

FOURTH GRADERS EXPERIENCE AN EDUCATIONAL "FARM DAY"



Above: Farm host Amy Hutchison (right) shares a laugh as one class visits the sheep pen.



Above: Stations about crop production, such as this one on soybeans, were set up around the farm site.

By Ron Barry

Friday classes can sometimes be a severe challenge for school teachers. The kids are climbing the walls, ready for the weekend. The teachers are worn out from keeping them properly corralled all week.

But this past Friday, no such problems occurred for the fourth graders in Crockett County – they were headed to the farm!

The farm in this case was that of Chad and Amy Hutchison in Gadsden, who graciously hosted the annual "Farm Day" experience for Crockett fourth graders, an event that offers the youngsters a chance to learn about crops, interact with some live animals, and the opportunity to observe first-hand exactly how a working farm operates.

Coordinated masterfully by CCHS math teacher Ellery Brewster – who doubles as one of the school's cheer coaches – the event is sponsored by the Farm Bureau insurance firm and brought together experts on the production of corn, soybeans, and cotton; live animal interactions with instruction and demonstrations by FFA members from the high school class of Haley Williams; and a special guest appearance by Lainey Hutchison, a 2023 CCHS graduate who is one of the most decorated FFA members in memory and currently attends UT-Martin, where she is on the rodeo team.

Add to that the expertise of her parents, who were available to answer questions, provide dogs for extra petting, and inform the students on the travails of raising cattle – their herd was in a nearby field, grazing during most of the instruction time – and it made for a full, fun day for Crockett's young learners.

Classes from Alamo and Bells came in the morning hours, and students from Gadsden, Friendship, and Maury City claimed the afternoon slot.

"This is a great event for the elementary kids," Brewster said. "It's a great way for them to learn about the crops that are grown in Crockett County and all the uses they have, and of course they always love to interact with the animals."

On this day, those animals included sheep, goats, a baby piglet, Lainey's horse, and – from a distance – the herd of cattle. No animals or children were harmed at any point during the day.

The children not only heard presentations on the local crops grown, but had the chance to witness the operation of a small cotton gin. Several different stations were set up so that simultaneous sessions of each activity were occurring, so no one had to wait on anybody else.

Students got to enter a sheep pen and learn how the animals are shown in competition, aided by instruction from FFA class members. They were allowed to pet the sheep and even walk them around the pen to get the feel for what it would be like.

At another station, high schoolers Bailey Ann Whitby and Brooklyn Haynes – also members of the volleyball team – gave the children a hands-on experience shearing a sheep to get it ready for a weekend showing.

"Didn't know we were sheeppers too, did ya?" Haynes grinned, lightening the mood for the nervous youngsters. Whitby engaged them by starting each session with a "Name the Sheep" exercise, so it would be more personal when they had their chance at the clippers. It may have confused the sheep by the end of the day, however, as it may not have been sure what its name actually was when the buses reloaded.



Left: FFA member Karly Pigue was one of those demonstrating how to show sheep in competition.

“Oooohhh, this feels weird!” said one youngster after shearing her section of the sheep. “Do we get to take this home with us?” asked another, clutching a handful of wool. “Sure!” said the “sheepers,” delighting their guests even more.

Also available was the opportunity to listen to a different sheep’s heartbeat with a stethoscope, which lit up the faces of several students as they heard the thumping through the device. At that same tent, children also had the chance to observe some fecal matter from the sheep, using a few microscopes.

Lainey Hutchison kept several groups entertained by feeding the piglet with a bottle while students petted its head; showing how she handled her goats within their pen; and finally taking them to see her prized horse, where they got as up close and personal as they could.

Williams appreciates the day for the way it allows her high school FFA members to have a leadership role in demonstrating their specialties.

“This is such a great group of students,” she said, “and having Lainey here is extra special because she has accomplished so much in FFA and is a real role model for continuing her studies at UTM.” Hutchison is a national finalist in Equine Science - Entrepreneurship, one of only four in the United States. The Crockett FFA has been named a Three Star National Chapter.

The day was a win-win-win-win: for the elementary students and teachers, for the FFA, for the Hutchisons, and for Farm Bureau. And besides the corn, soybeans, and cotton, maybe a fourth crop began to grow - a budding interest in agriculture in a child’s mind.



Above: Students got to see a small cotton gin in operation.



Above: Lainey Hutchison's piglet was a big hit with the elementary students.



Above: "Sheepers" Brooklyn Haynes (left) and Bailey Ann Whitby (right) help a student experience the sensation of shearing a sheep.

Right: Looking at sheep fecal matter with a microscope drew a range of interesting comments from the kids.



Left: Students had fun walking the sheep around.



Above: The facial expressions of the students told the story of the day.

Right: Several of the kids were thrilled to get up close to Lainey's horse.

Below: Hearing a sheep's heartbeat was a neat experience for this student.



Above: Students listen to a session on the many uses of cotton.



Above: Children wait their turn at walking a sheep through the pen.

Below: It was a long day of being petted by a lot of school children, and by the end of the afternoon one of the Hutchisons' dogs found this spot to rest.



Above: Teachers Tammy Gordon (Friendship Elementary) and Jenna Cherry (Maury City Elementary) found some time to catch up with each other.

