

# The Education Of a City Girl

*As she helped a struggling ewe give birth, she began to understand the sorrows and joys of farm life.*

BY GINNY NEIL, McDowell, Virginia

Even though I grew up in the city, I have always loved the outdoors. So, when my first teaching job landed me in a small corner of the Appalachian Mountains, I was overjoyed. Within 2 years, I met and

married my farmer husband. I pictured myself living on a beautiful farm like the one in my childhood coloring books. You know, the kind where the sun always shines, the board fence stays white and little lambs frolic on every page.

My first year as a farm wife was a revelation. Farming was hard work. I tossed hay bales, canned vegetables, cleaned stalls, helped pick the persistent rocks that surfaced in our fields, and painted that endless white board fence.

One night, I was snuggled on the sofa with my husband when he issued an irresistible invitation. "You want to walk down to the barn with me?" he asked.

Even though it was almost midnight, I jumped up. I still found the idea of a midnight stroll romantic.

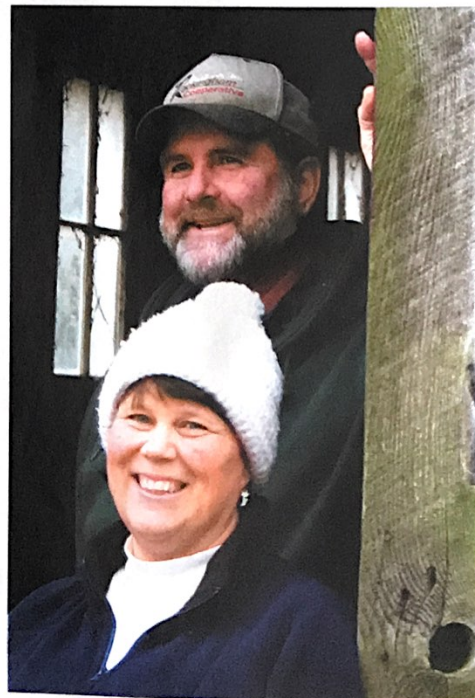
The snowy pastures and mountains glittered in the light of a full moon as we made our way through the barnyard to the sheep shed. I could hear animals shuffling around inside.

As Joe pulled the sliding door open, he said, "This will only take a minute. I checked the sheep about an hour ago, and all the ewes seemed fine."

He then flipped a switch and a single bulb glowed overhead. In a far back corner of the barn, a ewe lay on her side in the hay. She was moaning and straining as her feet paddled the air. Even I could tell something was wrong.

## Hands-on Experience

I waited in the feedway while Joe walked over and knelt beside the dis-



**Girl gone country.** The author and her husband (above); Joe feeds their sheep (top).





tressed mama. Then my husband looked over at me. "Come here and hold her for me," he said.

I had helped with this before, so I knelt down and pinned the sheep to the barn floor. Joe slipped his hand into the ewe's birth canal.

"My hands are too big to get a good hold on the lamb's legs," he said. "Reach in there and see what you can do."

I stared at Joe in disbelief. Soon after we were married, he gave me a copy of the book *Raising Sheep the Modern Way*. I read it front to back that first summer while I waited for jars of beans, squash or tomatoes to seal. I found all the illustrations of lamb deliveries especially interesting.

A year ago, I had been an ignorant city girl. But now I was an educated farm wife. I knew how many ways lambing could go wrong.

Joe ignored my protests and took the front end of the ewe as I stepped to the back. I studied her anatomy for a moment. It didn't look like the black-and-white drawings in the book. After my helpful husband pointed the way, I care-

fully slipped my fingers into the ewe's birth canal.

It was like plunging my hand into a bowl of warm oatmeal. I tried to visualize the pictures from the book as I wiggled my fingers around. Finally, I touched what felt like two knobby legs folded backward.

"The lamb is facing forward," Joe said. "All you have to do is hook a finger around one of its front knees and straighten it out."

I slid my hand along a wet, woolly leg until I found the crook of an elbow. Then I eased a finger behind the joint and tugged. It was kind of like fishing.

"Don't be afraid to really pull," Joe said. "You can't hurt the lamb."

Soon, a little white hoof popped into sight. This wasn't so bad after all.

"That's great. Now do the same thing to the other one. It's better if both feet come out together," my husband instructed.

In a short time, both the hooves were out. Joe grabbed one and I took the other. On the count of three, we pulled a baby lamb into the world. At least that's what we intended. What really happened is that we pulled two little legs into the world.

## Sorrow and Joy

I stared at the legs. There weren't any drawings in the book that looked like this. I turned and ran out of the barn. I stood outside, taking big gulps of the night air and staring at the stars while Joe finished the delivery.

I heard him slide the barn door closed, and he joined me in the silence. After a moment, he hugged me. "There's nothing you could have done differently," he said gently. "Sometimes, a lamb dies before

birth and it disintegrates when you pull it out."

I turned to face him and noticed a burlap bundle tucked in the crook of his arm. He unwrapped it and showed me a small, wet lamb. "I wanted you to see. There was a live one in there, too."

That sopping lamb, wrapped in burlap and bawling for its mama, was beautiful.

That was the beginning of what I have come to consider my "real" education. Flushing fish and burying pets in the backyard had not prepared me for the farm. My view of life and death had been

as two-dimensional as the sheep in my coloring books. Not all the little lambs lived to frolic on the next page.

I saw a lot more death and blood and stink in my first year on the farm than I had seen in my whole life. But I also saw a lot more beauty. The imminent threat of disaster made a meadow full of lambs, a thrush perched on a fence or a mountain hunching bristly shoulders against the blue sky even more precious.

Although it might seem strange to the uninitiated, that night in the barn was a gift to this naive city girl. As I stood under the stars, watching a wet lamb take its first breaths, I was privileged to learn that sorrow polishes the mirror of joy.

**Welcome to the world.** A lamb takes a bottle (top left); below, Della Correll photographed this newborn near Hershey, Neb.

