



**WICK:**

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first-hand," she said. "It's funny because, for most of them, it was culture shock. Some of those kids had never been out of the city or never been out of their apartments or their trailer parks or wherever they were from."

Wick said she remembers one boy was so excited to put on some irrigation boots and tramp through the fields with her husband as he changed the sprinklers. Three other siblings were all interested in painting the barn, so they did.

"It was a scene," she said with a laugh. "We had paint everywhere, and they had paint all over

themselves, but it was an absolute blast. We had to touch up a little bit here and there after they were done, but it was quite an experience for them to get to do that."

Shari Wick said one of the other highlights has been hosting student field trips.

"I taught elementary for 20 years and brought the kids out here for maybe 12 to 15 of those years," she said. "The kids always talk about that. You run into them now, and they are adults and they say, 'I still remember going out to your farm, Mrs. Wick.' From stepping in the pond, to throwing rocks into the pond, they are just things that kids just don't get to do anymore."

During those field trips,

students changed out artificial irrigation pipes, took water samples and did a variety of other tasks that allowed them to experience life on a farm.

During that time, the Wick family also completed the daily farm duties, which involved taking care of a variety of animals through the years and managing the irrigation of their farm. Shari Wick said they split some of the chores between each of their children, and the whole family worked together to get everything accomplished.

"They always had something," she said. "Whether it was dog and rabbits or goats and the horse, they always had something that needed do-

ing. Both outside chores and inside chores, whether they were male or female, it was equally shared."

Shari Wick said the children also helped with the raking, mowing, pulling weeds and helping their dad string fencing for their wired fences. Their children learned how to drive a tractor at the age of 10 and could pack a bale of hay.

**LIFE AFTER CHILDREN ON THE FARM**

Now that their children are adults, all the farm chores have fallen back on Mike and Shari Wick,

which at times, has been pretty challenging.

"Mike usually gets up real early, usually to get the first round of irrigating and feeding done for any of the animals," Shari Wick said. "Then we both work during the day. Sometimes, if there is something that needs to be done, he'll take his lunch hour and drive home and take care of it, but usually it is right when he gets home from work and changes into his farm gear and he's out changing pipe again or moving fence or whatever he needs to do until he's done. I get dinner on the table. Sometimes it

is late and sometimes, if there is a catastrophe, it's really late."

Sometimes, Shari Wick said she feels overwhelmed by how busy they are, but just when they start to consider giving up farming for a simpler life, something reminds them just how blessed they are.

"I don't know how many times I've said to him, 'Do we still want to keep all this and keep doing this?' But then you sit out here on a spring night or in the summer and you just think, 'gosh, we are so lucky,'" she said. "It is a lot of work, but it is so beautiful."

**SILVERDALE:**

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United States is produced overseas, in places such as Australia and New Zealand, where it is less expensive to produce the meat.

"Just between the dollar exchange, they can get their dressed product here at the same value as ours," he said. "I think the Australian dollar is somewhere around 80 cents now, and the New Zealand dollar might be a little lower, and that's a huge advantage for an exporter, not so good for the folks where the product is going."

Despite the competition, he said the sheep business and the market for lamb, especially last year, has been "good." He said the number of sheep in the country, however, has declined sharply through the years.

"At the end of World War II, there was 45 million sheep in the United States, and now there's about 4.5 million," he said. "That's what's happened to the industry. Most of it's labor and availability of range to run them on."

Karin Watson said it is difficult to find quality employees to tend the flock while grazing.

"It's a 24/7 job," she said. "You can't leave them. We used electric fence, which is a big help, so they don't have to be totally herded, but you still have to have a human being there to make sure they're going to be safe, so it's a challenge."

Sheep operations in the Midwest and eastern United States often keep their animals inside of fenced property, she said, but, on the western side of the country, most operations rely on federal land for grazing.

"Sheep producers have been dependent on the (Bureau of Land Management) and Forest Service for their summer grazing, and that's been severely restricted, and it's not getting better," she said. "There's all sorts of conflicts with predators, a.k.a. the wolf, and then we've got the cougar and all the other large predators that are in the hills. It's just made it difficult. ... You can't afford to put them in a confined feeding situation. It's astronomical to keep mother ewes. It's like putting cows in a feedlot to wait for them to calve next year. It just doesn't work."

Karin Watson said she knows people in the Northwest who have been forced to discontinue grazing their sheep on land their family has used for generations because of new policies.

"They're running big numbers, and where are they going to take them?" she said. "It's a challenge."

Tom Watson said the most difficult challenge current sheep operations face is government policy.

"There's issues of wolves," he said. "There's issues of supporting the folks who work in the trapping side of the U.S. government. There's issues of the spotted owl. All of these issues have shrunk the availability of range for

both cattle and sheep, so it's a big, big factor. ... There's a lot of factors. Farming's changed. A lot of the country that was grazed by sheep 50 years ago is now in irrigation, similar to what's around here in Hermiston and the Columbia Basin, and all that ground was pastured at one time. You find similar situations in other parts of the country. It's a changing industry, like all industries are. Change with the times."

**SPECIALIZING WITH SILVERDALE**

Karin Watson said the couple's daughters were involved with 4-H and FFA and showed sheep at the fair, so they "had a few around all the time." The family's flock of black-faced Suffolk sheep, which are common at fairs, grew through the years, she said, but, about 20 years ago, the Watsons started breeding the Suffolks to white-faced Texel sheep to create a cross-breed they call Silverdale for its speckled, silver face.

"The Suffolk has been developed into a pretty large sheep and pretty streamlined-looking for the show ring," she said. "The meat qualities, we feel, have been secondary, so we were looking for more muscle, more meat, which, in the layman's term, creates more yield."

Texels, she said, are "shorter-statured, wider-bodied, bigger-muscled" sheep that originated in Holland and, when bred with Suffolks, produce the desired qualities.

"You have one animal that's a slender-built animal and one that's real meaty," she said. "This is going to give you more meat. It's just natural."

Karin Watson said Silverdale Farms' primary operation is selling its best Silverdale rams to commercial flock owners for breeding. She said the cross-bred Silverdale is also a stronger stud animal with "hybrid vigor."

"The Suffolks have been bred over the years, and they aren't noted for longevity," she said. "Our goal is to raise a ram that can go out with a commercial flock of ewes and go through breeding time and then come home and rest up and be ready to go next year. Some Suffolks have a reputation of not being that successful. We were looking for a cross-breed that would have the hybrid vigor and also create more meat in the offspring. It's what you call a terminal sire. All of our rams' lambs in a commercial flock go to the meat market. They're not kept for breeding."

Karin Watson said Silverdale Farms maintains about 150 ewes for annual breeding: about 30 pure-bred Suffolks and a slightly larger group of pure-bred Texels, but the majority are Silverdales. The goal is for each ewe to produce two lambs each year, she said, but the 150 usually produce between 225 and 250 each year around March.

"We want twins," she said. "All of our females are twins or triplets themselves. We don't keep any singles,

so, if she just has one lamb, that lamb goes to market. If she singles twice, she's going right along with the lamb because it costs the same to feed a ewe that gives you one lamb versus one that gives you two, and they can easily raise two."

She said, while it is not uncommon for a ewe to have a single lamb its first breeding year, if that continues, it might be a genetic predisposition, which could be passed onto the offspring. If a ewe has triplets, she said she will remove one of the lambs from its mother and feed it with a bottle or try to pair it with another suitable ewe because the ewes only have two teats.

The Watsons use a variety of criteria to select the best Silverdale rams from the offspring to sell for breeding.

"We sell about 70 rams for breeding a year," Karin Watson said. "That's the top of the top. We grow them fast. By Sept. 1, they'll weigh an average of 180 pounds each. They're fast-growing, and they can be sold for breeding, but before we allow them to be sold for breeding, we ultrasound the rib-eye and see what size the lamb chop is, and they're ranked. If they don't fit our criteria there, they go to market, and they're not for sale. We want to tell our buyers what they're buying from us is something we'd keep ourselves for breeding."

She said some of the best remaining lambs are kept for future breeding at Silverdale Farms, but most are sent to the Superior Farms processing facility in California, usually by the first of September.

The Watsons shear the Silverdale Farms flock in September, Karin Watson said, and the "five months minus five days" gestation period begins again with a new round of breeding in October.

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