



Horses and Sheep and the Law, Oh My!

by Deirdre Norman

Lawyers at Leisure is a new feature of Virginia Lawyer that profiles the interesting hobbies, passions, and projects of the members of the Virginia State Bar.

Deep in the Middleburg Hunt Country, past miles of black four-board fencing containing grazing horses, past mortarless stone walls edging tree-lined lanes, down a long, rutted gravel road that doglegs at a small pasture where three small ponies quietly graze sits a small farm in Purcellville called West Manor, the home of farmer and lawyer Barbara S. Williams.

Revolutionary War patriot John West built West Manor, crafted of stone, hewn timber, and clay and lime mortar, in 1791. West had been briefly jailed for his anti-crown activities during the war, but was released by King George because his uncle, Benjamin West, was one of the founders and the second president of the Royal Academy of Art in London. Today, the two-story shuttered house sits on a knoll overlooking Williams's small farm.

In her cozy kitchen, warmed by a black cast iron stove, where a slim gray cat lolls on the counter, Williams says, "I never wanted to be a lawyer. I wanted to be a veterinarian." She majored in Animal Science at Virginia Tech and upon graduation applied to veterinary schools. When she didn't get into vet school,

Williams decided to regroup and used her animal science degree to become a sheep farmer. Williams decided on sheep after working with them at Virginia Tech because, “They are so gentle and quiet, easy on the fields, and anatomically just like small cows.”

“I was selling custom cut lamb to private customers long before the farm-to-table movement became a thing,” she says. Williams later grew her sheep enterprise into a wool production enterprise and switched from raising Suffolk sheep for meat to raising Lincoln and Romney sheep for wool. Today, as she talks about the ins and outs of caring for a herd of 135 pound ewes and 175 pound rams, Williams is wearing a soft brown sweater and shawl woven from the wool of her beloved sheep.

In the course of her thirty-five-year sheep farmer career, Williams has delivered hundreds of lambs. She also castrated the rams, docked their tails, vaccinated them, and dewormed them — all of which took full advantage of her animal science degree as well as her science inclinations in general. Her two grown children have both developed upon their mother’s scientific bent with her daughter, Samantha Williams Roberts, attending veterinary school at the University of Georgia and her son, Stuart Williams, having obtained a PhD in chemistry.

During her farming career, Williams has been involved not only with raising sheep, but caring for horses and also raising angus cattle. In the 1980s, Williams’s love of farming led her to a role managing a horse farm for a local plaintiffs’ attorney and her love of science led her to helping this attorney with a case that involved medical records. “I was working on this case and going through the medical records and the attorney suggested I read the law — a means of becoming a lawyer without attending law school by essentially studying under an attorney for three years and then taking the bar exam.”

Williams says the Law Reader program was originally a way for those living in remote parts of the state with little access to law schools to apprentice and learn under a practicing attorney. While there is a certain romance associated with the idea of a law reader — perhaps because Abraham Lincoln and

Thomas Jefferson learned the law this way, and perhaps because it represents the road less travelled — her success is a rarity.

Of the almost 19,000 people who passed the Virginia Bar Examination from February 2000 to July 2013, only thirty of them had read the law. The reality behind the romance is that it takes an extreme personal commitment on both the part of the law reader and the supervising attorney to succeed. In that same time period law readers had only a 21 percent pass rate for the exam compared to almost 70 percent pass rate for law school graduates.

Williams not only succeeded in becoming a lawyer against the odds, she has become a very successful and active lawyer. In her lengthy legal career, Williams has been the president of the Virginia Trial Lawyers Association and the president of the Virginia Women Attorneys Association as well as the chair of the board of governors of the VSB Litigation Section. When she’s not practicing law, Williams rides her horse, Colour, almost daily and maintains a small flock of sheep to keep Colour company. Though she has been a lawyer for twenty-eight years now, Williams has been a farmer for thirty-six years — and maintains that she is always happiest in her barn. Says Williams, “This barn, this place is where I really like to be. Here, or out on a trail riding Colour!”

If you have a passion other than the law, or know a lawyer who does, please let us know by contacting Gordon Hickey at hickey@vsb.org.



Scenes from Barbara Williams’ historic farm.