

Producers Report Meat Goat Market Profitable, Growing

EVERETT NEWSWANGER
Managing Editor

LANCASTER (Lancaster Co.)
— While Lancaster County is known for being first in Pennsylvania and the nation in many agricultural enterprises, the recent title of "Meat Goat Capital East of the Mississippi River" seems a bit dubious — until you do a little investigative research.

Dr. Robert and Betty Herr, Narvon, have become the resident authorities on meat goat production and marketing. The Herr family is well-known for their show flock of Polled Dorset sheep under the Nix Besser prefix. But since Herr retired as an agricultural educator in the public school system, they have also developed a meat goat feed lot and contract buying business on their 40-acre home farm located between Blue Ball and Honey Brook.

When Herr judged the Ephrata Fair goat show this fall and we reported that he said more than 2,000 meat goats often go to market through local weekly livestock auctions, some questions were raised. But it's true. And this, in a county where you would find it hard to find goat meat offered on any local restaurant menu.

So, where do all these meat goats come from, and where do they go? That's one of the questions the group of New York State meat goat farmers were trying to have answered on their recent visit as guests of the Herrs and the New Holland goat sale. These members of the Empire State Meat Goat Producers Assn., Norwich, N.Y., were seeing firsthand what kind of goats are selling and how they might

develop their own flocks and markets back home.

"As an association, we now work together to sell to the Easter market in Canada," said James Croisant, Chenango Forks, N.Y., president. "But we are looking at what it takes to produce for other markets throughout the year. If we can raise a more mature animal for market, we can use our pastures a lot more."

"We also have a lot of dairy farmers that have gone out of business, and the land will not now support a dairy business. Land that could support a 15,000 pound herd average in the past cannot support a 24,000 pound herd average now. Many of these older farms have grown up in bush, and goats can recover the land without much investment. The goats can mow the brush, and in three years, the land is back to where the sunlight can get to the grass again."

The New York group believes the meat goat industry has a bright future. And many experts agree. According to estimates by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the city of New York alone could consume 1,000,000 goats a year if the goats were available. They estimated that there are only 850,000 goats in the US right now. And they said we need about 5,000,000 breeding goats just to supply the demand.

And because many farm enterprises have high overhead and low commodity prices, farmers are struggling to make a profit. But meat goat farmers like Lyle and Grace Mellott, Needmore, in Fulton County, say they can make

more from the goats than they can from dairy or beef cows.

"You take a billy goat to auction, and he brings \$130 to \$150," Mellott said. "Heifer calves go for \$10, but kid goats sell for \$25 to \$30."

The Mellotts got into the business by buying several goats to clean fence rows. Later, they bought La Manchas that have good milk production and then used a Boer flock billy to complete a milk/meat cross.

The dairy goat influence increases milk production so the nannies can raise the kids. The Boer cross that has the industry's attention, introduces massive gains and meat quality to the equation.

This kidding operation has 170 nannies. The kids are left to drink from their mothers until they are 60 to 70 pounds. The female kids are raised for breeding, and the billy kids are sold at private sale to the ethnic market.

A 14 percent grain mixture is fed to balance the hay and pasture and 25 percent protein blocks are scattered around the lot. A 40-acre pasture allows hay to be made as first-cutting before the flock is turned out to pasture in the spring.

Electrified chicken wire is used to keep the goats in the pasture, but the fences are checked daily because of the inquisitive nature of goats. Disease problems are the major management concern. Goats are much harder to keep healthy than steers or cows. Chickens run loose with the goats to scratch up

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Robert and Betty Herr have become the resident experts on meat goat production. They have developed a meat goat production unit on their 40-acre farm and have a contract buying service. A retired educator, Robert is called for advice on the meat goat industry and conducts many regional informational meetings.

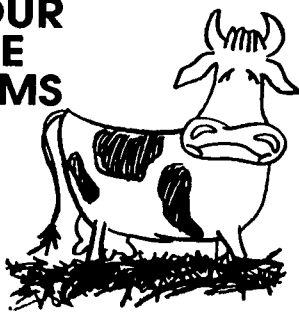
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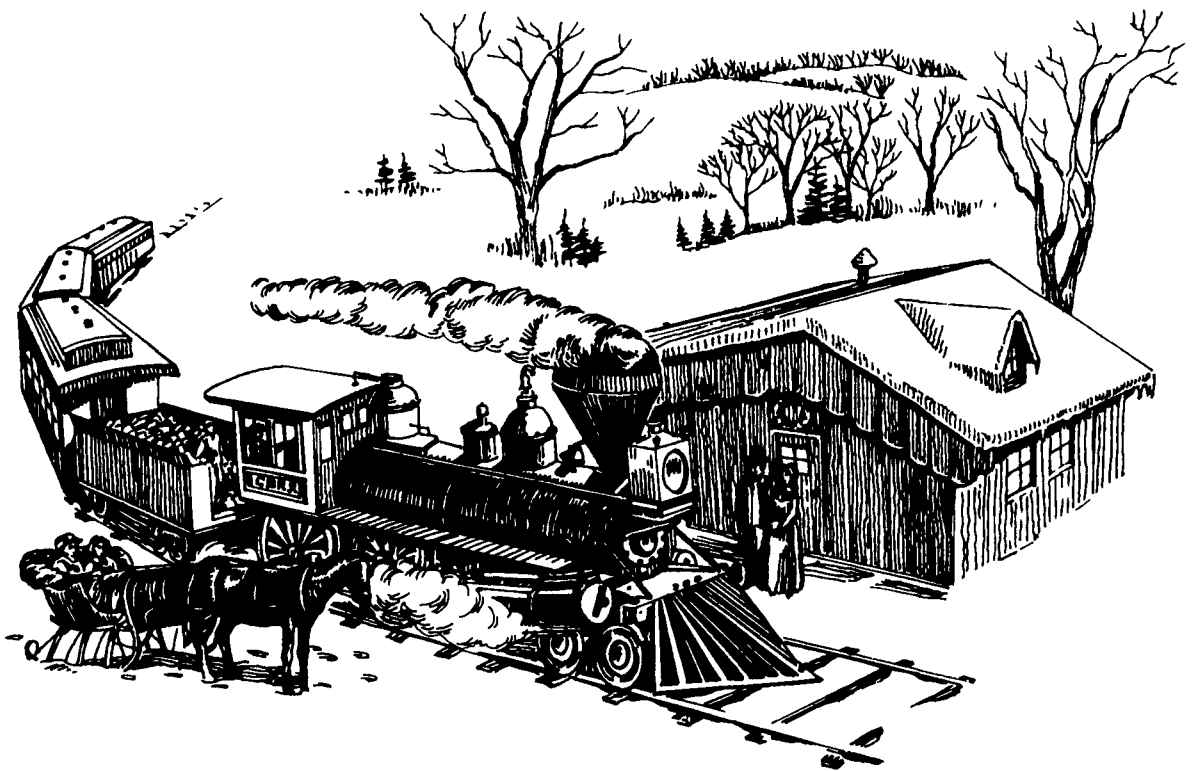
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