In the heart of the Missouri Ozarks the little village of Peace Valley wakes to another beautiful sunrise, revealing the rolling hills and hardwood forests that Jim and JudyJo Protiva call home. It is here in this small, but tightly-knit community that a former Grand Canyon guide and a Rocky Mountain Ranger decided to settle down to raise a family and grow food in a way that honored God’s creation to the fullest. Over the next 21 years, the Protivas turned their passion for clean, healthy food into Peace Valley Poultry; perhaps the oldest pastured poultry operation in the state.

When they first dreamed of farming their own plot of land the couple was living outside of Ft. Collins, Colorado, where Jim worked construction for a living. Land in Colorado was too expensive for the young couple, but Jim’s Grandfather had recently bought a farm in Missouri, so the couple decided to move there.

Soon, the Protivas found themselves renting an 80-acre farm with fields low in nutrients. They began searching for an abundant source of poultry litter to enrich the fields, but with no major poultry producers in the immediate area they kept coming up short.

“I actually looked into the possibility of starting a confinement chicken house, but thankfully, we were too far from the butcher plants,” said Jim. “Then someone loaned us a copy of Joel Salatin’s pastured poultry video. That was in 1994. It took me two years to get up the nerve to raise the first batch of chickens because I had never butchered anything before.”

Once the Protivas began pasturing poultry they were able to rejuvenate the soil, feed their growing family, connect with community and build a business that has thrived for 21 years.

Jim attributes the long-term success of Peace Valley Poultry to sheer motivation. His desire to retire from hanging drywall was the first push, followed by the encouragement of family and the dedication of their small community to pitch in when things got tough — like in the “great turkey flood” of 2002 that almost saw their entire flock drowned in the fields after days of torrential flooding rain.

JudyJo remembers the day vividly. “Jim had driven to Springfield, and I had no idea what to do when I couldn’t reach him. I called a friend for prayers and another to come and help. The next thing we knew, a large part of the community had come to the farm. There were canoes, trucks and people just walking out through the water and carrying the turkeys back in their arms.” By the time Jim made the 100 mile trip back to the farm, the whole thing was
over. “We had turkeys standing on the shoulders of other turkeys to keep their heads above water. One neighbor even brought a canoe and ferried the turkeys to shore. The strong community spirit in Peace Valley is one reason we never thought of moving in search of a bigger marketing area.”

Indeed, the community spirit in Peace Valley has allowed the Protivas to maintain a healthy abundance of workers and volunteers that not only help out on butchering days, or in a crisis, but as Jim puts it, “a core group of dedicated customers and volunteers that always lift our spirits when we are dog-tired.”

Yet, it was his eldest son who motivated Jim to find his own way of pasturing poultry, urging his father to build and use hoop houses instead of the Salatin-type shelters they had been using. “The hoop houses cut the labor required for daily pasture moves in half and provide much cooler conditions in our hot summer climate, which gives us bigger and healthier birds. It is the high humidity and lack of wind in the summer that really hampers the chickens’ growth. We used to quit during July and August because of the heat, and most of my fellow producers nearby still stop production during the heat of summer.” The only time the Protivas stop raising poultry is during the cold, winter months when feed-to-weight gain ratios would be at their lowest.

By building and using the airy hoop houses instead of chicken tractors, the Protivas were able to produce the fresh, never-frozen poultry that their retail and restaurant customers desired, from March all the way through to late November. The switch also allowed them to increase the overall quantity of finished birds, which are used to fill their frozen chicken orders year-round.

“We now use only hoop houses to raise our chickens and turkeys. The 14-foot high peak lets the heat rise above the birds and spill out of the ends of the shelter, and two people and a tractor can move one in about five minutes. The rear cross member of the hoop house is tall enough to pass over the chickens’ heads. We suspend the netting at the rear and pull the hoop house one full length forward. If the move comes at midday when it’s hot, the chickens gladly walk back into the shade of the hoop house. Our smallest houses are about 26-by-29 feet, which is about 1.5 square feet per bird.”

Jim said that the only disadvantage he sees with the hoop houses is that they have to start the tractor every day and risk field compaction. For Jim, farming in a sustainable and frugal way is at the top of the list.

“Our current daily labor requirements for moving 2,000 chickens in the field are one hour for two people and a tractor; and moving 700 turkeys takes two people 10 minutes.” As for predation problems, Jim notes that the ends of the hoop houses are fitted with pheasant netting, which cuts down on many fatalities despite the fact that some of the Great Horned Owls in the area have learned to dine right through the netting.

“I don’t think we lost a single turkey to a predator in 2016,” said Jim. “Usually the owls and coyotes get several, but it looks like the livestock guardian dogs have earned their keep this year.”

Although the hoop houses are moved once per day to fresh pasture, the Protivas also allow their poultry free choice of non-GMO feed.

“We make our own feed from Missouri-grown non-GMO corn, along with roasted soy, oats and vitamins and minerals. We grew our own corn and soy when grain prices spiked about six years ago, and I talked a local wheat farmer into growing non-GMO soy beans for us.”

When asked about the use of antibiotics, Jim replied frankly, “Daily moves to fresh pasture and freshly ground feed are all that is necessary to grow healthy birds.” He also points out that their input costs are lower than most small producers because, among their other cost-saving measures, they buy their grain directly from the farmer and grind and mix it themselves.

“Our goal is to pass our savings along to the consumer. Over the years we have designed and built many labor-saving tools with which to raise poultry on pasture. These tools greatly reduce the amount of daily labor required to move chickens and turkeys to fresh pasture. If we assign $15 per hour as the wage we want to make, it takes about $1 of labor to care for a chicken for eight weeks on our farm. That number is sky-high compared to labor requirements in a confinement house. Profit is the sticky wicket. How much profit you make per bird greatly determines how many birds you can sell. Currently we make about $3.50-$4 profit per bird. That may seem like a lot of money, but we have to replace worn out equipment from that fund and also buy things that rejuvenate us, like dental, medical care.”

The Protivas look for every opportunity to reduce costs through ingenuity and a little hard work.

“The USDA has an abundance of federal grants available,” said Jim. “Go to any small farm conference and chances are the USDA will be there with a booth trying to hand out money in the form of grants, not loans. I think free money stifles innovation. For example, ranchers can get government cost share money to put in pasture water systems for management-intensive grazing. I think the landowner pays about 25 percent and the government 75 percent, but because we didn’t sign up for the ‘free’ money, I spent a lot of time pondering a cheaper alternative than PVC pipe, backhoes and $800 freeze-proof tanks to get water out to the pasture. We have a small independent phone company called Peace Valley Telephone and they came over and plowed in the coiled poly pipe, as opposed to digging it in with a backhoe. And we
made frost-proof water tanks out of discarded skidder tires for about $100. The result was that we got a water system for about 25 percent of the typical government-approved system, or about equal to the landowner’s cost share of a government system. Our customers’ enthusiastic support of our pasture-based meats buoys us to the point where we don’t ever consider signing up for the ‘free’ money.”

Another way the Protivas save themselves and their customers money is by buying smart. “From the very beginning we have tried to keep our meat affordable. Our goal is small margins of profit on a large volume of sales. To this end we bought a soy roaster about 10 years ago and have been mixing our own poultry feed ever since. I think we are using around 3 pounds of feed per pound of dressed poultry. It might be a bit better if we would grow males and females, but we grow only females. The males had too much green muscle disease, also called deep pectoral myopathy, so we went to all females. With a feed cost of $1.18 per pound, our cost of gain is around $.54 per pound. Whole chicken at the farm is $3 per pound and turkey is $3.25 per pound.”

In addition to saving money on feed, Jim notes, “Buying 500 baby chicks a week for 31 weeks gets us a lower price than smaller farmers. This year we paid for 15,500 Cobb 500 females at $1.05 each. We use Cornish Cross because most customers expect the big breast meat, and the better feed conversion we get from them also suits our customers’ budgets. We bought 700 Broad Breasted White female turkeys and butchered 671 of them; our best percentage ever.”

Jim also found he could save money and labor and produce healthier chicks by raising them in customized brood wagons. “We built boxes from Advantech floor sheathing that measure 8-by-24-by-2 feet high. This size has zero mortality practically ceases after day four. Because the chicks are in a microenvironment in the box, the room temperature can stay cooler than if we were brooding on the floor.”

At three weeks the boxes are towed to the field, backed up to a hoop house and the chicks pushed out onto grass. The box is then towed to the compost pile and the litter is shoveled onto the pile. This takes two people less than one hour to do. The box is then parked in the sun for a day or two to sanitize and then the process starts over again.

When it comes time to process all those birds, the Protivas are reminded of why they have stayed in their small community, far from any major market. “Lack of available help on processing day has probably shut down most pastured poultry operations. I know my friend in Alabama has had trouble finding workers. We have relied heavily on, among other fine workers, home-schooled teenagers to help us butcher. Plenty of good food, a decent hourly wage and two free chickens if they show up on time entices most to work all summer long.”

JudyJo adds, “We have about 12 dedicated workers that come every Tuesday at 6:30 a.m. to help butcher 500 chickens. On a good day we butcher about 225 birds an hour. We then clean up and proceed to cut up about 100 chickens, with the balance sold as whole birds. After lunch, which is a potluck affair, we bag the whole birds and load the refrigerated truck for the delivery route on Wednesday. We are usually done butchering and packing by 1:30 p.m., shortly before our customers for on-farm pick up begin arriving.”

Peace Valley Poultry’s processing plant has labor-saving tools such as a motorized kill line and room for galvanized live haul crates mounted on wheels to be backed into place next to the kill line. Guts and feathers are put into a stainless steel wagon, the “gut wagon.” It dumps by backing up and stopping quickly, on a compost pile. Their products include whole and halved chicken, whole chickens cut up, split bone-in breasts, boneless/skinless breasts, thighs, legs, wings, necks and backs, hearts, livers, gizzards and feet. They sell freshly butchered chickens as well as frozen ones, but their turkeys are processed to be sold fresh for Thanksgiving, and about 10 percent are frozen for Christmas turkeys.

Nothing from the butchering process goes to waste at Peace Valley Poultry. The feathers, blood and in-
were ordered in advance, keeping up with the book work for the business and doing retail customer sales on the farm and other locations.”

She also keeps track of on-farm and website sales, as well as from several regional outlets in Missouri, including MaMa Jean’s, Horrmann Meats, and Homegrown Foods in Springfield, Ozark Country Market in Poplar Bluff, Sunshine Market in Mountain View, International Farmers Market in West Plains, Jean’s Healthway in Ava, and CDR Naturals in Bourbon and at Nature’s Way in Mountain Home, Arkansas.

Jill Henderson is an artist, author and organic gardener. She is editor of Show Me Oz (showmeoz.wordpress.com), a weekly blog featuring articles on gardening, seed saving, nature ecology, wild edible and medicinal plants and culinary herbs. She has written three books: The Healing Power of Kitchen Herbs, A Journey of Seasons: A Year in the Ozarks High Country and The Garden Seed Saving Guide.

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