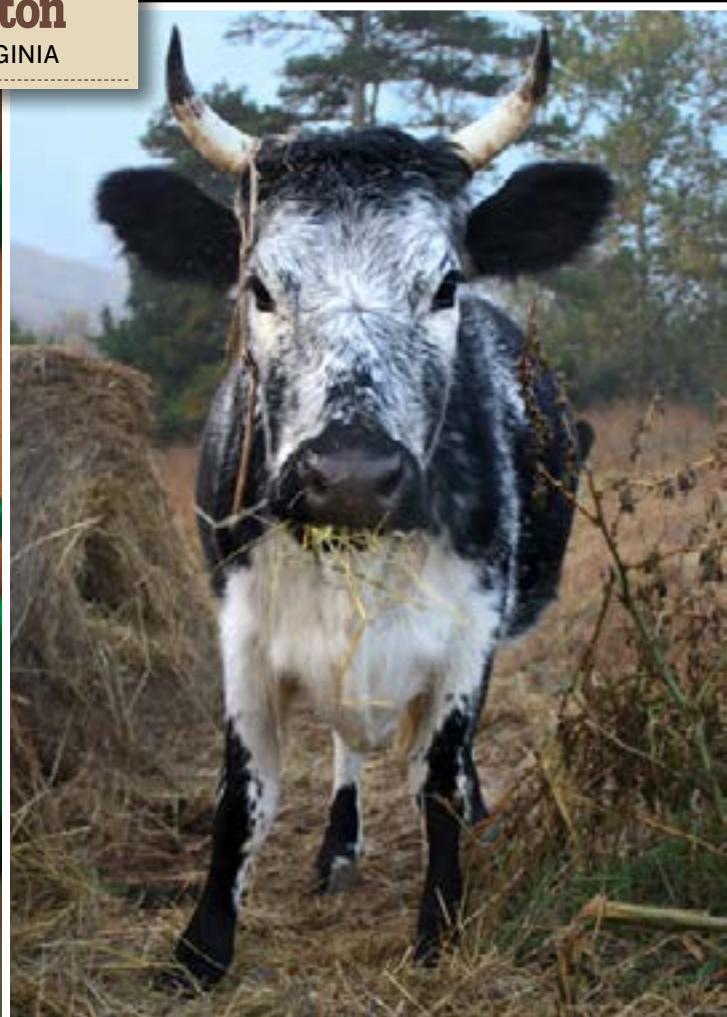


Bill silhouetted against an October sky; hatch day for the layers; and Ms. Fancy Pants the cow.



THE WAY WE LIVE IN

Afton
VIRGINIA



Still Walking in Tall Cotton

This thriving Blue Ridge Mountains business began with a neighbor's offer and a tiny herd.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY PATTI LOU RIKER AFTON, VIRGINIA



Tall Cotton Farm sits in the shadow of the Blue Ridge Mountains in the Commonwealth of Virginia. You can sit on our farm and see the place where Rockfish Gap cuts through Afton Mountain. Our neighbors include Long Arm, Burnt Mountain and Sharp Top, the hills bordering our valley in Albemarle County.

My husband, Bill, and I bought our 200-plus-year-old farmhouse on a 2½-acre plot in 1994. The house had five fireplaces, no indoor plumbing and no running water. For a couple of years, as elaborate homes went up around us, we worked steadily on the house. We joked about walking in tall cotton, and the name stuck.

A couple of years later, the folks who farmed 175 acres across the road retired and asked if we were interested in buying. Bill, who'd lived on a farm for a few years, knew just enough to get us started.

Bill and I began farming in the summer of '96 with four Hereford-Devon cows. We divided the farm into 21 paddocks for rotational grazing, brought home an Angus bull and bought 12 young cows from my brother-in-law. As our business grew, we sold our calves at the local cattle auction. But I hated seeing my babies leave the farm for feedlots, so we looked into selling beef directly to customers.

Then I read about Joel Salatin, a nationally known farmer who lives



Patti Lou and Bill with 3-week-old broiler chicks.

on the other side of the Blue Ridge Mountains. He's used laying hens as a natural method to reduce flies in his cow herd. I called him, read his books and followed his advice.

We started a flock of laying hens in 1999 and sold eggs and beef for several years. I found a USDA processor for meat chickens in 2005, and we began raising broilers and selling at farmers markets.

We have been raising turkeys since 2008, when I acquired 42 Broad-breasted Bronze and Giant White turkeys from a hatchery in a half-price sale. Raising turkeys has become our favorite enterprise. We now keep a laying flock and buy eggs from a hatchery. This year, we hatched almost 300 turkeys.

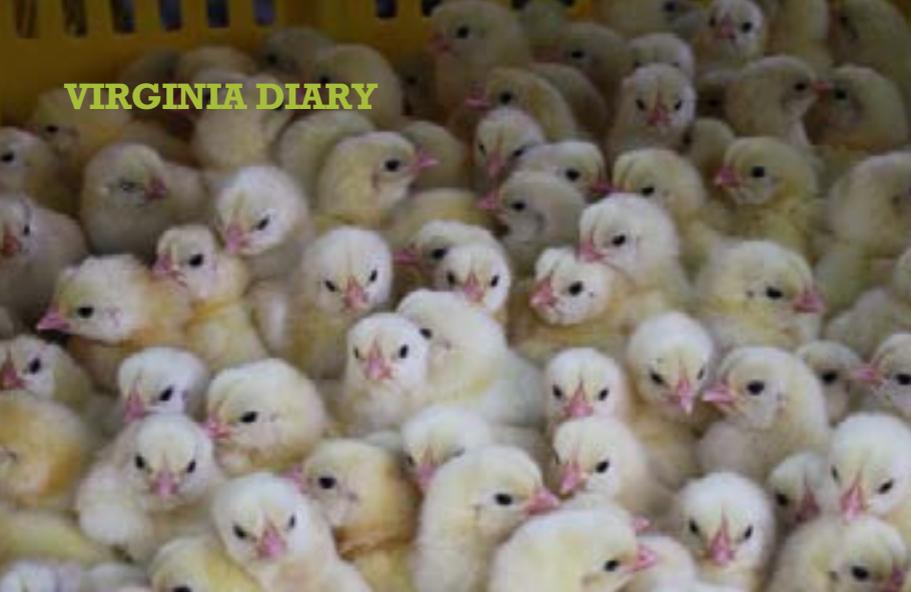
My husband and I are still the only two hands at Tall Cotton, Bill

being the full-time farmer. I work full time as a hospital lab computer analyst, so I farm mornings, evenings and weekends.

We now raise cows, turkeys, pigs, chickens and a few ducks, quail and guineas. We produce grass-fed beef, plus pork, turkey, chicken and eggs on pasture, using mobile houses and sustainable methods. Our animals are processed at USDA facilities, and we sell meat directly at the farmers markets, at winter markets and through our email buyers list.

It's been an incredible ride. We started it to make a living, but we ended up making a life.

■ **OCT. 1**—Tuesday. We moved 516 of our 3-week-old broilers out to their new pasture home and emptied the brooder. Baby chicks



Population growth: From left, the arrival of baby Cornish Rock-cross chicks; a future laying hen greets the world; a young flock gets feed from Bill.

“One of the roosters was so excited about dinner that he jumped off the roost and landed on my head.”

need additional heat in their first three weeks, so it's important to keep them in a contained area that's warm, dry and free of drafts. Bill had to fix fences and chase cows after we got a call that two had escaped to the neighbor's yard.

■ **OCT. 2**—Wednesday. I met the truck from the Staunton hatchery to pick up 600 Cornish Rock-cross chicks. This is our sixth and final flock for the year. Shorter fall days and cooler nights mean these birds will grow more slowly.

■ **OCT. 3**—Thursday. Our cows decided the grass was greener in the neighbor's field, so Bill spent the afternoon checking fence lines. When we fed the flock, we discovered that the water line had crimped since last night and the birds had been without water, so we put out extra water pans.

■ **OCT. 4**—Friday. Bill went to pick up our processed chickens in Moneta, about 90 minutes away; then it's two hours to load and two hours to unload at home. When we finished unpacking at 10:30 p.m., we were exhausted and famished.

■ **OCT. 5**—Saturday. We were up at 4:30 to load out for market. Bill headed north to Charlottesville, where the market runs from 7 until noon. My market is 10 miles away in Nelson County and opens at 8.

We both returned for a quick lunch before checking on the cows and fences. Bill began evening chores while I washed and packed eggs. At 9 p.m., we left to deliver eggs on our route and returned home by 10.

■ **OCT. 6**—Sunday. I woke with a stomach bug that kept me from church. By afternoon, I felt well enough to move the chicken houses onto fresh grass. We have three hoop houses running on pasture. Taking down the electrified net fence, moving the house and chickens, and putting the fence back up can take an hour for each flock. This afternoon Bill worked on fences, installed a new fence charger and helped me finish chores.

■ **OCT. 7**—Monday. We hatched out our last two turkeys today. At the beginning of spring, we had two separate laying flocks and were gathering between two and six turkey eggs a day. But as summer went on, predators moved in. Coyotes began taking a bird every other night. After the coyotes moved on, a raccoon learned that he could breach the net on rainy days. We lost all but one hen and one tom of those two laying flocks.

■ **OCT. 8**—Tuesday. I left work early to pick up Goober—our lovable black goldendoodle—and drive to Forest Lakes, where every

Tuesday is market day from April through October. Tonight Goober and I practiced walking with a leash since the children of one of the vendors want to walk him in the dog parade next week.

■ **OCT. 9**—Wednesday. Bill finished all the chores before I got home, leaving only the laying hens to feed. We have three small flocks that yield 40 to 50 eggs a day. In the upper house, one of the roosters (an Ameraucana) was so excited about dinner that he jumped off the roost and landed on my head.

■ **OCT. 10**—Thursday. It's

raining! I'm so thankful for this all-day soaker after almost eight dry weeks. The farm roads have been dusty, the summer grasses are dying and electric nets are difficult to use because it's hard to get posts far enough into the ground.

■ **OCT. 11**—Friday. We did chores early tonight so I could finish up a pot of soup for a co-worker who lost a family member.

■ **OCT. 12**—Saturday. We have a space at City Market in Charlottesville again this week, so I was up at 4. A light mist and the threat of rain made packing harder.

We wrapped our chalkboards and picture board in tarps before loading them into the truck. With the rain and another festival nearby, the markets were slow.

We delivered the soup and finished chores before washing, packing and delivering our eggs. Back home after 10, we savored bowls of chicken soup.

■ **OCT. 13**—Sunday. I was up early and finished chores before church. Bill picked up crates in Moneta, since we're scheduled to take 200 chickens to the processor tomorrow. I moved the chicken

houses in the rain. I was soaked to the bone and my fingers were so cold I could hardly feel them. When Bill returned, he noticed I'd forgotten to connect the electric nets to the power. I'm so glad! It would've been a deadly mistake.

■ **OCT. 14**—Monday. The eggs I moved to the hatchery on Friday began hatching yesterday morning. I'm trying to hatch out enough birds to increase our laying flock for next year. So far I have 13 month-old birds, 16 that are 2 weeks old and 26 chicks from this batch.

By 8:30 p.m. we'd loaded 25



Talking turkey: Bill checks the flock.



Elder statesman of the Cornish Rock-cross chickens.

October glory on the road to the Rikers' farm.



crates with eight birds in each and put them in the cattle trailer. We made the trip to the processor in Moneta, unloaded and were back home a little past midnight.

■ **OCT. 15**—Tuesday. Today is our 19th wedding anniversary. I left work early to drive home, pack and head back to town for market. Business was slow, but almost 20 folks showed up with their dogs for

the parade. Goober walked very well and even fetched an award for “fluffiest dog”!

■ **OCT. 16**—Wednesday. Bill finished building the frame for another hoop house, the new pasture home for our turkeys. Tonight I noticed our little brown duck was missing. There were no signs of struggle, no feathers, nothing. I set up our live trap and baited it with

marshmallows, which raccoons find irresistible.

■ **OCT. 17**—Thursday. The chicks in the brooder are just over 2 weeks old. This space is perfect for 400 birds for three weeks. When we start 600 birds in it, I have to watch carefully after the second week. They're too young for the pasture, so I'll need to be diligent about cleaning the brooder and adding fresh pine shavings.

When I headed out to feed the laying hens, I noticed that the door on the trap was closed. Inside was the biggest raccoon I've ever seen!

■ **OCT. 18**—Friday. The last batch of eggs in the incubator will hatch on Sunday, so I stopped the rocker this morning. Normally I'd move these eggs to the hatcher, but I didn't have time today. Since this is the last batch for this year, I'll turn down the temperature a bit and move the chicks as they hatch. Chicken eggs incubate for 21 days; guinea and turkey eggs need 28 days.

■ **OCT. 19**—Saturday. We set up at two markets again. Today there wasn't a full space for us in the city, but Bill set up with a few

other vendors on a side street. We unpacked from market and washed eggs for deliveries this evening. Egg production decreases as the days grow shorter.

■ **OCT. 20**—Sunday. Baby chicks hatched this morning, so I moved them from the incubator to the hatcher to finish drying. Then I misted the remaining eggs with warm water to increase the humidity for hatching.

We dropped by Apple Butter Day in Batesville, the nearest community to us, where people gather to make a big pot of the stuff.

■ **OCT. 21**—Monday. As I moved 23 new chicks to the brooder, I noticed a splay-legged one—limbs stretched out to the sides in opposite directions, making it impossible for him to walk. If I catch this early, I can often fix it by cutting a bandage in half lengthwise, then wrapping the padded portions around each leg. I tried it, and by the time I came home from work, the chick was standing and had figured out how to walk!

■ **OCT. 22**—Tuesday. I left work early, headed home and packed for market. Sales were slow, but a

number of folks stopped by to talk about our turkeys. We used to take names and email addresses for Thanksgiving turkey orders, but this year we're asking customers to fill out a form online.

■ **OCT. 23**—Wednesday. Bill made a trip over the mountain for grain and supplements, as he does twice a week. He buys cornmeal, cracked corn, roasted soybean meal, oats, organic kelp and Fertrell Nutri-Balancer for mixing in a big feed tub. We do not add antibiotics, fish meal or other animal by-products to our feed mixture.

■ **OCT. 24**—Thursday. It's illegal to sell raw milk in Virginia. Bill and I prefer our milk unadulterated, so we take part in a herd share with a local farm. Once a week I drive to the farm to pick up a gallon. This evening, on my way home with our milk, I hit a deer. It ran off and I didn't stop. The

“We do not add antibiotics, fish meal or other animal by-products to our feed mixture.”

passenger side of my car bore the brunt of it—a broken headlight and crumpled fender and hood.

■ **OCT. 25**—Friday. This morning I discovered the damage to my car is worse than I'd thought. As I was driving to work I could see steam rising from beneath the hood, so I went straight to the body shop.

■ **OCT. 26**—Saturday. Today was the last Nelson Farmers Market for the season. We'll see many of our vendors and customers at an indoor market we attend once a month over the winter, but it's still a bit sad when the season ends.

■ **OCT. 27**—Sunday. Before leaving for church, I put a chicken in a slow oven for dinner. Tonight after chores we loaded the rest of the partial flock of chickens and took them to the Moneta processing house, getting home after 1 a.m.

■ **OCT. 28**—Monday. While I



Moving day means a crate ride for 3-week-old chickens headed for pasture.

was at work, Bill used the cattle trailer to move 100 turkeys to the new pasture house. They seemed unusually quiet while exploring their new world, but I can't tell if it's because they're in a new space

or because it's getting dark earlier in the evenings.

■ **OCT. 29**—Tuesday. Today was the last farmers market at Forest Lakes, and I missed it. I was in meetings all day at the hospital and ended up staying late.

■ **OCT. 30**—Wednesday. I went to work early and left early to help move chickens. When I got home at 3:30, Bill had moved most of the flock out of the brooder. I helped him load the last batch, and we finished setting up the house and the electric net.

■ **OCT. 31**—Thursday. The turkeys are adjusting well to their new home. They're very vocal: Every time I call them, they answer with gobbles and chirps.

Thanks for spending some time with us, living in Tall Cotton. I hope you've enjoyed it as much as I have. God bless. 🐔



Patti Lou (at left) chats with customers at the Nelson Farmers Market; Sox the cow finds a shady spot in the pasture.