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Outsmarting the 'Houdini Horse'

Alea farmers invent universal gate latch

By Marie Oliver

Patience, persistence and a nimble mouth served Tater the "Houdini horse" well in the past. He could spring the latch on any gate novice farmers Scottie and Greg Jones came up with to make him stay put. Until now.

"It was getting really tiring," says Scottie. "He was opening all our gates at night and letting all the livestock out. I would wake up in the morning and look out the window and there would be sheep on the lawn and horses where they weren't supposed to be."

On their 40-acre homestead with sheep, cows, horses, chickens, geese, dogs, cats and a peacock, that was a lot of livestock to keep track of.

Thanks to the couple's ingenious invention called the U-Latch, Tater's fun has been spoiled, but Scottie and Greg are happier.

The special locking mechanism on the latch makes it impossible for an animal to operate.

Keeping Tater under wraps was not the only motivation for the invention. The couple also wanted a gate latch they could operate one-handed. Scottie says traditional clip and chain locks require the use of two hands: one to stabilize the chain and the other to operate the clip.

"If you're on horseback, you need a great horse who likes to stand perfectly still as you're leaning way over to open the gate with both hands," says Scottie. "It's a problem."

With 14 gates on the farm, they spent a lot of time dismounting.

"We were always having to get off the horse to open and close the gate," she says. "A lot of times I'd be coming through a gate holding



Above, Scottie Jones latches a pasture gate with the U-Latch, which she and her husband, Greg, invented. Right, Tater no longer can unlatch the gate and let all the animals out.

a lamb, or dragging a ewe or something. It just seemed silly that we had all these gates and it took two hands to open them."

The U-Latch design makes it unnecessary to stabilize the chain, so it can be operated with one hand. Many farmers resort to using baling twine to solve the problem, but that won't keep a determined animal like Tater in place.

Attaching the latch to the gate instead of the post also solves the problem of gates that do not perfectly line up with the post.

Because their farm was built in the 1890s, that was the case with most of Scottie and Greg's gates.

"We hadn't found a solution that worked on this old farm," says Scottie. "By putting the latch on the actual gate, it doesn't matter how far away the post is. Gates some-



times drop over time or kids stand on them—things like that. It doesn't matter if the gate is higher or lower, because it will latch anyway."

The invention really was the case of several heads being better than one. Greg had the original idea. Scottie worked with an engineer friend, Mark Rinehart, to develop drawings. They had several prototypes fabricated, but none worked exactly as they envisioned. Some were dangerous to the animals.

Late one night, Scottie had a flash of inspiration that brought them to the final design. The first 1,000 U-Latches were made in late winter 2006, and Scottie began to work on how to market and distribute them.

With a patent pending and more



than 800 of the latches sold, Scottie has learned from her customers the latch has more uses than she and Greg intended.

"One of my customers in California told me she was using these latches to hook fencing panels together," she says.

Fencing panels are used to create temporary corrals, which often must be set up on uneven ground.

"I hadn't seen all the different possibilities for the latch," she says. "I love it when people say, 'Well, this is what I use it for!' That's when we came up with the word 'versatile.'"

When the couple moved to Oregon from Tempe, Arizona, four years ago, Scottie was in the middle of completing work toward her

master's degree in business administration. While Greg went to work teaching psychology at Linn-Benton Community College in Albany, she completed her MBA—and they both learned to run the farm.

Scottie's education, plus her years of experience as director of retail services at the Phoenix Zoo, has given her skills that helped her start a small business. But farming, and selling to the farming industry, is a whole new experience.

She says without the support of many local and regional businesspeople—and others through the Internet—things would not have gone nearly as well as they have.

The U-Latch has not solved one problem for Scottie and Greg. After

installing the latch on the stable gate, they awoke one morning to once again find the livestock running free. Upon further inspection, they found Tater had—probably in frustration—kicked the side of the gate that was attached to the barn until the wood gave way.

The gate was hanging open, with the U-Latch still firmly in place.

But that's just fodder for another invention. Most days, Tater now stays put. ■

For more information about Scottie and Greg Jones' Leaping Lamb Farm and the U-Latch, go to www.u-latch.com, or call (877) 820-6132. Scottie's blog on farm life can be accessed through the Web site.