

The Call of the Land

Jenny Watkins, Ananda Hills Farm

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It began with a pair of knitting needles when the hands holding the knitting needles wanted to know how the skein of yarn came to be. As these same hands learned their new craft twisting fibers and turning the spinning wheel, they wondered about the sheep who gave the wool. ‘Where were they from? How were they raised?’ Then Jenny heard it - the call of the land – ‘*what would it be like to knit from wool given by sheep that you raised yourself?*’ The call explained itself, through more questions – ‘*what would it be like to live a more rural life, to be part of the land?*’ Jenny questioned back, “What would it be like to completely live off the land?” In changing her life to answer the call, a farmer was born.

In 2001 Jenny began to look for property to have a hand spinner’s flock of Shetland sheep. A 10 acre farm in Port Ludlow called, “Pick me!” and Jenny acquired what is now Ananda Hills Farm located in Beaver Valley area. “It started as a hobby but my hope was that the hobby would pay for itself. I had no farming experience and I hoped I could learn how to make a whole life from a farm.”

What was it like when she started? “I remember when the owners left and I was standing here alone in this barn and going ‘*Oh my god what have I done?*’ but it was sort of like the drive to do this had a life of its own and didn’t care that I was a single woman with no farming background.”

Jenny took her first six months on the farm to simply watch the seasons and get to know her land. Her first five sheep arrived on Christmas with three of them already bred. The following spring, her flock doubled to ten. Shetlands are among the smallest British sheep with rams having beautiful spiral horns. A friendly very social breed, they respond well to their names and even wag their tails when petted. Her small flock can produce ultra fine yarn for hand knits as well as coarser yarns for socks and outer garments. Shetland wool comes in eleven colors although Jenny is breeding for deep chocolate brown. Her flock’s wool is prepared for spinning by a local fiber processing business and then returned to Jenny who markets the wool personally.

For the first couple of years Jenny says, “It was learn as you go.” Her next step was to add chickens to improve the pastures and have some eggs of her own. Bred from hardy healthy birds from the European genetic strains called “Freedom Rangers”, her chickens have been bred to forage on pasture. At this stage of the farm, different people came into her life and helped her expand the farm. She realized and learned that chickens were a great benefit to sheep. They are a dead end host for sheep parasites as they break and scatter the manure. “The chickens serve our new cow too!” Jenny shares, “And the sheep and cow keep the grass short for the chickens.”

Through these experiences and her studies, Jenny learned of the work of Joel Salatin, a farmer from Virginia who is a leader in the model of pasteurized poultry and pasteurized beef, particularly how chickens and cattle have a powerful symbiotic relationship. “We practice this

concept of multi-species grazing,” explains Jenny. “The animals benefit each other and benefit the farm overall.”

Another species common around Ananda Hills Farm is canine. The farm is named after Jenny’s Australian Shepherd who encouraged Jenny to follow the call of the land by attending school to learn how to herd sheep and working on her frisbee skills in her spare time. Now joined by a Border Collie named Ken and a livestock guardian named Scout, Ananda finds frisbee to be her real calling.

Although the farm began to deepen its call to Jenny and her farm income began to show small amounts of growth, she still needed to work half-time in her career as a visiting nurse. Jenny learned “It wasn’t sustainable selling a little bit of wool and a little bit of eggs. But I couldn’t figure out how to take the next step.”

So she signed up for the Small Farms class at WSU. Here she found some real help, exposure to the work of the local extension office, and a lot of other farmers whom she made connections with. So Jenny took the follow-up class for running a farm business. “I’m still learning how to apply cash flow sheets” she smiles.

Last year, Jenny tilled $\frac{1}{4}$ acre and began growing crops for the Farmer’s Market and raising broilers. Her greens, potatoes, carrots, parsnip, and squashes and meat helped the farm income to grow but so did the need to develop the infrastructure of the farm. Having built her flock of fourteen chickens to over two hundred, 10 new chicken houses were needed. Each of these small housing units can hold about 20 hens allowing them to distribute the chickens so each pasture can benefit. (Did you know that recent studies have documented the health benefits of eggs from pastured hens? They include lower total fat, cholesterol and calories and high levels of vitamins E and A as well as more beneficial omega 3 fatty acids.)

Sowing the seeds for her leap to full-time farming, Jenny kept her job, built the chicken houses, added fencing, and put her money into a new greenhouse. The new 30 x 40 foot greenhouse will extend the growing season and house greenhouse crops like melons as she launches her next venture –the first Ananda Hills Farm CSA!

As the farm grows, so does Jenny. Modeling after Karyn and Emily at Old Tarboo Farm, Jenny converted her classic organic farm to the biodynamic organic farm model. She explains, “Around the time I took the WSU class, I visited a farm on Lopez Island as I was interested in a cow share program because I had found that drinking raw milk was a powerful healing tool for me. During the weekend of my visit, they had a workshop on biodynamic farming. I learned a lot about it and began applying those principles here. I began to go to Sunfield Farm too and I met my partner Theodore Carlat who ended up joining me here.” Theodore is a trained artist committed to biodynamic farming. He has been involved with the organic biodynamic food business and farming for over thirty years.

According to Rudolf Steiner, animals critical to a biodynamic farm are the earthworm under the ground, the cow on the ground, and the bee above the ground. Already working on the soil for

the earthworms, Jenny added her first cow, Flora who went to work immediately generating enough compost for the farm. The bees? The first five hives arrive this year!

Jenny and Theodore follow the tenets of biodynamic farming, from preparation of 'natural medicine' for the farm, following the biodynamic calendar, to the final focus of seeing the farm as an organism itself. "We are focusing on nutritional quality, working towards generating enough of our own fertility with our animals and cover crops to minimize bringing in inputs for the farm," she explains.

What's on the horizon at Ananda Hills Farm? Jenny answers, "More livestock fencing to take full advantage of all the pasture and to benefit the chickens, adding more small fruit like strawberries and blueberries and some fruit trees. As we learn and refine, we bring the farm back in balance."

As the farm becomes as diverse as the colored yarns she spins, it is in the wool that her passions call home. Jenny made a commitment a year and a half ago to bring in her own breeding stock. Last year was the first year with her new lambs. Listening to the call of her heart, she is taking more time to develop her fiber, teach hand spinning and natural dye classes, and to attend a hand spinner's retreat.

Thinking she may be only a year or two from reaching her dream of living full-time off her land, Jenny wants to refine her herd of Shetland sheep so she can offer a hardy low input breed producing wonderful wool that would be good for a homesteader who wants to listen to the call the land herself. Can you hear its whisper inside of you? "*What would it be like to...*"

Support Jenny's journey through purchasing her wool, meats, vegetables, and eggs at our local Farmer's Market, Ananda Hills Farm CSA, and soon from her website. Ananda Hills Farm eggs are available at The Food Co-op.