

# Brad & Leslea Hodgson

## Seeing & believing

One day in 1997 Brad and Leslea Hodgson drove from their home in Minneapolis to southeast Minnesota's Fillmore County to check out a farm that was for sale. As they crossed the Root River on a blacktop road they came to a rise overlooking the former dairy farm. It had seen better days: the house was a mess and the rest of the farmstead was a hodgepodge of rusty fencing and small, slumping buildings, one of which was mounted on old herbicide containers. Showplace Acres it wasn't.

"Fortunately we aren't grossed out

They rented the land out for crop production while they began the process of making it into a pasture farm.

It wasn't easy—there had not been cows on the farm since the early to mid-1990s, so even basic fencing was either lacking, or half buried in the neglected fields. "You would grab a piece of wire fence sticking out of the ground and it might not stop pulling up until you get to the north end of the farm," Brad says, only half joking.

Over the past few years, the Hodgsons have been seeding down one small field



want to just live in the country."

"With an 80-acre lawn," Brad adds.

### Putting it all together

So in 2000 and 2001, the Hodgsons took the Land Stewardship Project's Farm Beginnings™ class. Over the years, the couple had attended LSP field days on alternative livestock production techniques, but they wanted to learn more about such things as business planning and direct marketing. Leslea, who worked for years as a sign painter and took soils classes at the University of Minnesota, says they felt they had gathered a lot of good information on how to raise beef cattle on grass, but needed a way to put everything together in one place. Farm Beginnings offered a way to do that. The program provides participants an opportunity to learn firsthand about low-cost, sustainable methods of farming. Students take part in a course that teaches goal setting, financial planning, business plan creation, alternative marketing and innovative farming techniques. Established farmers and other professionals present at the seminars and provide a strong foundation of resources and networks for those interested in farming. There are also opportunities to connect with established farmers through farm visits and one-on-one mentorships.

"There was so much information at every class pertaining to all the decisions you'll need to make putting a farm together," says Leslea. "We gained a huge network out of it."

Brad says Farm Beginnings also exposed them to a great diversity of people, who represented not only various agricultural interests, but also non-farm professions and expertise. This added greatly to the class discussions, say the Hodgsons.

They also benefited from Farm Beginnings presentations given by established farmers. Those farmers talked about how important it was to not get locked into one way of doing things, especially when it came to something as unpredictable as agriculture.

"You can plan and plan and plan and it



**Brad and Leslea Hodgson: "...we always wanted to make it a business. We didn't want to just live in the country," says Leslea. (LSP photo)**

easily," says Leslea, 41. "If we would have been looking for something pristine, we would have been out of luck."

The couple looked beyond the shabby farmstead at the land's rolling hills and saw the makings of a beef grazing operation. They bought the 100 acres in February 1998.

When Brad, 36, worked for a Montana irrigation company in the 1980s, he loved seeing all that grass on the High Plains. He sees no reason why their farm can't have such a perennial system as its basis. "I've always dreamed of seeing all this land in grass," he says.

at a time, slowly converting the farm into a series of rotationally grazed paddocks.

But it wasn't just the farm that needed preparation. Both Brad and Leslea had grandparents who farmed. Despite the summers they spent on those farms while growing up, the Hodgsons admit to having little real world farm management experience, and they didn't want their love of rural living to just become some romanticized hobby.

"I wanted to get out on a farm as soon as I was old enough to move out of the house," says Leslea. "But we always wanted to make it a business. We didn't

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the early 1990s, when he was switching to a system where the cows got most of their nutrition via grazing on pastures, Gorman spent a lot of time on a hill that gave him a bird's eye view of the operation. He sat up there and planned where paddocks, water lines and hay fields should go. For Gorman's land, and for him, grass-based dairying seems to be the best fit.

The farmer is convinced the highly erosive acres that make up the farm need to be covered in well-managed grass and hay. He also feels the cows are healthier out on the pasture. Grazing has allowed him to become certified organic so he can take advantage of premium prices.

"This is basically an excellent grazing farm," Gorman says as he walks past his herd and into a hillside paddock where bits of limestone poke out through the thin soil.

The farmer also says grazing is not as physically demanding on the body as conventional dairying. Since the cows are harvesting their own feed during the

spring, summer and fall (Gorman feeds them bagged haylage during the winter), the farmer isn't spending long hours bouncing around on a tractor to produce field crops for feed. And because the cows rotate through paddocks on a regular basis, spreading their own manure, he doesn't have to struggle with manure storage and disposal.

If he had been highly invested in a confinement system that required lots of field and manure handling equipment, financial constraints would have shackled him to that type of dairying.

Bill also feels the two and a half years off from dairying gave him some perspective on grazing, which is a technique that's constantly evolving. Since returning to dairying, Gorman has adjusted his paddock sizes, made his watering system more efficient and focused on raising higher quality hay for the winter months.

But Gorman didn't come back from his sabbatical thinking he now knows it all when it comes to grass-based farming. The farmer belongs to a grazing group, a loose collaboration of farmers from the region who meet regularly on each

other's farms to share ideas. Since he took his break from dairying, a lot more support and information is available on how to produce milk using managed rotational grazing. This is important, says Gorman. Such a system may lack a heavy investment in equipment and facilities, but it is definitely management-intensive.

"You can't write a book on grazing," he says. "Every farm is different. It's such firsthand knowledge."

Gorman has built his herd back up to 40 cows, which is a size he feels comfortable with. Does he see himself jumping out of dairying again anytime soon? No, says the farmer. The demand for organic milk is high right now, which means Gorman is receiving a good price for his product. But it also means organic milk cows are going for a high price, which gives farmers like him the flexibility to change directions in the future.

"Because I'm not invested in a lot of heavy metal, I could again sell my herd, or part of it, or expand a bit," says Gorman. "This system lets you explore your options. It's a nice way to dairy." □

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can end up completely different," says Leslea. "I like to let life and nature show me how it's all going to go. That seems to be why things turn out different than you plan them and why you need to be flexible and innovative. There are some great ideas people are trying out there for dealing with all those surprises."

After taking the class, the Hodgsons hooked up with Arlene and Melvin Hershey, LSP members who produce eggs, poultry and specialty meats for direct marketing to consumers near St. Charles, Minn. Leslea worked for a summer with the Hersheys.

Today, almost a decade after seeing the pasture potential of a broken down farm, the Hodgsons' green dreams are closing in on reality. The land is now covered in pastures and trees, and the couple is in the process of building a brood cow herd to add value to all that grass. They have nine cows, and hope to grow the herd to 30. They got their grazing herd started in 2002 with six cows and six calves they bought with a Heifer International no-interest livestock loan. As Farm Beginnings graduates, the Hodgsons qualified for the loan, which they have five years to pay off (during the first two years, no payments have to be made).

They chose to raise Black Galloways because they have a reputation as "easy keepers"—natives of the highlands of Scotland, their thick coats make the cattle good at weathering the harsh climate of the Upper Midwest. They don't need as much backfat to keep warm, making for a leaner beef, and they make good use of poor quality grazing lands. Indeed, as the Hodgsons checked on their herd on a blustery fall afternoon recently, a cold rain lashed the hillside grazing paddock the cattle were in. But the brood cows and their calves seemed downright cozy as they moved slowly through the lush forage.

The Hodgsons are easing into marketing, and sell a few animals each year to acquaintances wanting antibiotic- and hormone-free beef. They also raise chickens and direct-market them.

Root Prairie Galloways, as their reclaimed farm is called, isn't providing a fulltime living just yet. Brad is a cabinet-maker and has been running his own custom business out of a shop on the farm for the past two years. Leslea commutes 28 miles to Rochester, Minn., to work at a Menards home improvement store.

And the farm still needs some work. The couple spent \$4,000 alone for watering systems. Fortunately, they got money for fencing through the USDA's Environmental Quality Incentives

Program (EQIP). In addition, when the Conservation Security Program (CSP) came to the Root River watershed, the Hodgsons qualified for Tier 3, the highest level a farmer can attain. CSP pays farmers for using systems that protect and enhance the environment (see page 12). Through CSP, they will receive \$60,000 over the life of a 10-year contract. That will help them further establish their managed rotational grazing system.

As they work to establish a farming system that is not only financially viable, but will be an environmental benefit to the Root River watershed, the Hodgsons realize they have some major challenges ahead. For inspiration, all they need to do is remember what the farm was like when they first set eyes on it, says Leslea.

"We like uphill battles." □

## **Fresh Faces- Fresh Farming**

To read other profiles of graduates of the Land Stewardship Project's Farm Beginnings™ program, see the Oct./Nov./Dec. 2004 issue of the *Land Stewardship Letter*, or log onto [www.landstewardshipproject.org/programs\\_farmbeginnings.html#profiles](http://www.landstewardshipproject.org/programs_farmbeginnings.html#profiles).