

# Hill View Farm

by Kathleen Conroy

We bought our farm in Mount Vernon Springs in 1998, and named it after a marker that we found in the front yard of our turn-of-the-century farm house. Ore Hill, a Revolutionary War and Civil War source of iron ore, is visible from our front porch.

In 2011 we purchased 20 acres of adjoining pasture from our elderly neighbors' farm. This land was continuously farmed by their family for over 100 years and we hoped to maintain it as farm land. We leased the land to a neighbor while we pondered our options. We had learned about Dexter cattle through the American Livestock Breed Conservancy and we were intrigued by their history and their reputation for producing exceptional grass-fed beef.

Dexter cattle are a traditional Irish breed. They were favorites of earlier American settlers and homesteaders as a triple-use breed, excellent as dairy cows, oxen and beef cows. They are smaller than other cattle breeds and good foragers, cheerfully eating a wide variety of weeds, brush and grasses. Dexters are outstanding mothers. They give birth easily and without assistance. They are attentive and protective and they make plenty of milk for their calves.

Early in 2013 we got a call that a friend of a friend had 2 Dexter heifers (unbred females) they wanted to sell. Those two cows were the start of our herd that we've grown slowly as we've learned how many animals our pasture can support.

Our primary goal is to raise healthy and happy Dexters while maintaining healthy and productive pasture land. Our Dexters eat only grass and hay from our pasture, never grain. We have focussed on sustainable methods to improve their

forage and protect the soil. Our animals provide the pasture's only fertilizer. We move them from small paddock to small paddock continuously to evenly distribute their urine and manure. This rotational system of grazing also breaks up parasite life cycles.

We never use herbicides on our pasture. We manage weeds mechanically by mowing and scything at the appropriate time to ensure they don't reseed. This year we are experimenting with using a winter cover crop of annual rye grass to control spring buttercups.

With the help of a grant from Chatham Soil and Water, we fenced out our pond and our Dexters drink only fresh well water. The combination of abundant forage and clean drinking water ensure that our Dexters stay healthy and strong year round. We are able to avoid the use of antibiotics and certainly never give our animals any hormones.

Humans can't survive on grass, but cattle thrive on it thanks to their unique and complex digestive system. Cows are ruminants, with four stomachs, perfectly designed by mother nature to digest grasses and forage. Their digestive system depends on microorganisms in their rumen (the first stomach) to ferment and break down the fiber of grass and forage into usable nutrients.

When cows digest grains a different set of microorganisms in the rumen are activated. In a normal cow diet, these microorganisms would only swing into action to digest grass seeds. When cows are fed grain, these more aggressive microorganisms quickly overrun the rumen. Cows that are fed supplemental grain become unable to digest grasses. Cattle are not equipped to deal with high-grain diets, they cannot cope with the digestive toxins and high acidity of grain digestion. Feedlot animals are under so much stress from this unnatural diet that they sicken, their livers shut down, and they will die if they are not slaughtered.

We want our Dexters to live naturally on grass, so grain has no place in our operation.

Our cows are moving constantly, working their way across the pasture to graze the grasses. Unlike feedlot animals that are contained, our Dexters get lots of exercise which leads to better muscle tone. The resulting beef has more texture than grocery store beef. Grasses, clover and all the weeds of the pasture are rich in heart-healthy Omega-3 fatty acids. Because our Dexters spend their entire lives eating and digesting these forages, the resulting beef is higher in Omega-3 fatty acids than grain-fed beef. Analysis from the Union of Concerned Scientists, Nutritional Journal and others have found that grass-fed steak has about twice as many omega-3s as a typical grain-fed steak.

We want the product of our farm to be something we are proud of, and something we can feel good about eating and sharing. Every decision that we make regarding animal or pasture care is based on the principle that healthy grass will grow healthy cows, healthy cows will produce healthy beef, and healthy grass-fed beef will be the best food to feed ourselves, our families, friends and neighbors.

*Kathleen Conroy raises Dexter cattle for grass-fed beef and can be found selling it most Saturday mornings at the Chatham Mills Farmers' Market in Pittsboro. [hillviewfarmnc.com](http://hillviewfarmnc.com) [kathleen@blast.com](mailto:kathleen@blast.com)*