



Barbara and Jim Hansen retired in 2007 to start new careers as alpaca farmers in Trout Lake.

Pronk, Orgle, Spit at Meadowrock

Trout Lake couple share the joys of a working alpaca farm

By Drew Myron

At Meadowrock Farm in Trout Lake, a herd of wide-eyed, long-lashed, slim-necked alpacas pronk—a sort of leap, jump, feet-off-the-ground skip across the fields. The scene is idyllic as the gentle animals bound through pastures with views of Mount Adams.

For Barbara and Jim Hansen, this storybook setting is just another day in paradise. In 2007, the couple retired from their careers in Vancouver, Washington, headed east, and started a second life as alpaca farmers.

Alpacas have been called one of the easiest, gentlest, most intelligent,

earth-friendly and cleanest animals to raise. Cousin to the camel, alpacas are native to the high Andes Mountain countries of Peru, Chile and Bolivia.

Introduced to the U.S. in the 1980s, alpaca farms have popped up throughout the countryside. Washington boasts more than 100 farms, according to the Alpaca Owners Association.

While breeding was once the main drive, the demand for alpaca fiber is growing. Farmers hope to benefit from the shift.

“We want a national industry,” Barbara says.

At Meadowrock Farm, the focus is fiber and education.



A Luxury Fiber

Alpacas produce a specialty fiber that has been called a “wonder product.” Alpaca hair is known as fiber, not wool or fur. It is warmer than sheep wool, stronger than mohair, softer than cashmere, smoother than silk, better-breathing than thermal knits and mostly water repellent. The fiber contains microscopic air pockets that help create lightweight apparel with high insulation value. Since alpaca fiber has no lanolin, it is easier to process, does not have the prickle of wool and is hypoallergenic.

The alpacas are shorn once a year, typically in spring, and yield five to 10 pounds of fiber each.

Neat as a Pin—or an Alpaca

Alpacas are good land stewards. With two toes, they have soft hooves that leave the terrain undamaged. When grazing, the animals nibble the tops of grass rather than uprooting the plant. They are even tidy with their waste, using a communal dung spot in the same way a cat uses a litter box.

Meticulously groomed and lovingly manicured, Meadowrock Farm takes



Left, Barbara enjoys her time with her alpacas and sharing information about them with guests at Meadowrock Alpacas Farm & Annex. Above, guests to the farm can take in a view of Mount Adams as it stretches above the trees.

pride in its appearance.

“That’s just how we do things, how we were raised,” says Jim, who hails from four generations of water well drillers, and a family business founded nearly 100 years ago.

Barbara grew up working the family farm in Vancouver and is a retired accountant. Together, the duo have can-do attitudes and a drive for the details.

They sweep the barn twice daily. Animal waste is scooped vigilantly and never left overnight. The animals eat from bins, never from the floor.

“It’s all geared so that the alpacas stay healthy,” says Barbara. “I really like details.”

Barbara’s ability to retain and share information is ideally suited to her favorite role: farm store manager and tour guide.

“I like to share the alpacas with other people. Education is what it’s all about for me,” says Barbara, who has welcomed visitors from Japan, Sweden and throughout the world.

Tours are offered in half-hour and hour-long sessions, and provide a hands-on experience of the working farm. Last year, Barbara led 250 educational tours. She says she hopes to double that number in 2016.

Barbara’s pride and joy is a 1,200-square foot shop with more than 6,000 alpaca products, including yarn, blankets, hats, scarves, sweaters, vests, gloves, and a large assortment of soft alpaca socks.

“Most people get lost in the socks,” she says, laughing. “We opened the Alpaca Annex in 2011. It was to be a typical farm store, and I got carried away.”

Alpacas may be trendy, but it is not a passing fad for Barbara. In fact, it just may be a part of her heritage.

While researching her family history recently, she discovered her great-grandmother trekked across the nation in 1881, traveling by rail, steamer and boat from Maine to Washington. Upon her arrival, according to a newspaper clipping, “She wore a red and black alpaca dress which had flat pleated ruffles, six inches deep all around the bottom of her skirt.” ■

Meadowrock Alpacas Farm & Annex is open year-round, Wednesday to Sunday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. and by appointment. Visit 80 Mt. Adams Road, Trout Lake, call (509) 395-2266 or go to www.meadowrockalpacas.com to learn more. The cost is \$5 per person, and free to children 5 and younger. Box lunches are also available.