

Curious looking and curious about visitors, alpaca yearlings are not camera shy at the Blonde Velvet & Me ranch in the Snowden area.

Photo courtesy of Carol Thayer and Rick Daugherty



Garment Factories

By Jeanie Senior

Carol Thayer remembers showing a customer stacks of intricately patterned blankets at her store, The Enchanted Alpaca. The fleece used for the blankets came from the herd of alpacas she owns with her husband, Rick Daugherty.

Promoting the quality of her product, Carol said, “Look what my girls did.”

The customer ogled as he looked at all the blankets. Finally, he asked, “How many daughters do you have?”

Carol still laughs about the exchange. She figures it is what she gets for using the term “girls” to refer to the female majority in their herd of about 75 alpacas.

Rick and Carol didn’t set out to make alpacas their business. They were living in Camas, where Carol, a registered nurse, worked full-time in the medical

Couple focus on genetics to improve alpaca fleece for commercial fabric use

legal field and Rick was an industrial mechanic.

She bought a bred female alpaca and its buddy because “alpacas are herd animals,” she explains.

That was 14 years ago. Carol sold the first baby alpaca to friends, who subsequently became one of the biggest alpaca operations in the United States.

They used the proceeds from the first sale to buy another alpaca “and we just grew slowly,” she says.

Rick sold a business and invested in a herd of alpacas. Eventually, both quit their jobs to focus on the alpaca business. They moved about six years ago to their

property on Snowden Road, now called the Blonde Velvet & Me Ranch.

Carol opened The Enchanted Alpaca retail store in White Salmon in early 2008, and relocated it to downtown Hood River in December that year.

“So, here we are,” she says.

Besides alpaca fleece blankets, which are woven by hand at Quail Run Fiber Mill in Spokane, the shop sells alpaca rugs hand-woven in Texas, also made from their herd’s fleece. Clothing is available for men, women and children, from hats and socks to sweaters and outerwear. Some of the items, such as boiled alpaca wool jackets and vests, and hats, are made locally. Sweaters, jackets and coats come from Bolivia and Peru.

In the summer, Carol sells clothing made from bamboo and from pima cotton, also grown in Peru.

Alpacas are a smaller cousin of the

llama, indigenous to Bolivia and Peru. While llamas are raised to be pack animals, alpacas are bred specifically for their fiber.

Alpacas first were imported to the United States in 1984.

“They imported enough to have diverse genetics, then stopped,” Carol says. “They didn’t flood the market.

“Until this economy tanked it was pretty much very stable, but everything’s been hit. Things have changed. We’ve still had good years. Even last year, we sold a lot of alpacas.”

Carol and Rick focus on genetics to improve the quality and quantity of alpaca fleece. The couple work hard, she says, at bringing science and genetics into the business.

They have conducted clinics on raising alpacas, and worked with about 10 other alpaca businesses in the Columbia Gorge, including several in Klickitat County, from Trout Lake to Goldendale. They also have traveled to Peru and Bolivia several times. American alpaca breeders support several relief programs in the two countries, from orphanages to dental clinics.

Alpaca is comparable in softness to cashmere and warmer than wool. Garments woven or knitted from alpaca last longer and don’t pill.

“These are the kinds of things people are going to slowly learn about, and then they will be back for more,” Carol says, noting that wearing alpaca sweaters and socks, for instance, lets them keep their thermostat turned down at home.

“Something changed for Rick and I,” Carol says, about leaving their other jobs to raise alpacas. “It became so clear that we could work as a team. Oh my gosh, it’s just been incredible.”



Carol Thayer fits Jan Stewart of Husum with an alpaca wool coat by Peruvian fashion designer Lillian Castellanos at The Enchanted Alpaca in Hood River. Background photo shows a blanket courtesy of the fleece of alpacas raised by Carol and her husband, Rick Daugherty, on their Snowden Road ranch.

Photos by Jeanie Senior

The ranch also has been a family endeavor; their three sons—Will; Gregory and his fiancé, Kendra Johnson; and Joseph and his wife, Alicia—helped with its development and still are around to provide backup help.

Carol expects they will trim the size of their herd a bit this year.

“I think if we can get down to 40 or 50 we’ll feel like we have a better control over our life,” she says.

Getting to know alpacas has been a revelation, Carol says. They are smaller than llamas, averaging about 130 pounds at maturity.

Llamas “can march up to you almost in an aggressive manner,” Carol says, noting

alpacas are more standoffish. “Their only defense is to run. The only way to protect themselves is to have a head start. Within the scope of that, they’re very happy to be around you. What they don’t like is this hugging thing.”

However, she says, take a chaise lounge into the pasture on a sunny day and sit and read a book “and they will gather round, talk about you, sniff your eyelashes, untie your shoes—as long as you don’t stick your hands out at them.”

Similarly, when another alpaca gives birth, the rest will line up along the fence and carry on a running commentary.

“I grew up on a cattle ranch, but it was so different, kind of a livestock mentality,” Carol says. “I have never seen this level of socialization. They seem to have a very complex social order.”

Four great Pyrenees guard the flock, an important consideration in an area where coyotes and cougars

threaten the alpacas.

The national Alpaca Owners and Breeders Association has an active show circuit, and Carol and Rick’s alpacas have done well in competition. But “we really look more seriously at the genetic potential of an animal and its relatives rather than ribbons,” she says.

As for the store, it has done well.

“December exceeded all expectations,” Carol says. “That’s ‘thank you’ to the local people” who stayed in the gorge to shop. “Even in this recession (the ranch) has still been a viable business. (Alpacas) are one of the few livestock businesses that has carried its weight.” ■

Learn more about the *Blonde Velvet & Me* ranch at www.blondevelvet.com.