Adding value through direct market sales
Tom Arnold, Arnold’s Farm, Elizabeth, Illinois

Tom and Jessica Arnold farm a diversified livestock operation northeast of Elizabeth, Illinois, in the Apple River valley and surrounding hills of scenic Jo Daviess County. They are assisted in various capacities by their three grown children: Vanessa, Cody, and Andrew. The farm consists of 480 acres of driftless region land and is managed roughly as 1/3 pasture, 1/3 crops, and 1/3 timber. Beef, hogs, chicken, and turkey are raised along with most of their feed. A majority of the property has been owned and operated continuously by the Arnold Family since 1886 with an adjoining farm being added by Tom’s parents in 1978. Tom, Jessica, and children are the fourth and fifth generations to continue stewardship of this land.

Livestock operations
The beef operation consists of a 60 head Angus/Hereford cross cow herd with calves backgrounded and finished to market weight. Tom’s brother, Keith, has invested in 50% of the cows and is responsible for the herd’s care. Tom and Keith share management of the stockers and fat cattle. All animals are raised on rotationally grazed pastures throughout the growing season and fed hay and corn fodder through the winter.

Cows are calved late April through early June on spring pasture. They stay on pasture until calves are worked and weaned late November. At that point, calves are retained near buildings and fed the higher quality dry hay and free choice minerals. Cows are grazed on corn stalks and supplemented hay. All stock are returned to pasture early May. In late July, stockers are evaluated by condition. Those doing well on grass are left to finish as grass-fed beef. Those needing more energy are brought to yards near buildings and started on a ration of ground corn, oats, and free choice high quality hay. This gives pastures a late summer break by reducing stocking rate and a mix of grass-fed cattle and grain-fed fat cattle to choose from for marketing.

A Berkshire/Duroc cross sow herd of 65-75 head is maintained for the farrow-to-finish hog operation. Natural service by pen mating with 4-5 boars is used. Sows are farrowed in individual pens every eight to ten weeks in groups of 20-25. Pigs are weaned at six to eight weeks of age. They are raised in outdoor lots with access to deep-bedded shelter, self feeders, and water. Market hogs are finished to a live weight of 275-300 lbs on a home-ground ration of raised corn, purchased soybean meal, and minerals.

Cornish/Rock cross broilers are grown each year on pasture in pens moved daily. Three to four groups of 800 are raised from April through October. Chicks are purchased from a hatchery at 3 days of age with the first batch started in a brooder early April. They are fed a grain ration similar to the hogs, which is also used as a supplement to their later time on pasture. After 2½ -3 weeks indoors, and weather permitting, they have matured enough to transfer to the pasture pens where they are raised until 8 weeks old. The group is then transported to and custom processed at a USDA inspected plant where they are packaged and frozen. Subsequent batches are started in June and August to best utilize facilities and accommodate retail sales.

Broad-breasted White turkeys are raised similarly to chickens. 170-200 poults are started in the brooder around July 4th. Brooding period is 3-4 weeks before moving to pasture. Since they will soon be larger than chickens, an open pen with electrified portable net fencing for a perimeter is used. These pens are moved to fresh pasture every 5-7 days. Custom processing is done early November to have birds available for Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Crops raised are non-GMO corn, oats, alfalfa/grass hay, and pasture. Tom’s brother Keith is in charge of cropping. All cropping operations are done with owned equipment and family labor. Grains are stored on-farm. Most hay, fodder, and straw is baled in large round bales.

Direct selling of meats to the end user
Arnold’s Farm markets all their raised livestock as meat directly to consumers. This is accomplished through a newsletter/ordering/delivery system, farmers markets, on-farm store, and several retail establishments and restaurants. Selling points have included no hormone, antibiotic, or growth promotant use in raising of the livestock; rotational grazing practices; all animals raised outdoors in fresh air; direct connection to the farm/farmer; locally raised and processed; fresh, high quality cuts minimally processed.
Sales development has been a work in progress since 1993. Early marketing was confined to selling sides and whole beef and hogs to friends, relatives, and neighbors. 20, 25, and 30-lb. packages were soon developed to accommodate those wishing smaller quantities while still allowing utilization of the whole animal.

Creation of the Arnold's Farm Fall Festival and Pumpkin Patch in 1995, which continued through 2001, promoted the farm and meat sales to a wider customer base, enabling a move into the sale of individual cuts and the development of a Chicago area delivery system. Folks interested in buying and having meats delivered near them would leave a contact email address. Every other month, a delivery date and drop off locations were determined. Those who had expressed interest were emailed a newsletter including that information as well as news about the farm, ordering details, and attachments of items available with current pricing. The customer would email back their order, specifying a preferred drop location. Orders would be assembled at the farm, invoiced, and delivered to the designated locations. As of 2014, this service has grown to 16 drop off locations in northern Illinois covering 2 days of delivery.

In 2005, Arnold's Farm was asked to participate in a series of indoor winter farmers markets held at Chicago area churches. This opportunity offered more exposure to the delivery service. Farmers markets became a major source of email addresses to add to the newsletter mailing. In 2014, Arnold's Farm was involved in six Chicago area summer farmers markets and one Jo Daviess County market.

In 2007, Arnold's Farm chicken and pork was brought onto the menu of 111 Main Restaurant, Galena, IL. Shortly thereafter, Otto's Place, Galena, added Arnold's Farm pork to their menu. Several retail outlets in northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin are offering Arnold's Farm chicken and pork. Also, AJ's Lena Maid Meats, Lena, IL, the local processor for Arnold's Farm beef and pork, features pork raised on Arnold's Farm in their retail store.

For photos of the farm and updated information, visit the web at http://www.arnoldsfarm.com