



## The *New* American Farmer

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Rosa Shareef

Sumrall, Mississippi

### Summary of Operation

- *Pastured poultry, goats and sheep on 10 acres*
- *Management-intensive grazing*
- *Member of an 84-acre religious community dedicated to agriculture and rural life*

### Problem Addressed

*Desire for rural living.* Rosa Shareef, her husband, Alvin, and their children are members of a religious community that established New Medinah so they could live and work in a rural place. From Chicago and other large cities, most members had little direct experience with agriculture but felt a strong desire to earn their livelihoods with their hands and raise their families in rural America.

The Shareefs opted for chicken production, thinking poultry meat and eggs would complement the other enterprises. They have since expanded into sheep and goat production.

New Medinah's 84 acres were carved from a larger farm. The group first purchased 64 acres in 1987, then added 20 adjacent acres several years later. Prior to the purchases, the whole plot had been used as cattle pasture.

New Medinah lies in Marion County in south Mississippi, about an hour due west of Hattiesburg and just east of the Pearl River. Its rolling hills grow steamy hot in the long summer, providing a long growing season. Many small row crop farms in the area have given way in recent years to cattle and cash timber operations.

To learn more about raising poultry on pasture, the Shareefs participated in a SARE grant project headed by Heifer Project International. Funded to help southern farmers with the “nuts and bolts” of alternative poultry systems, Heifer organized hands-on training sessions, offered start-up funds and provided small-scale processing equipment.

The Shareefs learned a lot at a three-day seminar hosted by Joel Salatin, Virginia's authority on raising livestock on pasture. Salatin has written well-regarded books and articles about the considerations and the moneymaking potential of pastured poultry, and conducts frequent seminars at his farm in southeastern Virginia. He has spoken at conferences and farmer forums throughout the country to spread information about this alternative system. In his three-day poultry seminar, he offers information on everything from construction of the portable chicken cages to processing to bookkeeping, and the Shareefs felt reassured after participating in it.

“I'm a city girl raised in New Jersey,” Rosa Shareef says. “My husband was born in Mississippi and raised in Chicago, so we needed as much education as we could get.”



Lisa Mercer

*Rosa Shareef raises a small herd of goats to supplement her pastured poultry operation.*

### Focal Point of Operation — Pastured poultry

The Shareefs are one of four New Medinah families raising poultry on pastures. The poultry includes Cornish Cross chickens for their meat, broad-breasted white turkeys, and Rhode Island Red chickens for their eggs. The Asian population in and around Hattiesburg prefer her older egg-layers, Shareef says.

Like all other community members, the Shareefs practice rotational grazing with their poultry and other animals. The Shareefs' 10 acres are subdivided into two permanent, five-acre pastures with smaller paddocks defined with electric fencing. To minimize the possibility of disease, she rotates her poultry around one five-acre plot for a year, then switches them to the other plot for a year. The goats and sheep then rotate through the plot just vacated by poultry.

Using a simple plan designed by Joel Salatin, the Shareefs made cages that are supported by a 12 x 12 foot wood frame, enclosed with chicken wire and rest on wheels. They keep 50 to 95 chickens in each pen, moving it daily. The chickens harvest their own grass, bugs and worms, but the Shareefs also supplement their diet with a high-protein poultry feed.

Though New Medinah is a community made up of people of the same faith, it is not a commune where all the work is shared. Shareef says each family was responsible at the start for determining what types of enterprises they preferred, and each family is expected to support itself. At processing time, her husband and her children are there to help kill, clean and package the 95 or more chickens they can butcher in a typical day.

The Shareefs maintain their own customer base, and market their eggs and poultry

under their own label.

### Economics and Profitability

Diversity is the watchword around the Shareef household. They have income from a number of different sources, although they hope to make enough of an income off their agricultural efforts to make that their primary occupation. Currently, Alvin teaches at a junior college in Hattiesburg, although they plan for him to quit teaching computer courses to participate full time on the farm.

Their other most dependable source of income is the sale of their pastured broilers, though their efforts in this area have been hampered by weather and other setbacks. They produce about 100 chickens per month.

Still, Rosa says, the potential is there, and if they can get back to more normal weather, or when they can find the time and money to construct shading structures, they will be back on track to processing a higher number. When they do, they expect an average monthly income of between \$5,000 and \$6,000. That's the average weight of their chickens (3.5 to 4 pounds) multiplied by a price of \$1.50 per pound.

Shareef calculates the cost of raising one of her broilers to an age of eight weeks is about \$3, so the profit she makes from selling each bird at the average weight is roughly \$2.25. Multiplied by her expected sales of 1,000 birds per month, that's a monthly profit of \$2,250.

In addition, the Shareefs raise 50 turkeys each year, all of which are currently processed and sold just before Thanksgiving.

"Those are the real money-makers," Shareef says. "I ask the same price per pound as I get for the chickens, but my

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average turkey dresses out at more than 20 pounds, so there's more profit even if it takes longer to raise turkeys and they eat more."

Rounding out the income picture are the sales of eggs, watermelons, spring and fall greens, any extra produce from the family garden, as well as lamb, mutton, and meat goats. Shareef produces 20 goats annually, primarily to area Muslims who slaughter them for religious ceremonies.

All of their sales come through word of mouth and through repeat customers. Shareef spends no money on advertising, nor does she need to leave the farm to peddle her product. Many of Alvin's students have become repeat customers — and not because they hope to curry favor from him, Shareef says.

"Good product at a good price tends to sell itself," she says. "All I have to do is keep working to make more of it."

#### Environmental Benefits

New Medinah was planned to have minimal negative impact on the environment. All members of the community live in a concentrated section of the property that surrounds a school for the community's children. That leaves lots of open space for gardens, pastures and woodlots.

The pastured animals deposit lots of fertilizing manure, and because they tend to select different grasses and are moved daily, they have only added vigor to the pastures, Shareef says. That's even during a protracted drought.

#### Community and Quality of Life Benefits

Members of New Medinah help each other build their goat herds in a "pass-on" program by giving each other some of their goats' offspring. "By using livestock raised

within your group, everyone knows how it was raised," Shareef says.

New Medinah members were sensitive to the wariness and outright suspicion among many residents of Marion County when they announced their plans to build a com-

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munity there. Some even circulated petitions to keep them out. However, in the nearly 20 years since, both groups have reached out and established warm bonds with one another, Shareef says.

Those efforts now include programs that expose young children to the care and feeding of horses, small engine repair and cultivating seedlings in a greenhouse. While managed exclusively by New Medinah members, the programs remain open to all children in the county.

"A lot of the same people who didn't want us here now buy a lot of good food from us, so I think each side has shown we can be good neighbors," says Shareef, who teaches youths in a community garden.

#### Transition Advice

"Think big but start small," Shareef says without hesitation. "If you're thinking about pastured poultry that you process at home

the way we do, make sure you visit someone who does that on processing day and help out. If you don't enjoy that part of the job, my advice is that you don't even try it, because that's a big part of raising birds."

#### The Future

The Shareefs' foremost goal is to reach the point of processing an average of 1,000 chickens each month. They are certain the market is there, and say they just need the time and budget to attend to all the details involved in such an expansion.

Shareef says the profitability of raising turkeys is so appealing she's going to expand beyond producing only traditional Thanksgiving birds to take advantage of the sales potential at Christmas and Easter, too.

■ *David Mudd*

#### For more information:

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