



## ROCK COUNTY HAS A NEW FSA DIRECTOR

There's a new leader in the Rock County Farm Service Agency, and she's new to the northern climate as well as Midwestern farm practices. Nora Nord is the new county executive director for Rock and Pipestone counties.

NEW FSA DIRECTOR ► PAGE 2B

## Rock County is among the top pork producing in the state

Rock County is home to 111 farms that sold pigs, marketing more than one million head annually. That production ranks Rock County among the top pork-producing counties in Minnesota, with sales valued at more than \$220 million.

KEVIN BARNHART ► PAGE 4B

## Calving season is almost here – are you ready? No matter what time of year your cows are calving, it is important to have all your supplies gathered, and ready for action.

ERIN DE KONING ► PAGE 5B

## When prioritizing animal care, don't forget to care for yourself

It literally 'takes a village' to raise a critter to market. Our operations benefit when we partner with a support team.

IAN SANDAGER ► PAGE 11B

## Horses and nature promote healing at Rock Ranch near Hills

"The horses respond and do all kinds of things in our sessions that sometimes I can't even believe what they're doing, but they are interacting with it. ... We want the horses to be free, to be who they are, and to respond sometimes in very unique ways to the people."

**Carissa Palmberg**, Director of Equine Assisted Counseling at Rock Ranch, Hills, Minnesota



Heather Johnson photo/0226 Ag Tab Spring Rock Ranch

The 16-by-16-foot counseling cabin is located west of the riding arena and is positioned at an angle for unobstructed views in three directions through its large windows. The only view to the driveway and county road to the east is obstructed. Inside, counseling can take place sitting at a table, standing at the windows or on the observation deck on the outside of the cabin. At left, Marie LaRock (left) and Carissa Palmberg are pictured in the recently constructed counseling cabin now in use by the Rock Ranch equine assisted counseling program. The additional option to conduct EAC sessions in the cabin is expected to expand the number of sessions this year.

Mavis Fodness photo/0226 Ag Tab Spring Rock Ranch

## Rock Ranch enters 10th year of program with expanded rural experiences

**By Mavis Fodness**

Since founding Rock Ranch as a nonprofit organization in 2016, Marie LaRock is still building on the vision she saw for her grandparents' farm located west of Hills.

"I could see what we could

do here, but I didn't want to just serve people with disabilities," she said.

"I wanted to be able to serve all abilities, and I wanted to incorporate everybody together in a Christ-filled setting."

The beginning horse-back riding curriculum she developed focused on an atmosphere where children and adults could learn to ride a horse as well as focus on physical, cognitive, social and emotional skills."

As the Rock Ranch horse-back riding program grew, LaRock continued pursuing the role of horses in improving mental health.

In 2021, she began

SEE ROCK RANCH ► PAGE 3B

## How sweet it is!

## Luverne couple's bee keeping hobby turns into a honey of a business

**By Mavis Fodness**

Honey production wasn't the goal for Sherri and Bill Thompson when they ordered honeybees six years ago.

Amid the pandemic shutdown, the Luverne couple were drawn to the social insects for another reason.

"We just started watching the YouTube videos and they were just fascinating to watch as they worked together as a colony," Sherri said.

However, a honeybee's work results in honey production and the "Thompson's Honeycomb Hideaway" business was created in 2020.

For the past two seasons, the couple has harvested 20 gallons of honey from their five hives, and the inventory is frequently sold out.

Each 21-ounce squeeze bottle of homemade honey retails for \$25.



Mavis Fodness photo/0226 Ag Tab Spring Beekeeping Sherri and Bill Thompson started "Thompson's Honeycomb Hideaway" in 2020 and now produce 20 gallons of honey per year from the five hives they keep near Luverne.

When the Thompsons started beekeeping, they had no business goals in mind.

"We had no idea what the bees' capabilities were or what the opportunity was like for a business or how much honey they would create," Sherri said.

They've found their end product is delicious and, through word of mouth, their brand has developed a local following.

"We have some good repeat customers," Bill said.

As their honey production knowledge and experiences grew, the Thompsons began sharing their story with local organizations as guest speakers.

Their hobby is also a popular les-

SEE HONEYCOMB HIDEAWAY ► PAGE 6B

**FROM PAGE 1B ▶ ROCK RANCH EXPANDING OPTIONS IN EQUINE ASSISTED COUNSELING**

equine assisted counseling (EAC) sessions, which recently added a counseling cabin on the property.

**Healing in nature**

Carissa Palmberg is the director of EAC at the Ranch.

“Part of the equine assisted counseling is nature therapy — so we want to be out in nature,” she said.

However, weather during the winter months limits the time spent outdoors and the ranch’s indoor riding arena limits exposure to the feeling of being outdoors.

“This cabin is going to allow us to do sessions, to be able to be warm enough, but then also feel like we’re still in nature, allowing what God’s designed around us to help unleash the healing and things that are going on for people in counseling,” Palmberg said.

In addition to Palmberg, other equine assisted counseling therapists include Natasha Kellenberger, Lynne Hunter and Brenda Ling.

The 16-by-16-foot counseling cabin is located west of the riding arena and is positioned at an angle for unobstructed views in three directions through its large windows.

The only view to the driveway and county road to the east is obstructed.

Inside, counseling can take place sitting at a table, standing at the windows or on the observation deck on the outside of the cabin.

Horses are not ridden during the counseling sessions but are part of the natural elements along with dogs, cats, birds and butterflies that can be seen from the cabin.

“This is an experiential therapy, so there doesn’t even have to be talk,” Palmberg said.

“There can be long periods of silence in a session, and it’s fine because there’s still a lot of processing happening, even if somebody is not verbalizing what’s happening.”

The ranch has 15 horses to use in its programming. Four or more horses are used during a counseling session.

**How equine assisted counseling works**

During sessions, counselors use the Arenas for Change process that allows clients to externalize a story about what is occurring around them.

“Instead of looking into what’s going on and pressing into that, we try to actually pull the story out and have an emotionally safe distance from (their real) story,” Palmquist said.

“We use the word ‘story’ a lot and we use metaphors from stories a lot because it’s a very approachable language to use.”

Key to the equine assisted counseling program are the equine specialists who handle and chose the horses for the sessions. Together the specialist and counselor help clients built on their story over multiple sessions if necessary.

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Heather Johnson photo/0226 Ag Tab Spring 2026 Rock Ranch

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**Carissa Palmberg**  
Director of Equine Assisted Counseling at Rock Ranch, Hills, Minnesota

they’re doing, but they are interacting with it,” Palmberg said.

“That’s another reason we don’t do riding in our counseling sessions. We want the horses to be free, to be who they are, and to respond sometimes in very unique ways to the people.”

The horses are often called “story editors,” because they will change a person’s perspective in a way that counselors cannot accomplish.

“Sometimes the horses are able to shift somebody’s perspective in a dynamic, powerful way that is really neat to see,” Palmquist said.

The number of counseling sessions



Heather Johnson photo/0226 Ag Tab Spring Rock Ranch

will increase at Rock Ranch thanks to the counseling cabin.

As the ranch’s indoor arena gets busy with its popular “Ride Rock Ranch” and “Senior Saddles” sessions, the counseling cabin will continue house private sessions in its remote location in the pasture and away from the barn and main horse corrals.

“It’s very nice to have a new space where you have all these windows pointing out at nature,” LaRock said.

“Just that movement and the imagery that this type of experimental therapy provides, is just priceless.

It can make just a world of difference for so many people.”

**Entering 10th year of programming**

Rock Ranch was established by Marie and Dan LaRock in late December 2016.

The Ride Rock Ranch program began in 2017, serving 50 children and more than 700 lessons were completed.

Two years later, the ranch added

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**FROM PAGE 3B ▶  
ROCK RANCH  
EXPANDS EQUINE  
ASSISTED  
THERAPY**

its Senior Saddles program in which visitors from local nursing homes are invited to interact with the horses and share life's memories with volunteers.

More than 75 seniors visited the ranch last year.

As the ranch enters its 10th year of programming, it's the equine-assisted counseling that is expected to have the most growth in numbers.

Last year, more than 165 counseling sessions were conducted, up from more than 50 conducted in 2021, the pilot year for EAC.

"The counseling cabin has helped us in that preparation of getting ready for what we see as a continual growth in that program," LaRock said.

"So, we're ready for it, and we are ready to try different things now."

Among the new programming ideas are mindfulness clinics, which also incorporates a social worker in curriculum development.

The clinics are open to anyone seeking improvement in their mental health.

More days during the week have become available for EAC sessions.

"The future is bright," LaRock said. "It's going to be exciting to see what happens and how that programming continues."

As a community relations activity and public open house, Rock Ranch will again host the fifth annual Tack Swap and Vendor Fair from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday, March 21.

The event is in cooperation with the Rock River Wranglers Saddle Club and it's open to the public.

LaRock and Palmberg were recent guests for an on-site Star Media interview that can be viewed at [tinyurl.com/starmedia-rockranch](http://tinyurl.com/starmedia-rockranch).

# A county shaped by pigs

*Rock County is among the top pork producing counties in the state*

**Contributed by Kevin Barnhart, Rock County Pork Producers**

Agriculture has long been central to Minnesota's identity, shaping local communities, economies and traditions.

Among the state's agricultural strengths, pork production remains one of the most significant. From family-owned farms to larger operations, pig farming contributes billions of dollars to Minnesota's economy each year while supporting food production, jobs and rural vitality across the state.

According to the most recent U.S. Department of Agriculture Census of Agriculture, Rock County is home to 111 farms that sold pigs, marketing more than one million head annually.

That production ranks Rock County among the top pork-producing counties in Minnesota, with sales valued at more than \$220 million.

Behind those numbers are farm families who care deeply about the animals they raise and the land they steward. Today's pig farmers combine generations of experience with modern technology, raising pork efficiently while protecting soil and water resources for the future.

## Minnesota's pork industry

Across Minnesota, pig farming continues to play a vital role in the state's agricultural landscape. Minnesota consistently ranks second in the nation's leading pork-producing states, raising more than



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nine million hogs each year and supporting tens of thousands of jobs both on and off the farm.

These careers extend far beyond the barn, including animal health, nutrition, transportation, processing, research, and food service.

Together, they form a broad network of people working every day to ensure families in Minnesota and around the world have access to safe, wholesome, and delicious pork.

For Rock County, this statewide strength translates into dependable employment, thriving local businesses, and long-term economic stability that helps rural communities grow and succeed.

## Caring for animals, land, and future generations

Today's pig farmers balance tradition with innovation. While many farms have been in families for generations, modern production relies on continual improvement in genetics, nutrition, housing, and manure management.

These advancements allow farmers to raise more pork using fewer natural resources while protecting soil and water for the future.

Farmers also invest heavily in animal care, biosecurity, and responsible stewardship.

Even as they face challenges such as changing markets, rising input costs,

and ongoing labor needs, their commitment to caring for animals and the land remains constant.

This dedication ensures pork production in Rock County is not only productive today but sustainable for generations to come.

## Investing in pork's future

Over the past year, Minnesota pig farmers have continued investing in efforts that strengthen the future of pork through promotion, education, and research through the Minnesota Pork Board Checkoff programming.

This includes funding research that improves animal care and environmental practices, supporting education programs that connect consumers with how their food is raised, and promoting pork through modern marketing efforts.

One example is the national **Taste What Pork Can Do®** campaign, which highlights pork's flavor, convenience, and variety to inspire today's consumers and encourage new ways to enjoy pork at home.

These efforts build trust, expand demand, and create opportunity for the next generation of farmers in counties like Rock County.

## Strong future for Rock County

With deep roots in family farming and a future shaped by innovation, care, and community connection, pork production will remain a cornerstone of Rock County agriculture for years to come.



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