

Time to Reflect

—Ulf Kintzel

Photos by Author

“They” say that turning fifty is different in a person’s mindset than turning 49. They were right. At least in my case. This is the year I am turning fifty. While I am writing this article, I am working on things for which I found no time during the busy times of spring, summer, and fall, and I am also preparing for lambing season. The repetitive work of setting up jugs for lambing allows time for thoughts other than the ones you think to get the daily work done.

There have been three substantial changes in my professional life over the last twenty years that influenced the trajectory of my business. First, there was my move to the U.S. twenty-some years ago, undoubtedly also something that influenced my personal life greatly. Secondly, it was our family’s move a little more than ten years ago from northwestern New Jersey to the Fingerlakes area in upstate New York to a real farming community. Last but not least, about twelve years ago I started upgrading my flock of Texel sheep, a meat sheep breed with wool, to White Dorper sheep, which are hair sheep and shed. Some of you might wonder why I don’t mention grass-fed. That is because I had always been mostly grazing my sheep and fattening my lambs on pasture before I went strictly grass-fed. I only dabbled a couple of years in supplementing the pregnant ewes in the winter with some corn but stopped doing this really quickly again almost twenty years ago. I will begin elaborating on these changes with describing my switch to White Dorper sheep.

The move away from sheep with wool that need shearing to hair sheep that shed and don’t need shearing has been a tremendous improvement to my sales and my bottom line without any downside. How did this come about? I used to shear sheep in New Jersey for many small flock owners. It was an expense for them and no or only little income was coming

from the sale of this wool. Shearing sheep is an incredibly hard job and is detrimental to your health. In fact, it is the hardest job I have ever done. I remember thinking, “What if I could sell these people sheep that shed?” While that would mean I would lose the income of shearing, I knew that this was a job I didn’t plan on doing until my retirement anyway. So I began to consider purchasing sheep that shed and started educating myself. I was in no way set on a breed. The most dominant hair sheep in the U.S. are Katahdin sheep, a breed that did not impress me. I know, I know, right now I am probably drawing some anger from some of the readers who have these sheep and probably love the breed. Hear me out, will ya? To me, the biggest drawback was that there was too little meat on these sheep. I needed something meatier. Other available hair sheep were even less meaty. My Texel sheep were the ultimate meat sheep and I had a lot to lose. So I looked into Dorper sheep. They had just been introduced to the U.S. from South Africa and were just too expensive at that time. I wasn’t willing to spend upward of \$3,000 for a ram. But as with any new toy, I figured prices would come down eventually when the breed was established. They did. In 2005 I was ready to purchase my first Dorper rams. The question was which ones, the white ones or those with a black head? I chose the White Dorpers over the Black-headed Dorper (which are just called Dorper) because the offspring of White Dorper rams would still be white when paired with any white sheep breed, while the Dorpers would produce a very colorful sheep. I figured that the color white would benefit me when I sell ram lambs to upgrade existing flocks, while upgrading with Dorper sheep would take years to get away from the very colorful sheep during the first few generations. That turned out to be a correct calculation.

The White Dorper sheep turned out to be just as meaty as Texel sheep. They were also just as suitable for raising on



Can a billion dollars buy you a better view? The family’s vote says “No”

pasture without any input of grain. So I lost no desirable trait but gained the shedding and I also gained a sheep that lambs easily. Texel sheep are known for causing some lambing problems from time to time because of the large heads and broad shoulders. Dorper sheep have a slimmer head and narrower shoulders and usually lamb with ease and without assistance. What else did I gain? A milder taste of the meat, especially a milder flavor of the older sheep.

Going to hair sheep is a trend entirely caused by extremely low wool prices and a lack of shearers, while going grass-fed is due to demand of grass-fed meats and at times due to high grain prices. I was able to combine the two, which led to an enormous increase in customers who wanted to buy breeding stock from me.

The trend you hear from “official” places suggests a different route: Go with sheep—often with breeds called composite breeds—that have a lamb crop of more than 200 percent (which means an average of more than two lambs per ewe per year). In comparison, my lambing percentage is, depending on the season during which they were bred, anywhere between 160 and 185 percent.

Sounds like a lot less, doesn't it? However, this higher lamb crop comes at a price. That price tag spells g-r-a-i-n. I clearly remember reading the column of a regular writer for a national sheep magazine who boasted about his lambing percentage of 220 percent and more. However, he fed grain heavily to sustain this high output and to maintain his ewes. At the end of the article he conceded he hadn't made a profit that year due to high grain prices. When I write an article, I often try to imagine what reaction I might get for one or the other statement of mine while the reader is reading that statement. Right now, I am imagining a bunch of dairy farmers nodding their heads, being all too familiar with the notion of being pushed by sales people or government officials who advise them to have higher output, only to see that the additional income ends up as profit in the pockets of all those who advised them to have higher output while they get stuck with the bill. In other words, what good does the additional output do me when it comes at the expense of an even higher input? Granted, my lambing percentage, although very commendable in my view, does not compare to the one of composite wool breeds with well over two lambs per ewe on average. However, I feed about one first-cutting round bale per ewe per winter and a little additional second-

cutting hay during lambing season. Other than that, my sheep thrive on pasture and nothing but pasture. I have no feed bill for grain. I have no need to spend money on grain feeders and grain storage. I get to pocket most of what I sell my lambs for. You be the judge which of the two management systems you would go with.

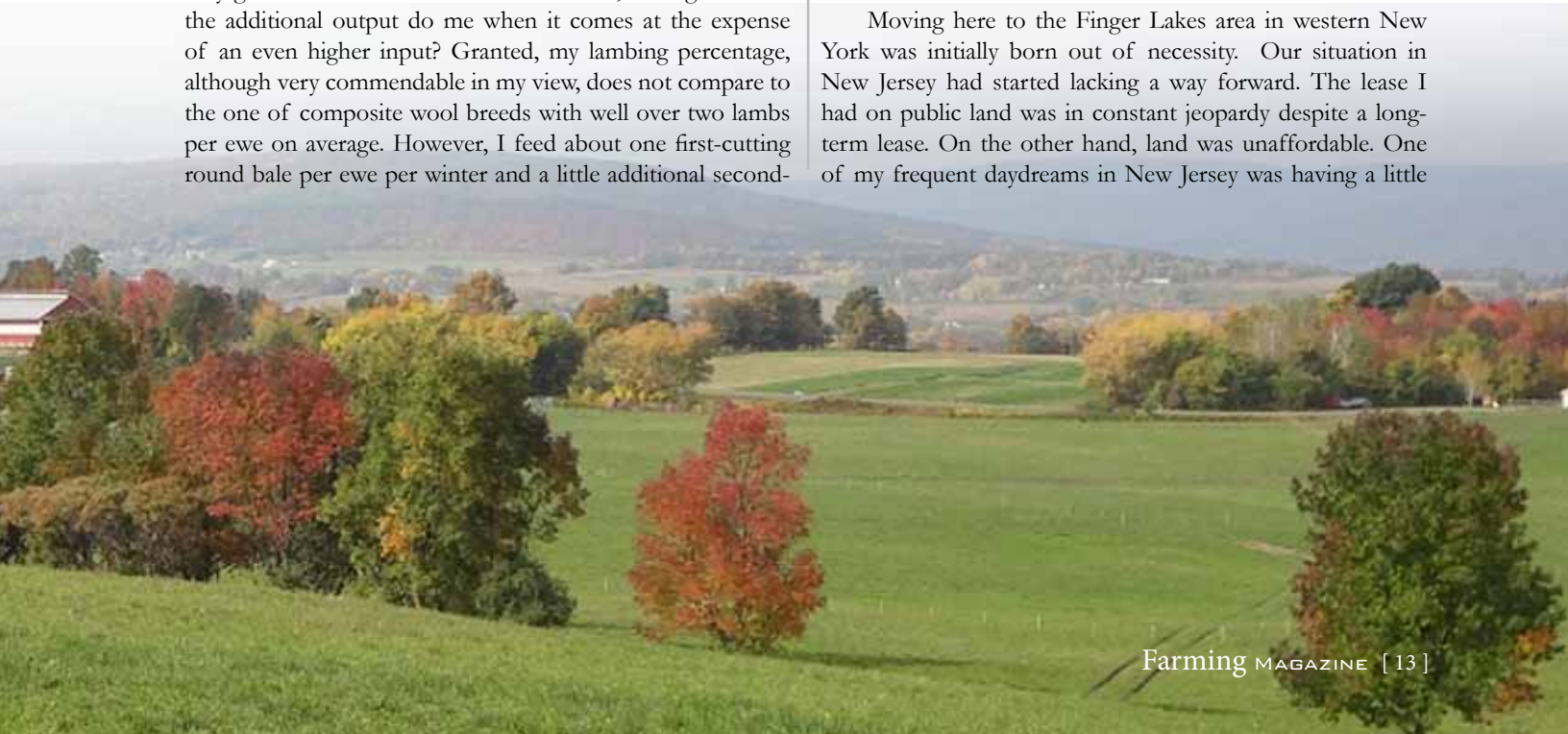
It has been pointed out to me at times that my breed of sheep isn't perfect. I agree. I never claimed perfection. Some have pointed out that other breeds require less hoof cutting since their hooves grow slower. It's true. Black or pigmented hooves tend to grow slower than white ones. White Dorper sheep have white hooves. Generally speaking, the conformation of hooves was not high on the radar for White Dorper breeders when the breed was created. It has recently become more of a focal point. My new set of White Dorper rams, which I purchased from Lewis White Dopers, reflect this focus on feet. These rams have, and pass on, much better hooves.

Furthermore, some have criticized that White Dorper sheep as a breed are not by nature parasite resistant. That is true too. Any sheep breed originating in an arid climate isn't particularly parasite resistant like some of the ones that originated in hot and humid climates. So you select within your own flock for worm resistance and develop a strategy how to manage internal parasites. That's what I did. Personally, I don't have problems with internal parasites in my flock. This issue is well managed and is not an economic factor or a health issue.

But let's look at the bigger picture: It is a well-known fact that everything in life is a compromise. You can't have it all. So, combine all the good traits of this breed and decide if you can do better with any other breed. And then decide if the imperfect traits are ones you can live with. That's kind of like my wife agreed to marry me: she knows about my numerous imperfections but also knows she couldn't have done any better :-).

In summary, I can honestly say that this choice of breed of sheep has helped increase my bottom line by a wide margin.

Moving here to the Finger Lakes area in western New York was initially born out of necessity. Our situation in New Jersey had started lacking a way forward. The lease I had on public land was in constant jeopardy despite a long-term lease. On the other hand, land was unaffordable. One of my frequent daydreams in New Jersey was having a little



house and a barn in the middle of 80 acres or so. However, it had to remain a daydream in that state. At the time of our move, an acre of agricultural land cost about \$10,000 there while it cost about \$1,500 on average up here in the Finger Lakes. In addition, the soil types are much more fertile at our current farm than anything I encountered in New Jersey. This was initially greatly underestimated by me. It feels almost silly nowadays that one of my biggest worries at the time of the



It was a great decision to switch to White Dorper hair sheep.

search for a new farm was about the length of winters up here, which are not at all much longer or harder compared to the northwestern corner of New Jersey where we lived. Secondly, the infrastructure around here is still catering to agriculture. I read once in a Farm Bureau article how farmers grade their home state when it comes to farming. New York State received an F. An F? I'd give it a B+. Granted, taxes could be lower. Therefore, I can't give an A. But whatever I need for my farm, I find around here. There is an abundance of farm and supply stores that still tailor to real farmers and not just hobby farmers, the way I experienced it in New Jersey. Then there are hay auctions, livestock and produce auctions, gardening places, sawmills, construction crews that build barns, businesses that sell sheet metal, excavating and tiling outfits, bulk food stores—the list goes on. In addition, most places have their products or services competitively priced. They are also often local. That means the money stays in the community, which helps a thriving local community. This is probably why the one-dollar bills look so used around here. They change hands so many times within the community before being taken out and replaced by new ones. A lot of this has to do with the thriving Mennonite community in the area. They often own and run these businesses that are so vital to the local infrastructure. I am grateful for being surrounded by this thriving agricultural community and it would be remiss of me not to mention the grass-roots support I receive from it. In New Jersey, I had few, almost no, people to exchange ideas and experiences with as far as grazing is concerned. While

I still could seek advice from German colleagues over the phone as far as sheep management and herding dog training are concerned, there were no other graziers around. I found like-minded people in this locality as well as the broader area. Many ideas derived from these peers. I threw old beliefs overboard when I witnessed that there were better solutions. New ideas came to the forefront. Late-heading orchard grass? Frost-seeding? The importance of residual? Different varieties of grazing white clover? All of these new ideas were not ones I came up with. I learned it here. This grass-roots network of people who graze their animals has been incredibly valuable and I grew because of it. So a B+ it is for my area. Once the property taxes are slashed in half, I will give it an A.

There is a personal component to our move as well. The more rural setting is the cause for a calmer and quieter lifestyle. My wife loves the area and is happy to have an easier commute to work. It has been great thus far raising our three children in this area. Finally, I calmed down. The builder of our home told us I was very New Jersey at first. Now I can honestly say I am not *as* aggressive anymore as I used to be.

Last but not least, I would like to talk about my move to the U.S. and tell you about my experience as an immigrant to this country. My move to America in 1995 was undoubtedly a life changer. I didn't come to escape oppression, since the communist system in East Germany where I am from had already collapsed six years earlier. I came because of the opportunity to start the business that I am running today. I sought economic opportunity. That is a fancy phrase for wanting to make money. But I also sought adventure. The thrill to be able to emigrate to the U.S. was always part of my decision. To put this in perspective, not only have I always had a very favorable view of America, but the story of a free and incredibly diverse society created by immigrants always intrigued me. You also need to know about the propaganda in the former communist countries, East Germany and Soviet Union alike. It was incredibly hostile towards the U.S., pointing to and dwelling on the worst parts of U.S. history. But they never told you about personal or religious freedom, free enterprise, rule of law, or free elections. East German newspapers and news on TV wanted to make you believe the U.S. was the evil empire. That is the rhetoric I grew up with but never believed to be quite true. Perhaps you can appreciate the irony that I ended up here. I still chuckle about it at times. At other times, I am still in awe and disbelief that this all happened.

Not everything has been positive, though. In the past few years I have noticed an increasingly negative view of immigrants. I know the U.S. has been here many times before. "Irish need not apply" isn't that far back in this country's history. Other groups of immigrants have faced the same situation and nowadays other groups are the target. I have often been confronted in very loud or aggressive ways with the conviction of some people, distinguishing between legal (good) and illegal (bad) immigration. I was told people should stand in line. I'd buy into that if there were a line to stand

in but there isn't. Or you stand in it five, ten, or even twenty years. Even though neither my wife nor I are in the group of immigrants that are attacked these days, it feels personal. It feels like going home and being told you don't belong. I still have a positive outlook on the end result of this new development. We always have come out on the better side of all this. We will again. This country always has been a country of immigrants and I am certain this will not change.

I also hear very often that the American dream is dead. I disagree. My family and I are living it. The outlook for our three children is wonderful. Our daughter, who just turned 18, was admitted to the University of Rochester. She picked an engineering field that is growing exponentially. That means my wife and I are certain that our kids will indeed do better than the generation before them, which is us. I do feel, however, that the American dream cannot be had working from 9 to 5. When I mentioned this to my butcher Mike, he replied: "It never was to be had working 9 to 5." He must know. He too works longer hours than that.

And then there is politics. The job the last president did was liked by about half of the nation and disliked by the other half. Now it is reversed, given that we have a new president. Granted, I have my political convictions, but I don't expect the trajectory of our family's life to change substantially under any new president. Why? Presidents are given too much credit when things go well and they are likewise blamed too much when things go bad. This is the fourth president that I experienced and none influenced our lives one way or another. America has the secret sauce. Life for many is what you make of it.

Could this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity of mine have been easily replicated in some other countries, like my country of birth, Germany, or my wife's country, Poland? I am still in close contact with some of my colleagues in Germany and the discussion revolves around this topic at times. Their unanimous answer is always "no." What they have in Germany often does not have much to do with free enterprise anymore. It isn't that they are socialist like many believe in the U.S. It is more that regulations put them in a straightjacket and the tax burden is unbearable. It keeps you from doing certain business practices which are considered perfectly legitimate in America, and high taxes stifle the desire to grow more and make more money. I am aware that many think we are heading down that path as well. There is no comparison. It's not even close.

I feel gratitude towards and love for this country of my choosing. I feel just like an old Dutchman once told me: "This country has been good to me." I never thought when I was younger that I would have this much opportunity and eventually would live such a wonderful life. Thank you, America.

Although I mainly spoke about outside influences, I want to say something about my wife Barbara at this point. I often said "I" when I could have or at times even should have said "we." My wife is an immigrant like me, leaving her

home country, Poland, by herself at the tender age of 21, two years prior to my arrival in the U.S. We met on a blind date here in the U.S. That's a funny story for another day. We found common goals and she works just as hard and long on them as I do, sometimes even harder or longer. This kind of partner is an absolute necessity, and without her we wouldn't be where we are today. Soulmates are not found; they are made over time.

I also would like to mention the many people who helped us along the way. Especially at the very beginning when money was tight, other people were gracious with their help, be it my friend who gave me room and board in exchange for work, be it the farmer who took a chance to get paid later when I needed hay in the first winter, or be it the family who picked up most of the tab for my wife's college degree. The story of the self-made man or woman is a myth, a story spread by ungracious people. Yes, you have to go and grab opportunities by the neck. They don't come to you. Yet, everybody needs help along the way and everybody who is successful received help at one point or another in his or her life. So I say thank you to Beth and Barrett and all the others who helped me, who helped us. You know who you are.

I am optimistic about the coming years. In my view, this is a good time to be a sheep farmer. Shedding sheep remain in high demand. Grass-fed remains strong since it has reached mainstream and is no longer a fringe development. The same applies to buying local. My sales for market lambs are as secure as it gets in free enterprise. This new location of ours keeps developing favorably. The Mennonite community grows exponentially. They too will continue creating their own business opportunities.



Demand for grass-fed lamb is high, competition for it is few and far between.

I am counting on it. Combine the sustained popularity of shedding sheep with the growing interest in grass-fed meats and add the many benefits of our new location and you see why this has been the almost perfect situation for us. It is only almost perfect because I still don't get to go trout fishing as often as I would like. But I am working on it. 🐟

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 US 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.