

Raising capons: A family affair for the Shenks

BY LAURA ENGLAND

LITITZ — When it comes to 4-H participation, the Glenn Shenk family of Lititz, has dipped its hands and energies into a variety of projects, ranging from sewing and cooking to strawberries and dairy. But one project that each of the six Shenk children, along with Mom and Dad, have found a rewarding pleasure in is raising flocks of capons.

The Shenks began raising capons about nine years ago when sons Bud, now 21, and Jeff, 19, bought their first flocks for 4-H. Bud and Jeff no longer raise the birds for projects, but sisters Melanie, 15, Daphne, 14, Lisa, 12, and Monica, 9, have picked up where their brothers left off.

Members of the Elm Penryn community club, the Shenks have found that raising capons takes a total family effort. During the summer and fall, the girls are responsible for feeding and watering the birds twice daily, in addition to keeping their project books up-to-date. When November rolls around, Mr. Shenk, his wife Audrey, and the children all pitch in to dress the birds for the county 4-H round-up.

This year's project began June 9 when the Shenks received their flock of 75 capons. At that time, the birds were three to four weeks old and weighed about three-fourths of a pound. Now, six weeks later, each capon weighs between three to four pounds and will reach

a finished weight of eight to 12 pounds by November.

To get these results, a good feeding program is essential. The Shenks begin with a 16 percent protein pacemaker starter and then switch to a complete grower feed. Towards the end of October, the capons are fed a little shelled corn to help put the finish on. Also, water is available at all times.

Raising the flock, Mrs. Shenk said, involves a minimum of daily care, but housing maintenance such as bedding, checking the amount of ventilation and making sure the automatic watering system is working properly, should be routinely checked. Health is also important, and an eye must be alert to any problems.

When outside chores are completed, the girls can concentrate on keeping their record books in order. This involves keeping track of all expenses — cost of the birds, housing, equipment, feed, and miscellaneous expenses such as dressing and marketing. The receipts are entered after the county round-up.

In 1982, the girls made a \$270.33 profit. Their initial investment was: 75 birds, \$114.00; feed, \$383.67; and miscellaneous expenses, \$7.00; for total expenses of \$504.67. In selling the capons at round-up, the girls grossed \$775.00, for a net profit of \$270.33.

This profit, however, did not include the labor cost, Mrs. Shenk said. The bulk of the labor comes



The Shenks, from left, Melanie, Daphne and Lisa, are raising a flock of 75 capons this year. The birds are housed in the shed behind the girls.

in November when the birds are dressed the day before the show.

"We dress about 25 birds for the show," Mrs. Shenk said, "which takes almost 20 hours with three or so people helping."

Mrs. Shenk said she and her husband usually begin dressing the birds in the morning. When the girls come home from school, they pitch in and do their share. Each girl needs two pairs of capons for the round-up — one pair is judged and sold, and the other is just sold.

For round-up this year, the Shenks will need a total of 16 capons. By dressing 25 birds, the girls have a better selection to choose from, Mrs. Shenk said.

The birds must be matched in size and weight as closely as possible, Melanie said. The birds are judged in pairs, and having the same size, weight and color are important factors, she added. Defects in dressing and packaging are also considered.

In competition, the girls have fared well. In her first year, Melanie received the reserve champion title. Since then, she and her sisters have been consistent in receiving blue ribbons and occasionally some red.

But regardless of the ribbons they receive, the girls have learned much about responsibility and dedication.

"We learn alot," Melanie said. "We learn to dress and feed the birds and how much money is



Daphne takes time to add more feed to the capons' trough. The birds are fed twice daily and have free access to their feed.

needed to grow them."

Although the girls are busy raising their capons and participating in other 4-H activities, they still find time to pitch in with the chores on their 180-acre farm where they raise 75 dairy cows.

"There's always something to do," Mrs. Shenk said with a laugh, "and there never seems to be enough time to do it."

And this is where a family effort becomes important, contests 4-H club leader Mervin Peifer. Peifer, who lives in Manheim, has served as the capon project leader for the past 25 years and believes that parents play a significant role in all 4-H projects.

Equally important is the role Peifer plays in the 4-H capon project.

As a leader, Peifer orders the capons from a supplier in Adams County in March. A county-wide estimate is made and the birds arrive in two shipments, already caponized. The first shipment arrived June 9 and the second on July 14.

This year, 3200 capons were ordered and distributed among the county's 26 members. If any birds are left over, Peifer raises them.

Peifer also takes the time to check the 4-H'ers projects and give any help he can. One important

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At this time, the capons weigh from three to four pounds each. Melanie said the birds will weight between eight to 12 pounds at dressing and will resemble a turkey.



Besides raising capons for 4-H projects, the Shenks also grow strawberries. This year, the girls planted 200 new plants and are shown with their mother, second from left, as they check for any possible problems.



An automatic system provides water at all times for the Shenk's flock of capons.