

The accident and the miracle

It was on a ranch in Wyoming that Wendy was trying to control a team of fractious Belgian draft horses when Sheldon "stepped out of a car and it was either run him over or hit a fence post. So I hit the fence post. As I'm going by, I say, 'See ya.' That was the beginning of the relationship," laughs Wendy...a narrowly averted accident.

A month later, she invited this "Canadian cowboy" to accompany her on a round-about trip back to her home state of Virginia. Sheldon was too smitten to notice that Wendy had a knack for "taking in strays," himself included.

And so, with a stray "feller" in tow, Wendy came home to a life as a race-horse jockey. She ran at Charlestown, Laurel, Pamlico, Penn National, Delaware Park. She remembers, "When Ethan was a baby, he went with me to the barn early in the morning and he grew up in the barn while I was riding race horses and he went to the track at night and watched me ride the races."

And then one morning early came the accident. "We were on two babies, and we were exercising them on the track, and my saddle broke." She looks heavenward. "And I couldn't recover. I went down in between horses and got stepped on and it separated my shoulder real bad." She shrugs as if to say, that's just the way it goes. "And while I was recovering from that, Christian came along. I got pregnant while

I was recuperating."

Wendy's story is interrupted by the arrival of the Orange County handicapped school bus coming down the Fine Felt Farm drive. A lift lowers the wheelchair-bound boy to the ground. Wendy wheels him to the shade of a cedar tree, chickens cackling and pecking at his feet, and continues the tale.

Christian was born on Christmas Day... "a problem at delivery," resulting in cerebral palsy. Later, epilepsy claimed his sense of sight. Wendy's racing career was over. They sold their race horses and slowly struggled out from under the crushing weight of the hospital bills.



Left, the Orange County handicap bus delivers Christian Weibe home from school. His Mom, Wendy (left), says Christian prefers to be outside among the numerous animals on the Weibe farm.

Bottom left, quadriplegic and blind, Christian Weibe is "a 10-year-old boy in a body that doesn't work." Still, his mother says he likes to do many of the things that 10-year-olds enjoy, including wrestling with his brother and driving over a bumpy field. He also enjoys feeling the soft feathers of the Midget White Turkey in his lap.

Photos by Susie Audibert

wheelchair. Asked how much he can comprehend, Wendy says he follows conversations and enjoys books on tape. "He is pretty close to a 10-year-old boy. The way I describe it is he's a 10-year-old boy in a body that doesn't work. So, he doesn't communicate fully. He has certain sounds for certain needs. But he doesn't carry on conversations." Wendy casually picks up a turkey and puts it in Christian's lap, where it sits patiently, almost sensing its role as a therapy animal.

"Like any other 10-year-old, he loves rough housing," she continues. "He loves to wrestle with his brother. His favorite thing is to go driving. 'Don't go on the road, go in the field, and don't go slow; I want to hit the bumps.' The harder the ride the happier he is. He wants to do what his brother and sister do, and he tries. So, whenever we get the chance, we have him right in there with the animals too."

And so last year, the Miniature Horse Show Association sponsored a handicapped division at the state fair. "He is quadriplegic and blind and he's fisted and we put his hand braces on so the lines were velcroed to his hands, set him up in the cart and he drove a team in the show and he also showed in hand which means he leads the horse in and trots it out...this boy, who never uses his hands. I explained to him how he has to do

this. He held onto that horse and held onto those lines and he worked so hard when it was over he was so exhausted he fell out of the cart into my arms." Christian won first place.

Christian is also regarded as something of a miracle-maker in the Weibe household, because, you see, none of all this...the farm, the rare breeds of draft horses, chickens, turkeys, pigs, cattle and sheep, none of this... not even the chicken named "Dog," would have happened had Christian been born a "normal" child.

"It not only changed our lives, we came to a screeching halt," says Wendy wide-eyed. "We could have gone in a lot of directions, but ended up in this direction which, I think has been the greatest thing ever."

And so, they turned a mind numbing setback into a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

"It has been a huge blessing. Christian has definitely changed our lives for the better. We have no complaints," says Wendy, bright-eyed. "If you had asked me before he was born was this the way we would end up, I would say 'you're crazy.' I was a workaholic. I worked eight days a week, never stopped. That's the life we had. Then, Christian came along and," Wendy smacks her fist for emphasis, "a new door opened, and here we are."

That's the miracle.



Above, a chicken named "Dog" investigates some scraps Anna Weibe has thrown it. The chicken's name stems from the fact that it follows members of the Weibe household everywhere, like a dog.



Right, Wendy Weibe and Mrs. Beasley share a tender moment. Among other things, Wendy has been a race horse jockey, a mother, a farmer, an author, and an artist. She is also teaching a class in felt puppetry this summer through the Arts Center in Orange.

Photos by Susie Audibert

There are 200 chickens scratching about in the yard at Fine Felt Farm, but only one of them thinks it is a dog. "Wherever you go, she'll meet you at the house, run with you back to the chicken house, then back to the house again," explains Wendy Weibe (pronounced Weeb), pointing to a rather non-descript, white chicken. "She's just a dog."

The Weibe's real dog, a dachshund, fixes the chicken with a baleful look, as if to say, "What is your role here?" "Everything on this farm has a job or it can't stay," explains Wendy. "Number One rule—it can't just be a pet. It has to feed somebody, or be used, or work the farm. It's gotta have a job." Anna, Wendy's nine-year-old daughter has heard this before. She wants pets.

And so, just what is "Dog's" job? "Dog" is a laying hen. She produces eggs. That's her contribution. Then there's Ramona, the Jersey cow. She produces milk that not only raises her calf but also keeps all five

They have a lot of different farm animals—sort of a 21st century Old MacDonald's Farm.

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members of the Weibe family in milk, cheese, yogurt, butter and ice cream.

And then there's Mrs. Beasley, the kind-eyed mule who today has jumped INTO the hog pen, not out of it, to investigate the litter of pigs that were born last night. She pulls wagons and carts. Today, Mrs. Beasley is sporting a scrape on her withers. Telltale tufts of her white hair are stuck to the top of the low door leading to where the piglets are, evidence that her curiosity got the better of her; she was run out by the protective sow. The sow just lies there, an expression of eternal bliss and "who me?" innocence on her face. The piglets scramble around her looking for a free spigot.

Welcome to Fine Felt Farm, a 40-acre Garden of Eden, well...sort of...located in the southern most tip of Orange County off Monrovia Road. It is home to this incredible family of five: Wendy, her husband Sheldon, and three kids, Ethan, 14, Christian, 10, and Anna, 9. They share this space with the 200 aforementioned chickens, 100 turkeys, seven, or is it eight, draft horses, three mules, two milk cows, a few beef cattle, some sheep, pigs, and a partridge in a pear tree...and a peach tree...and an apple tree or two and some damson plums and a plot of wheat, and a patch of pumpkins, and a vegetable garden, and a chicken named "Dog."

The noise is overwhelming—a cacophony of crowing, gobbling, bleating, neighing, grunting, barking and mooing, although, because of their sheer numbers, the feathered fowl are clearly winning this shouting contest. And when it comes to landscaping and decorative planting, well, you might as well forget it, because chickens are everywhere, nesting up against the house, taking dust baths amongst the forlorn shrubbery, pecking and scratching, cocking their heads sideways to



Ethan takes Pete for a warm-up stroll prior to doing some work. Ethan has decided he wants to become a "biological woodsman," a logger who uses horses to skid felled timber with minimal impact to the land and standing trees.

Photo by Susie Audibert

better view a potential morsel. They are all hard at work, whether it's laying eggs or growing fat for the pot.

"We do everything free range—all very natural meats," points out Wendy. We raise the birds for that and we raise the pigs for that and we have beef for that. We started it just as wholesome foods for our family and we extended the bird and the pig part for selling, and it's gone very well." She points to the ripening wheat patch. "We plant greenery for the birds to self-feed off of year round, so they can self-feed instead of being fed. And it makes a great meat." The chickens work their way through the wheat, pecking at grains, stalks, leaves, insects.

There is a bird side to all this. "We do lose some of our fruit to birds and insects," Wendy admits, "but we harvest enough. I'd rather do that than spray them."

But as for that fox—the one who reduced the Guinea hen population from 24 to three—that's a problem. "I will share up to a point," says Wendy, her eyes narrowing.

She changes the subject. "All of our animals are 'heritage animals,'" she says brightly. That means that Fine Felt Farm raises and, more importantly, preserves rare old breeds, some almost extinct, that have been passed up for today's farm factory livestock.

Take the tractors for example—Suffolk Punch draft horses,

a breed developed in England, not to carry knights in armor, nor to haul beer wagons, but to work the farm as, well ... tractors. The Weibes started out with Pete five years ago because they wanted a reliable horse to pull their quadriplegic son, Christian, around in a wagon. They now have seven of these gentle giants. There are only 1,500 in the whole country, descended from only three blood lines.

The pigs are "heritage" too—Tamworths, another English breed. "They are the best foraging breed" explains Wendy. "They get very little supplementation. Most of what they get is from out in the field. Most pigs you can't do that. You have to feed them." And when they do feed animals here, it's either hay they cut from their own fields or whole grains, or pumpkins from the patch...none of it processed.

How about the Midget White Turkeys—a rare breed that was developed when "stoves were smaller, so they developed a smaller turkey to fit in the ovens," explains Wendy. "It was right before the huge commercial turkey breeding, selling-into-the-grocery-store-thing happened." What's nice about them is they dress out at eight to ten pounds, and they are tasty! Besides, Wendy claims, "They ARE smart. They talk to you and they laugh at your jokes." "Gobble-gobble-gobble," laughs a curious Tom.

The Weibes also use some time-honored farming techniques. For example, they will not separate Ramona the milk cow from her calf. "It works well because if something comes up and I cannot milk, then she's not suffering and the calf is getting everything it needs. And they don't get mastitis. There're no problems. It's the way they used to do it 150 years ago. It worked then. I don't know why you can't do it now."

The sheep are "heritage" too—Navajo-Churro. Their job is to produce wool that Wendy will make into felt that she will then transform into sculptures and rugs. She hauls out a rug that was woven from this wool by the Navajo in 1890. Since then, because of misguided government programs that were intended to "help" the Native Americans, the breed almost became extinct. It is now on the rebound.

And what's this about felting? An "aw shucks," look crosses Wendy's face as she shyly admits "that's on

the side, when I have time. I've always done that." She explains the process: wool fibers are laid in layers perpendicular to each other, soap is added to change the Ph, "to open up the scales on the fibers, just like the scales on your hair. And then you add water to lubricate it enough to move and you just work it. You're literally matting it up. When you wash the soap out, the scales lock down, and then it's a solid piece of material." Wendy has limited her felting these days to doing just commissioned works, "because I don't have time to just sit and play."

Oh yes, did we mention that during the school year, she teaches art to the Head Start kids through the Arts Center in Orange Outreach Program? And this summer, she's conducting a puppet class, where students make their own puppets out of felt, write a play, compose music and perform a puppet show. Most parents groan when their kids come home for summer vacation. Wendy rejoices; she gets a reprieve from all those farm chores like feeding and watering and milking and mucking.

When her kids go back to school this fall and write the ubiquitous, "What-I-did-on-my-summer-vacation" essay, all they'll be able to say is, "We just worked." She pauses and laughs. "They DO like it," she insists, "We're not forcing them. They really enjoy working on the farm. They've learned so much and they're good workers. If I had to do all this by myself, we wouldn't have all this." She waves vaguely all around her. Besides, "my children now know how to milk and make products from milk and raise animals and process birds, and they can take those life skills with them when they go."

They also wouldn't have all this without "the ol' Canadian cowboy." Sheldon not only looks the part...

tall and lean with a hat, boots, colorful shirt, handlebar moustache; he really is one. He has a Reserve Champion Rookie Steer Wrestling belt buckle to prove it. Born and raised in Alberta, Canada, he finds it ironic that he had to come all the way to Virginia to learn to steer wrestle. No time for steer wrestling now. "It means you've got to be on the road all weekend. Too many animals and my 'Honey Do' list is really long," he winks knowingly. During the week, Sheldon works as the manager of a propane company. "He has to support this farm, so he has a real job," smiles Wendy.

Earlier this month, the Weibes hosted a Youth Day for the Virginia Draft Horse and Mule Association. The idea came when Wendy noticed no young people coming to association events. "There were the old men... and my kids. No other kids. And when those men retire, nobody's going to be doing it any more," she laments. "We need to DO something about this," she remembers saying. "If we can just get one kid interested..." she lets the sentence dangle. "So we opened up the farm and let them all come and feel it and see it and do it and try it and maybe one of them will get in the draft horse business. That's our goal."

That's 14-year-old Ethan's goal too. He wants to become a "biological woodsman," basically logging with horses, not machines. As his Dad explains it, "The horses don't tear up the land like the machines do." Ethan already knows what college he will attend to major in forestry.

It all started with the first Suffolk Punch they bought. "Before that horse, Ethan was like 'yeah, horses, whatever,'" says Wendy mimicking her son's eye roll. But along came Pete. "Pete and Ethan connected like that," she snaps her fingers. "Ethan started working Pete and Ethan started logging with Pete." Now he's spending part of his summers learning biological woodsman skills from the legendary Jason Rutledge of the Healing Harvest Forest Foundation.

Ethan is also trying to learn how to play electric guitar like Jimmy Page of Led Zeppelin. We mention that just so you don't get the idea that these folks are running

around in homespun clothes in some kind of a time warp living in a log cabin with no running water or electricity. The Weibe household is quite normal. They

have access to the internet. They use motorized tractors and cars and pick-up trucks. They have heat and air conditioning; it's just that they have a lot of different farm animals...sort of a 21st century Old MacDonald's Farm.

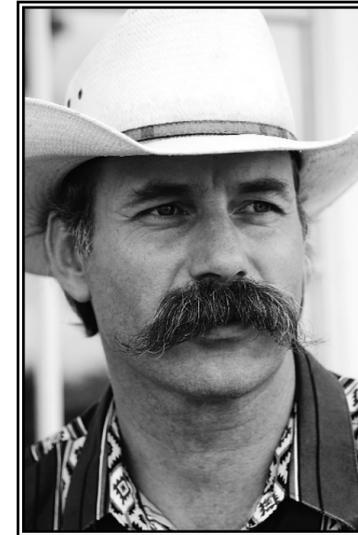
And this life of raising your own all-natural food is not without modern-day worries. Right now, the Weibes have Health Department approval to process up to a thousand birds a year in what used to be Wendy's felting studio. Currently, they sell to neighbors and friends. They would like to sell to restaurants and grocery stores, and have even provided some area chefs with free samples of their meats...to rave reviews.

"The animals that are here to be processed get nothing (in the way of chemicals, hormones, antibiotics, processed feeds) from gestation to the day they die," says Wendy with a note of finality. "It's all natural. I have had the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services come out and inspect the facilities, because we

want to go for an inspected facility. So we would be working both with the Health Department and VDACS. Everything is good. We're a little shy of having everything ready, but because of this bird flu looming, I haven't gone forth with it yet. We're just waiting to see what the avian flu thing does."

In a worse-case-scenario, "we'd need a lot of freezers," says Wendy glumly. If wild birds infect their flock, "they (VDACS) would eliminate any back yard poultry. The only poultry allowed would be 'housed' poultry—in houses, not cages. They said if worse comes to worse, they'd have to be in a sided building with windows and doors, and none outdoors anymore." She sighs in frustration. "It makes no sense, because once you house them you make them so much MORE susceptible to everything. And how many people die from E. Coli and Salmonella versus avian flu? I don't understand it." She shrugs. "It will not affect the big poultry houses; they will stay in business. It's the backyard farmers that will suffer from it." And the rare heritage breeds such as the Midget Whites might become extinct.

The chicken named "Dog" doesn't hear a word of it. He just scratches after some scraps Anna threw him in the yard.



Sheldon Weibe hails from Alberta, Canada, but says he had to come all the way to Virginia to learn how to steer wrestle. Sheldon's steer wrestling days are over because he is too busy weekends taking care of the "Honey Do" list at the family farm.

Photo by Phil Audibert



Midget White Turkeys are just one of the rare "heritage" breeds of animals on Fine Felt Farm in southern Orange County. Raised on range with no additives, hormones, antibiotics or processed feeds, the turkeys dress out at a flavorful eight to ten pounds.

Photo by Susie Audibert



Wendy Ashworth Weibe was a race jockey for almost 15 years before moving with her family to Orange County. Here, she crosses the finish line for the win on Fancy Pullet at Charlestown in 1988. Little did she know then that 15 years later she would be raising fancy pullets on a farm in Orange County.

Contributed photo