

THE SPIRIT OF 76

By Alice Eby Hall

I'm 76 years old and in my 54th year with Nubian dairy goats. I'm amazed at how my management practices have changed. "The spirit is indeed willing, but the flesh is weak," according to Jesus in Matthew 26:14, so things simply can't go on as they used to.

Barns and pens aren't cleaned as often or as thoroughly, and it sure doesn't happen all at one time any more. Pitching manure takes way more effort now than it should. Fortunately, the herd is smaller so the barn doesn't fill quite as quickly.

The animals aren't as well-disciplined as they used to be. Chores take twice as long without walking, leading, and brushing the animals. But with less discipline, the does are not as well-behaved on the stanchion, and that takes more energy, which I no longer have to spare. Restraining kickers is almost beyond my ability any more. Fortunately kickers are still few.

It used to take no more than five minutes to milk a doe no matter how much she produced. Now it takes five minutes to clean a doe's udder, sit beside her, and take the preliminary orifice-cleaning squirts. Complete milking takes twice that long. If the does aren't patient, I have to give them more grain to convince them to hold still.

A couple of years ago, I noticed that several of my does were really light on their left halves. I reviewed pedigrees to determine if that condition could be heritable. Didn't seem to be. I looked at medical records to see if there'd been any infections or injuries—few. I puzzled over the question of light left halves for several months.

One day at morning milking, my right arm, which has always been dominant, gave out almost completely, and I had to finish milking one-handed. So that's what the light-left half problem is—my right arm has been deteriorating and hasn't been doing a complete job of milking. Therefore, my does were drying off on the left half. The remedy is to finish the left half with my left hand. With more complete milking, the udders are even again. Of course, that doesn't speed my milking time!

My stanchion looks as if milk buckets are tipped often. They aren't. The problem is my aim. I used to milk into a bucket with a lid on it leaving less than half the top open. I could also milk directly

into baby bottles or one-pound coffee cans. Now I can hardly hit a wide-open bucket, and splashes and puddles of milk adorn the stanchion.

More hoses have come into play. With two artificial hips, an artificial right elbow and a screw in the left one, and a knee that's bone on bone, carrying buckets, while I can still do it slowly and carefully, isn't quite as convenient now. Sure wish someone would come up with an easy-to-use hose with no quirks. I've tried several different kinds, and they all have ways of reducing or redirecting water flow.

Breeding is a problem. With less discipline and attention, and with more predator problems than there used to be, (hard to hit a moving target when we're shaking) the herd is skittish and generally harder to handle. If I turn the bucks loose, I can't pen them again because we're both too feeble to handle a buck. The does don't lead well. For difficult ones, we crate them, put the crate on a wagon, and tow the wagon to the buck barn with the car or truck. If we back the wagon right to the buck barn door, we can unload the doe into the barn. Or I can put a couple of does in the back of my Subaru Outback and drive them to the buck barn. Easy does will follow cookies. Yes, I've taken to bribing my herd.

Sometimes I miss my Border collies, but I wouldn't have energy to train one now. Besides, dogs make me feel guilty if I don't work one enough or spend enough time with one, they look depressed.

Difficult kiddings are also a problem. I used to be able to enter a doe with my left hand, move the kid, pull it out, whatever. No strength to do any of that any more. If a doe can't kid, and I can't help her, I have to put her down. Boy, is that disheartening!

Caitlyn fooled me. I couldn't get her kid out—big breech—probably buck. My shot missed, and she took off up the hill. Her production isn't very good, but what can I expect? She'll be pregnant for as long as she lives now. A cougar took her beautiful doeling from 2013, and I guess I'll never get another.

Used to be I'd charge out of the house whenever anyone bawled. I rescued a lot of goats that way. Now I can't charge—it's more of a shuffle. By the time I get there, the problem is either solved, or it's too late anyway. So I usually don't bother checking. Since I figure I won't be much help, I just let the animals take care of themselves between chore times. Lots easier, but not as profitable.

Not that profit was ever high on my list of achievements. Sure, making a buck (that is dollar) here and there is a rewarding feeling, but it has never been my main goal in anything I've attempted. My needs are few. I'm easy to please or placate, so why work for money? Life has many other rewards!

One reward has always been the joy my happy, smiling goats bring to me.