



Calling in the Ewes

In a midlife moment of truth, **Scottie Jones**, MA '80, and her husband, Greg, MA '76, PhD '79, chucked secure professional jobs, bought a small farm and moved "back to the land." But making a living on Leaping Lamb Farm proved nearly impossible. Five years later, with a dozen money-making ideas shattered and savings all but exhausted, they hit upon an idea that just might make it work.

STORY BY SCOTTIE JONES • PHOTO BY SHAWN LINEHAN



We go out one night a week.

Tonight, I'm in a pizzeria watching my spouse, Greg, argue the relative merits of chainsaw "bore cuts" with our neighbor, Brick. "Horizontal or vertical?" Only a veteran logger like Brick knows the answer. But that doesn't deter Greg, a psychologist, from arguing. And me? I'm wondering how, starting as an art history student on Mizzou's stately campus, I wound up running a sheep farm tucked so deeply in the coastal mountains of Oregon that the topic of "bore cutting" constitutes good conversation on a night out. Well, that's a story, and the old man cutting down imaginary trees in a pizzeria is more than half of it.

We think we have an arc for our lives, a plan that will take us to our dreams. Then fate intervenes, knocking us down an entirely different path. For me, that first bump came when I met my future husband on Francis Quadrangle at Mizzou. We moved to Phoenix, and my goal of becoming an art historian transformed to managing a chic art gallery in nearby Scottsdale. After several more mutations, I found myself directing marketing and retail for the Phoenix Zoo. So, how did I make the leap from well-paid professional to sheep farmer? Like I said, I'm looking at him.

Men are itchy creatures, and they are never more itchy than when life is most content. So, as my husband reached the zenith of his career as a psychologist, he became discontent. To be fair, he had help. The demands of managed health care were turning sensitive caregivers into beleaguered accountants. And commuting to work in Phoenix's multilaned, gridlocked, easy-bake oven guaranteed a bad start to every day. The final catalyst came when an oncoming car crossed the center line, demolishing our Acura and almost demolishing Greg. He survived but lost the use of his left hand. There were months of rehabilitation, which meant months to ponder all the parts that itch.

Greg became convinced the violence of that terrible day had stripped away his "suburban pretense." He felt our lives had become too structured and disconnected from each other. We needed to "get back to the land, get back to nature and regain our sense of balance." I thought the doctor should run more neurotests, but they assured me it was his hand, not his head, that went through the windshield. Greg began an online obsession with real estate, staying up late and conjuring a new life. His solution to urban alienation turned out to be a sheep farm in Oregon.

So, Greg, suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, had become delusional. OK, but why did I dismiss my early skepticism and follow him off the cliff? Partly, I like a good adventure, and this promised to be a doozie. But what sold me was the farm itself, which possesses the awe-inspiring beauty of a national park. Besides, we had enough money to retire, and a small sub-

sistence farm could pay for itself. I sprinted from skeptic to convert in three months.

As you might expect, two deluded suburbanites do not farmers make. Like many small farms, ours had languished through a period of neglect. Livestock roamed free, not because they should but because they could, and the task of mending fences seemed unending. The first six months on Leaping Lamb Farm was a deep dive into crisis management and triage. There is no quicker cure for delusional thinking than farming.

Our first lesson in rural reality came within days of our arrival, during a benign walk on a beautiful morning with the family dogs. Spotting a stray ewe, the dogs morphed into wolves, chasing the poor bleating animal through the woods into a creek, where they set upon her. By the time we beat them off with sticks, the ewe was badly mauled. We called a neighbor to get the name of a vet.

"Ewe?" she clarified.

"Yes, her ear is torn off, and she's bleeding."

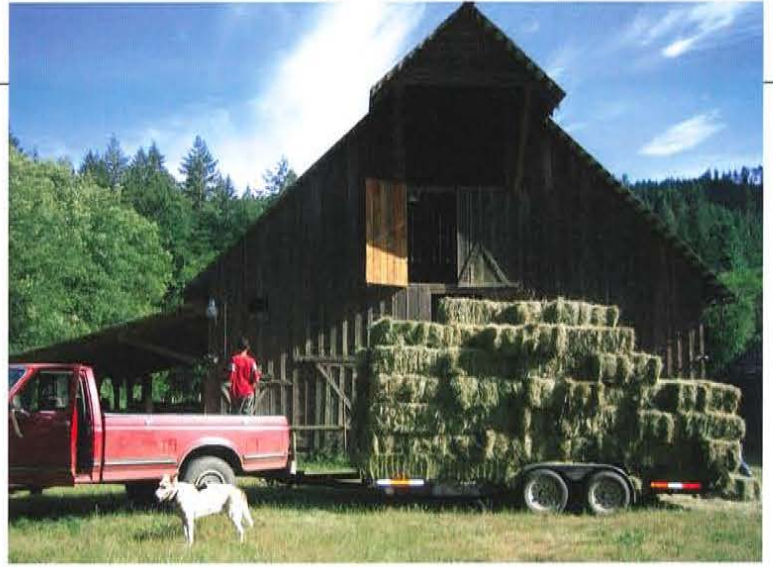
"A ewe costs \$100. A vet visit is \$150. Clean and stitch the wounds. Tomorrow, she's alive or dead. Either way, you're ahead \$50."

And there it was, first delusion shattered. You can't afford experts, so figure it out yourself. If that doesn't work, call a few people and try something else. We did as suggested. The ewe survived and went on to lamb for many more years. We learned a valuable lesson: Farming is a daily exercise in creative improvisation.

The next delusion tumbled just as fast. Moving irrigation pipe is a daily chore. The first week, Greg dropped the Big Gun sprinkler, bending the rocker arm and rendering the sprinkler useless. Repairing the part would require a long drive to the irrigation store. Nothing in the country is convenient. Greg was in a hurry to pick up the part and get back, but instead of prompt service, he found a gaggle of men engaged in fishing stories. Clearing his throat and shifting his feet did not improve the service. When, at last, his turn came, Greg dropped the rocker arm on the counter and asked if it could be fixed. The owner, Doug, squinted at it through his glasses and asked, "Where do you live?" Doug's question did not reassure my husband that he was dealing with a competent professional. But then, he was still deluded.

Two keys to the complex business of farming are having access to a wealth of resources and staying connected. People are drawn to farming by the allure of independence. People survive farming by mastering the art of interdependence. Hence the fishing stories. The rocker arm was obsolete. It would take a network of contacts to locate one. In the meantime, Doug, understanding that without irrigation our livestock would not have graze, placed a call to a neighboring farmer and arranged for supplemental hay. And that's why the correct response to a parts request can depend on where you live.

The big pop to our balloon came with the year-end financial tally. We were running a 90 percent deficit. At this rate, we would burn through our retirement before the fall salmon could return to spawn. We had to do something. For the next five years, we engaged in a desperate struggle to turn a profit. Greg took a teaching job in town while I experimented with alternative income streams. I improved our sheep herd to increase produc-



tion. When that proved insufficient, I added sales of eggs, heritage turkeys, fruit, mushrooms and anything else I could think of. It all helped, but nothing turned the corner to profitability. Eventually, we realized that our plight was that of all small farmers.

America is doubly blessed with the best land and the most efficient farmers in the world. This means food is cheap for consumers, but it also means profit margins are low for farmers. Success in a low-profit industry depends on economies of scale. This go-big-or-go-home scenario pushes farmers to consolidate to remain profitable. Farmers compose roughly 1 percent of the U.S. population. Of that group, the top 12 percent account for 89 percent of

agricultural production, according to the 2012 FDA census. Roughly stated, the top 10 percent of farmers are responsible for producing 90 percent of our food. Average net income from a mid-sized farm with \$100,000 to \$250,000 gross sales is less than \$30,000 a year. Few families can live on that, which is why 80 percent of farmers also work off the farm.

Consolidation has a dark side. As farms get bigger, fewer people are needed to manage them. Rural communities are drying up, and those valuable networks of interdependency are collapsing. Loss of population also means fewer votes, so rural agendas can lose priority in politics. Perhaps most challenging is the issue of legacy. If bigger is the goal, then di-

† Clockwise from top left, Scottie Jones hangs out with Paco, a long-haired Sicilian donkey. Hay from Leaping Lamb Farm is ready for storage in the loft as winter feed. Farmstay guests anticipate the release of sheep to pasture, as do the sheep.



UNLIKE HOTELS THAT OFFER LODGING, FARM STAYS OFFER AN EXPERIENCE.



CHILDREN OFTEN VOTE FOR RETURN VISITS OVER DISNEYLAND BECAUSE "THE ANIMALS ARE REAL."



MILL, CREW, MUSHROOMS, TOMATOES: SCOTTIE JONES; MUSHROOM PLUGGING: EMERY JONES; LAMB: DAVID HAYS



+ **Opposite page:** Top row from left, a mobile mill saws Leaping Lamb logs into boards for the farm-stay cottage. The Wayfaring Bros. construction crew and Greg Jones, right, take a break from barn repair. Middle row, inserting mushroom plugs into an oak log yields shiitake mushrooms, right. Bottom row, the Jones' grandson Henry rolls tomatoes from the greenhouse. A farm-stay guest gleefully bottle-feeds a lamb.

+ **This page:** The chicken coop at Leaping Lamb Farm commands a fine view of a flower bed — sunflowers, zinnias, marigolds and cosmos — in a vegetable garden. The grape vine on the fence was planted by the farm's homesteaders. Trees in the backdrop are mostly Douglas fir.

viding farms among heirs is self-defeating. This poses enormous problems for equity and continuity in farm families.

We had our own issue with legacy. In our world, farming and family go together. It's hard to justify the long hours and hard work if it's not part of a legacy for our children. Our youngest daughter had expressed an interest in agriculture. When she was away at college, we decided to build a little cabin that might call her home to the farm. We hired two neighbor friends to help. Milling the lumber from our trees, we built a beautiful cottage with majestic views of the fields and a panorama of the mountains. I couldn't wait to show it to our daughter over Christmas break. She was suitably impressed — before announcing she had applied to vet school and wouldn't be returning for years, if ever.

That was the last straw. We were desperate. We'd have to sell the farm. But then inspiration struck, and the conversation went something like this:

Could we make money by renting the newly constructed cabin to guests as a farm hotel of sorts?

Nah. Most people don't want to stay on a farm.

But *we* did. Maybe others would, too.

But most people aren't deluded idiots.

Fair enough, but the delusion was buying the farm. Staying on the farm is beautiful, even magical at times.

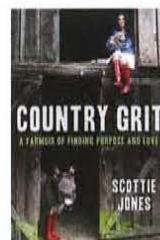
With nothing more to lose, we opened a Leaping Lamb Farm Stay.

Unlike hotels that offer lodging, farm stays offer an experience. Many urbanites yearn for greater connection with nature and express curiosity about their food supply. Our guests help brush the donkey, feed livestock, collect eggs and pull fresh veggies from the garden. Parents are amazed to see that nature can compete with computer screens for their children's attention — as attested by the numerous crayon drawings covering the cabin's refrigerator. Children often vote for return visits over Disneyland because “the

animals are real.” Yes, and so is the poop. Visitors learn country lessons, like don't feed the chickens while wearing sandals (toes look like corn kernels). A Navajo guest returns every year during spring lambing just to reconnect with memories of her childhood and culture. After a decade of this, we now have extended families returning to cook meals together and bond in the deep quiet of rural life. We call it “resizing therapy” as iPads shut down, egos deflate and nature recalibrates our proper size in the universe.

The farm stay allowed us to stay on our own farm. Considering this, we launched the U.S. Farm Stay Association with the goal of connecting guests with farm stays across the nation. The little cabin that started as an idea to save our family farm became a step toward preserving family farming on a national scale. (More: www.farmstayus.com).

We're not getting rich, but we are sustainable, which is all we ever wanted. We believe there is value in maintaining small farms as part of the cultural fabric. They may not be efficient at producing food, but they do maintain agricultural diversity and serve as incubators for intensive farming practices. They also preserve older farming traditions that are part of America's heritage. Our small farm affords a vital connection between urban and rural communities, and we do it without government assistance. Even a Show-Me farmer would call that a pretty good deal. **M**



Scottie Jones is the author of *Country Grit: A Farmoir of Finding Purpose and Love* (Skyhorse, 2017). Driven by a desire to cut ties with a suburban life that had left Scottie and husband Greg feeling empty, they chucked it all and bought a 60-acre farm in Oregon. With humor and hard-earned wisdom, *Country Grit* tells the story of their first five years learning to survive as farmers and entrepreneurs.