

A Love and a Living

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It's a fortunate situation when an individual can do what they love to do, and at the same time make a little money. That's exactly the scenario that Ernie Hay of Talladega County, Alabama, has created on Hey! Goat Farm. Because of physical problems, Mr. Hay was forced into early retirement. Hay says, "I did not need to sit around; I couldn't do hard physical labor,



Raising goats started out as a hobby, but it turned into a love and a means to supplement the income.

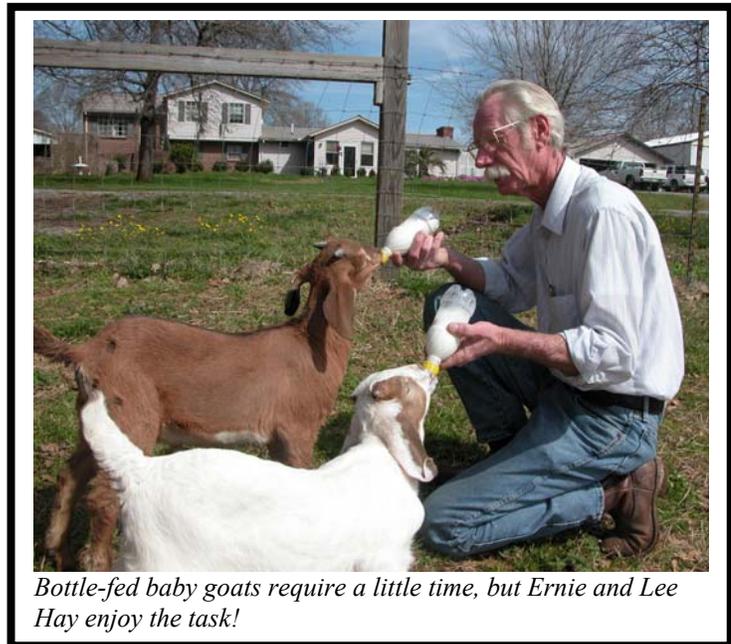
but I could do something." And, that something turned into a goat farm.

"My little farm was covered with kudzu," says Hay. Hay knew of two possibilities to help control the kudzu—hogs and goats. "I've had hogs, and they don't smell very good. They do help

control the kudzu. I wanted an animal that I could enjoy." So, to get a handle on the kudzu problem, Hay's sons fenced in a pasture and he purchased three little common goats. "They were just regular old goats that you can pick up for just a few dollars. I enjoyed working with the goats. And then, when the babies were born, I was hooked," says Hay. Not only did Hay enjoy working with the goats, low and behold, the goats were getting rid of the kudzu! Hay purchased a few more goats. "Before long, I had seven goats and a billy. Well, those seven goats and a billy turned into 14 babies, seven mamma goats, and a billy, and I was in business," laughs Hay. Hay decided to expand the operation, and soon there were 90 goats. "At first it was a hobby, but then I realized that I couldn't keep all of them. I needed to start selling some of the goats," says Hay.

Marketing the goats was no problem. “There were people coming to me wanting to buy the goats,” says Hay. It was a business man’s dream—a product that was in demand. Hay decided to expand his operation even more, so he purchased another piece of property. “No matter how large I got, I still didn’t have enough goats to meet the demand,” says Hay.

Hay is not the only one who enjoys the goats. His wife, Lee, also takes pleasure in working with the baby goats. “At first, her only contact was when the new babies were born, but she got hooked just like me,” says Hay. Occasionally, you will have to bottle feed a goat. Hay explains that this may be necessary for a number of reasons—the mother may have



Bottle-fed baby goats require a little time, but Ernie and Lee Hay enjoy the task!

rejected the baby, the nanny may have had multiple kids, and occasionally a doe will die. “That’s just part of farming. All your animals will not be perfect,” says Hay. When it is necessary to bottle feed a kid, Mrs. Hay takes on that task. Hay says, “Lee tries to feed the bottle babies four times a day until they are about two months old. I should say, she feeds the bottle-fed babies four times a day. No matter where we are, we’ve got to get home in time to feed the babies!”

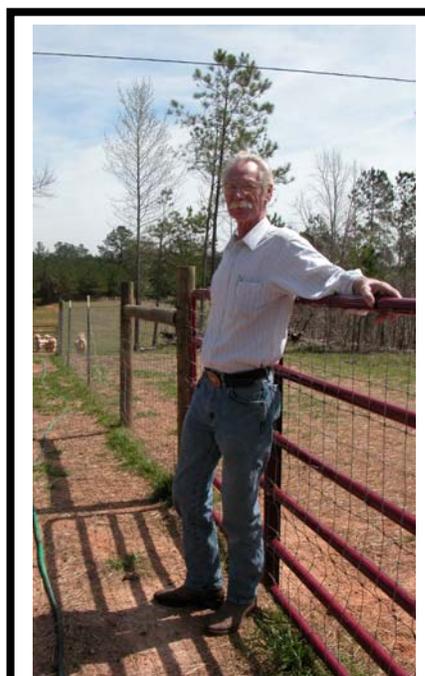
In a large operation, it may not be practical to bottle feed baby goats. In Hay’s situation, it is the practical thing to do. “Fortunately, I have nannies that give enough milk to supply milk

for the bottle-fed babies. I milk two nannies, twice a day. I have enough milk, so the bottle-fed babies only cost me a little bit of labor,” says Hay.

As his herd increased, so did the quality. Currently, Hay raises goats that are a mix of Nubian and Boer. Nubians are well known for their dual purposes of dairy and meat providers. Boers are predominately used for meat. Crosses between the two breeds produce vigorous meat and dairy combinations.

For the producer with limited acres, goats seem to be a good match. “The average goat farmer has about 35 acres,” says Hay. “You can run about 10 nannies on an acre of good forage land.” Eddie May, USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) District Conservationist in Talladega County, says, “If you have 35 acres of land, what can you do to make money? You can’t really compete with big farmers. One thing you can do is raise goats—get into niche farming.” May looks at working with the goat industry as outreach to individuals who have not participated in, or have received limited benefits from, USDA or NRCS programs. May says, “Frequently, people have land that has just been sitting there; they are just paying taxes on the land and not doing anything productive whatsoever with the land. Then, they found out about raising goats. This is an enterprise that works for the landowner with limited acres.”

Hay has taken advantage of the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), administered by USDA-NRCS, to maximize his pasture. EQIP is a cost-share program that helps producers install conservation practices that would be beneficial



With cost-share assistance from the EQIP program, Hay has established a grazing system to include cross fencing and water troughs. “I couldn’t have made these improvements without this assistance,” says Hay.



Hay says baby goats learn quickly how to be a goat! These little fellows were practicing their butting skills.

to the environment. Hay has used the EQIP program to install a grazing system for his goat herd. Goats eat in successive layers from the top of the plant to the

bottom. Hay explained that goats have a tendency to get parasites if they browse grass that is less than four inches tall. “By rotating the pastures, it keeps the goats from eating the grass down to the level where the parasites reside. The grazing system, with water troughs, has been very helpful. I could not have made the necessary changes to my pasture without the cost-share assistance,” says Hay. Hay emphasized that the standards in the EQIP program are what any reputable farmer would want to do. “You would want to have fences as good or better than the standards require,” says Hay.

Hay helped organize the Meat Goat and Sheep Producers of Talladega County Association. With 90 members in the association, the organized effort provides a cost-effective way to buy supplies in quantity and divide the cost among the members. One objective of the association is education. “We have



“We know a lot about goats because we’ve made a lot of mistakes,” says Hay. The Meat Goat and Sheep Producers of Talladega County provides a forum to share information among goat and sheep producers.

all the right climates to raise good meat goats, we have the forage, and we have the land, but we have to educate,” says Hay. According to Hay, goats are a natural with cattle. “The cattle farmer can use the goat as a bush hog. The goat will go out there and eat everything that the cow doesn’t eat. The goat doesn’t have the parasites that affect the cattle, and the cattle don’t have the parasites that



Kudzu control got Ernie Hay into the goat business. Now he finds the enterprise to be an enjoyable activity as well as a money-making proposition.

affect the goats. So, the goat will help clean up the pasture, cut down on maintenance, and at the same time, provide a second commodity to sell that has cost very little,” says Hay. “The forestry people are learning that the goat can help manage the undergrowth in the forest. Managing the undergrowth helps cut down on fires, helps eliminate plants that take nutrients away from the timber, and the goat is another commodity for the timber farmer to sell while he waits for the timber to grow. There are all kinds of pluses to goat production. The meat goats that we raise today have a very high quality of meat. The meat is low in cholesterol and fat, and it’s a good product for us to consume. We have to educate the American public that goat meat is a good quality meat.”

Hay believes that the Association will be very beneficial to goat and sheep producers. He says, “I retain very little when I hear it. But, when I hear it, read about it, and see it in action, then I comprehend. That’s the benefit of our organization—we share information.” There has

been so much interest in the association that they are making plans to change the name to be more inclusive, to include individuals who want to be a part of the group who are outside Talladega County.

Ernie Hay gets excited when he talks about goat farming. It started out as a hobby, but it turned into a way to supplement his income. Doing what you love to do and making a little money at the same time—that makes life worthwhile for Ernie and Lee Hay.

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