

Kid's KOrner

Family Raises Plump Turkeys For Thanksgiving

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MOUNT JOY (Lancaster Co.)
 — Somebody has got to raise a turkey for your Thanksgiving Feast.

If you're lucky, that turkey will be raised by the Graybill family in Mt. Joy.

"It's a family project," Joyce, the mother, said of the 31 turkeys that gobble incessantly and ruffle their white feathers on the Graybills' 6½-acre farm.

Five turkey toms and 16 hens excitedly greet visitors to their domain in the barn. The toms' normally-colored red heads and beards turn blue with excitement as the three Graybill children, Mark, 11; Sarah, 8; and Rebecca, 5, line up in front of the turkey pen.

The children repeat this little ditty:

*"The turkey is a funny bird,
 His head goes wobble, wobble,
 wobble.*

*And all he says is just one word:
 Gobble, gobble, gobble."*

As the children repeat the poem, the turkeys crowd against the fence. For a moment they silently stare at the children. Then as-if on cue, all the turkeys chant in unison, "gobble, gobble, gobble." The birds intermittently lapse into another moment of silence followed by "gobble, gobble, gobble."

The Graybills started raising the day-old turkeys in May. At first, the poults needed to be kept underneath a heat lamp in the house.

Not all the turkeys survived. "That's because turkeys are stupid," Mark said.

"Well, maybe stupid is a strong word," his mother cautioned, "but they do need to be taught everything."

Even to eat. Pushing the turkeys' beaks into the feed doesn't seem to help the newborn turkey understand that feed is for eating.

Since turkeys like bright objects, the Graybills interspersed colorful marbles among the feed placed in a shiny aluminum pan.

The shiny colors enticed the turkeys to peck at it. When the birds pecked at a marble, they accidentally tasted a little feed.

And, that little taste has them pecking again until they finally realize that feed is to be eaten.

The day the turkeys were big enough to move from the house to the barn was the time three curious turkeys climbed from the box and decided to explore the Graybills' basement. In one corner of the basement was a sump pump immersed in some water. The three turkeys decided to go for a swim. Unfortunately, turkeys cannot swim so that was three less turkeys.

By nature, turkeys like to peck everything and anything. Occasionally a turkey will become cannibalistic and peck a sibling until it draws blood. When this happens the turkey must be removed from the flock.

The surviving turkeys are now



Time to pick out a favorite turkey. From left, Mark, Sarah, friend Lindsey Gruber, and Rebecca.

plump and healthy. In fact, some weigh 40 pounds — that's a lot of turkey for the Thanksgiving table.

Of course, before the turkeys are prepared for the table, they need to be dressed. That means the turkey must first be killed and have its feathers removed. That's a big job and one that Joyce can do for a couple of birds but doesn't have the time to do for all of them.

"One of the hardest parts of raising turkeys is to find a processor to dress them," Joyce said.

Because U.S.D.A. requirements for doing custom work keeps changing, many processors said that it is not cost effective to dress the turkeys.

"Dressing birds seems to be a dying art," said Joyce, who found someone who will do it this year, but will not next year. Husband Dale delivers and picks up the birds at the processing plant.

When customers come to the

Graybill farm to pick up the turkeys, Sarah and Rebecca entertain the children who come along. They show them the pygmy goat, cats, beef cattle, and rabbits on the farm. Mark, whose specialty is math, will count the money and add up the profits.

Some people do not know that turkeys are raised on the farm. As a nursery school teacher, Joyce teaches her students about turkeys and other farm animals. Other years, she brought her class to the farm, but recent changes in state laws require three-year-olds to be seated in car seats for traveling. This makes it difficult to take the nursery class on field trips.

Joyce wants to show her class what a turkey looks and sounds like so she has taken lots of pictures of the turkeys and has tape-recorded the turkeys' gobble, gobble, gobble to share with her class.

"We'll talk about turkeys, read stories, about them and make turkey designed refrigerator magnets," she said.

"It's an opportunity to weave agriculture into the classroom setting."

Joyce is always looking for innovative ways to teach the children about agriculture because only two of her students live on a farm.

Joyce comes from a family who has always been strong on promoting agriculture whether it is milk, corn, or Harvestores. Before the children were born, Joyce worked in dairy promotion for the Department of Agriculture and for the Atlantic Dairy Association.

Visiting a farm is one of the best ways for people to understand farm life, she said.

Turkeys can be purchased from

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The Graybill family raises Large Broad Breasted Whites for private customers who prefer homegrown turkeys raised without additives and are tender and juicy.



Mark and Sarah play with their pygmy goat Pride, which, they say, makes a better pet than a dog. In addition to turkeys, the children raise rabbits to show and sell. Mark has 11 Palomino rabbits; Sarah, 8 Florida Whites; and Rebecca, 4 Mini-lops.