

The Fence

“Good fences make good neighbors”

—*proverb*

—Ulf Kintzel

Photos by Author

Are you expecting a Robert-Frost-like poem? Then I will disappoint you. I am not mending a wall with the neighbor. He and I get along so well anyway, so there is nothing to mend. I am sure Peter agrees with me. I am writing about my woven wire fence that has now for two seasons enclosed the perimeters of our farm. Why did I pick this topic? During a visit to our farm, the editor asked me to write about it. My first thought was that this will only amount to a reader's letter. However, the more I thought about it, the more came to mind what this fence means to me.

Let's go back a little...well, let's go back quite a bit and explore what I used to do in 30 some years of shepherding and sheep farming. In my early days as a shepherd, back in the 1980s in East Germany, the sheep were herded during the day and put in the barn or solid night pen made from wooden panels. While the barn was usually safe, the night pen wasn't safe when it came to stray dogs. When I moved to West Germany in 1990, I mainly herded sheep under the transhumance system. That meant that the sheep were outside most of the year, in pastures in the summer in the hills and mountains, and in the fall in the valleys with dozens and dozens of miles to walk in between. The night pen was made from electric netting. While the sheep were herded during the day, on occasion a pasture was also fenced using electric netting. While this electric netting does quite a terrific job keeping the sheep in, it doesn't do the same job keeping dogs out. I remember herding sheep near the city of Freiburg, where as a rule the sheep farmer put an additional pen around the night pen just for the purpose of deterring dogs. Mind you, these weren't stray or wild dogs, but simply pet dogs of owners who didn't obey the leash law and had no real control over their dogs.

When I came to the U.S. in the mid-1990s, I used the same electric netting. In addition to dogs, I also had to worry about coyotes and, since I was in northern New Jersey, increasingly about black bears. The purchase of a guard dog eased some of these problems but didn't eliminate them. In addition, these were now my sheep and entirely my responsibility. That creates a whole new mindset!

When we moved here to the Fingerlakes area in western New York, we had land to purchase and a house and a barn to build. There wasn't enough money to fence in the entire farm and my willingness to borrow more was limited. It wouldn't have been wise either since the property line in the back of our farm was an uneven one and more land was to be had in the future. So, we had a permanent fence along the road and our straight southern border: high tensile woven wire with southern yellow pine posts and a high tensile strand on top that could be electrified. That fence was 5,005 feet in total length. The western and eastern borders we left open for another day. Here I continued with electric netting as the perimeter fence.

In 2015, after the additional twenty-five acres of land had been purchased a few years earlier and had been paid off, I was finally in the position, financially speaking, to have the perimeter fence completed. Not being 20 years old anymore and going for 50 instead, I have started to appreciate some conveniences over the years where I used to just plow through to

The woven wire fence shortly after it was built. The spaced-out longer posts are used to mount a birdhouse.



Playing it safe to avoid trouble (and lawsuits).

save the money, without worrying about the recovery of my body. I hired the same company that had built my woven wire fence nine years prior. The outfit is called BASH Contracting and they are worth mentioning. BASH Contracting is a small business in Clearfield near State College in Pennsylvania. Fence builders for agricultural fence are in short supply and good and competitive ones in even shorter supply. I dealt with Pat, one of the owners, who sadly died just recently at an age way too young. Pat and his crew of Angelo, Boomer, and Garrett built me a woven wire fence second to none. This time around, in 2015, we incorporated improvements in design compared to the fence built in 2006, i.e. putting the high tensile fence as close to the ground as possible instead of putting one strand of barbed wire at the bottom to deter coyotes. Gates were placed at strategic places where I knew after ten years at this farm that I would need them. Every fourth or fifth post was a longer one so I could mount a birdhouse on it. The grand total for the 12,408 feet of fence built in 2006 and 2015, including gates, end braces, corners, longer posts for birdhouses, and repair of the fence built in 2006 amounted to just a little over \$46,000. You say that's a lot of money? It sure is. However, it is worth every penny to me. Here are eight reasons why:

Before erecting the fence, I used my electric netting as a perimeter and interior fence. While electric netting is much safer than multi-strand fences with twine or similar, which I never considered for their lack of safety, they also take more time to erect. I absolutely don't mind taking down and erecting electric fencing, but the fact that I spend a good part of my day with it remained a fact. It is impossible to leave the electric netting up all year around the farm. It would take more netting than I could spare and the grass would grow into the netting and drain it of all electricity. If you add up the grazing cycles, I had to put up miles and miles of electric

netting as perimeter fence before I could even get to the grazing cells. In addition, the fence needed to be powered. Energizer units of at least two joules were needed. Also, the necessary deep-cycle marine batteries are heavy, need to be recharged every so often, and don't last all that long.

Now I have not only the woven wire fence as a perimeter fence. It gets even better. I mention the hot strand of wire on top or above the woven wire fence. This wire is powered by a plug-in unit in the barn. I start my electric netting at any given point of the farm at the woven wire fence. When done putting up fencing, I connect the electric netting with a power link to the hot wire strand. Wait, that's not all there is! I also have a remote control, which allows me to turn the energizer on and off wherever I am at the farm. In addition, this remote-control acts as a fault finder. If you touch the fence with it and there is a problem, an arrow points you in the direction of the source of the problem. I didn't appreciate it at first until the first time a staple came off the upper strand and it touched the woven wire, draining the fence of almost all the electricity. I assure you, it can take you a long time to find that spot on a fence more than two miles long without such a remote. The fault finder makes it easy.

While I still use my battery-powered energizers and marine batteries during the fall when I leave the farm for several weeks and pasture my sheep at the neighbor's farm, I no longer need to carry around any battery all spring, summer, and winter.

I used to make grazing cells that lasted me anywhere between one and three days of grazing before I rotated. Without deliberate planning I noticed that I started making the grazing cells smaller, simply because I now had the time to do it. Having grazing cells for two or three days are now a thing of the past. During the growing season, I now rotate daily with almost no exception. This helps to graze the farm



The BASH crew from left to right: Boomer, foreman Angelo, and Garrett.

more evenly and increases the use I get out of our farm.

All in all, let's put the first big check mark on the fence as a time and labor saver.

Dogs continued to be a problem here at our new location in the Finger Lakes. On several occasions a stray dog, or dogs of irresponsible dog owners who just let their dog out of the front door and don't care what happens next, came into the pasture or even into the flock. No damage was done since either my interior electric fence or my guard dog stopped the problems in their tracks, but it led to some intense situations with some neighbors. It is hard or impossible to explain that it is their job and not mine to keep their dogs off my farm and out of my flock. It is also an impossible undertaking to assure them that my guard dog is not vicious and that she simply views a pet dog the same way she views a coyote. Or that sheep don't play with a dog and are highly distressed instead and may abort when pregnant when the dog comes into the flock and chases them, even if the dog's intention was to just play as most owners claim (which the dog most often isn't because there is a predator in dogs of any size). Even if my guard dog takes care of any intruding dog, I would hate the idea of my dog killing the neighbor's little pet dog, dear to their children.

Recently, I saw two dogs of yet another neighbor roaming the street, moving right alongside my woven wire fence. I was driving down the road at the time, acknowledging these dogs. Yet I never missed a beat, never took my foot off the gas. Here was an argument with a neighbor I didn't have to have. My sheep were safe. Large dogs can no longer come into my pasture. Let's put a check mark on that one also.

Before I moved up here, a livestock dealer who had business in this area was forewarning me how many more coyotes there were up here than there were in New Jersey. She told me of a sheep farmer who had quite a few guard dogs to fend them off. Great. However, when I moved up here, I saw and heard little evidence of coyotes. That surely has changed. The last few years I have seen coyotes right in my back yard. You hear them quite regularly and more and more often from every which direction. In fact, their howling can

wake me up at times in the middle of the night. I remember jumping into the car in the darkness of the night because of their noise and the continuous barking of my guard dog responding to the coyotes. I don't need to do this anymore. I just roll over and go back to sleep when I hear them at night. Check mark for that one too.

There was one source of trouble that I had in New Jersey which I did not have to face here: black bears. I was told the area is perhaps a bit too open for them. That was until a few months ago, when my neighbor to the north told me about the black bear with cubs she saw behind her house in the woods. While black bears

like lamb as much as I do, I know for sure that black bears are very sensitive to electricity. My upper strand of hot wire has anywhere between 6,000 and 8,000 volts at 6 Joule. If you get zapped by it, you will feel a lot of pain. Sure, the bear can figure out to climb over one of the three gates in the back of our farm. However, I like my chances. Check mark.

"The greatest thing about my job is that I love my job." That is what Chris Matthews, a news pundit on TV, said once about his job. I remembered that sentence since it fits me so well. However, even though I seem to have the greatest job in the world, I need a break from it once in a while. So do my wife and the kids. While we stay mostly at home and rarely go out, once a year we have a vacation for a week. It is a must. I am fortunate to have a reliable farm sitter, but whenever I left on vacation, the worry that the sheep might get out and I will be needed back home was with me. So we never went farther than a day's drive. When I had the perimeter fence built, I also had an interior section of about 15 acres fenced. While that sounds like a lot of additional fencing, it only added a little over 1,000 feet to the total fencing since it was a corner piece already fenced on three sides by a perimeter fence. I call it the "vacation pasture." I can now put up my interior fencing in advance of our annual vacation and my farmer sitter just needs to take a few electric nettings down each day. If the sheep get out, they will still be in that pasture. No harm can be done. That enables us to venture a little farther. In 2016 we were able to say: "Hello, Newfoundland, here we come." What a wonderful vacation it was with lots of nature, history, hiking, and seafood every day. Another check mark, just for being able to go worry-free on vacation.

My area is known for a fair amount of snow. Ever heard of lake effect snow? While there are worse places when it comes to that kind of snow, we do get our share. In addition to the snow, we get a good amount of wind. That leads to a lot of drifting snow. In some years, it buried my electric netting that I left up as a perimeter fence. My flock, or at least a part of it, stays out all winter with access to shelter but still not housed. That makes a perimeter fence necessary. The

drifting snow on my eastern side buried the electric netting at times. While the flock still couldn't get out, it made the sheep vulnerable to predators, which can walk right on top of those snow drifts. Also, it did at times do some damage to the fencing. Fence posts broke, netting snapped. High tensile woven wire takes a lot of snow weight without any damage. It will sag a little under a heavy snow load, but will snap right back up when the snow melts. Problem solved, check mark.

Here is a question to any reader who has sheep: Did your rams ever get out prior to breeding season and breed some sheep that were not supposed to be bred at the time? Yes? Same here. They are hard to keep in when the ewes are cycling. Goat bucks are worse. They are quite good fence jumpers.

I solved that problem and had another interior woven wire fence built to fence in a few acres as ram pasture behind the house. It added less than 500 feet, again because I was able to use existing perimeter fence, two sides this time. I have not had any ram or buck jump out, even when I had the sheep in season grazing right next to it. It isn't just the solid fence with four feet of height. The hot wire on top of it zapped each ram at least once when they tried to climb up with their front feet and put the head across. I heard the goat buck voicing his displeasure when it happened to him. So, no more untimely and unwanted breeding. Check mark.

Deer hunting season is still big around here. Not every hunter in the neighborhood is respectful of other people's property, though. Those pesky hunters who trespassed from time to time onto our farm and whose slugs ricocheted off the trees at times, threatening the well-being of the hunters I did allow to hunt on my property, were hard to keep off



This power link connected to the hot strand above the woven wire allows me to electrify my temporary fencing wherever I am at the farm.

the farm despite "No trespassing" signs. The fence is now a physical barrier which leaves no dispute about where the property line is and is decorated with permanently made "No trespassing" as well as "Sheep dog on duty – Do not disturb" signs. Hunters no longer have an excuse or easy possibility to trespass. Here is the nice part: Deer are still jumping the fence with absolute ease. That means I still get to hunt on my own property, sitting in my tree stand, knowing I will not have to deal with disrespectful hunters. Check mark number eight.

If you are young, you may have no appreciation whatsoever for the money I spent for this fence, despite of my reasoning. Instead, you may think of the many things that you could have purchased instead. You are right. I used to think that way as well. However, if you are my age or a little older and you have

started looking for ways to make your farming life a little easier because you have a body that refuses to recover as easily as it used to after a day of hard work, you may have an open ear to what I said. So, in the same spirit as the VISA commercial, which tells you what things cost in real dollars and what priceless return you gain, I can say: 12,408 feet of woven wire fence: \$46,000. Having the ability to make all the check marks above and sleep soundly at night: priceless. 🐑

Ulf owns and operates White Clover Sheep Farm and breeds and raises grass-fed White Dorper sheep and Kiko goats without any grain feeding and offers breeding stock suitable for grazing. He is a native of Germany and lives in the U.S. since 1995. He farms in the Finger Lakes area in upstate New York. His website address is www.whitecloversheepfarm.com. He can be reached by e-mail at ulf@whitecloversheepfarm.com or by phone at 585-554-3313.

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