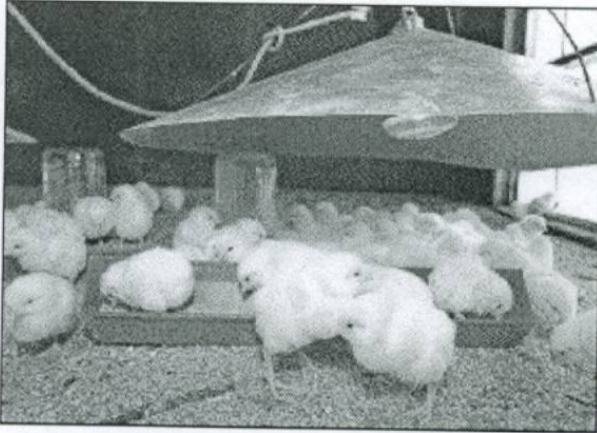




Mitch Wojnarowicz/The Recorder

Ken Gies talks about the moveable pasturing system he uses on his Minden farm. BELOW: Two-day-old Cornish cross rock chicks.



Poultry in motion

Minden farmer hatching a plan to meet the needs of his

peers

By **ELAINE GRANT**

Recorder News Staff

MINDEN - Rhode Island reds and Cornish game hens might be the tastiest birds in town, but one local farmer is hoping to develop a Montgomery County version that could surpass them all.

Ken Gies recently received a \$6,717 grant from the Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program to explore the feasibility of establishing a local poultry hatchery to meet the needs local farmers.

Gies said there are a couple of reasons for trying to develop a local bird. He said chickens grow best in the environment they were hatched in; a chick hatched in California, for example, might not do well in New York.

Another reason for developing native poultry is that animal rights activists have been working with legislators on laws that would prohibit hatcheries from shipping day-old chicks by air. Gies said the Minden area where he lives is the perfect spot for a hatchery to satisfy the needs of poultry growers.

"I'm in the middle of nowhere here in Fort Plain and I like it that way. I am four hours away from any point in the state. If someone really wanted their chicks we could ship them," he said.

Gies intends to add a little interest to his study by placing an emphasis on pastured poultry. He stressed that pastured chickens are not allowed to run about the fields indiscriminately. They are kept in floorless cages that are moved along in the field so they have a constant supply of fresh grass. He can run about 500 chickens at a time on an acre of grass.

Gies said he believes there is a tremendous difference between the way pastured poultry tastes and those who are raised in confined chicken houses. He said there is a difference in what they eat, a difference in how clean they are and a difference in their health conditions. He said most commercially raised chickens are constantly being treated with antibiotics because they are so close to each other that the air they breathe is never really clean.

"If you put two drumsticks side by side, the pastured chicken will have a better taste and is practically a health food," he said. "If people would spend their money on decent food, they wouldn't have to spend nearly as much on health care."

With only 16 acres to work with on his property, Gies said he wouldn't be able to run a profitable hatchery but he intends to get the information, develop a business plan make it available for others.

In the meantime, he has some interesting ideas for making what he refers to as his "mom and pop facility" work. He pointed to a small draft house grazing in a side yard. "That's my tractor over there," he said.

Ken's wife, Jill, explained that the horse, whose name is King, is an 18 year old retired Amish workhorse. Ken puts him to work a few times a year plowing the garden, cutting and raking hay and doing other jobs.

A pair of nanny goats calls out from their pen. The goats provide the Gies family, including their four home schooled children, with milk. Even the orange cat in the barn and her litter of kittens do their part by keeping the farm free of rodents.

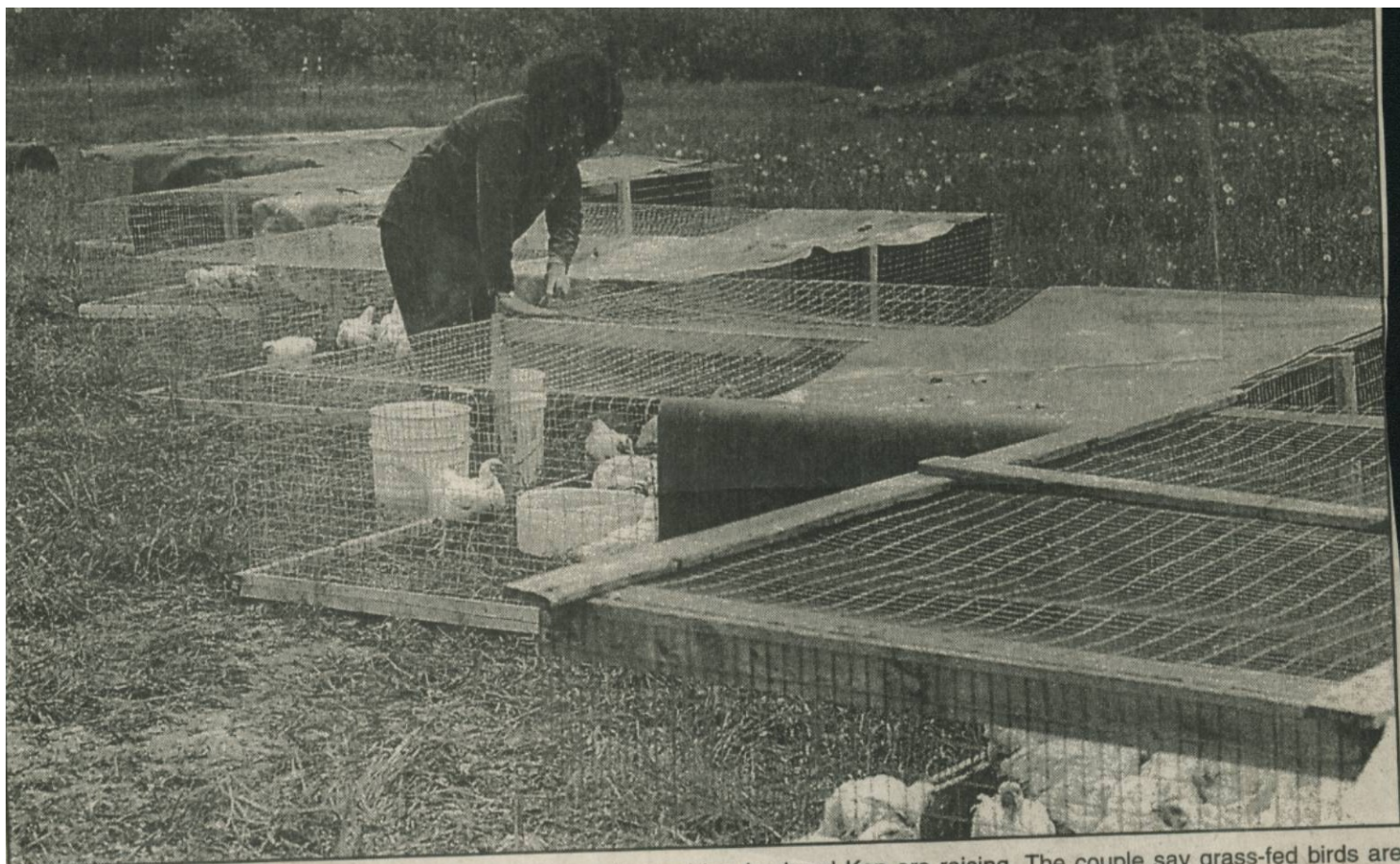
Gies fashions most of what he needs by recycling. A set of staves from a silo has been welded together to form a greenhouse. A variety of vegetables seedlings are thriving inside. The produce will eventually be taken to local farmers markets.

A second set of silo staves has also been fashioned into a greenhouse frame but at this point it will be difficult to wrestle it away from the children who are using it for a giant jungle gym.

Even the heat lamps Gies uses to keep the newest chicks warm has been modified to meet his needs. In order to accommodate a larger group of animals, he has taken sheet metal and fashioned a large dome to distribute the heat more evenly.

He expects a pond he had dug last year to provide enough water for his animals, his crops and his home.

Gies has had a few challenges since he started his operation. Shortly after buying his property, the barn blew down. He's been rebuilding it a section at a time. "I'm hoping to get past crisis management this year," he said. "I like animals and my long range goal is to someday make a living at this."



JILL GIES IS SHOWN ABOVE TENDING TO chickens she and her husband Ken are raising. The couple say grass-fed birds are healthier with better tasting meat. (Times Photo by Lorraine Heath)

Grass-fed chickens produce better meat, local farmer says

By LORRAINE HEATH
Evening Times Staff Writer

MINDEN — A local couple has begun a new venture: raising chickens. That in itself is not very 'new' but the way they raise and feed those chickens is definitely new to this area.


Ken and Jill Gies of Fords

The chicks are on a fresh patch each day to ensure the best possible diet of grass.

"The grasses impart a deep yellow color to the fat and change the chemistry of the meat," Ken explained. "It has nearly 20 percent less fat, 30 percent less saturated fat, 28 percent less calories, 50 per-

said it took him a little time to adjust to his new climate as well as the decrease in land.

"I was raised on a ranch that consisted of 2,000 acres. I could walk 60 miles and finally end up on someone else's property," Ken said. Even though the family has



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MINDEN — A local couple has begun a new venture: raising chickens. That in itself is not very 'new' but the way they raise and feed those chickens is definitely new to this area.

Ken and Jill Gies of Fords Bush Road, town of Minden, are raising chickens on grass and feed and not just feed, as most area chicken farmers do. Ken Gies says his grass-fed chickens are healthier and better than those raised on feed alone.

"Their diet consists of grain, grass, bugs, natural vitamins and minerals. From about the time they are three-weeks old they are outside in moveable range pens," Ken said.

The pens, some of which were made by Ken himself, are moved periodically along the 15-acre farm to ensure the chickens are getting a fresh supply of grass. Ken and Jill say they give their chickens no medication, no hormones and, even better than that, their chickens are not housed indoors.

"There is no stale, dusty air for them to breathe and no crowding of birds on wire floors," Ken said.

Grass, Ken and Jill say, is key to the fine meat chickens they are raising. Grass, they said, is a natural cleanser.

The chicks are on a fresh patch each day to ensure the best possible diet of grass.

"The grasses impart a deep yellow color to the fat and change the chemistry of the meat," Ken explained. "It has nearly 20 percent less fat, 30 percent less saturated fat, 28 percent less calories, 50 percent more vitamin A and 100 percent more Omega 3 than the conventionally raised caged birds," Ken said.

Ken added the breast meat of their chickens is also fat free.

"But if you don't care about the health benefits of a grass fed chicken, the taste is exceptional," he said.

Ken has also just received a grant for a feasibility study on the need for a hatchery in the area. At present, Ken and Jill have their chicks shipped to their farm when they are one-day-old. From there, the chicks begin their grass fed routine under the watchful eye of the Gies family. If the study shows there is a need for the hatchery, then the couple will move forward with the next phase of the plan.

"We do sustain some loss of chicks when they are shipped to us, maybe one out of 104 will die," Ken said.

The couple began their new venture over a year ago. Ken, who hails from the Yukon Territory of Canada,

said it took him a little time to adjust to his new climate as well as the decrease in land.

"I was raised on a ranch that consisted of 2,000 acres. I could walk 60 miles and finally end up on someone else's property," Ken said. Even though the family has 'only' 15 acres to tend to, it is a seven-day-a-week job.

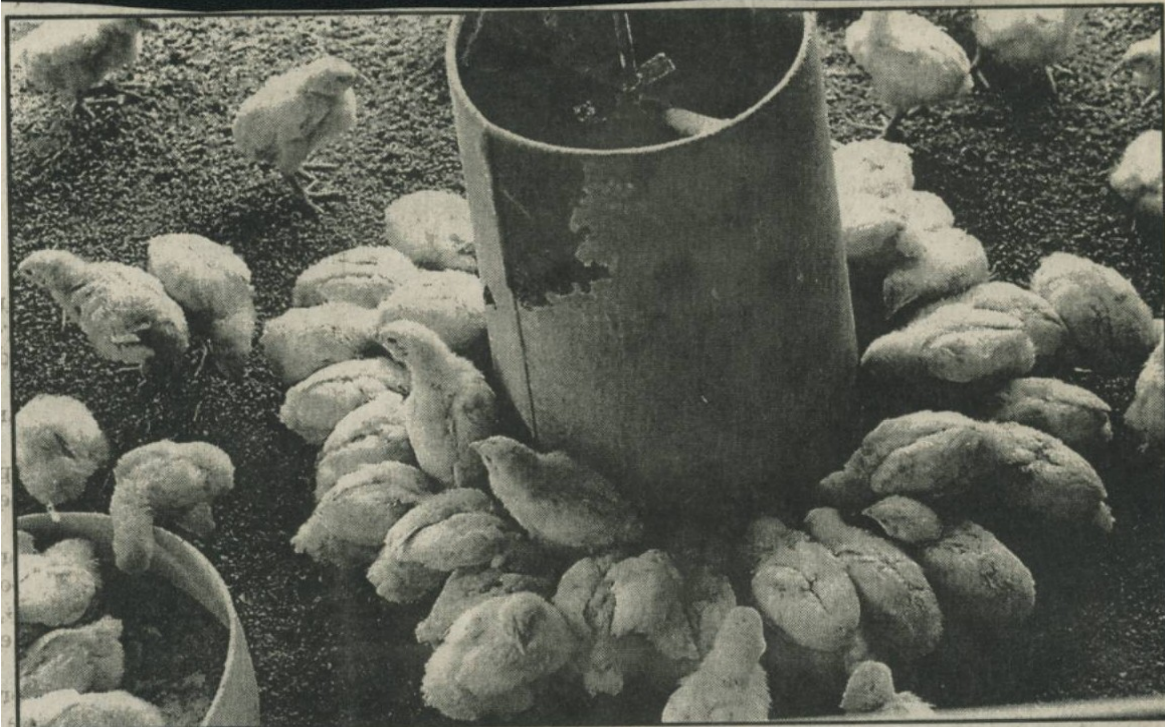
"We only take four hours off on Sunday to go to church," Ken said.

Ken is assisted by his wife, Jill, and their four children: Jeremy, 5, Abigail, 6, Joshua, 8, and Stephanie, 9. All four children are home schooled by Jill.

Ken keeps his farm simple and no one rides for free. He said the cats kill mice and rats, the horse pulls the

■ Please see Chickens

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BABY CHICKS, SHOWN AT FEEDING TIME, will be moved to the outdoors when they are about three-weeks-old. After that, the chicks will be fed a diet consisting mostly of grass and will find their home in the outdoor pens. (Times Photo by Lorraine Heath)

■ Chickens

Continued from page 1

plow, the goats eat the grass near the trailer, and the couple even have rabbits that they are raising for meat.

"Everyone here has a job," Ken says.

The family is now ready to tackle orders for their chickens and are one of the vendors at the Little Falls Farmers' Market. Chickens will be available for purchase from June until October, and turkeys available (fed the same way) in time for Thanksgiving. The couple also has brown eggs, laid by the grass fed chickens, at the market on Saturday.

"Last season we ran into some difficulty storing and delivering the birds dressed to customers. This year we will have the poultry picked up at the farm on specific dates. This will allow us to

concentrate on producing the high quality animals and better fulfill the regulations we must follow as small-scale poultry processors," Ken said.

Small scale though they are, the couple wants to establish a good relationship with their present customers and future customers as well.

"If you have a problem with our birds, let us know, we will correct it," Ken said.

Chickens will cost \$1.75 per pound while turkeys will be a little higher at \$2.50 per pound. Whole chickens are \$7-10 at 4-6 pounds and turkeys from \$20-50 and weigh between 10 and 20 pounds.

The couple is planning to process birds three times a week, Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

"We will process in the morning with pick-up in the afternoon," Ken said.

The couple is very dedicated to producing quality meat for their customers and it shows in the way they tend to their farm.

During the interview, both Ken and Jill did their chores, while the children, getting a day off from school, played in the fields and near the freshly made pond. Ken's philosophy is simple: values.

"Some people say it is not good to home school children, I disagree. We spend a lot of time together and that is important. I did have three jobs, making about \$10 per hour but I hated it. Now, I am outdoors, see my children, and know that what I am producing here is quality," he said.

Ken said happiness is the trade off he accepted when he quit those other jobs.

"We are struggling financially, but we love what we are doing," he said. "What good is money if you are unhappy?"

Anyone who would like to order a grass-fed chicken or turkey can do so at the farmers' market or by phone at 518-568-5322. Ken and Jill both say once a customer tries one of their birds, they will see the difference in meat.

"You do not know how long that chicken has been on a shelf at the grocery store or even what it was fed. We provide the freshest possible chickens," Ken said.