent us pictures of the crosses. And in two years, he did it,” Holderread said.

Kids who came late

Through the years, Dave and Millie welcomed five college students to live with them and learn about agriculture.

One young man, Beau McLean, grew up on a cattle ranch in Montana. At age 10, he found a used copy of one of Holderread’s books at a garage sale, which furthered his desire to raise poultry. When preparing to attend OSU a decade later, he met, then lived, with the Holderreads.

“They became like second parents to me,” he said.

Today, McLean co-runs a pastured poultry and beef operation in Montana.

Phillip Landis, a sheep rancher in Albany, also lived with the couple during college.

Landis said he learned how to be frugal, wise and a keen observer of animals. He also learned about hospitality and putting others first.

Holderread said helping young people has brought him and Millie joy.

“We thought we’d have kids, but they never showed up. But we like to say they showed up as young adults,” he said.

A legacy

When Holderread began planning for retirement, he strategically spread out his bird genetics.

“We still need more champions of waterfowl, but Dave went above and beyond to place the genetics with people who want to carry on the legacy,” said Beranger.

Davis, owner of the waterfowl preservation farm in Canada, bought many of Holderread’s birds.

Davis said Holderread changed his life. Davis now aims to prevent breeds from going extinct.

“I have a chance in history to preserve something beautiful that would otherwise be lost,” he said.

Today, the Holderreads continue to raise horses and keep a small flock of geese and ducks.

“I can say one thing about life,” Holderread said, grinning. “It’s been interesting.”

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