

Old souls

Through their Lake Nowhere Mule and Donkey Farm, Jim and Deb Kidwell have developed a passion for American mammoth jackstock

By Allison Morgan

Deb and Jim Kidwell found their niche in the middle of Nowhere.

In 2004, the Kidwells relocated from Miami to Martin and purchased a 110-acre property known as Lake Nowhere, which had previously been developed as a sort of rural resort, complete with rental cabins, RV campsites, a clubhouse, and a picturesque lake. The property, however, had been neglected for several years and needed plenty of work — as well as some animals to keep the pastures under control.

“It was like we had bought a state park that had been let go,” says Deb, who had retired after 23 years on the police force in South Florida. “And there wasn’t a stitch of fencing. I spent my first summer mowing the whole property — with a riding lawnmower — and quickly realized that we needed some livestock. Jim mentioned cattle, but I didn’t have any experience with them. But I did know something about horses.”



Deb’s father, Grover Collins, who was originally from Kingsport, had bred and trained Appaloosas in Miami in the 1960s and ’70s. Since she hadn’t owned a horse in more than 30 years, Deb decided to start with something familiar and bought an Appaloosa mare. She then bought a draft horse, a Belgian filly, which she began showing in local events. It was at one of these shows during the Gibson County Fair that she “met” her first mammoth jack,



Deb Kidwell is especially proud of Lake Nowhere Jubal, a registered American mammoth jack born in January. He is the first to be sired by the farm’s new stud, PCF Genesis. Deb and her husband, Jim, moved to Martin from Miami four years ago and established Lake Nowhere Mule and Donkey Farm, where they specialize in breeding mammoth jackstock and draft and riding mules.

which inspired her to specialize in raising and breeding these gentle giants.

“I had grown up in a horse environment, but I had never been around mules or jackstock before,” says Deb. “It was just fascinating.”

The only truly American breed of donkey, the modern mammoth jackstock is descended from animals bred and raised by George Washington, who combined several Spanish breeds of donkeys to develop the beginning of the mammoth line. As the name implies, they are a large breed, with minimum height requirements of 14 hands for jennets (females) and 14.2 for jacks (males).

Today, the mammoth jackstock

breed is considered threatened, according to the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy, which estimates world numbers of mammoth jacks and jennets at around 5,000. Deb says the American Mammoth Jackstock Registry believes the number is closer to 2,000.

“I just fell in love with these animals and wanted to help preserve the breed,” says Deb. “These donkeys have precious personalities — they’re like old souls.”

In less than a year, Deb had started the process of turning Lake Nowhere into a mule and donkey farm. She began visiting breeders and reading every book and piece of literature she could get her hands

on. She talked to veterinarians, horse show judges, and breed registrars. After months of research, she began purchasing breeding stock, starting with the best young mares she could afford.

“We looked at conformation, intelligence, and personality before we looked at color,” says Deb. “Sweet mamas make sweet babies.”

Deb bought her first two mammoth jennets in December 2004, just 10 months after moving to Martin. She then a registered mammoth jack, Stonewall Jackson, and began her breeding program. Since then, Lake Nowhere has been building its reputation for producing top-quality mammoth jackstock and draft and riding mules.

“We are trying to breed show-quality animals with outstanding conformation to be used in whatever discipline the buyer wishes,” says Deb. “Our goal is to produce gentle, intelligent and willing animals.”

After Deb’s beloved “Jackson” had to be euthanized in 2006 because of severe, pre-existing problems with his hooves and legs, she acquired a black registered mammoth jack named PCF Genesis. He is now the herd sire for Lake Nowhere’s more than 20 breeding jennets and mares, including both saddle and draft horses in a variety of breeds: Appaloosa, Tennessee walking, thoroughbred, racking,



LEFT: Deb, left, and Weakley Farmers Cooperative’s Janet Turbeville feel for the foal of Pam, a Belgian mare. Pam and her sister, Sue, are the farm’s primary driving team. The Kidwells feed all of their equine Co-op Winner’s Circle Advantage 1400. RIGHT: Susan Powell, who Deb says is her “right-hand woman,” affectionately rubs the head and ears of OK Dusty, a mammoth jennet.

quarter, Belgian, Clydesdale, and Friesian-Percheron crosses. The newest addition is a rescued standard donkey named "Burrito" that happily roams with the herd.

At 15.2 hands tall, Genesis exemplifies the "old-style" mammoth jackstock conformation, says Deb. She and her farm assistant, Susan Powell, hand-breed the jennets and mares, and Genesis' first mule babies and jackstock began arriving this spring, heralded by the birth of a jack named Jubal in January.

"We're trying to stick with the old standards, so all of our jackstock are at least 15 hands," says Deb. "The results we are getting with our babies are just astounding. They are beautiful."

Deb and Susan get to know the foals intimately from birth, imprinting them immediately, haltering them when they're 2 days old, and lifting their feet the first week. At 7 to 10 days of age, the babies start to eat pelleted food. If the young equine are not sold by weaning time, trainer Jason Hoffman of Murray, Ky., helps get them ready for work or show.

"By the time our foals are weaned, they are halter-broke and will load into a trailer and stand for the farrier," says Deb. "Then they go to Jason for what I call 'pre-kindergarten,' where they are stalled for the first time and worked in a simple ground school for 30 days."

With so many different types of equine on the farm, Deb needed a simple feeding program that worked for all the horses, donkeys, and mules. The Weakley Farmers Cooperative customer found what she was looking for in Co-op's Winner's Circle Advantage 1400 (#321), which she started feeding soon after she bought her first two mammoth jennets in December 2004.

"When I went to look at them, even with their winter coats you could count every rib and vertebra," says Deb. "I called Linda Coffman, the registrar at the American Mammoth Jackstock Registry, for advice. I told her, 'These girls need to put on 600 pounds, and I don't know what to feed them.' She said I should try a pelleted feed."

Deb was already feeding Co-op 11% Sweet Feed (#327), and the mares were getting Co-op Mare and Foal Developer (#331), now called Winner's Circle Next Generation. When she asked the Co-op experts about a pelleted ration, they suggested she try Advantage. On the advice of her veterinarian, Deb decided to transition all the animals to Advantage to avoid the complications of keeping up with several different types of feed.



ABOVE: These horses are among more than 35 equine at Lake Nowhere. From left are AphC Saffron, an Appaloosa filly; Holly, a 2-year-old Clydesdale, and her sister, Pearl, who is 3. TOP RIGHT: Standing next to Genesis, Lake Nowhere's 15.2-hand jack stud, Deb, who is 5 feet, 7 inches tall, shows why these animals are named "mammoth." RIGHT: Jim spends quality time with LKNW Delta and LKNW Dixie, two of the farm's mammoth jennets.



"It took six months, but after that those jennets looked good enough to take pictures and register them," says Deb. "Since then, every equine here has been on the Advantage, and it has been an outstanding food. Every animal we have brought in, even some of the ones that had just been fed shelled corn, eat it. Nobody has ever turned their nose up at it."

Deb's connection to the Co-op goes beyond her feeding program. Two of her Belgian mares came from nearby 6 T's Farm in Dresden, which is owned by Weakley Farmers Cooperative employee Janet Turbeville and her husband, Mike. The Turbevilles have been close colleagues of Deb since she bought her first Belgian from them and even encouraged her to begin showing her animals in the first place.

"Deb has certainly earned her place in the community," says Janet. "You know how it is when there's a new kid in town, and especially when it's a woman. But she soon proved to everybody that she knows what she's talking about."

Indeed, Deb is extensively involved in community events, especially when it allows her to educate the public about the different characteristics of mules, donkeys, and horses. She gives tours of the farm to school children, civic organizations, and church groups and works with developmentally challenged adults in interactive equine therapy. She and Jim, a building subcontractor, often drive their draft horse and mule teams in area parades and participate in the University of

Tennessee at Martin's annual "Farm Fest," a day-long agriculture education event for first- and second-graders from Weakley and Obion counties. Deb also hosts an average of four hands-on laboratories for the university's pre-veterinary students each year.

"Last year, we had a stable management class from the college out here to help with vaccinations," says Deb. "We also usually get a freshman equine science class. This helps them learn just how different mules and donkeys are from horses, both anatomically and physiologically. If a person says they are a horse vet, they can't necessarily say they are a mule and donkey vet."

In her educational efforts, Deb enjoys clearing up misconceptions about donkeys and mules and demonstrating that they can be trained to do anything horses can do — often even better. She says some of the mules from Lake Nowhere have futures in dressage, hunter/jumper, cutting, reining, or barrel-racing disciplines.

"Mules are getting very popular because people are realizing how smart they are," says Deb. "They are very intelligent, curious, and trusting once they get to know you. What is often attributed to stubbornness in the mule is actually self-preservation. You can't get a mule to hurt itself, and if it isn't going to hurt itself, it's not going to hurt you."

Although she admits there's still plenty of work to be done to get their Martin property in picture-

perfect shape, Deb says she's proud of how far her equine operation has come in just four short years. Reflecting on her journey from the police force to the farm, Deb says she's still amazed that Lake Nowhere became somewhere she found a passion she didn't even know she had.

"I'm one of those people who is pretty happy wherever I go," says Deb. "You have to make your own happiness, I think. And being with these beautiful, powerful creatures every day is certainly my kind of happiness."

To learn more about Lake Nowhere Mule and Donkey Farm, call Deb Kidwell at 731-364-9572 or 731-514-4068, e-mail her at mulelady@frontiernet.net, or visit online at www.elitemulesandjackstock.com. She will also be hosting a Brad Cameron Mulemanship Clinic and Colt Class Oct. 31 through Nov. 3 at UT Martin.

This whimsical signpost on the Lake Nowhere property shows the diversity of the Kidwells' equine herd.

