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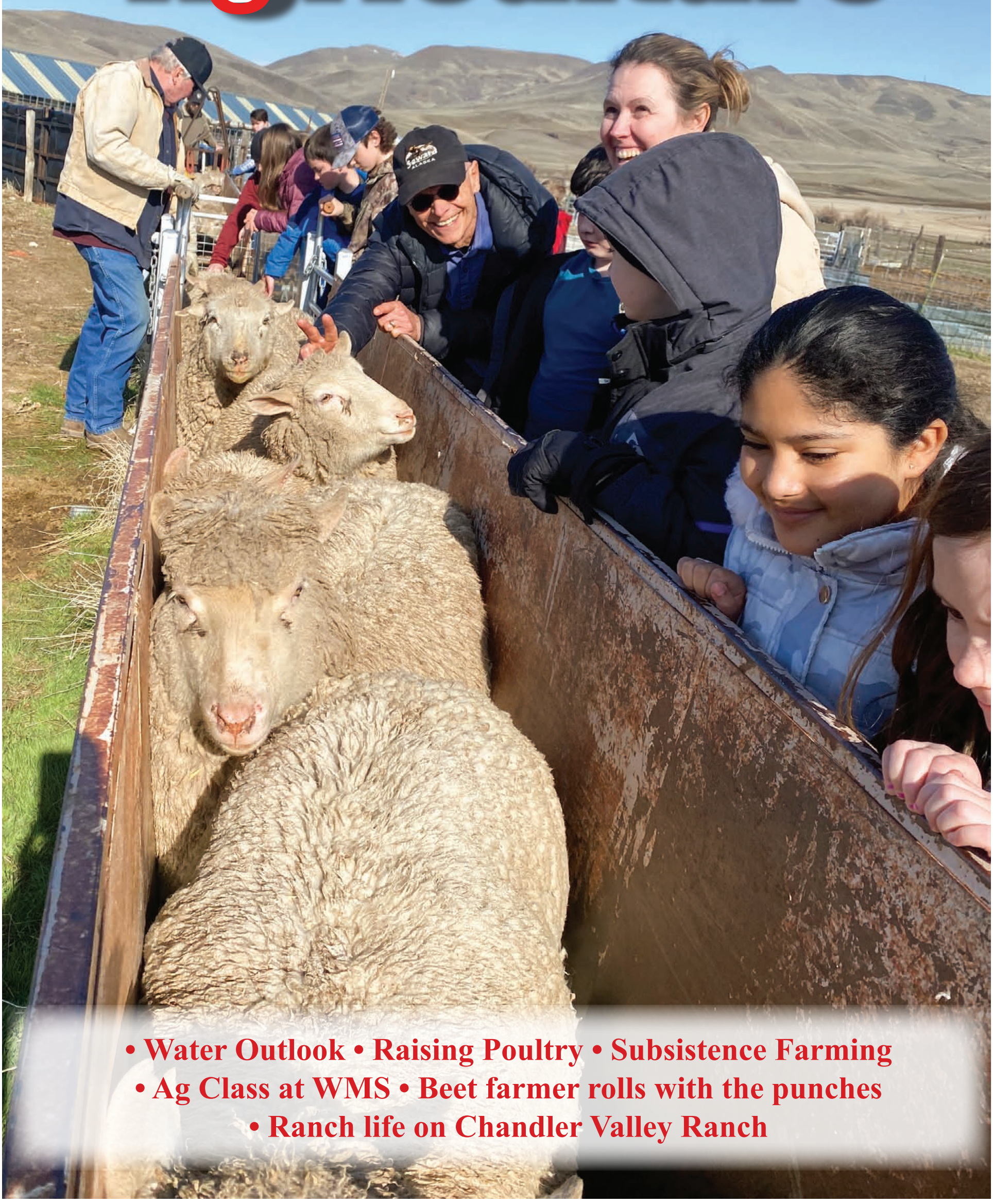

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• Ag Class at WMS • Beet farmer rolls with the punches
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Pringle Poultry's Danielle and Stephen Smith are enjoying raising their children in an agricultural setting, teaching them the art of raising their own food and sustaining the land. Daughter, Amelia is pictured with her newest chick. *Photo by Nancy Grindstaff*

Building a sweet life on the Weiser Flat

by Nancy Grindstaff

Only a year ago Danielle and Stephen Smith sold their home in Meridian and relocated their family of four delightful children to a three and a-half acre property west of Weiser on Pringle Road. The couple couldn't ask for better help on the place than Jullian, 10; Amelia, 8; Colton, 4; and Oaklen, 2 and a half.

Barely taking a breath, the family started right in on their plans to raise both meat chickens, egg layers, and turkeys, but not without one glitch three weeks after moving in. Apart from that, Pringle Poultry was on its way to establishing itself as a dependable local food source for area consumers.

"There was a barn here, but three weeks after we moved in, it burned down," Danielle said. "So, then we built this shop. In the end, my husband said it was a blessing, but I'm still a little traumatized," she added with a smile.

Raising chickens wasn't anything new to the couple as they had been growing them in their backyard in Meridian.

"Everybody wanted chickens from us, so we finally said we're going to buy some land and become more self-sustaining," Danielle said. "Everybody asks us what brought us to Weiser, and it was just the affordability of the land, and being where we could see the sun. Here on the Flat, it's just perfect for gardening, too. We love it."

Right away they built several chicken "tractors," portable chicken coops that allow their Cornish-Cross meat chickens to free-range the pastures behind their home on a 24-hour grazing rotation.

"They take eight weeks to finish, and then are about five- to six-pound chickens at eight weeks," Danielle said. "We order the chicks from a small-town hatchery owned and operated by a senior in high school.

"Last year, we pastured 400 meat chickens in that small space," Danielle said.

Their layers roam, scratch, and peck throughout the property, watched over by some very protective roosters.

"These are first-year layers, so they did really well going into the fall and the winter," she added. "We keep the roosters for protection. If hawks fly over, they push all the girls into that coop and stand in front of it. They are sweet, too. We don't keep any mean ones around."

Using organic practices on the property, the couple doesn't use chemicals or commercial fertilizers on the ground, but allow the chicken droppings to do the work. "I'm already seeing an improvement in the soil a year later," Danielle said, as we walked through the pastures.

Along with grazing, the chickens are provided non-GMO feed supplements, a mix of grains the couple buys from other area farmers.

This year's long entry into spring has set them back "maybe a couple of weeks," Danielle said, just because the ground is a little too soft from the extra rain to move the tractors through the pasture without leaving ruts. Their first batch of Cornish-Cross birds are right at four weeks, halfway to the butcher date.

They sell their products directly to buyers, but Danielle said they have also spoken to a few local retail markets as sales points for their meat chickens.

"We have the Oregon Natural Market in Ontario, and there was another farmer who stocked a store. They ran out of his chickens, so he came over and grabbed our chickens to put in there," she said. "We get them processed at J Bar in New Plymouth, so it's USDA inspected and processed, and then they package it up."

She said they had them packaged as whole birds, as well as cuts, giving customers a choice for their preferences.

"Last year, we did 200 wholes, and 200 cut up, and our breasts sold out immediately," Danielle said. "So, we're just learning the market right now. We have about 100 whole birds left, so this year we're looking more at just doing the cuts."

Danielle said Stephen recently hired on with the Weiser Irrigation District, cutting out what had been a daily commute to Meridian.

"Life is just turning around this year, so we just love it," she said. "We got here and started the business and it's just been boom, boom, boom."

Pringle Poultry's chicken and eggs are now available at The Market, located at 1595 E. Sixth St. in Weiser.

See Pringle Poultry's ad in today's special section of the *Weiser Signal American.* They can be found online at www.pringlepoultry.com or on Facebook, or they can be contacted directly at (208) 906-7890.

Crane Creek Reservoir is full, which is good news for area farmers who depend on the storage to water their crops during the latter part of growing season. Above, about one-acre foot of water per second spills over the Crane Creek Dam as of April 3. *Photo courtesy Ryan Davis of the Weiser Irrigation District.*

Summer water supply looks promising: Irrigation District

Crane Creek dam is full; water should be in canal by April 17

by Philip A. Janquart

The Weiser Irrigation District reported last week that Crane Creek reservoir is full.

It's good news for area farmers who, at this time last year, were questioning whether there would be enough water to irrigate crops for the duration of the growing season.

"The reservoir is full and there is about 1-acre foot of water coming over the dam right now," District Manager Ryan Davis told the *Signal American* on April 5.

Explained a different way, there were 48,000 miner's inches coming over the spillway at Crane Creek on April 3, he said. There are nine gallons per minute in a miner's inch, which equates to 432,000 gallons per minute spilling over the dam and into Crane Creek, which ultimately flows into the Weiser River, about 15 miles north of Weiser.

"There is still 44 inches of snow on Van Wyck Summit, with 13 inches of moisture in it," Davis said, adding that the snowpack in the Weiser River Basin was 160 percent of its yearly average as of April 4.

There does appear to be some degree of concern over the Weiser River potentially flooding.

"It all depends on the weather, not only up there (near Crane Creek) but up toward New Meadows and Council. If we get a lot of rain or really warm temperatures, the (Weiser) River could get very, very high."

The National Weather Service forecasted 67 degrees for Sunday, April 9 and 75 degrees for the following Monday. The rest of this week calls for temperatures ranging from the low to high 50s.

The current status is a stark contrast to last year, when the U.S. Geological Survey reported a 600-cfs (cubic feet per second) flow compared to the river's normal 2,500-cfs this time of year.

In April 2022, lack of precipitation in January, February, and March resulted in the water level at Crane Creek falling to less than half of normal. The *Signal American* was unable to obtain a percentage. However, the water level for Mann Creek Reservoir was also less than half, reportedly at 43 percent of normal.

Crane Creek reservoir is critical for area farmers who rely on its supply in the latter part of the summer when flow from the Weiser River drops too low to draw from.

The district typically utilizes the Weiser River until about midway through the season when it begins drawing from Crane Creek.

"It depends on how much river flow we have," said Weiser Irrigation District Secretary Jay Edwards. "We run something like 10,000 inches of water in the canal. When the river goes down to where we are only getting 3,000 or 4,000 inches, we take the additional water out of the reservoir so we can maintain a full canal."

Edwards said the switch usually occurs around the Fourth of July.

Although the reservoir is full, the district plans to tentatively release water into the Galloway canal a couple days later than normal. The district typically begins releasing water by April 15, according to Davis.

"We are going to try – if the weather cooperates – to put water in the canal April 17," he said. "We have a few places where it flooded out on the Flat, and the elk kind of tore up the canal bank. It's just been too muddy and wet. We have our own equipment and we are getting on it; we worked on it all day today."

Last season, the district was forced to put users on a rotating schedule to make sure there was enough water to go around. Administrators plan on doing the same thing this year despite the positive outlook.

This year, according to Davis, users can expect to see a five-days-on/five-days-off schedule.

"It seems to work better," he said. "Weiser Irrigation District covers 15,000 acres and when the reservoir is full, like it is this year, we still barely get a little over 15,000-acre feet of water. So, on a full reservoir year, when everything is good and we don't turn it on until July, we still technically run out of water at the end of the season."

He added that he has put together a color-coded calendar to mitigate any scheduling confusion among users.

Edwards said it is always a good idea to plan for the future.

"Maybe there won't be any snow next year – who knows?" he said. "The idea is to conserve the water and maximize what we have."

Weiser Middle School's first ever class of Ag Science students include Lance Albertson, Brody Bittick, Tori Brown, Stetson Cardenas, Xander Clark, Dustin Clark, Klete Cook, Zayn Crossley, Jean-Paul Despain, Austyn Drydale, Charlianne Grace, Lance Hart, Ryker McElroy, Hannah Moyle, Dolores Olivos Molina, CJ Scott, Hazie Woodland, and Alex Woods. WHS's Ag Instructor Patti Matthews took on the new class in January. *Photo by Nancy Grindstaff*

Weiser eighth graders get head start in Ag education

by Nancy Grindstaff

Beginning in January, a new Intro to Ag elective was added for Weiser Middle School eighth graders, with Weiser School District's second Ag Science instructor, Patti Matthews leading the class.

Matthews is in her fourth year of teaching agriculture classes in the Weiser School District, serving as a part-time instructor for three years, and just went full time this school year.

Weiser High School's agricultural classes include Intro to Ag Business I and II, each of which are year-long classes; Animal Science; Welding; Shop; Horticulture and Floral Design.

"Animal Science and Horticulture are both science credit and dual credit classes," Matthews explained. "Floral Design and the middle school class are our newest class offerings, and were both just added this school year."

Matthews said the idea of adding the ag class to the middle school's curriculum was first presented to WMS Principal Kenneth Dewlen early in the 2022 spring semester.

"Up until this year, there really wasn't room at the middle school to add another class," Matthews said. "Mr. Dewlen is very supportive of CTE classes in general, and has been enthusiastic about the ag class.

"The students met with him prior to National FFA week to present their ideas for involving the whole school in supporting agriculture," she added. "He was open to their ideas, made a few suggestions, and let them run with their plan."

By mid-October, the idea for the new class was ironed out and presented at the monthly Weiser School Board trustee's meeting for approval. The board gave Dewlen an affirmative nod for Matthews to implement and teach the class starting this semester.

By mid-February, the elective's 18 students had studied the origin of food and the history of agriculture.

"We celebrated National FFA Week, and introduced the importance of agriculture to the rest of the Middle School's students," Matthews said. "We are studying sustainability, with an emphasis on the world's population growth. It's expected to reach 10 billion by 2050, and farmers will need to produce 60 to 70 percent more food.

"The students are learning ways to increase sustainability, so farmers can continue to feed the world," she went on. "We will have segued into pollinators to finish the quarter, and then touch on animal agriculture during the last quarter."

Describing the pollinators section, Matthews said the students learned agriculture is unsustainable without the multiple insect and animal species that provide the service. Not just bees, but butterflies, hummingbirds, and more.

Matthews said the new class isn't a prerequisite to Ag I at the high school, but will give the students a broad view of what ag encompasses and where food originates.

"I didn't have any templates or ready-to-use curriculum," Matthews said. "But, times have changed and lesson plans and ideas are more accessible than in the past. State Ag Ed associations across the country post plans and ideas on their state websites for anyone to use.

"I used some of the existing plans and a textbook geared to middle school level ag classes to get started and then created a curriculum from there," she added.

A good number of the students in the class would have at one time been referred to as "farm kids." Several others are connected to agriculture through their parents' employment in ag-related industries. All of them seem to be enjoying what they're learning, and will, at the very least, become more savvy consumers in the process.

A few shared their thoughts about the class.

Lance Hart: I wanted to be in this class because my grandpa is a farmer on the Oregon Side, and I would like to follow in his footsteps.

Hazie Woodland: I enjoy the ag class because my family is in the ag industry and I get to learn about things that I don't know. I don't show animals, but I rodeo, and I have family members that show FFA projects.

Zayne Crossley: I took the class because my entire family is in agriculture. I want to join FFA in high school.

Dolores Olivos Molina: I was inspired to be in the class because of all the things that ag can change. I've been thinking of doing 4-H for the leadership projects.

Klete Cook: I wanted to get into this class because I live on a ranch. I thought I would learn a lot from being in this class. This summer I'm taking a steer in 4-H and next year I'll be in FFA.

Colt Cardenas: I decided to take this class because I thought it would be fun to do with my friends and fun to learn more about agriculture. I'm not doing anything in 4-H or FFA this year, but I did the last three years.

Hannah Moyle: I like the ag class because my family is into all of the ag industry. I don't do FFA but I have family members who have been involved in it.

Stuart Syme, above, sits in the cab of his John Deere tractor that he uses to plant sugar beet seeds in his 220 acres of farmland located southwest of Weiser. Syme said that a big part of being a farmer means 'rolling with the punches' when it comes to weather and market forces. *Photo by Philip A. Janquart*

Local farmer learns to 'roll with the punches' when it comes to weather, farming

Syme farms 220 acres of sugar beets that end up in hundreds of grocery stores across the U.S. in the form of granulated sugar

by Philip A. Janquart

Stuart Syme, by all appearances, is a laid-back type of guy.

Maybe it was how he was raised or, perhaps, it is over 40 years of not being in control.

And that's a lot of what farming seems to be about – taking what nature gives you. The military phrase is "adapt and respond."

Syme, who farms sugar beets on 220 acres out on the Weiser Flat, has most likely seen it all. His philosophy is similar to those who say that if you claim to know something, it's a sure sign you don't know anything.

"If you start thinking you are in control, you get very frustrated because something comes along – the weather will change, or something; you just gotta roll with the punches," he said a couple weeks ago when it was still raining.

Syme had yet to plant his fields, his entire year's revenue subject to the whim of earth's weather patterns. Yet, he reclined in a chair at the *Signal American* newspaper office in Weiser, leaning back comfortably, as though the game was well in hand and there was nothing to worry about, as calm and collected as a seasoned quarterback.

If he was worried, it didn't show.

In farming, not enough water could mean lower quality and yield; too much rain could set you back weeks, which can lead to a laundry list of problems.

"I never used to be laid back, but I think age teaches you that there is not much you can do about some things," Syme said. "If it's going to rain, it's going to rain, and you live with it. You make the best of whatever situation comes along."

Last week, the rain stopped and Syme was in one of his fields, standing next to his John Deere 6155R tractor. The iconic green, dual-hub, GPS-guided seed planter, which drives itself, can run upwards of $200,000, according to Syme.

He is well acquainted with tractors, especially their cabs, which have served as his work office for decades.

Syme was employed at Simplot for about 10 years after graduating from Weiser High School in 1978. During that time, he began dabbling in agriculture.

"I started farming a few acres of onions and did that for about six or seven years while I was working," he said. "Then I quit and started doing it full time in about 1988 or '89. A guy hates to jump ship and then realize, 'Oh, I shouldn't have done that,' but I grew up on a farm and it worked out."

Syme originally farmed land near Sunnyside Road southeast of Weiser where he grew onions for about 12 years. Now he has various acreages southwest of town, one near Jonathan and This and That Road where he showed the *Signal American* how he plants fields.

For those who are not farmers, it may come as a surprise that today's tractors are equipped with GPS systems, satellites thousands of miles overhead in space guiding them along a straight path as their rear-mounted seed implements – using a suction system – drop each tiny, blue sugar beet seeds equidistantly into the fertile ground.

"You can adjust it for any spacing length you want," Syme noted.

The sugar beet seeds he buys are about the size of a BB and are encased in a blue-coated shell, similar to a piece of M&M candy.

Inside the cab, there is a small computer monitor that shows, among other things, the tractor's path, and there is no steering

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Sheep rancher, Kirk Chandler, above, looks in on lambs who were recently born on his ranch off Devil's Elbow Road, north of Weiser. Ranching, as well as farming, is something that is in the blood. It requires facing obstacles and challenges head-on. Chandler describes ranching as a microcosm of life itself, which comes with life and death, stating that the lows are what gives human beings an appreciation for the highs. *Photos by Philip A. Janquart.*

Weiser native embraces the ups and downs of ranch life

by Philip A. Janquart

He stood silent, listening for that telltale sign of life.

Dressed in a canvas coat, "wildrag" around his neck, and wool hat – ear flaps neatly tied up, though it was cold – he strained to catch the sound of what he thought had been a faint bleat.

His breath formed small clouds of condensation, his stocky build motionless as the water swirled and gurgled around his muck boots.

The rain was coming down hard, forming alongside his lamb shed a wide, shallow creek that had not been there before.

He peered through the dark, confirmation coming seconds later as the bleating became louder and more persistent.

Kirk Chandler, 68, sprang into action.

He drove in the direction of the noise, the beams of his four-wheeler illuminating the scene: two new babies staggering about, already trying to get a footing in this world.

Kirk, who is in the middle of lambing season, will spend the next several weeks on his property, day and night, keeping an eye out for his ewes, most of them giving birth to twins, though he once witnessed six at one time.

"Ranching and farming, you get a deep understanding of life and death," he said on April 5, as he gazed across a field of sheep that had just been shorn for their wool a couple weeks earlier.

"Every day, we work with life and death; you have lambs born and you try to keep them alive and sometimes they die," he said. "I had about five or six rams die this winter. It happens; they only live to be seven or eight."

Kirk, who graduated from Weiser High School in 1973, said the sheep are rotated out.

"I keep the ewes for six years, then I sell them," he explained. "If somebody would buy them and put them back in a flock where they were going to raise lambs, and really feed them good and took good care of them, they would last another two years. But out here, where they range some, it gets so dry during the summer, they don't do as well after they are six."

Ranch life also comes with the unexpected.

Lambing season normally begins in April, but it started early this year, Kirk gathering ewes and their babies together and housing them in his 200-pen shed for months already.

"Apparently, I had a ram I didn't know was out, so I started on the first of February and have just been lambing ever since," he said. "We are having about 20 or 30 a day right now."

> *Unless you know the low, you can't know the high.*
> ~Kirk Chandler
> Chandler Valley Ranch

The second-generation rancher has about 800 sheep on a 2,000-acre operation off Devil's Elbow Road that spreads across a small valley and extends up into the bare hills to the north.

Scattered here and there are cattle that belong to eldest son, Cody, who works on the ranch, which was recently deeded over to him by Kirk and his wife Allis.

The couple reared eight children, including Cody, Sandee, Klave, Levi, Heath, Kellee, Kassee, and Maycee, all of whom are now grown and raising families of their own. Kirk and Allis have an amazing 33 grandchildren.

Chandler Valley Ranch originally belonged to Kirk's parents, Frank and Nancy, who bought the property in 1960. Ranching is the only life Kirk, who has also done some farming, has ever known.

"I was raised a rancher," he said. "Growing up, we had milk cows, maybe 30 head, and we had 125 beef cows."

The Market:

In the late 1970s and early '80s, however, they were forced to sell off 2,000 acres of what was then a 4,000-acre ranch.

"The economy went bad and interest rates were high," Kirk said. "Our operating loan on the place was 21 percent and land loans were over 18 percent and you just couldn't make it. Real estate prices would go up 25 percent to 30 percent or more a year. The place was worth several million dollars and then everything fell apart. The Farm Home Agency – the FSA (Farm Service Agency) is what it is now – they came out and appraised it at $240,000, so we lost a couple million dollars' worth of assets in having to sell our upper pasture."

Kirk and his family of 10 weathered many ups and downs over the years, forced to sell land or equipment to keep things going.

"You have some good years; years when you can start coming back, and then you have years like the last couple where you almost go broke," he said.

Three years ago, Kirk sold his lambs at $2.87 a pound. Last year, he got $1.40 a pound, a situation compounded by high fuel and fertilizer costs.

"A dollar forty didn't even pay the expenses," he said. "It's just the way the market is. I've seen this happen about three times in the 40 years I've been raising sheep."

Kirk said U.S. ranchers only raise about 40 percent of the lamb consumed across the nation. Large packing facilities, who buy from ranchers like Kirk, import much of the supply.

"Prices on lamb get up high where you can make some money and actually build a ranch with that money and then [packers] start holding on to their domestic supply and import lamb," he said. "Then they get those lambs that they are keeping too big and when they start slaughtering them, nobody wants it because it's not lamb anymore, it's mutton and it kills the market for three or four years."

Kirk, whose lambs weigh about 60 pounds when they are sold in August, said ranchers are forced to pay the prices set by the packing facilities.

"You have to sell them; you can't keep them because then you become a feed lot," he said. "You have to wean them and start feeding them. That's all stuff we would have to buy, and we aren't set up for that … so, you sell them for next to nothing."

It means offsetting the loss by selling land or equipment.

"You have to cut back and do what you can with what you have and hope the price starts coming back up," said Kirk who has historically sold to a company in California.

Part of his solution involved switching to another packing outfit, this one located in South Dakota.

"We've sold to them for four years now. From there, they go to a plant in Minnesota," he said. "The guy that buys them said that if you are in New York City between the middle of May to June, and eat at a fine restaurant, you'll be eating our lamb."

Water:

Precipitation over the last month or two has been helpful, filling up ponds on Kirk's property he uses to water pasture ground, but when it comes to ranching and farming, it's not so much about today, rather what happens tomorrow.

"The rainwater gives us moisture we need to get through the summer – if it keeps up," he says. "If it quits raining right now, we would have just as dry a summer

see ***CHANDLER,*** *Page 10*

Survival farming is getting more popular as people want to know where the fruit, vegetables and meat that they eat comes from. A garden can be grown in raised beds and container gardens. A hen can produce approximately 250 eggs a year. Goats are fun animals and their milk is full of rich nutrients and goat cheese is easy to make. Go out and enjoy the outdoors and plant a garden.

An introduction to subsistence farming with limited space

by Crystal Linn

Subsistence farming, also called survival farming, is defined as when one farmer, family, or group produces only enough to feed themselves. The limited surplus is usually stored for future use, though it can be bartered or sold.

While it is ideal to support oneself and family with 10 or more acres it is possible to do subsistence farming on an acre or less. However, it requires much pre-planning. This pre-planning will save time and money and will reduce the stress of the new adventure. Two things all of the experts emphasize are to start this new lifestyle debt free and to have ample resources, including an in-home reference library.

The most critical element to consider is your water supply. Where will it come from, how will you purify it, and where will you store it? Experts recommend at least two water supply sources with rainwater being one of the easiest to utilize.

It is suggested that in addition to growing basic vegetables, subsistence farmers should also grow crops which are high in nutrients, calorie dense, and carbohydrate heavy. Examples are corn, squashes, and the potato family. These foods require less quantity to meet nutritional needs and have a long shelf life. Also consider growing herbs and super greens for cooking and medicinal uses. Super greens, such as watercress, are easy to grow and dry.

The recommendation is to purchase either open-pollinated or heirloom seeds, then begin to harvest and dry your own. Hybrid seeds are more expensive and will not reproduce, making it necessary to purchase new seeds each year.

Fortunately, there are many ways and means to grow crops such as raised beds and container gardening. One method for root vegetables, especially potatoes, is to plant them in small mounds of dirt. It is possible to purchase special bags for growing potatoes. For gardeners with limited space, there are many ladder-type methods for growing plants. Do-it-yourself methods, such as stacked tires filled with dirt, are easy and affordable. Most citrus trees can be grown indoors in containers as can strawberries and many herbs. In addition to hydroponic gardening, there is a technique call Kratky gardening, which I describe as off-the-grid hydroponic gardening. Kratky gardening can be done in any location from a basement to a patio and beyond.

Besides growing their own food, many subsistence farmers forage their local area for berries and herbs. Some wildflowers can be used in cooking and first aid. Dandelions are a classic example.

Fortunately, it is easy to include some form of fowl and meat on a small plot of land.

Goats are almost as intelligent as dogs and can learn tricks and can be potty trained. One goat only needs about 20 square feet of shelter and about 200 square feet of grazing land. They are easy to keep and feed as they love fruits and vegetables, including banana peels. Goats are social and do not do well alone. Goat milk is rich, with nutrients and goat cheese is easy to make.

Sheep's needs are similar to that of goats, though they require more grazing space and are not as intelligent.

Depending on the breed, pigs can be content to stay in a pen, though that is more expensive because if they do not forage then they require more feed.

Geese are becoming more popular as farm animals, especially for their eggs. However, they require more feed than chickens and can be obnoxious.

Chickens are easy to keep in a small area. They have fun, distinct personalities. In addition to foraging, chickens love fruits and vegetables, requiring less feed which lowers your costs.

On average, each chicken needs two- to four-square feet within a coop and five to 10 feet of grazing area. One egg-laying hen will produce approximately 250 eggs a year and a meat chicken will be ready to butcher in approximately eight weeks.

Experts recommend raising chicken coops 12 to 18 inches off the ground to deter snakes and other predators, and to keep the chicken's feet from freezing in the winter. It is critical to keep the coop clean.

Consider foraging by catching fish, hunting, and setting traps.

In addition to the basic food preservation methods such as canning produce and smoking meat, consider other options. Make jerky or pemmican out of your meat and freeze dry your produce. If your home is small think about building a shed or even a root cellar. As always, do your research for the best results.

In conclusion, consider making additional products for personal use, bartering, and selling. The options are endless. You could make food products such as relishes or cheeses, and you could make other items such as soaps and herbal preparations.

Email us and share your thoughts. I personally reply to each email at info@wellnesswithage.com.

A ewe, shown above, inspects her offspring. According to Kirk Chandler, every sheep mother knows her own offspring, sometimes making it hard for them to accept lambs who have lost their own mothers. If they are not accepted, they will need to be fed using a feeding system he devised many years ago.

from page 8

Water, predators affect ranching life

as we ever have. Here, the only water is out of Monroe Creek and by the first of July, it’s dry to where there is no water in it at all.

Kirk also gets a little water out of Barton Reservoir.

“We have two ponds; last year, they didn’t fill up at all. Most of the drainage on Sheep Creek comes from just right up there on that flat. It doesn’t go back very far; it doesn’t go back into the mountains, so as soon as the snow – if there is snow – melts, it quits running.”

Predators:

Another problem ranchers typically face is predators that can end up costing thousands of dollars in lost livestock.

Kirk says that coyotes, cougars, and wolves are sometimes a problem, with bear often muscling in on the kill.

“Before I got guard dogs, I would lose 80 to 100 lambs (a year),” he said, adding that he now has a Great Pyrenees and Great Pyrenees/Anatolian mix, and one other dog, that guard his herd. He has lost dogs to predators in the past.

“That dog right there has been torn up by a mountain lion two or three times,” he said, pointing to the Great Pyrenees, which was resting at the edge of a field where some sheep were grazing. “They come in and they’re all ripped up and their necks are crooked because they have big holes where they were bitten. I had another one just like him, but he was probably killed because we never did find him.”

Kirk said bite marks help him distinguish which predator is responsible for killing his animals.

“You can tell because the coyotes bite them in their neck, so they have puncture wounds and they are bloody around the neck,” he said. “Then they gut them and skin them out and just eat them from the inside out.

“Mountain lions kill them by biting them right over the back of their head and neck. You’ll see two holes that you can put your finger into. They eat the wool and the hide and everything. Usually, they will start up on the cheeks and the neck and then eat the shoulder out. The coyotes will just gut them and eat their insides out first.”

The wolves seem to go after Cody’s cattle. Sometimes, he finds them mostly intact, except for some damage near the hooves and heels. Kirk said the wolves will run them until they die, the pack’s purpose to teach hunting skills to the younger pups who nip at the cattle’s heels.

Wolves, in particular, have been overpopulating in Idaho. According to the Idaho Department of Fish and Game’s 2023-28 Gray Wolf Management Plan, there are about 1,500 wolves in Idaho, a thousand more than its current 500-wolf target.

The wolves push deer and elk down to populated areas where they feast on crops and hay, Kirk said.

“Last fall, our hay was a foot high, and they came in and ate it all,” he said. “There can be 100 or 150 of them, eating grass and hay and crops. It cost us probably 50-ton of hay at $250 a ton. We never used to see any elk; we never used to see any cougar, nor did we ever see bear and they are down all around here now – all the time. You have to live with it, just take the loss.”

Despite the challenges, Kirk said he wouldn’t live any other way.

“I’ve done this my whole life,” he said. “I was raised with cattle and milk cows. I switched to sheep after I got married because, in high school, I went with the FFA to (Phil) Soulen’s lambing camp, so that’s why I have sheep. I bought my first 20 sheep from Phil. I drove up to McCall and got them. The next fall, I bought another 150 from him and that’s where these sheep came from, from him.”

Like in every walk of life, ranching has its ups and downs, but Kirk is willing to roll with those punches to live the way he wants to – free.

“I’m not worried about a boss, worrying about someone firing me all the time or whether I’m doing a good job; I do what I want to do. It’s always changing; it always keeps your interest.

“You have beautiful days where you are working outside and the grass is green; and other days are miserable and hard, but you don’t appreciate the good if you don’t have the bad,” he said. “There is opposition in all things. Unless you know the low, you can’t know the high. If you are just even all the time, if it’s always good, you’ll never know real happiness … and that’s what life is about; it’s about learning those things.”

Above, Stuart Syme demonstrates how the GPS system in his John Deere tractor works. Satellites, thousands of miles above the earth's surface, relay information about spacing and positioning, helping farmers plant straight rows that affect how crops grow and flourish. *Photo by Philip A. Janquart*

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Today's tractor is guided by GPS

required.

Over the years, Syme has grown onions, wheat, corn, and hay. These days he sticks primarily to sugar beets.

Amalgamated Sugar Company

During harvest season, sometime in the fall, the beets are trucked to the "beet dump," which is located south on Ninth Street near the railroad tracks. It's where area farmers bring their beets to be weighed and tested for sugar content. From there, the beets are trucked to Amalgamated Sugar Company's processing plant in Nampa, it's tall stacks and endless rows of sugar beets clearly visible from I-84 as you pass through town.

Amalgamated runs processing plants in Nampa, Twin Falls, and Paul, Idaho and the sugar is sold to various labels such as White Satin and Western Family. Sugar from Idaho can literally be found in products all over the globe.

Idaho farmers raise about 170,000 acres of sugar beets per year, with all but 10,000 acres grown for Amalgamated, according to the Idaho Farm Bureau Federation.

Amalgamated is a farmer-owned co-op, with each farmer owning a number of "shares," according to Syme who said the company was once privately owned before the farmers came together and bought it.

For a time, it was called "Snake River Sugar Company," but it has since gone back to its original name.

"If you have 200 shares, you own 200 acres and you are obligated to plant those or get them rented to somebody else," Syme explained. "It's a co-op and it's owned by farmers, but a board runs it and tells the farmers what to do."

Syme added the current market price for sugar beets is "pretty good."

"Again, it's one of those things that are out of your control, so you either pay it (the price) or you get out of it (farming)," he said. "I mean, what else can you do? Fortunately, prices for our products have been good the last year or two."

Sugar beets are one crop that seems to be holding steady in a commodities market that has seen its fair share of troubles considering many economic factors brought about by the COVID pandemic.

Syme said it may simply be a matter of time before its effects reach sugar beet farmers.

"Some of the prices, they say, aren't going to be as good as they were, so the pinch could be coming yet," he said. "And it's funny, the price of fertilizer and that … any time the price of corn gets high, the price of fertilizer [gets high]. It's almost as though the wolves know there is a little more feed out there, so they chew into it."

But it's all about rolling with the punches, something that most people today are unwilling to do, which doesn't bode well for the future of family farming in the United States. Many farmers have no one to hand the operation down to, which means selling off land in order to retire.

"I think urbanization is killing farming," Syme said. "You don't see many areas that are being broken out to farm; you see farms being chopped up for houses and that's making it pretty tough."

Even if the younger generation did show interest in farming, starting one from scratch is difficult.

"For a young person to just come out of the woods and say, 'I want to start farming,' boy, I don't know that you could," Syme said. "You'd have to get help from somebody, somewhere, who is established and is willing to help you get going. It's not impossible, but it would be very hard."

Family farms have been disappearing at an alarming rate, many of them swallowed up by corporate food giants, which, in some cases, puts America's food security in foreign hands.

"I think Europe is still a bit more concerned about food security than we are because … they still remember World War II and those times," Syme said. "But we don't seem as concerned about it. I mean, you depend on somebody for cars, but you can always ride a bicycle or something. If you start depending on someone for food, though, you're in trouble. That's when you feel the pinch, and they put the screws to you."

But Syme is not worried, willing to keep rolling with the punches and enjoying what he has, primarily his family.

He said the only hobby that interests him is spending time with his grandkids and doesn't have an exit plan for retirement, perse, seemingly committed to working the land, doing what he wants to do, as long as he can.

"I enjoy farming," he said. "The majority of farmers are real introverts. They can just sit in a tractor all by themselves, all day long, and nobody bothers them. I'm right at home out here by myself. I don't bother anybody, and nobody bothers me.

"Someday, I may not farm as much, but I'll probably always do a little bit. Everybody says you gotta have something to do when you retire; for me, instead of making the farm a necessity, it's going to be more for enjoyment."

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