



# Getting Older

Photos by Author

—Ulf Kintzel

We remember some things in life clearly; many other moments we forget. I don't know why some events remain vividly in someone's memory, but I remember a moment very clearly that took place more than 30 years ago. My mother turned 50. I decided to surprise her, so I bought 50 Sweet Williams, bought a train ticket, and took a ride in one of the passenger cars, drawn by a steam locomotive. The 37-mile journey from my work place to my childhood home was safer that way for the flowers, rather than using my small, three-and-a-half-horsepower moped. Cars were in short supply and very expensive during communism and, at my tender age of 20 years, way out of my financial reach. The train it was. I can still see myself standing at the train station, looking at those flowers. What did I think? That my mother was now, since she turned 50, incredibly old.

Fast forward, I am now two years past this milestone myself. Sometimes I shake my head in disbelief that I am past this half-century mark. Our children are still home and that keeps me young, at least in my mind. My body says otherwise. I started working early. At 13 years of age, I started raising up to 40 rabbits, made hay with my scythe and wooden rake, gleaned corn, potato and carrot fields in the fall for winter feed, and grew fodder beets in our little garden. When I turned 14, I was legally eligible to take a summer job and worked for several summers at a local sheep farm, biking three miles to be there at 6 AM when work started, biking back after 6 PM when work ended, taking care of my rabbits and falling exhausted into bed. At age 17 I started my apprenticeship as a shepherd and have been working full time ever since except for a few years in college later on. Lots of changes after the collapse of communism in 1989 eventually led to an opportunity to emigrate to the US, which I gladly took. That meant even more work when I started my own business, raising sheep and training dogs during the week and shearing sheep on most weekends from April to September. Then, after getting married, kids arrived in short order. Since my wife had to continue her job simply to make ends meet, I started dragging our three children around with me during the week while going after my work, being a full-time parent in addition to running my business. Life for most first-generation immigrants is that way when they arrive with absolutely no financial means and no family support system but a strong will to get a piece of the American dream.

*My woven wire perimeter fence is now almost five years old and has lessened my burden to put up electric nettings.*

During all that time it never occurred to me that this is perhaps too much, that I should ease up. My wife—a first-generation immigrant herself—is the same way, and whenever I had the feeling she started doing more than me, I pushed myself to do more. Turns out, she felt the same way and so we pushed each other.

But things started changing. Over the last few years, I found myself looking for ways to invest in means that would ease my workload. I purchased a livestock trailer that allowed me to let the sheep jump into it rather than lifting them in the back of a truck or into a converted cargo trailer. I invested quite some money in a permanent woven wire perimeter fence, which tremendously eased the need of moving electric nettings. I used to purchase many additional lambs to fatten them. My flock size grew to more than 700 during the summer months. The purchase of these additional lambs has now come to an end and I have no regrets that it has. In fact, I have reduced the number of my own ewes by a few dozen. In short, I find myself with the desire to do a little less and do it a little easier. There are several reasons for it. One driving force of making money had always been a substantial mortgage. That mortgage has been paid off for a few years now and this made a big difference. Another reason has been my increased desire to have some spare time. We do go on a weeklong vacation once year. Reactions by others to that have been on both ends of the spectrum. Some are surprised that I, as a farmer, can go on vacation. Others have said a week is not long at all. I'm letting you in on a secret: I am already spending a considerable amount of time thinking about going a second time per year on a small trip once the children will be out of the house several years from now. Perhaps not a week, perhaps just a few days—sometime during the off-season when it gets cold, going to some place where it is warm. Hiking in Arizona and birding in Texas are high on that list of daydreams.

The biggest reason of all, besides less of a need of earnings and a shift in mindset, is my body. Not long ago, just last spring, I let the sheep through the chute to vaccinate the ewes. Before starting, the thought

occurred that I could also deworm the lambs since I already had the flock in the barn, rather than making this a two-day event. I did exactly that. I filled the chute time and again, and after deworming each group, I went through the chute a second time and vaccinated them. Two-thirds through my job I looked up and assessed how many were done and how many were still to come. A thought came to mind that I don't think I thought before: *This could end now.* After 500 some sheep and lambs, three dozen goats entered the chute, always avoiding the treatment until the very end. I can vaccinate or deworm four or five sheep in the same time I can do one goat because they fight it. Their kids try to jump on top of the adults and then out of the chute and you have to spend time to keep them from doing that. By the time I was done with all the animals I was spent. I “pride” myself that I can still do all the work I need to do without being outdone by a younger person. The problem is the next day. Or the next two days. The recovery is not the same. Putting a couple hundred round bales in the barn? No problem, just the knee won't stop hurting the next day from pushing the clutch with my foot. Putting up twenty electric nettings



*My livestock trailer no longer requires me to lift market lambs when I load them to go to the butcher.*

and taking down just as many? No problem, just that pinched nerve in my back will hurt for another day or two. Deworming a flock of 500 to 600 animals? No problem, just that my whole body aches the next day and will keep hurting for another. Cutting hooves



three days in a row on 200 some heavy ewes just prior to lambing? Well, by now I am sure you got what I am saying: recovery is slow and seems to get slower with every passing year.

If you are young, reading this article will probably have been quite a waste of time for you. You have perhaps a mortgage to pay, kids to raise, and a body that will take all the abuse there is, and you can get up the next morning and do it all over again. I see my much younger neighbor Peter toiling at all hours of the day, wondering if he indeed manages to stay awake in church once Sunday comes around. (He told me sometimes he doesn't, and I promised not to tell). I give him another twenty years; he too will have slowed down. No, wait, I give him another ten years to slow down. So, if you are young, save this article and read it again ten or twenty or thirty years from now. It will make sense then. Meanwhile, almost anyone who is in the late 40s and up will nod his or her head in agreement. How do I know? Because in every conversation I have had with people my age and older I received profuse agreement. If you are one of those older folks who still insists on being a workaholic, just wait a few more years and you too will get there.

I always tell people that I live a Norman Rockwell kind of life: a picture-perfect family, a farm like a painting, a time in history with great prices for sheep, and a production niche of grass-fed sheep that shed without many of my competitors having been able to catch up yet, let alone out-compete me. All that topped with relatively good health. I decided that chasing the last dollar is not worth it, especially when you don't have to (anymore). Is that what Ralph Waldo Emerson meant when he wrote "money often costs too much"? I want to enjoy life with my family. I want to enjoy our farm. I want to enjoy raising sheep and training herding dogs. That requires that I must accept that my body has started to put limitations to what I can do and that recovery after a hard day's work takes longer. Age isn't just a number. It's a fact. The upside is an ever-increasing quality of life. And more good has yet to come: I can't wait for grandchildren... 🐑➡️

*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](http://www.whitecloversheepfarm.com). He can be reached by e-mail at [ulf@whitecloversheepfarm.com](mailto:ulf@whitecloversheepfarm.com) or by phone at 585-554-3313 during "calling hour" indicated on the answering machine.*

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