

## OPERATED LIKE A LIVESTOCK FARM

# Farm Family Operates Their Own Private Zoo

In West Central Illinois among the grain fields and the cattle and pig lots is a private zoo full of zebras, yaks, llamas, tigers, timber wolves, monkeys and more.

The Little Ponderosa Animal Farm and Zoo, of rural Winchester, is a unique farm and "one of a kind in Illinois," says Bob Brackett, owner along with his wife, Donna, of the private zoo. Bob notes that he is the only private zoo owner in Illinois who has licenses to own tigers, lions and other big cats.

The Bracketts' 40-acre farm serves as a private zoo where they are the "middle-man" in the zoo business. They breed, buy and sell all types of wild and exotic animals for the public city zoos, drive-through park zoos and traveling zoos.

"It just started out as a hobby eight years ago and ended up as a full-time business two years later," Bob explains. He was in the trucking and livestock business before.

Raising these exotic animals is not much different than running a livestock operation, Donna comments. "It takes a lot of patience and work." The Little Ponderosa zoo is a family-run business where the Bracketts' son, Jay, and his wife, Diane, help out. The farm also has two other non-family employees.

"It was a real learning experience at first because I didn't know much about them," says Bob about his exotic animals. "Ninety percent of this business is care. And I like handling the animals so I'm happy I got into this business."

The busiest time for the Bracketts is spring and fall. "In the spring, zoos are opening up to visitors and need to restock some animals, which they can get from private zoo owners like ourselves. The fall is when zoos want to sell animals to get rid of excess animals for the winter months," Bob explains.

He does most of his selling and buying over the telephone. "In this business the word travels fast if you are a reputable dealer or not," he points out. For the Bracketts, their reputation must be a good one because the phone rings constantly at their farm.

Security at the Little Ponderosa has been a problem for the Bracketts. "A lot of people don't realize our farm is a private zoo and not open to the public," says Bob. People will just stop by thinking the farm is open to everyone."

When there are animals around worth \$1,000 to \$5,000 apiece, the Bracketts are understandably concerned about security measures.



Brackett holds Happy, a young chimpanzee that's part of the on-farm zoo which includes tigers, zebras, yaks and more.

They do, however, give special tours of their farm a couple weeks out of the year, usually in May, to area grade schools, youth organizations and some handicapped people. "My favorite is giving children the opportunity to see these animals," Donna declares. "Many children don't get the chance to visit big zoos in the cities."

The Bracketts are members of the American Association of Zoology, Parks and Aquarium. Bob notes that he has several different state and fed-

eral licenses permitting him to buy, sell, breed, exhibit and transport these exotic animals.

"We have several sets of guidelines so we have to keep everything in order," says Bob, noting that inspectors show up unannounced at their farm zoo.

For more details, contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Bob and Donna Brackett, Rt. 2, Winchester, Ill. (ph 217 742-5588).

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## RESEARCHERS EVALUATING INCOME POTENTIAL

By Veola Ellingboe

# They're Milking Sheep In Minnesota!

Sheep milking is a two-fold experimental project at the University of Minnesota Experiment Station, Rosemount. While not new in the United States, it is a relatively young project.

Research is aimed at evaluating the genetic variation among and within breeds, while also developing the idea of an enterprise where milk is used for manufacturing purposes, such as for cheese, according to William J. Boylan, University of Minnesota professor of animal breeding and genetics. Were sheep farmers to become interested in dairy sheep it could provide an additional source of income, that of milk, besides meat and wool, he says.

Citing France as an example, Boylan feels dairy sheep have potential here also. In France, 65% of the income (from sheep) comes from milk and 35% from the sale of lambs and wool. "We import into this country each year 22 million pounds of cheese made from milk of sheep," Boylan points out. "The economics has not been well researched yet, but in the places visited in Europe, it appears to be very enterprising."

"We think, from the dairy standpoint, that farmers can produce

a very high product with the expertise available in this country," says Boylan.

The project this year has 84 milking ewes, which were milked from April to early September. It's unusual and unnatural to milk sheep this long as a milking period normally is 16 weeks. The milk is taken from Rosemount to the University campus food science department where it's made into cheese. Yields so far have been more than a pound of cheese per pound of milk. The three cheese types made were a Feta, a Manchego and a Blue cheese.

It takes one to two minutes to milk a sheep. Production ranges from 1/2 to 2 liters, depending upon stage of lactation and breed. Ewes are milked twice a day. The sheep milking equipment (Alpha, Lavar and Fullwood) is made in Europe.

The 1985 study includes 36 ewes from six breeds, Dorset, Finn, Lincoln, Rambouillet, Suffolk and Targhee, and 48 ewes from a four breed (Dorset, Finn, Lincoln, Rambouillet) mating design. Ewes are machine milked twice a day. In their second year of research at Rosemount, researchers have found a marked difference among ewes and in total pro-



Photo courtesy Land Magazine

It takes one to two minutes to milk each sheep. Milk production ranges from 1/2 to 2 quarts per ewe.

duction.

The Finn sheep used in this experiment are a new breed to the United States. They were first imported in 1968 and their main claim

to fame is they have litters of as many as five to six lambs. The average is 3.2 lambs.

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