

Happy New Year!

With more grandchildren being born and retirement from Stew's day job on the horizon, we have been looking back over our 12 years in the alpaca industry. It is remarkable just how much the industry has changed.

We have included a couple of pictures to give you an idea of what an "elite" alpaca stud from a very large farm looked like back in 1995 and what we small breeders actually own now.

As you can see from the picture, alpacas were regularly washed and blow-dried for showing in 1995. The end result resembled a puffy dog. And many of the top herdsires were multi-coloured.

Nowadays, breeders do their utmost to ensure that the fibre characteristics stay intact while showing their animals. They know the judge will be looking very carefully at the fleece and judging crimp, density, fineness, handle and brightness. It isn't enough just to have lots of fibre. If a judge suspects you have modified the fleece in any way you will be heavily penalized.

Also, in today's industry, multicoloured alpacas make up a small "fancy" class at the shows and solid colours are the preference of the vast majority of owners.

But in those days we didn't have access to the Peruvian or Bolivian genes. Peruvian Accoyos were just beginning to show up in the U.S. and there were very few Canadian breeders who had access to those genes. We had to be satisfied with what we could get and those were usually old-style Chilean. The Chileans we see today are vastly improved compared to the original imports.

Also we paid a very hefty price just to be able to buy an alpaca and get our breeding program started. We were fortunate to be able to buy a female without having to also buy a male. We paid \$25,000 for our first female. That alpaca would sell for about \$7,000 in today's market.



1995 Stud



Modern Stud

However, we can't complain as our first female has given us some good offspring and those offspring have given us even better offspring and so it goes. This is the compounding aspect of the industry at work.

If you believe that the industry is having problems because of the downward price adjustments that have happened over the years you would be dead wrong. The industry is very healthy but it is not the same industry that we bought into. Thank heavens for that!

Alpacas are still a big ticket animal in the livestock industry but are now more affordable. Thanks mainly to an influx of imports from 1996 to 1998, opportunities to enter the industry are open to far more people and that bodes well for the future. We have moved from an exclusive to an inclusive industry.

Now when you tell people you raise alpacas they no longer say "wow, you must be rich." They now say: "I love alpacas — they are so soft and cuddly."

Times have also changed in the fibre end of things. Twelve years ago very few people had heard of alpaca garments. This Christmas our phone has been ringing with people looking for alpaca products or wanting to know how to wash the alpaca sweater they already own.

The people who are getting into the alpaca industry have also changed. They are much more knowledgeable and do a lot more research before making their purchase. They know that alpacas are not a get-rich-quick investment. These new people are farmers in their hearts and accept that any livestock investment takes some time to pay off.

Over the next few years I believe we will see more changes in the alpaca industry. We will continue to endeavour to raise the highest-quality show alpacas, we will continue to strive for the ultimate "North American" alpaca and we will continue to search for the best-quality studs to service our females.

Alpacas will, for a long time to come, offer a great opportunity to make extra income and defer taxes as well as offer a desirable rural lifestyle. They are still that huggable investment whose value increases with the birth of each cria and they are an investment that you can insure. There is still a huge shortage of alpaca fibre on the world marketplace and our industry has not even scratched the surface in that area.

The reasons that we "got into alpacas" have not changed. We have actually enjoyed more benefits from owning alpacas than we expected. Is there any greater pleasure than enjoying a tall cool one while sitting on the porch watching

the crias pronking in the field? Actually, there is — enjoying that idyllic scene with good friends we made through alpaca ownership.

As we enter 2008 the future in alpacas is looking great. The new reality of our industry is simple. More people can now afford to experience the "alpaca lifestyle." Let's drink to that!

Cheers

Barbara and Stew Lang

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