



## The *New* American Farmer

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Robin Way

Conowingo, Maryland

### Summary of Operation

- *Pasture-raised chickens, turkeys, ducks, beef cattle, goats and rabbits on 62 acres*
- *On-site poultry processing and farm store*

### Problem Addressed

*Creating efficient, sustainable poultry production.* Over several years, the Ways experimented with raising different combinations of animals, at one point ramping up rabbit production before deciding to focus mainly on poultry.

Poultry proved to be the most profitable, hands-on enterprise, partly because the Ways, their older children and volunteers could handle and process all the chickens, turkeys and ducks on site. While they operate a diversified livestock farm, the Ways began to concentrate on how best to grow out the birds, process them and market their meat.

Time management became crucial. With three kids, Robin Way farmed as close to full time as she could, while husband, Mark, worked on the farm when he wasn't at his off-farm, full-time job. "We're busy, but it's workable," Robin says.

### Background

Robin and Mark Way didn't ever think they'd raise chickens. They had a small herd of cows and a hay operation on their northern Maryland farm in 1997 when a county extension agent approached them for help with what seemed a novel idea. He was doing research on poultry that grew in movable, outdoor pens and needed a farmer cooperator.

Ever open-minded and eager to participate in a scientific experiment, the Ways started with 25 chicks. When the birds were slaughtered, the Ways hand-plucked and eviscerated them because they didn't have any equipment. "It took 10 people all day," Robin recalls with a chuckle.

They have come a very long way. The second year, the Ways increased to 100 chickens. By year three, they were hooked and, today, they raise about 2,000 chickens, 275 turkeys and 100 ducks annually. Their efficient processing methods today allow them to slaughter 75 birds in a few hours.

### Focal Point of Operation – Pastured poultry

Robin and Mark Way have overseen an evolution that has taken their farm to a diverse enterprise that combines livestock production, marketing and community development. While they happened into poultry production, everything they have done since their first flock of pastured chickens — from building a licensed, state-of-the-art processing area and commercial kitchen to hosting the community at an annual farm day and seasonal dinners — has brought them closer to their goals of economic well-being and environmental sustainability on the farm.

Robin is the farm manager, although she and Mark work as a balanced team. He rises early to feed the livestock, then leaves for his off-farm job at the Department of the Army. After work and on weekends, Mark produces hay and tackles various building projects, from a livestock enclosure to general upkeep.

Robin handles most of the day-to-day production details. Much of that entails moving and monitoring their chicken flocks, which come to the farm in the mail as day-old chicks. Their mix of structures accommodate chickens from this tender age through slaughter at about nine weeks.

The chicken growing season begins in March and continues until October, during which Way will raise about 300 a month. After they grow about one month inside, Robin, Mark and the kids move the whole flock to a “free-range house” surrounded by portable pasture netting. Also called “day ranging,” the practice provides chickens with more room and farmers with fewer coop-moving chores. At night, the chickens go into the house for safety. About once a week, the Ways move the house with a tractor to lessen the impact on the pasture.

When the chickens are nine weeks old and five or six pounds, they are ready for slaughter. The Ways process about 300 chickens a month using killing cones, a scalding tank and an automated plucker. After processing, the birds are iced and eviscerated, then packaged in the Ways’ USDA-inspected commercial kitchen. In keeping with USDA regulations, the Ways have an inspector present during the entire processing.

The Ways decided to hatch heirloom turkeys rather than buy them. In 2003, they purchased a small hatchery, with a 100-degree incubator that gets the chicks off to a warm, sheltered start. After the hatchery, Way

moves the turkey chicks to a small house, where they roam together on a floor of wood shavings. Turkey breeds include Blue Slate, Black Spanish, Naraganset, Royal Palm and Bourbon Red. Way purchases a specially prepared feed of alfalfa, ground soybean meal, oats, ground corn, fish meal, calcium and a few other nutrients. She credits the mix with greatly reducing pullet mortality.

Turkeys live in a pasture shelter that can hold about 40 birds until they are large enough to be moved to a free-range system at 12 to 14 weeks. The heritage breeds mimic wild turkeys, having small breasts and the ability to fly. The Ways also raise the more common broad-breasted white turkeys, which arrive by mail at one day old along with the chickens. In their shelters, the turkeys can stand, sit and peck — and are protected from predators. The turkeys grow from mid-summer until Thanksgiving, a lucrative, busy time on the farm.

The Ways also raise about 100 ducks a year, which roam freely about the farm in a low-maintenance bunch.

Starting with five beef cattle in the mid-1990s, the Ways now raise about 15 to 20 steers annually. They graze on pasture grasses and receive supplemental alfalfa hay and ground corn meal. Mark breeds them once a year to their bull, and calves are born each spring. At one to 1 1/2 years old, they take the steers to be processed at a local facility.



*Robin Way, shown with daughter, Melissa, attracts an enthusiastic crew of youth volunteers to help with the farm’s popular annual Farm Day.*

They maintain a small boer goat herd, raised mostly for a local ethnic market. They also grow rabbits from birth to slaughter in small shelters moved across pasture. Using a SARE grant, the Ways determined that raising rabbits on pasture rather than raising them in indoor cages results in meat with higher levels of Omega-3 fatty acids, which has been shown to lower cholesterol.

Mark built their on-site kitchen in 2001 after they spent close to a year applying for and receiving a bevy of county and federal health permits. The kitchen includes a septic system, a bathroom, a walk-in refrigerator/freezer and gleaming stainless steel tables.

Robin stocks the walk-in with all of the meat they process. In typical “can-do” fashion, Robin kicked off a new activity using her culinary skills — serving group dinners on the farm on off-season weekends.

### **Economics and Profitability**

For about five years, starting in 1997, the

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Ways invested in capital improvements on the farm. They fixed up their post-and-beam barn, built in the 1800s. They constructed the processing shed and commercial kitchen. With cost-share and technical help from USDA-NRCS, they built a multi-purpose shed that serves as a cattle shelter and composting area.

They expect the building phase will yield rewarding returns, especially considering Robin's many marketing strategies centering around bringing customers to the farm, as often as possible.

Early on, they reached a turning point. "We sold beef in large cuts," Robin recalls. "Our customers said they loved the meat, but didn't have freezers to hold that much. We said to one another, 'Do we want to create smaller cuts and have people come here?' And we said, 'Why not?'"

With that decision behind them, Robin went whole-hog into marketing the farm and its meat. She became convinced that they needed to establish Rumbleway Farm's "brand" in the public. She printed business cards, brochures and T-shirts, erected a sign and launched a Web site. All products feature the farm's signature yellow chicken outlined in green.

Putting up a sign, including the line, "Visitors Welcome" was costly and controversial within their family unit, but Robin says it has really made a difference, with possibly 50 new customers attracted while driving by. Fully half of their customers find them online and others learn about them during their annual Farm Day.

"We're a destination, not a happenstance," says Robin, referring to their out-of-the-way location. "We have to give them a reason to come." They also sell to two grocery co-ops in nearby Delaware.

Turkeys are the most profitable enterprise for the Ways, selling for up to \$2.50 a pound for the heirlooms, just less for whites. Selling a 20-pound bird at Thanksgiving brings a handy profit, considering the Ways spend \$4 to buy each chick and about \$10 on labor and feed. Chickens sell for about \$2 a pound. Beef runs up to \$9 a pound for the choicest cuts.

"We're sustainable," Robin reports. "I'm not going to say the farm makes hundreds of thousands of dollars, but we don't borrow from Peter to pay Paul."

#### Environmental Benefits

Rumbleway Farm animals are raised without hormones, antibiotics and pesticides. They spend at least half of their lives outside. By systematically moving the animals through pastures, the Ways minimize the impact on the ground and groundwater. Manure acts as a fertilizer, not waste.

"On our farm, animals are allowed to live and grow in as natural a setting as possible, outside, with fresh air and grass," Robin says. "We say our meat is 'all natural,' and our customers are happy with that."

#### Community and Quality of Life Benefits

Robin and Mark have three children: Samantha, Melissa and Mathew. The older girls help with poultry feeding, care and processing. Their involvement assures them time with their busy parents, who enjoy sharing their rural lifestyle with their kids.

The annual Farm Day is perhaps the most visible way the Ways reach out to their community. It features kid games, fishing, pressing cider, making crock sauerkraut and events like dog trials. "Our intent is to educate the populace," Robin says. "You have people come and see the farm, learn where their food comes from, and have a fun day. You always get customers out of it."

The farm literature and Web site invites people to come by — and come by they do. The Ways rely upon a coterie of neighbors to keep the farm running. When a tornado touched down on the farm, 20 people arrived that week to help. Four hours later, a wayward barn was moved back into place.

"We could not operate on this farm without all of the help from others," says Robin, who reciprocates with meat.

#### Transition Advice

Of all her marketing strategies, Robin says her farm sign was the best investment. While she fretted that it was too big, or too tacky, the end result was both eye-pleasing and good for business. The impact was "huge," she says.

A Web site is another must for small farms seeking to market themselves to the public. At least half of their customers found the farm on the Web.

#### The Future

"We want to continue to farm sustainably, successfully and happily, and not sweat the small stuff," Robin says. "We want to continue to educate our friends, neighbors and visitors about the importance of agriculture and sustaining the family farm. We would encourage everyone to buy local and support their farm communities."

■ Valerie Berton

#### For more information:

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*Editor's note: New in 2005*