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‘Farm Stay’ Business Offers Income, Education

Tabitha Goodling, Central Pa. Correspondent Oct 29, 2016



Photo provided by Hummerhaven Farm Gary and Bonnie Schubert's animals are part of the attraction for visitors to their "farm stay" business at home, Hummerhaven Farmstead, in Millerstown, Perry County, Pennsylvania.

MILLERSTOWN, Pa. — Inviting people from far away onto your farm to visit for a few days is more than just profitable; it is an opportunity to educate and engage otherwise non-rural families.

PA Farm Vacations features 14 farms across Pennsylvania that open their doors, fields and barns to the outside world.

Bonnie Schubert is the associate manager of the Pennsylvania Farm Vacation Association Inc. and operates a “farm stay” at Hummerhaven Farmstead with her husband, Gary Schubert, in Millerstown, Perry County.

Schubert said the association is trying to get more farms involved in the farm stay business, an opportunity

which allows farmers to create a bed-and-breakfast atmosphere of their choosing.

Schubert said some of the farm stays have aging owners and the businesses are fading away.

A special meeting to introduce interested farmers to the farm stay concept is planned for 9 a.m. Monday, Nov. 7, at Rocky Acres Farm in Mount Joy, Lancaster County.

Schubert said the opportunity is important because “every farm has a story to tell.”

Farm size does not matter. Some of the larger farms make the farm-stay business happen by incorporating their children and extended family to work on the property and keep things moving.

Schubert and her husband raised six children who have helped them with the farm stay business since they began it in 1998. Their farm is a late-1800s established farm that the couple purchased after moving from Delaware County. They are now operating a farm with 100 head of livestock: some milking cows, goats and other animals.

“We try to give the feel of an old homestead farm. We’re also ‘green,’” she said.

Other farm-stay locations may be on a smaller scale, with a retired couple or a family in which one person works away from home.

“They may just have the farm property and a coop of chickens and a few other animals,” she said.

Barbara Gerlach of Berryfield Farm in New Albany, Bradford County, bought their property with no intentions of even living there. Years later, they moved onto the property and opened it up to others.

“We are a small, diversified, integrated, organic working farm. The plan to be homesteaders blossomed into a market garden, a small orchard, a variety of livestock, an on-farm store, and a dining room (they have a certified kitchen) where we serve our guests and the public with prepared meals, with most ingredients coming from the farm,” Gerlach said.

David and Caroline Owens are self-described travelers who operate a 112-acre farm stay in Sunbury, Northumberland County.

“Our core business is raising pasture-based meats for direct sale to consumers. We moved to Pennsylvania from our first farm in New Hampshire in 2008 for that purpose. We raise sheep, pastured pork, pastured chickens and honeybees. The ewe flock numbers 130, giving us close to 200 lambs in the spring. We

currently have four Tamworth sows farrowing twice a year. We also offer educational programs for the public such as guided tours, children's camp, sheep adoptions, and lambing slumber parties," Caroline Owens said.

A common concern most farmers have when considering a farm-stay business is a lack of time.

"Our children were our 'cruise directors,'" Schubert said, adding that large families tend to function well with this type of business.

Schubert also said most guests study the PA Farm Vacations website and are prepared for what the business offers.

Owens also said time is not a problem at their operation.

"Except for the obvious tidying up before and after, this enterprise really does not require extra time for us. The main reason is that booking and payment are almost entirely done online. Guests research what we offer, send a booking request, and the administration is almost completely automated," Owens said.

Gerlach, however, said that sometimes the business can indeed get in the way, and farmers need to stick to routine and let vacationers know the schedule.

"The biggest challenges are managing our time and schedule when we have guests here. For instance, it is a terribly cold, rainy morning today and we would have done some indoor chores before feeding and let it warm up a bit. But our guests were up early and at the barn door so the pigs were disturbed and wanted fed immediately. So, out we went. We advertise that we do not change our schedule for guests and that they are encouraged to join in with whatever chores we have each day, but there are always instances that make that impossible."

Another common concern is profitability.

Schubert describes it as seasonal adjunct income. Her expenses are not great, she said, in that she provides items like paper towels and soap for the residence and also cleans the cabin herself.

Again, Schubert said, it depends on each individual farm.

"Some provide organic meals. Others may have their own product line and then sell things online."

“The only thing that generates income on our small farm is the vacation rentals and the meals we prepare for our guests and charge them for. The sales of our produce and meats from the store or at farmers’ markets will not pay the bills,” Gerlach said.

Owens also said the lodging is a major profit factor.

“The overnight lodging is a significant contributor to our bottom line,” she said.

There are other issues that sometimes cause frustrations, the farm stay owners said, but they all felt that the experience for their vacationers makes it all worth it.

Sometimes it is minor issues, Gerlach said.

For example, they needed “more signage about simple things that we never expected to need a sign for (such as) ‘Do not enter here’ signs, ‘Do not climb over fences’ signs, ‘Do not collect eggs out from under a setting hen,’ etc.”

Owens said she was more concerned about frustrations before they even began.

“We haven’t run into what I would call ‘challenges,’ but I did have preconceived notions before we began. Would the guests need to be entertained? Would they stay glued to our sides all day? What if we had a horse show or other place to be? As it turned out, I had nothing to worry about. What David and I consider normal everyday life is endlessly fascinating to a non-farm family. Rounding up sheep with the border collies, running lambs through the handling system, feeding piglets, checking beehives. ... We attain movie-star status just living our life. The vet, the blacksmith, the feed truck ... they are the cameo guest appearances in this stage production called ‘Life on the Farm,’” Owens said.

Those issues tended to not even be concerns, she said.

“I also underestimated the fact that guests have their own life to live. They use the farm as a base but head out every day to explore other local attractions. Some groups I hardly see,” Owens said.

It’s that interaction with people from all over the world that owners seem to relish, Schubert said, noting that their first visitors were from Germany. Since then, the Schuberts have entertained various families from cities across the U.S. as well as from Brazil, Costa Rica, Finland, France, Bolivia, Somalia, and from countries in Asia and the Middle East.

Schubert said the fun part of the farm stay experience is realizing how much people do not understand

agriculture and then helping them to learn that milk does not come from a store.

“(There were members of an) extended family, generational grandparents, non-English speaking, passing our house, strolling on the gravel road, smiling and pointing up the hill, saying ‘water buffalo’ as they walk ahead. My hubby’s face changes, looks at me, ‘Honey is there something I should know, do we have a new pasture addition’? Truthfully, this occasionally happens. But, in this case, the ‘water buffalo’ was our black Dexter cow, fully horned, grazing in the pasture lines,” Schubert said.

Anyone wishing to attend the meeting on Nov. 7 with the Pennsylvania Farm Vacation Association can RSVP to 717-653-4449 or Bonnie Schubert at 717-589-7748. The meeting will be at Rocky Acres Farm, 1020 Pinkerton Rd, Mount Joy, PA 17552.

More information about PA Farm Vacations is online at www.pafarmstay.com.

Tabitha Goodling is a freelance writer in central Pennsylvania.’