

Love of horses sustains woman's ag enterprise



By Bonnie Coblentz
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MISSISSIPPI STATE -- Virginia Mathews enjoys horses so much that she gladly took on a full-time job to allow her to keep them.

Mathews, known as Gigi to her friends and family, is a Yazoo County woman who owns Mathews Farms in Benton with her husband, Hugh Leigh Mathews III. She now cares for 11 horses and teaches riding lessons, but at one time she had as many as 76 mares.

“One time I added up all the time I spent working with the horses and figured I was making 2 cents an hour,” Mathews said. “I went to work full time with the U.S. Postal Service to support my habit.”

Although both are retired from outside employment today, she and her husband originally were row crop farmers. They got out of that business in the mid-1980s but then returned to it in the mid-1990s. Horses have been her passion for much longer.

“My daddy started me out with a horse when I was 2 years old. When I turned 20, he said, ‘I thought you’d outgrow these, but I see you aren’t going to,’” she said. “That’s when I went into the business.

“I just love a horse: the bad ones, the good ones,” Mathews said. “I love the smell of them. I love cleaning the barn.”

Mathews earned a degree in animal science from Mississippi State University and worked one summer for a veterinarian in Memphis. That’s when she learned what side of the animal business she needed to be on. She has had an equine enterprise since 1979.

“I love horses, but people I can’t always handle,” she said.

Although her love for horses has never wavered, the equine industry has had some problems, and the value of horses dropped dramatically from what it had been. About the same time the industry began hurting, Mathews developed Graves’ eye disease and was legally blind for seven months.

Her husband cared for her horses while she had three eye surgeries and regained her sight, but Mathews permanently lost her peripheral vision and is prone to vertigo.

“I could still ride a horse, but the young ones are harder, and I started falling off and breaking bones,” Mathews said. “In 1996, my husband said no more young horses.”



Virginia Mathews’ lifelong love of horses launched her career with the animals. The Yazoo County entrepreneur is a member of Women for Agriculture. (Photo by MSU Ag Communications/Kat Lawrence)



Virginia Mathews and her husband, Hugh Leigh Mathews III, have a farming operation in Yazoo County

Horse prices fell so low that it was difficult or even impossible to make money on these animals, so Mathews switched gears with her agricultural enterprise.

that includes horses, cows and pastureland. (Photo by MSU Ag Communications/Kat Lawrence)

"I realized in 2006 that the only thing I could do to make money was board horses and give lessons," she said. "I quit breeding horses at that time. There were so many excess horses and colts bringing nothing in sales in the state."

Today she has eight of her own horses, boards three others and teaches riding lessons, mostly to children.

"Most children have the idea of jumping on a horse and riding off into the sunset," Mathews said. "I teach them there is a whole lot you have to do to care for the horse, like clean the stalls and wash the horse. I teach them the parts of the horse and some basics of showmanship.

"I make them work on the ground a good while before they ride, and I teach them safety, including how to fall off right and not get hurt," she said. "Then I turn them over to somebody else for more lessons depending on what they want to do."

Very familiar with the hard work of owning and operating a farm, Mathews is diligent in doing her part to help others, especially women, in similar fields.

In 2007, she completed Annie's Project, an educational workshop for women in agriculture-related fields. Mathews now is a member of Women for Agriculture, an organization operated by the MSU Extension Service, to educate, encourage and support women who are involved in agricultural enterprises.

"Women in agriculture have mountains they have to surpass that men don't always have," she said. "It's good to network with other women who are farming."

Phillip Vandevere, Yazoo County coordinator with the MSU Extension Service, is Mathews' cousin. Each year he puts on his Extension Service hat to collect hay samples from her pasture for analysis.

"She produces hay for her own horses, and she has to know what to feed them and what to supplement with," Vandevere said.

With Mathews' involvement, Yazoo County has a strong contingent of members in Women for Agriculture and women participating in Annie's Project training. Vandevere said the organization supports women in their agricultural professions.

"Some ladies choose to go into farming or were raised on farms and understand how to operate an agricultural enterprise, but others come into the business with little knowledge of agriculture," he said. "They have married into farming or inherited land or had some event cause them to need to step up and be a part of what is going on. Women for Agriculture can give them the tools to become even better at what they are doing."

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