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FARMER'S DAUGHTER

Lisa Zirkle rides herd on lab by day, on cattle during `off hours' on homestead

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MOUNT JACKSON, Va. -
Darkness still rules at 5 a.m. Lisa Zirkle, 38, wakes up at her house, which was built before the Civil War, to tend a farm whose ownership can be traced back to before the Revolutionary War.

She throws on jeans, a flannel shirt and a jacket or two to fight off the frost and heads out to check on her "girls," or cows - purebred Simmentals, a Swiss import breed known for milking and maternal abilities.

At 6:30 a.m., she is off to work as a lab manager for a nearby poultry plant, but she will be back home at 5:30 p.m., just in time for a few hours' worth of chores before bedtime.

Miss Zirkle is asked why she lives this double life - lab manager by day, cattle farmer by night. Farming is dusty, dirty work, and she has only her father, Blair Zirkle, to help her. He is 76 and recovering from six broken ribs and a punctured lung, the result of being pinned against a loading chute by one of the cows.

The answer is simple: Miss Zirkle does it to preserve history - her family's and the land's.

Farms, particularly family-owned ones, clearly are dying out. Nearly 16 million acres of agricultural and forest land were developed from 1992 to 1997, a rate of 3.2 million acres a year, says Susan McAvoy, spokeswoman for the U.S. Department of Agriculture. In the 10 years before that, about 1.4 million acres a year went out of production, she says.

Urban sprawl and erosion are two of the reasons for that, the USDA says, and the high cost of machinery and feed drive other farmers out of the farming business. Sky-high inheritance taxes force out even more families.

Cattle farming in the Shenandoah Valley is especially hard, Miss Zirkle says, because of feed costs. Farms in the Midwest don't have to worry about that because most of their feed is produced locally, she says, but the transportation costs to get tons of feed to her farm every year are exorbitant. Then there! is the relative lack of competition among farm-supply companies in he r area, which drives up prices for machinery and other equipment.

But despite it all, Miss Zirkle is determined to keep the farm in the family.

"I've made a lot of sacrifices along the way for this place, but I don't regret any of them," she says. "The thought of this place going to someone outside the family . . . it was me or no one. My roots run really deep here. Just the thought of it going to someone else . . . I wasn't going to let that happen, no matter what I had to do."

AWASH IN HISTORY
This corner of the Shenandoah Valley is filled with history. It's evident even in the colorful names of the towns and hamlets that dot the map around Mount Jackson, places like Cootes Store and Tenth Legion. The story behind the land Miss Zirkle works begins almost 30 years before the Revolutionary War - with Lord Fairfax and 368 acres of rolling farmland. Since Oct. 18, 1749, when Fairfax sold those acres to Peter Gartner, five families have owned this piece of property between Front Royal and Harrisonburg.

The Yankees put a torch to some of it during the Civil War. It was, at some time, an orchard, a dairy farm and a hog farm.

Today, it's a cattle farm, home to 55 Simmental cows, 17 yearling heifers, 12 red heifers and four bulls. And, of course, Blair and Maxine Zirkle and their daughter, Lisa.

Miss Zirkle has the energy of a teen-ager and the drive of a Fortune 500 chief executive. She likes her job at the poultry plant. She says it helps pay the bills, and it gives her a chance to use her degree in animal science from Virginia Tech in Blacksburg.

She also says, however, that she can't wait for that moment every day when she can trade in her pantsuit and sweater for jeans and a flannel shirt, her spreadsheets and computer programs for clipboards and tractors.

Managing a lab for eight hours a day is work. Managing a herd of cows, regulating heat cycles and getting up two or three times a night to check on the cows during calving season, spreading hay, repairing 100-year-old fences, slopping through mud and waist-deep snow to make sure the herd is warm and fed - well, that's a labor of love.

"Farming is tough, and it's expensive to do," Miss Zirkle says. "But that's my ultimate goal. My job [at the poultry plant] helps me to do what I really love."

STARTING YOUNG
Miss Zirkle and her brother, Michael, are "as different as night and day," their father says. Michael Zirkle works as a management consultant for Price Waterhouse Coopers, the accounting

firm, in Birmingham, Ala.

The Zirkles have spread deep roots around Mount Jackson. There are so many of them in the area that Mr. Zirkle jokes, "There's a saying around here: `If you're not a Zirkle, you're probably sleeping with one.' "

Mr. Zirkle's grandfather, John Willie Zirkle, bought 116 acres of the original Gartner property in 1902. (The rest had been divided and sold to other families the previous year.) In 1921, J.W. Zirkle sold it to his son, Melv! in Blair Zirkle, who bought a 100-acre wine tract to add to the property in 1964.

Melvin Zirkle died in 1980, leaving the property to his widow, Nellie, and their three children, Courtney, Blair and Billy. Nellie died in 1983, and the three offspring took possession of the property.

Several years ago, the property was divided among the three siblings and Lisa, the only one of the five grandchildren who showed any interest in continuing the family business.

"The only thing she's ever wanted to do is work with cattle," Mr. Zirkle says. "She's always had in mind to own the farm. Three people can't make a living and work together on a farm, so when the time came, she said she wanted to buy the other two [shares of the farm], and she did. I still have my share."

It was an interest that showed up early, when Miss Zirkle was barely a teen-ager.

"I've been doing it since 1976," she says proudly. "My dad gave me a heifer that year, and that was my start! The first four years, she bred bulls, so one day I went to a sale an d purchased two more heifers, and I basically went from there."

She bought a few more from her father and uncle, and a small herd was formed, which she tended off and on through her college career. She says she applies knowledge from her animal science degree all the time.

"There's a lot of science to the cow business now," Miss Zirkle says. "I'm just beginning to get into the genetic transfers. I use artificial insemination, and that's a very fast way to make genetic improvements in the herd."

This is the busiest time of the year for her - calving season. For about 90 days after Valentine's Day weekend, Miss Zirkle will be up several times during the night to check on her cows as they deliver.

"I take quality naps [during the night]," she says with a chuckle. "It depends on what I see during the night. Sometimes I'll have to get back with a cow in another hour, sometimes I can let them go. But if I mess up, that's my profit for the year. I have to be on them."

She synchronizes her cattle's birthing cycles with hormone injections, which regulates the cows' heat cycles.

"When I give them a [hormone] injection, I'll give them another one in about 10 days, and theoretically most of them will be in heat for about three to five days. Then I artificially breed them and watch for another heat cycle in about 21 days. For the ones who come back in heat again, I'll re-breed them. I try to keep [calving] season under 90 days. That way I have a much more uniform set of calves to sell."

A LIVING LEGACY

Blair Zirkle looks out the window of his house and points to a crumbling stone fireplace, all that remains from a log cabin that was built in the 1700s as the Gartners' first home.

"That was quite a building," he says. Then he moves his finger to point to the two-level house where he was born and raised. It was built in two phases. The left side of the house was built in the late 1700s, and "the new wing," as Mr. Zirkle jokingly refers to it, was built in 1802.

The house he and his wife and daughter live in now was built before the Civil War. Miss Zirkle says she has heard that when Union troops rode through and burned the barn toward the end of the war, the windows of the house they live in now grew so hot they couldn't be touched.

Mr. Zirkle has made a hobby of researching the lives of his ancestors and the other families who have lived here, and Miss Zirkle has inherited his love and appreciation of history as well as his love of farming.

Last year, she bought a metal detector and found a host of historical knickknacks buried just beneath the surface of the farmland around her - knives, fish gigs, square nails.

"My dad has done a lot of researching into our family history," she says. "It's just absolutely valuable information. We have a unique opportunity to have a lot of visitors come in from all over the country, folks we don't even know, and they say, `We were related to such and such Zirkle.' And Dad, right from memory, can spout it all off. They are fascinated, and we are pleased we can help."

She sits back, staring out the window for just a moment.

"Sometimes I wonder, if all those ancestors could see me now," she says, "would they be proud of what I'm trying to do?"