

Plamondon, Black

Couple embraces a quieter life

By Bennett Hall
Mid-Valley Sunday

BLODGETT — Robert Plamondon always knew he wanted to live in the country. It just took him awhile to get there.

"I'm a fourth-generation back-to-the-lander," he began, by way of explanation.

"My great-grandfather graduated from Harvard Law School, practiced law for about six months and got such ulcers worrying about his customers that he went into orcharding.

"My grandfather farmed 3 acres in Pomona (Calif.).

"My parents lived in Los Angeles in the '60s. They got so scared by the Watts riots and the drug culture that they moved to Crescent City and bought a campground."

That's just the way things go in the Plamondon family, he said. "By the time we have kids, we move to the country to raise them."

And that's what Plamondon, 42, and his wife, Karen Black, 40, are doing now — raising their two boys, Danny and Karl, on a rambling, rusticated 37-acre spread in the Coast Range.

Norton Creek Farm is a working chicken ranch — and that's a whole 'nother story. To tell it properly, you have to back up about 20 years, to the early 1980s.

Plamondon was studying computer engineering at Oregon State University, and Black was pursuing a physics degree. They met, fell in love and married. They dreamed of making a life together in some quiet nook of the mid-Willamette Valley, but fate had other plans.

"We never wanted to leave the Corvallis area, but we graduated in '82 and '83," Plamondon explained. Oregon was in a recession, and they needed work.

"Jobs for engineers were scarce then," Black said.

Meanwhile, down in California, Silicon Valley was just hitting its stride. Going where the work was, the couple moved to San Jose. Black got a job with a semiconductor company, and Plamondon became a technical writer.

They never stopped dreaming of Oregon.

"By the time our oldest was 4, we figured it was now or never," Plamondon said. "We



KARL MAASDAM/MID-VALLEY SUNDAY

Robert Plamondon and Karen Black tend to the pigs on their farm near Blodgett. The couple own and operate a chicken ranch, selling eggs and broilers.

AT A GLANCE

WHO: Robert Plamondon and Karen Black

RESIDENCE: Norton Creek Farm, outside Blodgett

OCCUPATION: Own and operate a chicken ranch, selling eggs and broilers at farmers' markets and local stores

FAMILY: Two sons, Danny, 10, and Karl, 7

ANIMALS: One Dalmatian, six pigs, 18 goats, 20-odd sheep, 15 lambs, 50-60 turkeys, 150 broiler chickens and about 800 hens.

didn't like the school system in San Jose —

"— or the mall culture," added Black.

In 1995, Plamondon felt he had enough contacts in Oregon to move his tech writing business north, so the family took a deep breath and made the plunge. They stumbled onto Norton Creek Farm while shopping around for a few acres off the beaten path.

"We were looking for 10, but we settled for 37," Plamondon said.

Once they had the farm, they started accumulating live-

'We spent our time in the wilderness of Silicon Valley and fled screaming back to Oregon.'

Robert Plamondon

stock. And before they knew it, they were in the chicken business.

"It was all an accident. We bought some chicks in February of '96 because we knew you had to have chickens if you lived in the country," Plamondon said. "The chicks we got from OSU were randomly selected. I just thought half would be roosters and half would be hens, but all but a couple were hens. It was a textbook exercise in bad planning."

Soon the family was sitting on a growing pile of eggs. There was nothing left to do but sell them, and a business was born.

Today, Norton Creek Farm sells its free-range eggs at local farmers' markets, Richey's Market and the First Alternative co-op. It also has a fledgling trade in broiler chick-

ens. Plamondon still does some tech writing, but he and Black are upgrading their processing facilities to enable them to expand their chicken-and-egg business further.

"I'm always on the lookout to turn a hobby into a business because that lets me keep doing it," Plamondon said. With an uncomprehending shake of his head, he observed, "People quit their hobbies to spend more time on their jobs, but they never quit their jobs to spend more time on their hobbies."

The family has no regrets about trading their Silicon Valley careers for the backwoods of Blodgett. It's a good place to raise chickens, Plamondon said — and children.

"Karl once decided to walk to the Blodgett Store," he said. "That's 2 1/2 miles. He got intercepted by a neighbor before he got very far.

"You wouldn't much see that in town."