



THE KISS OF THE RABBIT LADY

BY CHARLES CAPALDI

We sold our 200 acre sheep dairy farm in Wisconsin just as urban sprawl from Minneapolis/St. Paul – nearly an hour away – began to reach our small farming community. City folk in increasing numbers had begun to realize that a ¼ acre lot in Minneapolis cost about the same as a 40 acre lot with a small house in the country, just a hop, skip and a jump down the highway in their BMW.

When we first bought our farm, the neighbors were mostly in their late 60's, had been farming their land for several generations and were accustomed to the sights, sounds and above all, the smells of farming. Within 12 months, the 'house on 40 acres' zoning had been down-scaled to a 'house on 10 acres' and there was talk of shifting to a 'house on 5'. Ten years later, when we spread manure on our pastures, the odor caused a riot of phone calls to our town chairman who patiently explained the importance of soil fertility to the new folks in town. His explanation fell on deaf ears. It was hard to begrudge my farming neighbors, land rich and dollar poor, the opportunity to cash in, after a lifetime of dirt farming and hard work. At the turn of the millennium, most of them were being paid the same price for their milk that they were in

1976. At the same time, it was hard to see good farmland shift from emerald green pastures and waving fields of grain to broad expanses of lawn, carefully enclosed by white picket fences, posted with warnings about security systems and inhabited by city folk who didn't know that you were supposed to wave hello as you passed a neighbor on the road.

So, we ran. Well, to be honest, we fled ... thinking there must be more remote places to live our rural lifestyle – places that were protected from the encroachment of civilization, places where people still realized that all eggs weren't created equal, that meat wasn't "born" in plastic wrappers on little pink Styrofoam trays, and that a bag of 5-10-5 fertilizer could be easily replaced with a scoop of cow manure. We sold the farm (not to a developer, which would have netted twice the profit, but to a nice couple from St. Paul who were ready to shed their city skins and take on the farming lifestyle), piled our three children into an old camper and filled out the paperwork to immigrate to Quebec. And off we headed, to discover greener pastures on the other side of the fence.

It took us three months to make our way from Wisconsin to Southern Vermont en route to Quebec – sampling everything that small-town America had to offer along the way. The Amish in Ohio, playing Russian roulette in their horse drawn buggies at congested intersections. Poverty sitting side-by-side with \$3 million dollar houses precariously perched on the Outer Banks of North Carolina waiting for the next tidal wave in the Atlantic. Along the way, we stopped at the farms I had grown up on ... the 80 acre peach orchard on Good Hope Road – now paved, complete with street lamps, a bedroom community with lovely homes on 5 acre parcels selling for a million or more ... the orchard was long gone, not even a stump left standing. The house built in 1742 was long gone, replaced by a sprawling monstrosity patrolled by guard dogs. The old hog farm in Oxford had been turned into an English riding stables where one could learn dressage and how to dress for your horse, all in the comfort of a heated arena. As we traveled, I became acutely aware of the fact that you can literally never go home again, no matter how hard you try.



It also became apparent that you can't outrun the development, the sprawl, or the urbanization of rural America. And by the time we got to the Green Mountain Spinnery in Brattleboro Vermont, a small spinning mill, we were disheartened, and Quebec as a destination was looking better and better. The lady working the counter, Margaret Klein-Wilson, voiced my worst fears. A native of Wisconsin, she had left years before to come to New England, the same flight my wife and I had made in reverse in our early 20's. Margaret sighed, smiled and said, "You can't ever outrun it. So I decided to buy what I could afford and make my stand right here." Truer words were never spoken. We went back to our campground that night, arms laden with wool and hearts heavy with the truth of her observation.

We aimed the camper at Northern Quebec and pressed the gas pedal. Our plan was to visit friends who had bought our entire previous year's production of sheep milk and who made world

class artisan cheese on their farm. The land was cheap, the people were friendly, and the timing was looking pretty good. Too good perhaps. Winter was coming and we needed to get out of the camper or head to points further south, but our immigration paperwork was not yet through and so we headed back to the States to find a place to hole up for the winter. We ended up just down the road from the Green Mountain Spinnery again, this time in Keene, New Hampshire. A week after we moved in with our sleeping bags and camp stove, the first snow of the year dumped a good foot of white fluff down upon us. That was a long winter filled with baking bread, home-schooling our three children, knitting sweaters to keep everyone warm, and soul-searching ... lots of it. We liked the area a lot ... but the cost of living was prohibitive. We couldn't afford a farm even half the size of our previous operation. Property taxes were at residential rather than farming rates and property values were unbelievable. Most of the "farms" were owned by wealthy folks from Boston and Connecticut who needed a traditional place to celebrate Thanksgiving every year and a place to spend their two weeks of vacation – far from the hustle and bustle of city life.

And so we kept looking. After the impact of 9/11, with American troops engaged in Afghanistan and Iraq, the development of the Office of Homeland Security and the inevitable abrogation of civil liberties by a God-fearing president convinced of his own divine mandate, we debated the relative merits of staying on in the States and fleeing to Canada. Ultimately, we decided that you couldn't outrun the injustices inherent in the system, the decline of agriculture, or global warming. We also decided that rather than fleeing from the changes, we should stay and face them. What would happen, we reasoned, if everyone who truly cared, fled the country.

In January, my son and I happened upon a stacked cordwood home for sale in Vermont, just miles from the Canadian border. Nestled on 10 acres, just off a dirt road, well off the beaten path, the owner built home was unfinished, unheated and cheap. This place was just the ticket for a rural homestead with enough rough pasture for a few sheep, goats and some chickens. Perhaps, we reasoned, the answer lay in forgoing a commercial farming operation – something that had never netted us much income anyway – and trying our hand at homesteading instead. As a homestead, we wouldn't need to be concerned about producing enough to sell, rather, we'd focus on producing food for our needs. The house and land cost less than a low-end Mercedes and by March, we had moved in and begun the hard work of getting the place livable. We had also become the newest flatlanders to move to Vermont's Northeast Kingdom.



The Northeast Kingdom is an anomaly in New England. Orleans County has the highest unemployment rate in the state and the local economy is largely driven by tourism. But, as you drive the back roads, you see one hill farm after another, silent testimony to a long standing tradition of subsistence agriculture reaching back to the days of the British retreat to Canada at the close of the American revolution. Here, we reasoned, is a people accustomed to the law of the farm, people who understand the value of green pasture, who don't mind the sound of a rooster crowing at dawn or the thrill of a gentle rain falling on your garden. At the outset, I didn't mind the flatlander designation. There were compensations, like the well driller who came out with his crew and celebrated the geyser of water gushing from our new well over a mug of hard cider, "You're a good shit ... for a flatlander." I took this as a complement and a sign of hope that ultimately, we could integrate into this community. Going to the feed store felt very much like rural Wisconsin, and while the area was less intensively devoted to agriculture than we were used to, we shared the flurry of activity that comes with the haying season, putting up wood for winter, getting the harvest in and the hatches buttoned down before the first snow fell. Then it happened. I was unloading a truckload of hay in weather that had plummeted to well below zero when a State Police officer pulled up in the driveway.

"It seems there has been a complaint filed about cruelty to animals. Do you have rabbits?" He asked.

Sure enough, we keep a pair of breeding does and a buck. They have two, sometimes three litters in a season, which we grow out for a couple of months and then butcher and put in the freezer for meat. In a gourmet grocery store, you can expect to pay \$8/pound for dressed and frozen rabbit. On a homestead, few animal protein sources come cheaper. Rabbits are funny though, they like fresh air and sunshine. The cold doesn't bother them, but the humidity does ... in fact, it bothers them so much that if we put them in our barn, we'd be facing a pneumonia epidemic followed by droves and droves of dead bunnies. Not a happy prospect. So while it isn't convenient

for us as the humans who attend to them, the rabbits are suspended over a garden row where their manure can build soil where it is most needed. A tin roof shelters them from the sun, rain and snow and their winter coats protect them from the cold, just as Mother Nature intended. We've done this for 15 years and can count on one hand the number of animals lost to disease.

The officer, admitting no prior knowledge of rabbits whatsoever, asked if he could see them. I obliged, brought him down into the garden and gave him the basics. He nodded, conceded that they looked plump, their coats were glossy, their eyes clear and their ears perky. He didn't see a problem and he certainly didn't see any abuse as evidenced by his curt, "These animals are well taken care of." End of story, or so I thought.

The next day a silver pickup pulled up in the driveway – as it turned out, the local animal control officer had received a call as well. He didn't know much about rabbits, sheep, goats or chickens, stray dogs being his specialty. Nonetheless, it fell to him to research the complaint. He had been led to believe that our animals were going without food, water and shelter. He needed to take a look for himself. We brought him down to the rabbitry and then to the barn to see for himself. He was surprised – the person making the complaint had insisted that he seize the animals. From her description, he had images of animals huddled and starving behind trees in the woods. What he found was a carefully tended operation. The animals were comfortable, healthy, in good condition and in many cases, visibly pregnant. Even more surprising to him was that their water wasn't frozen in spite of the -35 wind chill ... I explained that our children did chores three times a day in the coldest weather to make sure that fresh water was always available. A wise farmer once said that "water is the most important nutrient" and our kids have taken that lesson to heart. Satisfied, he hopped into his truck and drove off – telling me not to worry and muttering about the waste of time caused by this flatlander lady who thought our rabbits should be kept in the house. This, I thought, was the end of the story.



Having been on this homestead for nearly a year, I was a bit surprised by all the attention. I was even more surprised by the anonymous nature of the complaint. These animals had been here all summer and this animal-loving, concerned citizen had never even stopped by to introduce herself, let alone to inquire about the orchard we were planting, the barn that was going up, or the garden that was yielding a bumper crop of tomatoes. Nevertheless, after two visits by public officials both clearly stating that no abuse was taking place, we reassured the kids that they hadn't done anything wrong and concentrated all of our efforts on keeping the temperature inside the house above 55 degrees. On the third day of -35 wind chills, the family was working hard to bring in wood for the coming night and the plummeting temperatures that would surely accompany it, when up pulled the State Trooper, this time with a second patrol car in tow.

He shook his head as he got out of the car, his police dog in the back seat barking wildly – a behavior he described as “talking” when asked. “It seems,” he explained, “that this lady called the governors office, the president of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, and the District Attorney’s office. I know I said nothing was wrong with your animals but we are getting a lot of pressure from the state capital to do something about this situation. She must be making a lot of noise down there. ” You need to understand that the state capital, Montpelier, is a 2 ½ hour drive from here ... no member of any of the offices that she called had been out to see our operation, none of them even bothered to pick up the phone. In fact, she had never been closer than 100 feet to the animals herself – having only seen them from the road as she drove by in inclement weather at 35 mph. The officer suggested that the animals could be seized while an investigation was started and that I might want to “consider just putting them in the barn to make this problem go away.” As he put it, “She’s probably just a misguided animal lover.”

I found that statement ironic. Her “issues” weren’t based at all on her understanding of the needs of our rabbits, chickens, sheep or goats ... instead, they were based on her perception of livestock as having needs similar to humans.

Ironically, the animals most susceptible to cold on our farm are not the rabbits with their full winter coats, nor are they the sheep with their 12 pound and 7 inch thick fleece, but rather, the dairy goats that had been carefully provided with a straw-bedded shed. But, nobody paid them any attention. In fact, I doubt that anyone realized they weren’t sheep. Where we see ewes and rams, a city dweller sees “sheep”. Where we see heifers, cows and a bull, an urban dweller only sees “cows”. The distinction between hay and straw gets blurred by folks who have never made a bale let alone fed one out. Both public officials involved in this case admitted to having no specific knowledge of the needs of any of the species of

livestock on our farm. The complaint was about rabbits, after all.

I wonder, on what should we base our livestock management? Fear, perhaps? If we let the sheep out on a sunny day for sunshine, fresh air and exercise, will we get another visit from the State Police, or worse, have our animals seized? Ignorance then? Ignorance of the supposed physical needs of each class of stock as determined by an anonymous and ostensibly, non-farming observer? How about anthropomorphism? We could bring them all inside the house so they are warm and toasty throughout the winter and treat them as companion animals while they drop like flies.

Had she stopped to talk to me – I could have explained the relative feed value of our rations, why shearing sheep during a cold spring increases their metabolism just in time for lambing, or the challenges of handling parasites organically. She might have learned something from the conversation. I might have been able to allay her concerns. At the very least, a dialogue would have been opened that didn’t need to include ultimatums, police intervention and the office of the governor.



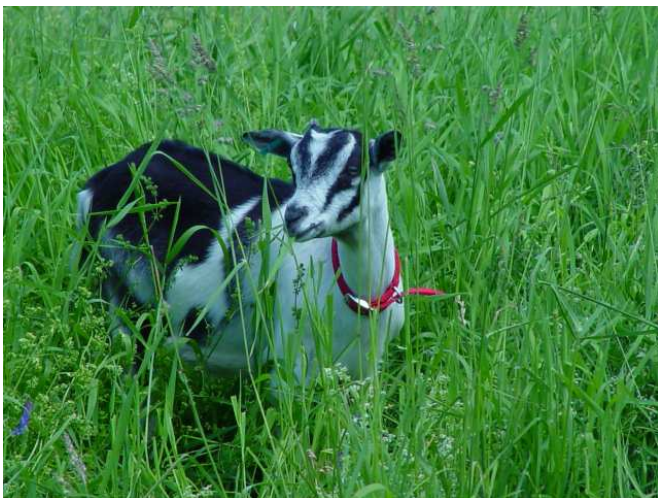
Since no charges were brought, my accuser remains nameless – leaving my children to suspect every car that passes as the culprit. No one ever talked to the proprietor of the feed store who counts on my business when I pull up to stock up on feed, mineral and salt. No one bothered to call the veterinarian who works with me to keep my animals in good health. When I slaughter chickens next spring, do I need to hide behind the house because 10 acres isn’t enough privacy and because her sensibilities may be offended by a dead chicken not previously entombed in plastic wrap and Styrofoam? What happens when an animal dies on pasture – as most life forms do when they get old - regardless of how good the life? These questions run through my mind and make me want to pack up and take off in the camper to look for a more remote

location. And then I realize, you can't outrun it, you have to stop and make your stand somewhere. So, this is mine.

In January 2004, David Consadine, a Wisconsin goat farmer was accused of animal cruelty and abuse by two farm workers who had been in his employ for the previous eight years. He stood accused of felony mistreatment of animals for killing baby goats with a claw hammer, performing a caesarian section without anesthesia, and lighting a goat on fire before cutting the animal's throat. He insisted that these were gross exaggerations of the fact. He had been raising goats since 1956 and was then serving as president of the National Dairy Goat Association, a position he filled several times over the years. His herd of dairy goats had achieved national champion status in several breeds and he had a wall of ribbons to prove it. He has been recognized as a Premier Breeder at the ADGA National Shows for many years. He was a sought-after dairy goat judge, having judged goats across the US and internationally and his knowledge of goats and the industry has enabled him to export of goat genetics.

He claimed that these were disgruntled employees who had been terminated and had a reason to slander his name. He claimed that the facts had been distorted. But his case was tried in the court of public opinion before he even had a chance.

People had visions of the McMMartin Nursery School Sex Abuse case ... you know the one, where prosecutorial "child specialists" had coached the kids into levying claims that ultimately couldn't be substantiated. Do you think the McMMartins opened another nursery school once the charges had been dropped? The local authorities, under pressure to act, did just that. He was arrested and charged. Meanwhile, animal rights activists started to foment a moral panic.



Voluntarily stepping down from his position as president of the American Dairy Goat Association, Consadine's name was dragged through the mud, he faced thousands of dollars of fines, potentially up to seven years in prison, and his projected legal expenses were in excess of \$20,000. The case was dropped by the district attorney after Consadine's

accusers refused to testify unless the District Attorney brought charges in an unrelated civil matter. This shed some light on their ulterior motives. In the end, his name was cleared, but at what cost? I'm not talking dollars here, I'm talking about the work, energy and effort that goes into building a great dairy herd over 48 years of farming. I'm talking about the irreparable damage to his name and reputation. I'm talking about the emotional wear-and-tear of fighting the battle. I'm talking about the unjustness of pointing a finger at the farmer who does the work, cares for the animals 7 days a week (weekends and holidays included), and who has worked hard to acquire the knowledge necessary for them to flourish under his care. Because let's face it, as a farmer, you only make money if your animals do well. If they die, if they are sick, if they produce poorly, then it is just money down the drain. Dairy farming takes this a step further. A contented, relaxed and happy animal produces far more milk than a stressed, abused and uptight one. More milk means more money, and the reality is that to most of us living an agricultural lifestyle, money is scarce enough as it is.



I've always been struck by visitors to our farm who can't eat the meat at dinner because they were just in the barn and saw those big brown eyes staring up at them. Admittedly, the calf with the big brown eyes is probably unrelated to the 1600 lbs. steer who contributed the steak on their plate ... but to them, the two are somehow linked. They feel guilty about eating it, an ironic state of affairs because the anonymous beef at the grocery store has little to do with the beef produced on a small farm. Commercial beef is raised in feedlots where the animals are so tightly confined that they must be fed a steady diet of antibiotics to ward off the diseases that accompany overcrowding. Practices, like manure refeeding (where 20% of the ration is replaced by dried, treated or ensiled manure) are prevalent, the rationale being that manure used as a foodstuff is more valuable to the farmer than manure used as a fertilizer. The average consumer doesn't get the fact that with the margins in agriculture as they are, big time producers resorted to treating and grinding up dead cows, only to use the resulting meal as a feed supplement as a cheaper source of protein ... a practice which has ultimately

led to Mad Cow Disease, a reality that the consumer does get, in some cases, first hand. Meanwhile, the meat raised on the hoof on small homesteads like ours, frolic on the pasture in the sunshine, eat the grass as it grows and live a full life before they grace our table – a sacrifice that we are so much more grateful for, since we deliver the killing blow ourselves. My feeling is that people who can't handle the concept that an animal had to die in order to put that chicken breast on their plate ... well, maybe they should become vegetarians. I'm not asking them to fire the killing shot. I don't expect them to raise their own meat. I'd just like them to get out of the way of me raising mine.



I pulled into the feed store yesterday and the guy behind the counter commented on how much less rabbit food I was buying than usual. Normally, we go through 200 lbs. a week and this week, I only needed 50 lbs. I told him my story and explained, “It was easier to butcher the rabbits early than it was to bring them inside only to have them die off.” He shook his head, “Damn flatlanders, they should just learn to mind their own business.” And I have to say, it felt good we’d chosen to make our stand here, because for once, the flatlanders were “them” and not me.