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Fred and Sylvia Nicora's place in the Town of Belgium is a virtual menagerie of animals living what their owners hope is a good life on a natural, sustainable farm

Signs of spring and new life are abundant at Fred and Sylvia Nicora's 19-acre farm in the Town of Belgium.

A Dexter calf was born in February and two more are expected any day. Dexters, which grow only three to four feet tall, are the smallest cattle breed in North America.

A Narragansett turkey laid her first egg last week. She could hatch a clutch of eight to nine chicks, called poults, if she lays more eggs and starts sitting instead of stepping on them. Her egg was the first from two breeding pairs of the American heritage turkeys the couple kept from last year's flock.

The Nicoras are also expecting shipments of baby turkeys and several purebred American heritage varieties of chickens prized for their meat.

Egg-laying chickens, which are kept in a coop and fenced yard in the winter, will soon be allowed to roam free.

“I can’t do that yet with the turkeys because of foxes and coyotes, but all the buildings are portable and moved to fresh grass every morning,” Fred Nicora said.

On Sunday, a shipment of Hampshire piglets, the oldest early American breed still in existence, arrived. The Nicoras’ daughter Madeline, 15, will raise the pigs for 4-H projects and their lean meat. There is a tendency to call Fred Nicora’s endeavor a hobby farm, but it’s more than that.

His quest is to have a sustainable, natural farm with purebred, American-heritage, largely grass-fed animals that efficiently produce high-quality meat, eggs and milk and yield enough income to help pay for his children’s education

What he can’t produce himself, Nicora tries to purchase from local farmers, including vegetables from Steve Young’s rural Belgium community supported agriculture venture.

“It was Steve who got me into the idea of natural farming vs. commercial,” Nicora said. “I initially planned to raise goats, but there wasn’t much of a market. There is a market for natural beef.”

So far, he said, only the pigs Madeline raised last year came close to making money,

“But the cattle, I think, will do it in time,” Nicora said.

His cattle are registered with the Purebred Dexter Cattle Association. Dexters, which originated in Ireland, are tri-purpose animals that are good for meat, milk and as oxen. Nicora hopes to milk one of his cows this year.

“What’s wonderful about Dexters is it only takes a half-acre of pasture per animal,” Nicora said. “They’re a lot more efficient than a lot of beef cattle. They take little land and produce a lot of beef. They can produce enough milk for two calves and still give half to the farmer.”

Most Dexter cattle are black and have horns, but Nicora has several that are red. Red, polled (born without horns) cows are the most valuable, he said, and he

hopes to eventually have a herd of them.

His gentle bull Ozzie is a strong, compact 1,200 pounds. A young bull named Rodeo, who isn't as gentle and recently charged Nicora, may become his first meat Dexter.

"I don't want to breed a bull with an aggressive personality," Nicora said.

Since he started farming two years ago, his neighbors have helped with everything from advice to fixing an electric fence.

"The farming community here is incredible," he said. "They are very helpful. You get to know the families and barter for stuff."

Nicora, who has a degree in architecture but prefers teaching, is a technical-education teacher at Cedar Grove-Belgium High School. He sold a contemporary-style house along Lake Michigan for the 1860s stone farmhouse and land three years ago.

"When I look at where I ended up, it's as if I was directed to farming," Nicora said. "The kids I work with are the ones who brought me into farming. A lot of them come from farms, and I saw the work ethic and how they handled animals. I wanted that for my children."

Nicora's wife, who grew up near a Mennonite farming community in Pennsylvania, and their children, Madeline, Tony, 11, and Grace, 16, help with the animals, but this is clearly his dream.

"I've always wanted to live on a farm," he said. "Maybe it's in the genes. I found out both my birth parents came from farm backgrounds."

Nicora discovered as an adult he was adopted, and he is learning about relatives and ancestors he never knew existed.

"Maybe that's why I'm so interested in genetics," Nicora said.

Everyone who bought Nicora's turkeys and chickens last year want more this year, he said.

“I think people are more interested in knowing where their food is coming from and trying to shop locally. They understand I take good care of my animals,” Nicora said. “I am concerned that every animal I have has a good life before we enjoy the benefits of what they produce.”

Madeline and Fred Nicora held onto free-range chickens that lay brown eggs. Photo by Sam Arendt