

# Life on the Homestead...

## The Creative Homesteader

By Suzann Gilliland Peterson  
High Desert Grange, Nevada

Homesteading today is very different from homesteading in the mid-to-late 1800s and early 1900s. In 1976, upon the repeal of the Homestead Act of 1862, homesteading took on different characteristics. Gone were the requirements of plot size, head of household or minimum age, residency, size of home, land improvement, attestation, or title.

Basically, homesteading in our current environment means anyone who grows produce or raises livestock on their own property in order to support themselves and to sell in that effort. Homesteading in today's world is as varied as the homesteader.

And homesteaders are among the most creative people.

### Audra Borders, Battle Born Stockton Well Grange (NV)

Take, for example, Audra Borders, Secretary and Homestead Instructor for Battle Born Stockton Well Grange in Silver Springs, Nevada. Audra hates waste, everything from "junk" on the side of the road to missed opportunities to help someone in need. Finding ways to creatively use waste is what drives her.

"Everybody's creativity takes different forms. I can take throw-

away stuff and repurpose it," she explained to me. Her almost five-acre property is legally homesteaded in Lyon County and she manages it with her mother. Her boyfriend lends a hand as needed.

Being self-sufficient is Audra's main goal. Repurposing everything she has on hand supports that goal. She preserves much of her garden produce. To help maintain the homestead, her mother and boyfriend run a

cleaning business. Through that business, they are able to work with estate agents to help close houses, thereby affording them the opportunity to remove unwanted items for use at home.

Finding furniture, equipment, wood, machinery and more on the side of the road has allowed them to build the roof of their rabbit hutch from parts of a walk-in freezer. Their chicken house is an old camp trailer; the buck shed is made from garage door panels. Waiting for a future project are 150-year-old rough-cut Tahoe cedar 2x4s from an old house whose owner bartered with a family member - wood in return for work.

Because of Audra's commitment to homesteading, her three children can go anywhere in the world and utilize the survival skills she has taught. Those skills come in handy for Nykolas (Army National Guard), Jasmyne (Naval Reserves), and Jacylne (Coast Guard) who have taught those skills to some of their supervisors and peers.

With all that she has learned and taught, what does Audra think is the most creative thing she has done? It remains, she says, "Taking a pile of junk and turning it into something useful."

### Sandy Specht, Yucaipa, California

For Sandy Specht of Yucaipa, California, creativity was all the things her dad did for her and her mother to ease their somewhat solitary life on their farm in Rupert, Idaho.

At the age of four she and her parents left Los Angeles for Idaho, where her father had purchased 175 acres of dirt and legally homesteaded it. That was 1958, and Rupert's population was 5,000.

Crops failed their first two years which meant no income. Sandy's mother missed her mother, city friends, and the amenities of Los Angeles. What does a creative person do? Spend the winters in Los Angeles, of course! Each December through February found the Spechts living with Sandy's grandmother while Sandy's father worked at various aerospace companies to recoup any losses.

To make farm life more bearable, Sandy's father found ways to uplift his family's spirits. He made a playhouse out of cardboard and one out of haybales. He taught Sandy how to ice skate on their irrigation pond. He built a raft for her and her mother out of used telephone poles. Those simple "gifts" went a long way in making a plot of land a loving home.

Sandy's father sold the farm in 1985 and moved his family to Yucaipa, and her parents have since passed on.

I asked her what the "funnest" thing was about living on the farm. She replied, "The wide open space. I'd ride my bike every day."

Would she like to live the farm life again? "Someone else's farm on vacation!" she exclaimed. "Probably not under my own responsibility. It is a lot to care for. It was challenging." But a creative mind, willingness to adapt, and creative hands carved out a satisfactory life and a joyful existence.



Audra Borders making potting soil.

### Michele North, North Star Farm, Norwell Grange (MA)

Like most homesteaders, Michele North faces constant opportunities to adapt and overcome. Making ends meet with increasing costs, along with locating educated buyers who will spend a little more money on her locally grown and processed products, causes her to lament that there are only 24 hours in a day.

Michele is a new member of the Norwell Grange in Norwell, Massachusetts. North Star Farm, a name designated by her father in 1966, was originally located in Marshfield as a small backyard farm. Eight years ago, it was relocated to its current site and now provides produce, meat, lobster, and homemade products to the local area around South Shore.

The farm is run by Michele and her boyfriend. She is the owner, trainer, instructor, and head decision maker. Her boyfriend owns and operates their commercial lobster boat. Together, they own a small flock of registered Natural Colored Wool sheep and Shropshire sheep, selling wool, wool products, lambs, and fresh lamb along with chickens, ducks, rabbits and a small variety of herbs and vegetables which they sell mostly to private chefs.

To farmer's markets, she brings items she makes, including leather balm, bird houses, candle holders made from old barn boards, seasonal herbs and vegetables, fresh eggs, sand dollars, and sea shells. Additionally, they take lobster orders, and their equine

facility offers boarding, training, lessons, and summer horse and farm programs. She has also hosted interns from the local high school.

What does Michele consider to be the most creative things she has done? "Developing new products from what I have available and crossbreeding my sheep for a better fleece for wool, and at the same time developing a meaty carcass," she responded.

There is no lack of creative endeavors. Her advice for beginning homesteaders: "Don't just focus on the wool or the meat, have a combination of both. Then, develop products from there. For example, making and selling products from the wool, or selling special sample boxes of meat to gain new clients, and processing the sheep skins after the butchering process."

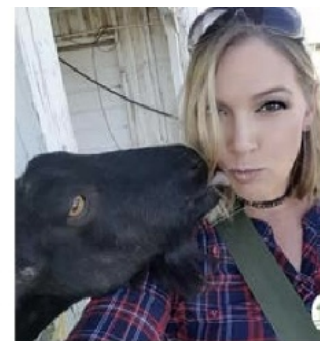
Michele lives by an old saying: "Use it up, wear it out, make do, or do without!" She adds, "That sentiment fits homesteading and small farming perfectly."

### Marissa Ames, Ames Family Farm, High Desert Grange (NV)

As the Editorial Director of Ogden Publications, which includes *Mother Earth News*, *Countryside*, and *Backyard Poultry*, among others, and the owner of Ames Family Farm, Marissa Ames has very little time for anything other than work... work on the farm and work at her job.

Stories of what she grows, how she grows it, how she processes it, what she makes from it, and how she stores it often end up in her publications. She also raises small livestock, including the rare San Clemente Island goat. Marissa was the first person to bring them into Nevada and now has established breeders and a system where they can work together to exchange breeding stock and keep genetics good. Additionally, she leads the Homesteading Club for High Desert Grange. She and her husband work hand-in-hand on the farm. According to *Mother Earth News*, Marissa spends her free time eating lunch.

I recently asked her what she considers to be the most creative things she has undertaken on her



Marissa Ames with her purebred La Mancha goat, Dulcinea

homestead. Without hesitation, she listed three:

- I Am Zambia. She and her husband are part of an organization that teaches sustainable farming methods to rural villages and schools in Zambia. She trials crops here that grow well in Zambia so she can demonstrate them or understand what the farmers are going through. Each year, she grows seedlings that she sells to raise money to feed the children of those farmers.
  - Raising endangered San Clemente Island goats.
  - Maximizing human and animal feed throughout her garden. Everything she grows is carefully considered so that all parts of her plants are utilized. For example, this year she planted Painted Mountain corn for human consumption. After each ear matured past the milk stage, she cut the stalks off right above the ears and fed them to the goats. In this way, the corn could keep maturing but the feed still had nutrition. She has saved hundreds of dollars utilizing this method.
- Creativity and Marissa are inseparable. She says she lives and breathes homesteading. "I'm even working on a new fiction series where the protagonist is an urban homesteader and many issues surrounding food sustainability become a driving force in the plot. There's really nothing I do that isn't homesteading - except maybe when I relax at the end of the night to a few superhero movies."

So let your creative juices flow!



Michele North at the Vermont Morgan Horse Show with her Jack Russell Terrier, Fernando.



