

# A Brief History of the Camelid Phenomenon in North America

By Eric Hoffman

## THE ORIGINS OF THE LLAMA AND ALPACA BUSINESSES IN NORTH AMERICA

**W**e all have a starting point for our involvement with domestic South American camelids. The personal history of the majority of present day owners, especially those on the alpaca side of the equation, may be only months or a few years. This reality is a reflection of how rapidly the alpaca business in North America is expanding.

My involvement started more 30 years ago. It started in 1976 with the purchase of Sunny, a young llama who became my recreational trekking companion for hundreds of miles in the High Sierra, and has evolved into a lifetime involvement in the camelid business in the US and abroad. My travels and work have given me a multi-faceted perspective on these animals. I'm often struck by the common backgrounds of alpaca and llama owners living in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Switzerland, Germany, England, France, Sweden, central Chile, and the United States. Many owners in the "new camelid countries" are well-educated folks who have no previous experience with livestock, yet they eagerly take up camelid ranching at a time in life when most farmers are wracking their brains to achieve retirement. Many people say they are attracted to a lifestyle change, the animal itself, money or tax benefits they hope to earn, working with fiber, or combinations of these things.

Not long ago I delivered a lecture to about 250 alpaca owners in the U.S. I flashed an image of Tom Hunt on the screen and asked if anybody knew the man in the picture. Nobody knew Tom Hunt. To me this is as strange as being a student of American history and not recognizing Benjamin Franklin. If you don't know who Tom Hunt is and the role he played in the camelid business I hope you feel compelled to read this piece to find out. After all, "The game of history is usually played by the best and the worst over the heads of majority in the middle." Eric Hoffer, in *The True Believer*, 1951.

In the paragraphs that follow I will attempt to reconstruct the history of both alpacas and llamas on this continent. Since I was part of both these developing animal businesses I fully realize the history I recite may not be the history someone else would choose. I have reported on the pivotal events that have put us where we are today by quoting from original documents written a the time. I have interviewed people that were involved in the beginning years. I have tried to remain neutral and to report what happened and avoid, as much as I can, my feelings about what has taken place. For alpaca history buffs, sources of archival information will be posted on the Bonny Doon Press website (*Camelid Archives*) in June '06. I think it is critical that all alpaca and llama owners know about their "roots". Ours is a shared destiny.

It would probably surprise many new camelid owners to learn that there are more llamas in the world than alpacas; and even with Peru's 2.8 million alpacas, the alpaca industry is still miniscule in the international luxury fiber market. I hope knowing how these wonderful creatures came to our shores, and learning about the needs and thinking that shaped our procedures and institutions will not only inform owners, but also inspire them to step forward and work to ensure a healthy industry where conscientious breeders are able to succeed.

- Eric Hoffman

**O**f the two domestic South American camelid species llamas (*Lama glama*) were the first to reside in North America in any numbers. There are records of llama living in the Central Park Menagerie (now defunct) in New York in the 1870s. One East Coast zoo recorded 41 surplus llamas between 1895 and 1928. Another zoo recorded 55 surplus guanacos between 1875 and 1966. The presence of guanacos and llamas in close proximity undoubtedly resulted in cross breeding. This is still readily apparent in some of today's zoo populations.

Early records tell of llamas arriving on the East Coast of the United States from Argentina and Ecuador. Oddly four importations were recorded on July 18, 1939, nine years after a ban on imports. This was an era when animal brokers had names like Leon Leopard and Snake King. Some brokers living in Mexico were reputedly adept at delivering "anything," regardless of the law, if the price was right. Even though they had been domesticated for 6,500 years llamas were treated as exotic animals. Llamas were usually housed alongside giraffes, zebras and reindeer, all species from far away places.

By the 1930s newspaper mogul, William Randolph Hearst had a small herd of llamas as part of an extensive animal collection on his palatial grounds at San Simeon on the central California coast. This group was reputed to have contributed greatly to the North American gene pool. This may not be the

case, since no more than a dozen llamas were ever recorded at San Simeon and the care and reproductive performance of these animals was questionable. By the 1950s there were probably about 300 llamas in North America and even fewer in Canada. Alpacas (*vicugna pacos*, formerly *Lama pacos*) were even rarer, and if found at all they were only in zoo-type exhibits. The 1940s were dominated by a World War. The 1950s and 60s saw little change in the status of South American camelids. An interested party could pick

up a male llama for \$100 and a female for \$400. It wasn't until the 1970s that there was real change.

In the 1970s Richard and Kay Patterson, moved from Ohio to their new ranch in Sisters Oregon. In their large Hubbard vans were 30 llamas and 40 pedigree Polish Arabian horses. They had first owned guanacos but switched to llamas before leaving Ohio. As Kay remembers it, "There was no llama business in 1973. We weren't that interested in selling them



*Hearst Herd - Photo courtesy Hearst San Simeon State Historical Monument, Baldwin Collection. Newspaper mogul William Randolph Hearst had a llama herd at his San Simeon estate in California until World War II. This herd's contribution to the North American gene pool is thought to have had marginal influence.*



*Kay Sharpnack (formerly Kay Patterson) is credited with starting the llama business in the United States with her former husband Dick. Here Kay holds a chulengo (baby guanaco). It is a little known fact that the Pattersons started with guanacos in the 1960s. Part of their herd is pictured in the background.*

and would sometimes give them away to a person who bought one of our horses.” This changed when Kay placed an advertisement for llamas in the Bend, newspaper in late 1974. To their surprise everything sold. “We quickly developed a policy. We only sold to private parties, never to zoos and we always sold them in pairs. Even though we could’ve sold for more we kept the price at \$1,200 a pair at the start, with the only selection criteria being they must be healthy. We didn’t want to repeat what had happened in the pony and horse markets, which became inflated overnight,” explains Kay. Among the Patterson’s customers in 1974-5 were Paul and Sally Taylor, Beula and Jim Williams, Kim Novak, Lyn and Averill Hyder, Andy Tillman, Bobra Goldsmith, and Stephen Biggs all of whom have continued to own llamas for decades.

In 1975 the zoo species inventory (ICS) listed 600 llamas in all of North America. The Pattersons began buying llamas wherever they could find them and set a goal of maintaining a minimum of 200 births a year. They were soon operating with a herd of 500 animals. Many of these early purchases came from the Catskill Game Farm in New York (1972-76). Southern Californians Jerry Buhrman and Harold Via sold their herds to the Pattersons. Kay recalls, “Many of the southern California animals looked similar to one another. They were woolly llamas, but didn’t exhibit the fiber below the knee that began appearing on some llamas after alpaca imports started in the next decade.” Quickly the Pattersons established some dominant studs, whose names are still found on many of the pedigrees in North America: Dr. Doolittle, Pancho Via, Sitting Bull and Zorro PL are some of the better known. Kay and

Richard Patterson divorced in 1989. Kay now lives with her husband Eric Sharpnack, a veterinarian, and a large contingent of llamas on their Hinterland ranch in Sisters, Oregon.

Back in the 1970s, the llama business took off in different directions with new owners interacting with their animals in ways that made them feel good. Bobra Goldsmith quickly established herself as a llama trainer as did Paul Barkman, a professional animal trainer working for Marine World. Andy Tillman wrote a llama book, *Speechless Brothers*. Francie Greth and her husband Guy Peto established a commercial packing business, taking paying customers into wilderness areas with pack llamas lugging gourmet wines and foods. The Greths also started a publication, *3-L Llama*, which evolved into *Llamas Magazine* after Cheryl and Bob Dal Porto bought it from them. Numerous commercial packing outfits sprung up throughout the West, primarily in Montana (Steve Rolfing), California (Steve Biggs & Paul Meisner, plus Russ and Fran Shields), Oregon (Tom and Toni Landis) and Colorado (Charlie Hackbarth & Bobra Goldsmith). There were also llama trekkers who operated



*Llama packing in the 1980s created a positive image and brought greater awareness of their willingness to work with people.*



*Sunny, the pioneer llama, trekking in the Sierras, circa 1979.*

for the sheer fun of it, often attracting publicity for llamas with their exploits. In 1979 I did my part by crossing the Sierras with the permission of Sequoia-Kings Canyon National Park officials, who wanted to assess the suitability of llamas as pack animals. Accompanied by two veterinary students, Sunny and I covered distances of 24 miles and made two 2500’ climbs in a day, and we climbed Mount Whitney (14,485’). Sunny basically proved llamas were a viable alternative to the heavy-hooves and prodigious appetites of horses in sensitive wilderness areas. I wrote an article chronicling our adventure, “Sunny, the Pioneer Llama,” which appeared in the San Francisco Chronicle’s Sunday magazine with more than one million readers. One intrepid trekker with two llamas walked across the U.S. from Mexico to Canada along the Pacific Crest Trail. The late Mike Larrabee, a former Olympic champion, and dentist Bill Redwood sponsored “llamathons” in which highly conditioned llamas ran with their human companions. The press followed these events that sometimes drew one hundred llamas and over 250 human participants. The llama packers

were having fun and the number of newspaper and magazine articles generated nationwide did much to increase the awareness of llamas as companionable animals.

Selling llamas at auction changed the llama business forever. Nebraska cattleman Fred Hartman discovered llamas in the early 1980s. He was a promoter like none seen in the West, where most llama owners lived. With Fred it was about volume and pushing the price uphill. At first the size of animals mattered, the bigger the better. Later a more squat, round animal, with prodigious fiber growth and coverage became the desired look. Fiber quality in terms of low microns and low variability usually didn’t figure into the fiber equation. Histograms were unheard of. It was about look and bloodlines. Hartman ran the dominant auction format in the 1980s and continues selling camelids to this day. However, Celebrity Sales (Tom and Nancy Simmons and Tim and Teresa Vincent) started a competing auction



*Clancy won more llamathons than any other llama. Bill Redwood of Mancos, Colorado owned Clancy but hired competitive human runners to win llamathons. In this case Clancy is placing first in the Pescadero llamathon after completing the 6 mile course averaging 7 minute miles.*

business and nudged Fred Hartman from center stage. The turning point for the Simmons/Vincent team came on their first llama sale held October 21, 1989 when they posted a \$31,594 average female price and a \$31,000 average male price. At the time this was the most successful sale ever held. To this day, Celebrity Sales is the dominant sale provider for both llamas and alpacas in the U.S. In Canada Warren and Jan Fertig of Red Deer filled this niche for many years.

Shows and auctions changed the price structure and changed the animal. The packer crowd, with their shorter-fleeced, long-legged *c'ara llamas* found their style of animal losing out in the show ring and auction format. About the time llama prices began to exceed \$7,000 other changes occurred. The per animal price had now risen high enough for animal importers to be able to cover the costs of exporting animals from South America and still make a profit. Longtime zoo animal importers Tom Hunt (International Animal Exchange) and his partner Jurgen Schulz (Catskill Game Farm) formed Camelids of Delaware Inc. (CODI). CODI would become a major contributor of new stock in both domestic camelid species from South America for the next decade. At the same time Pet Center (Phil Mizrahie, David Mobilef, and Alexandre Perrinelle) also began working on exporting alpacas from northern Chile. Irv and Bea Kesling, of Kokomo, Indiana were also in Chile attempting to export alpacas and llamas. The process was lengthy, and financially risky with no guarantees.

#### ARRIVAL OF THE FIRST ALPACAS

Between 1980 and 1982 Dick and Kay Patterson imported eight pairs of huacaya alpacas into the U.S. (there were also a few alpacas

in the Cincinnati Zoo & other zoological parks). The significance of the Patterson alpaca imports was that the animals were seen by steady stream of llama customers touring the Patterson pastures under the majestic Three Sisters volcanoes. The spectacular setting and idyllic ranch provided a suitable setting for people already learning about camelid husbandry with their llamas, only now there was a smaller, woollier version of camelid to consider. These original alpacas were third generation offspring from South American stock moved to mainland Europe by well-known animal trader Vernon Pape. The animals purchased by Pattersons were mostly dark and had been imported from the United Kingdom from two sources there. Kay Patterson remembers being enthusiastic about her alpacas, but victimized by gossip. "The alpacas were great. We would've stayed with them but we decided to sell all of them in response to constant gossip that we were using them to cross with llamas. We were well established for breeding pedigree purebred horses and were basically



*Port Clinton, Ohio: Here is part of the first shipment of alpaca from Chile to the United States just after it emerged from quarantine in 1984. Three groups of importers shared the quarantine facility: CODI (Tom Hunt and Jurgen Schulz), Pet Center (Phil Mizrahie, David Mobilef, and Alex Perrinelle) and Irv and Bea Kesling.*

purists when it comes to livestock breeding, so we decided to end the gossip. We sold all of our alpacas to Dr. Ralph Uber of Yakima, Washington."

In late 1983 Irv Kesling announced he had imported 37 alpacas from northern Chile. These alpacas have often been reported as the first alpacas imported directly from South America to North America. In fact, his animals were from the same quarantine as a much larger group owned by Tom Hunt and Jurgen Schulz, and Pet Center in Los Angeles. The animals arrived in Key West Florida as one large shipment. Kesling was just the first to announce his to the public.

In 1984 I helped organize the International Llama Association (ILA) annual conference at the Coconut Grove's Boardwalk in Santa Cruz, California near my home. I received a call from Tom Hunt, who introduced himself as an animal importer in possession of a large shipment of alpacas. He wanted to send me six alpacas so llama conference goers could see them. This initial communication evolved into a working relationship. Cecile Champagne (then

my wife) and I brokered all of the CODI alpacas from 1984 until 1991. Primarily this amounted to two large groups of animals, the 1984 and 1988 importations from northern Chile. We also handled some Cincinnati Zoo alpacas and alpacas purchased in England. There were about 250 CODI alpacas in each of the Chilean groups, all of them huacayas. Anthony Stackowski DVM bought many alpacas from the first CODI shipment and was advertising alpacas for sale in 1984. Phil Mizrahie and his partners brought in 134 alpacas as their part of this first shipment that went through quarantine with the CODI and Kesling animals, but they held off marketing for a year.

Cecile and I held the first public alpaca sale at our California ranch on January 21, 1989. We sold 71 CODI alpacas for \$1.5 million. At \$60,000, Bravo Bravo was the top selling male. He was purchased by John McManus of Truckee, California. During the same time Pet Center, whose most public partner Phil Mizrahie is still very active in the alpaca business, was importing alpacas from the same general region (Putre, Chile) as CODI and selling them from their Los Angeles facility in Chatsworth in private treaty sales. Genghis Kahn and Little Joe, two of the early Pet Center males became well known for their good quality offspring.

These two entities CODI and Pet Center would evolve into the dominant import groups (sometimes with different partners and names) and eventually merged while picking up additional partners such as Anthony Stachowski DVM and Fred Swift. This group, working with powerful figures in Peru and retired high-ranking and highly respected USDA veterinarian Jerry Callis, was able to craft a quarantine protocol acceptable to the U.S. and Peruvian governments. Their ability to work through nearly



*Phil Mizrahie shared in the distinction of importing the first alpacas from South America in 1983 in a shipment to the US government quarantine near Key West, Florida. This shipment included Irv Kesling and Tom Hunt and Jurgen Schulz's alpacas as well. Mizrahie was part of the team that went to open up Peru and Bolivia to exports. He went on to be one of the most prolific importers to the United States and Canada, plus he and Clyde and Roger Haldane of Australia opened up market in Australia and were instrumental in creating a market in New Zealand as well.*

impossible requirements and governmental reluctance allowed the exportation of alpacas from Bolivia and Peru, opening up yet more source herds to North American alpaca and llama owners. The U.S. government was particularly worried about the spread of Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) which could be devastating to all forms of North American livestock. Agreeing on testing procedures and assuring disease free animals was of paramount importance. For FMD countries (Peru and Bolivia) the quarantine protocol required 45 days in the country of origin in a facility overseen by USDA veterinarians and 90 days in the Harry S. Truman US government quarantine in Key West, Florida. The expensive undertaking of running these facilities (staffing with USDA veterinarians, etc.) were borne by the importer.

There was no stopping Phil Mizrahie. He teamed up with the Clyde and Roger Haldane and Alan Hamilton in Australia and opened the

Australian market with a shipment of 450 huacayas, from the Putre region. Many of these animals became part of well-known Coolaroo Alpacas in New South Wales. Mizrahie and the Haldanes also moved 750 animals into New Zealand. His group closely followed New Zealander Murray Bruce, who was the first to import into New Zealand and an ill-fated import by another group of New Zealanders that amounted to a financial disaster for people investing in the shipment. These were the key movements of alpacas in the 1980s.

Phil Mizrahie also was a partner of Bill Barnett, DVM, who came to the camelid import business a little later (early 1990s). However, once Dr. Barnett started he was relentless and now owns Alpaca of America, which may be the largest alpaca operation outside of South America. During the 1990s Pet Center and the CODI group's joint venture in Peru brought in six importations averaging between 420 and 450 alpacas per shipment. There were a few llamas in some of the shipments for specialized customers. Each group of alpacas was purchased from various entities in Peru and had an import name such as P1, P2 etc. Some groups were bought mostly from Rural Alianza (largest alpaca operation in the world); others were a mix of Rural Alianza, Accoyo, and Solocotta and other sources. Even though importations stopped in 1998 Phil Mizrahie often gets calls from people wanting to verify the origins of a particular animal or lineage. The calls he finds the most amusing are requests to verify an Accoyo lineage in the P5 shipment, a shipment that had no Accoyos in it at all. "Sometimes people come to me with an alleged history that has more to do with

marketing than accuracy," explains Mizrahie, "I just tell them what we have in our records."

There were numerous other importers, but the people named here were the volume operators over the long haul.

#### FIRST SURI ALPACAS

All of the alpaca importations from South America during the mid and late 1980s came from the Putre region of northern Chile, where the word, "suri" doesn't exist in the native dialect, because none occurred there. One suri was reported in North America as an offspring from two huacaya parents in Port Clinton, Ohio in 1990. This may be the first suri, or at least the first reported one in North America. Bill Barnett DVM and Phil Mizrahie imported the first suris. Their animals were released from the Harry S. Truman quarantine center in Key West, Florida on November 28, 1991. The animals came from Bolivia. There were 116 in all, 10 males and 106 females. Phil Mizrahie also remembers the P2 shipment from Peru as an important suri shipment, mostly sourced from Rural Alianza and Sollocota. Andy Tillman, working out of Bolivia, Canadians Hans and Karin Buhrman, Australian Pat Viceconte, Bolivian Billy Bohrt and others also exported suris in the 1990s into North America. Suri llamas took a while longer to materialize. Many of the initial "suri llamas" were admitted *huarizo* hybrids by the persons submitting them to ILR screening, but some of the suri llamas had all the phenotype characteristics of llamas, including llama size. The first suri llamas came through quarantine stations controlled by the aforementioned importers.

#### THE FORMATION OF BREED ASSOCIATIONS

While importations were underway attempts to organize llama breeders into a cohesive organization took on more importance. There were many issues. How can a lineage be verified? What should be done with animals that appeared to be *huarizos* (llama/alpaca crosses)? What should be done about importation and disease questions? By 1985 the llama community had developed two national organizations the Llama Association of North America (LANA) and the International Llama Association (ILA). These organizations were primarily involved in education, research and lobbying the USDA on disease questions with the hope of slowing down or stopping the tide of imported llamas. Often imported llamas were both purchased at extraordinarily high prices and condemned for eroding the market by the very people who bought them. ILA developed the largest following during the heyday of llama prices in the late 1980s and early 1990s but the organization lost its focus and did not adapt to changing times. By 1996 ILA was sinking fast. Key personalities became embroiled in bitter debates on issues such as who would control the registry. The fall off in membership, due to attrition and sluggish recruitment of new members, occurred rapidly. A focus on political issues and alignments overshadowed the needs of new owners to learn about basic husbandry and animal management. Owners discovered their regional groups could offer helpful seminars for a lower cost than what was being offered by ILA. These newcomers saw no reason to continue with a national organization focused



*Cecile Champagne was the editor of Alpacas!, the first publication entirely for alpaca owners. It was published 1986 to 1989, until AOBA launched a magazine. Alpacas! is the publication of record for much of the beginning years of the North American alpaca business. Cecile was also the Alpaca Corner editor for Llama Life for a number of years.*

on international matters and personality driven issues that seemed remote to their needs. Regional groups and the different national entities such as ALSA and ILR valued their autonomy and didn't come to ILA's rescue. After ILA's collapse many of the regional groups lived on. A few ILA regional groups have survived until today and continue to prosper. Two good examples of this are the Willamette Valley Llama Association which works closely with Oregon State University, and the Greater Appalachian Llama Association (GALA) in New England, which still has llama and alpaca owners belonging to the same organization and boasts a large active membership. Of the national breed associations only the more down-home LANA survived and is with us today. Andy Tillman was ILA's first elected President and Fred Bauer was LANA's first President.

With alpacas, which did not arrive in North America in substantial numbers until 1984, the organizational development came a little later and went in a different direction. Cecile Champagne was the editor of *Alpacas!* the first publication solely serving alpaca breeders in North America. The publication ran from November 1986 until spring 1989 and was replaced by *Alpacas Magazine*. The original *Alpacas!* contains the names, activities and

advertisements of the earliest alpaca owners, some of them long gone and some very much still in evidence: CODI, Pet Center, Cecile Champagne, Ted Chepolis, Phil and Chris Switzer, Eric Hoffman, Dan Milton Judy McKeon, Jack and Dee Myers, Wayne and Eileen Ausland, Susan Stackhouse, Joan Spiers, Jim Faiks, Eileen Newcomb, Ralph Uber, Diane Longo, Lyn Gattari, Tim Talbot, Vicki Arns and Ron Brennan are constants. The list of owners did not expand appreciably from this group until 1988 and 1989 at the time AOBA was formed. During these beginning years there was a steady flow of alpaca information in *Llama Life's* alpaca corner written by Cecile Champagne, and the "All About Alpacas" column in *Llamas* magazine, for which I was responsible. After functioning as a loosely formed Alpaca Committee within ILA under the chairmanship of Ted Chepolis and Tim Talbot (1986-87), AOBA held its first elections and adopted a constitution and by-laws in 1987. I returned from a journalism assignment in Australia to find myself elected the first president of AOBA along with AOBA's first ever board members Harry Goulder, Diane Longo, Phil Switzer and Susan Stackhouse. I served two terms as President as did Steve Knoblock who followed me when the second elected AOBA president "resigned after a controversy over the use of AOBA's business office to gain exclusive access to persons inquiring about alpacas" according to a 1991 *Llama Life* article. This incident also resulted in replacing the management company Bostrum and hiring new managers, Ken and Marsha Hobert of Estes Park, Colorado, who ran AOBA's affairs very ably from 1991 until 2003. Steve Knoblock's quiet but steady management style helped build trust in AOBA.

## THE REGISTRIES

In 1985 with imports underway there became a pressing need to organize a registry for llamas. To establish a registry meant the LANA, ILA and Patterson herd studbook (which contained about 3000 llamas in 1986) needed to agree on operating rules for a single registry. There was much wrangling about how to identify animals, how to ensure a lineage was accurate and where to store the registry information. A Joint Governance Committee was formed to come up with a workable solution. Attorney and Llama Life publisher Terry Price successfully chaired the meetings. An independent single registry, known as the International Lama Registry (ILR) would be the registry for animals belonging to all three groups, but the issues of lineage verification and animal identification were still not resolved.

## BLOOD TYPING FOR CAMELIDS CREATES OPPORTUNITY FOR STATE-OF-THE-ART REGISTRIES

In 1987, at the annual LANA Conference, there was a brief announcement that doctoral candidate Cecilia Torres Penedo from the Veterinary Genetics Laboratory at UC Davis had developed a blood typing system for camelids that could accurately determine the parentage of a llama. This form of parentage verification had existed for other forms of livestock, but not for camelids. Its development changed the focus of the debate on how to best develop a camelid registry. In general, livestock registries that rely on the memory of a person to recount breeding records, are fraught with accuracy and credibility problems that worsen with time. In some cases



*Dr. M. Cecilia Torres Penedo from UC Davis Veterinary Genetics Laboratory is the person most responsible for developing blood typing as a means to verify lineage in camelids. Dr. Penedo's work made it possible to create the Alpaca Registry, the first camelid registry to require scientific verification for all offspring to registered parents.*

"fill-in-the-blank registries" are more to do with the image of having a registry than maintaining an accurate record of lineages. Whereas registries requiring mandatory scientific verification (be it blood typing or genetic fingerprinting) are considered credible for lineage verification and scientific studies. Scientific verification (first through blood typing/ later through DNA fingerprinting) took the human error (both accidental and purposeful) out of lineage verification. Unfortunately for the llama business in the U.S. blood typing/DNA testing never became mandatory. Today the International Lama Registry boasts 163,460 llamas with only 22,920 of them blood typed.

The Canadian Llama and Alpaca Association (CLAA) was formed in 1989. The CLAA screened both llamas and alpacas until December 31, 2001, using ARI screeners. As of December 31, 2005 there were 16,373 alpacas and 14,307 llamas registered with the CLAA. The CLAA does not know how many of these animals are double-registered with the CLAA and ARI or the ILR.

## ALPACA REGISTRY SETS A NEW STANDARD

Luckily for today's alpaca owners, breeders were just beginning to organize and there were no entrenched factions in 1988-89 when efforts to create a national registry were put into motion. There

were roughly 600 alpacas in North America and less than a dozen people owned most of them. In 1988 I was serving as the first elected President of AOBAs and had strong feelings about separating the llama and alpaca gene pools in North America. Susan Stackhouse and I had been in on initial discussions with UC Davis with friends attempting to make a scientifically verifiable llama registry. As soon as I understood how blood typing worked I saw it as more than a method to verify lineage. I also saw it as a way to isolate a population and a means to conduct meaningful research and control the quality of animals entering the registry.

Given a compelling reason, it was likely that alpaca owners would join together to create a registry and thus commit the "starter stock" which would allow ensuing generations to claim a science based pedigree. That compelling reason turned out to be the threat of crossbreeding alpacas to llamas. As a few troubling reports of llama breeders using alpaca males, "to put more wool on their llamas" circulated, alpaca owners became a tad edgy. This kind of thing could erode their market and marginalize both llamas and alpacas.

A second issue was a need to designate alpacas as authentic regardless of their country of origin. A small but tenacious group of alpaca owners instituted marketing techniques designed to downgrade the competition, labeling alpacas originating in Europe (English alpacas and their progeny) or anyplace other than where their stock came from as inferior and not possessing "true blood." Squabbles among breeders based solely on origin, with the absence of any soundness or fiber criteria, proved to be destructive to the fledgling alpaca business. The "importance of origin argument" persists to this day, despite the fact that objective screening of

thousands of alpacas from Chile, Peru and Bolivia has proven that both good quality and sub par alpacas can be found in all populations.

As a solution to the problems of crossbreeding (*huarizos*) and discrimination based solely on the country of origin, the idea of a species-specific registry began to take shape. Central to the registry design would be protection of the alpaca gene pool from dilution from closely related species by identifying which animals were alpacas, followed by establishing bloodlines in this population. The registry was, by design, nondiscriminatory toward different bloodlines and origin. Its purpose was to document the lineage of each alpaca and eliminate the possibility of non-alpaca progenitors.

Susan Stackhouse and I went about making a registry with the encouragement of Dr. Penedo and Murray Fowler DVM. (At this time UC Davis was one of the preeminent universities in camelid research in the U.S., thanks largely to Dr. Fowler's efforts). In the fall 1988 issue of *Alpacas!* the published board notes of the first AOBAs meeting at Shanty Creek, Michigan outlines my intention to write a registry and how I thought blood-typing would be used to assure integrity. The BOD approved the ensuing registry unanimously shortly after I wrote it.

Both Susan and I had already blood-typed many of our animals to help Dr. Penedo establish blood type markers. After studying half a dozen livestock registries we decided to base our registry's organizational design on that of the Morgan Horse Registry (which we were granted permission to use). Though the table of contents of the horse registry and the emergent alpaca registry are similar, their contents are very different. The horse registry is breed-of-horse registry that goes into

minute detail describing a Morgan horse, which is one breed out of a vast multitude of breeds belonging to the *Equidae* family. It is a registry with a narrow focus, much like some dog registries. We needed to deal with the alpaca in general (species) terms and be explicit that camelids suspected of possessing guanaco or llama genetics could not be registered. The horse registry model allowed embryo transfer (ET) and artificial insemination (AI) and did not have stringent requirements regarding blood-typing of both parents, which struck me as inadequate for our purposes. After considering artificial insemination and embryo transfer I decided to exclude them entirely because the technology did not then exist for alpacas and there was no telling how responsibly it would be used if it were developed. I felt AI and ET should only be made part of the registry if they were thoroughly studied and voted on by the full registry membership.

The draft Alpaca Registry required all animals to be blood-typed and only offspring whose blood analysis proved them compatible with both registered parents, were eligible for registration. This disallowed the possibility that one parent could be a llama because without both parents being registered the offspring would not qualify. Susan and I were aware of registries in which only the stud is blood typed and the dam is not (for example, today's Australian alpaca registry), but felt without blood-typing both parents the probability for unwanted crosses was too great a possibility in North America with its large llama population. When I finished the registry document, it was circulated and edited by Susan and Cecile Champagne. I also went over the main points with Dr. Cecilia Penedo. It was approved unanimously by the AOBAs BOD made up of me (as President),

Harry Goulder, Phil Switzer, Susan Stackhouse, and Diane Longo. The membership later approved it with 94% affirming the board's decision.

Three more steps were necessary for the fledgling registry to succeed. First, we needed to sell the registry to the owners of the largest herds. We realized if one of the large import groups balked we'd be in trouble. For extra incentive we allowed all resident alpacas to be registered for 90 days and after that time all candidate animals would have to undergo screening to be admitted. The registry would close on March 30, 1989. Selling the registry was easy. In one day with three phone calls three of the four largest entities joined the registry: Tom Hunt and Jurgen Schulz (CODI), Anthony Stackhowski DVM, and Ralph Uber MD. Phil Mizrahie listened to my pitch and said he'd think about it. I called him again and he agreed to join. When I contacted Phil for this article he recalled his thoughts, "When you called me I was skeptical at first. I made you convince me. The plan made good sense. It protected our animals and gave them pedigrees. It was a big step forward for all of us." Once the "big four" were committed the breeders with just a few animals quickly joined. The registry boat was leaving the dock and everyone wanted to be on it. We had close to 100% compliance when the registry's open period ended on March 30, 1989.

Next we needed a place to house the registry and issue certificates. After reviewing several options we decided on the ILR because they were already in the business of registering camelids and joining them would save processing costs for both organizations. One option we passed on was Craig Rous, a computer savvy alpaca owner living in Davis. With the help of ILR President Terry Price we negotiated an agreement with the ILR, which allowed the alpaca registry to work

autonomously with its own elected board, and have the right to levy surcharges on animals entering the registry. Remaining somewhat autonomous proved critical in the years to come when subsequent ILR BODs were less than cooperative with the original agreement. During these years there were three Alpaca Registry representatives elected from the ranks of registered alpaca owners. These representatives served on what was known as the Alpaca Registry Screening Committee (ARSC). After several years with the ILR the alpaca registry bought its independence from the ILR, incorporated with its original name the Alpaca Registry Inc. and continued to register alpacas using the ILR offices and UC Davis's Veterinary Genetics Laboratory to verify lineages. This change in the organization's status did not interrupt or alter the basic registration procedure for the rank-and-file owner. The lab at UC Davis and ARI's administrator at the ILR, Dar Wassink created a system that was fast and accurate.

The last part of the registry's purpose was to define its geographic region as North America. In the original registry document geography is designated as the "North American gene pool," not just the United States. I was sensitive to the fact Canadians had been part of the alpaca business from its inception. In fact, Margaret Brewster, whose farm is near Calgary in Alberta Canada served as President of ARI when it changed its status from a semi-autonomous committee (ARSC) in the ILR to an independent organization with full autonomy (ARI). Even though the Canadian government mandates a separate registry for both llamas and alpacas in Canada, Canadians have belonged to both the ILR and ARI from their earliest day, which entitles

them to the same market and gene pool as registry members in the United States. It is a North American, not national registry.

### SCREENING

The new registry automatically registered crias whose blood samples qualified them. The procedure for unregistered imported animals was a different story. Anthony Stachowski DVM, serving as board member in 1992, was the first to draw up a screening form for unregistered camelids whose owners wanted them in the registry. Dr. Stachowski's ten point check list was a start. It identified some undesirable traits, but wasn't as comprehensive as the later ARI screening forms that have been used from 1995 until today by many alpaca registries around the world. These forms were developed from a series of meetings held at the University of California School of Veterinary Medicine and Oregon State University.



Brad Smith DVM, PhD screens an alpaca in Bolivia. More than 25,000 alpacas worldwide have been screened by various registries prior to exportation. Animals that didn't pass screening are left in country of origin.

David Schieferstein and I wrote *The Alpaca Registry Screening Manual*, much of which came directly from *The Alpaca Book*, written by Murray Fowler DVM and me. We also worked with a board-appointed advisory committee of Jerry Forstner, Maggie Krieger, and Jim Schmidt, which David Schieferstein and I co-chaired. This committee approved all screening related matters recommended to the BOD.

Screening is an objective method of evaluating an alpaca in three areas: 1) phenotypic characteristics common to alpacas 2) structural soundness with the absence of overt congenital defects and 3) fiber quality. A two-tier system was adopted making use of two classifications of screeners: the veterinary screener and the phenotype screener. The former worked from a two-page checklist and could disqualify an animal if any of a long list of defects (cataracts, heart murmur, defective testicles, extra teats, slight mandible deviation, severe leg defects, etc.) were

found. The phenotype screener was responsible for weighing, measuring and identifying each alpaca and assessing its phenotypic characteristics, body score, fiber density and properly taking and labeling a fiber sample for lab analysis. The phenotype screener also deducted points for mild and moderate structural defects not severe enough to cause immediate elimination by the veterinary screener. The point system totaled the phenotype screener's examination of the animal (55 points) with the fiber results (45 points). If the animal scored less than 80 points it did not qualify and was left in the country where it was screened. It is important to state that we screened thousands of animals from many different regions in Bolivia, Chile, Peru and Australia. In all of these groups and their subgroups we identified very sound animals with no point deductions and in all of these groups we disqualified animals with unacceptable faults.

The system worked well. Candidates were trained, tested and



Screening team poses for a picture. From left to right: James Ames DVM, Brad Smith PhD, DVM, Karen Timm PhD, DVM (in front) Eric Hoffman, Margaret Brewster and Linda Carpenter DVM. Drs. Ames and Carpenter are USDA veterinarians overseeing the shipment of alpacas from Bolivia. They are responsible for testing the animals and securing the quarantine. Drs. Smith and Timm make up the veterinarian team of screeners, while Eric Hoffman and Margaret Brewster are the phenotype screeners. Margaret Brewster is the only Canadian to have been President of ARI. In the particular importation they screened nearly 500 alpacas and disqualified 50 of them. In all, more than 7,000 alpacas were screened for the U.S. market and more than 3,500 for Canada. Worldwide, about 25,000 alpacas have been screened prior to exportation. Six registries have relied on screening.

had to undergo an apprentice period before they were qualified to be screeners. The first training for screeners took place at Oregon State University. About one half of the screener candidates did not finish the program or finished but didn't qualify. Screeners came from the United States, Canada and Australia. ARI screeners operated under a clearly stated conflict of interest code, much stricter than any in effect today. They always worked in teams of two to four depending on the size of the import. The screeners were Margaret Brewster (Canadian), Bill Calder DVM (Canadian), Craig Dorin DVM (Canadian), Lavona Fercho (Canadian), Murray Fowler DVM, Paul Jones DVM, Eric Hoffman, Jim Leech DVM, Pat Long DVM, Ty McConnell DVM, Ewen McMillan MVB, MRCVS (Australian), Denis Ryan MVB, MRCVS (Australian), Brad Smith DVM, Phil Switzer and Karen Timm DVM. Veterinary screeners were paid \$1000 per day and phenotype screeners were paid \$500 per day, a rate set by the ARI board made up of Margaret Brewster, Mike Safley and Jim Schmidt. In a day, screening at a rate of 80 animals a day a screening team would make \$40,000 a day for the registry, or \$200,000 in a five day screening.

When screening ended for ARI in 1998 many of screeners continued to work in South America for overseas registries. The United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Sweden, Germany, Switzerland, Chile, and even the Peruvian government used the screening forms developed for ARI either in their entirety or partially. The Australian Alpaca Association used much of the form for their Stud Certification Program.

These forms have been used around

the world. Undoubtedly screening improved the quality of exported founder stock. Phil Mizrahi: "Screening fees cost us [importers] a lot of money but it was worth it. We realized every disqualified animal represented a financial loss. We learned the screening forms and pre-screened our animals. We sent fiber samples to Yocum-McColl before the screeners arrived. This way we knew exactly where we stood. At the end of the day the quality of animals being exported was much better than it would've been." Bill Barnett: "At first I saw screening as invasive and I wasn't all that cooperative or happy about it. But, once I saw it applied and understood it, I became convinced it is a good tool. It is a guarantee to the person receiving an animal."

Approximately 25,000 alpacas have been screened by ARI trained screeners worldwide, 7,687 for ARI, 3,500 for the Canada (CLAA). Screening raised a great deal of money (approximately 3.5 million) for ARI with a screening fee of \$500 per animal. This money was used to fund *The Alpaca Registry Journal* (a peer reviewed science publication with no advertising that went to every ARI member as a part of their membership) AOA's marketing effort, and helped fund the Alpaca Research Foundation's (ARF) initial research projects.

### REGISTRY CLOSURE

**D**uring the first ten years of the registry most members of the BOD did not entertain the idea of entirely closing the registry to imported animals. It was generally believed that total closure



*Nel Vickers and Tom Hunt rejoice after the first large Peruvian Alpaca sale held at the Vickers' ranch in Wisconsin.*

might result in lawsuits due to violation of antitrust laws. This perception would change. By 1998 ARI was screening approximately 500 to 1000 alpacas a year into an ARI population of about 30,000 alpacas. The majority of the BOD (I was one) believed that screening standards could be made more demanding if we needed to slow the flow of inbound animals. Indeed, many alpaca owners supported screening as a way to curb importation, more than for any other reason.

However, thoughts of using screening as a gatekeeper and genetic additive went out the window when board President Mike Safley launched a mailing campaign for total registry closure. He launched a referendum which was a total surprise to the majority of the ARI board of director and thus circumvented the board process. The board majority sought specialized legal counsel on the legal issues concerning

total closure. Was it legal? It took a couple of weeks to find a top anti-trust litigator and meet with him. The legal opinion was ambiguous and did not give the board a definitive answer. Under some circumstances closure might be challengeable, but in other circumstances it was not challengeable. According to our legal expert, the fact that the services provided by the registry could be duplicated by another registry, a not yet created entity, undercut much of the anti-trust argument that had existed, but not all of it. If the aggrieved entity was financially unable to create a like registry, such a party might have a cause of action. Meanwhile the public campaign led by Mike Safley, Jerry and Libby Forstner, Greg

Mecklum, Ken Madl and others gained momentum. New mailings, rationales and legal opinions on closure arrived in the mailboxes of alpaca owners throughout the US. The volume of paper arriving made the mail received in an average congressional campaign look puny in comparison. The board mustered an opinion published in *The Alpaca Registry Journal* that was signed by board members Tilly Dorsey, Robbie Guidry, Eric Hoffman and Phil Switzer explaining what closure met to the registry and AOA in terms of financial ramifications. The board was besieged by angry and sometimes threatening communications by alpaca owners wanting total closure. The board's position was to allow the importation of 300 animals a year, which we saw as a number that would allow the infusion of fresh genetic material without negatively impacting the market. We also felt that the \$150,000 in screening revenue from

screening 300 animals annually would be sorely needed for ARI. This board position went nowhere. The referendum won handily, defeating the board position of 300 animals annually in favor of total closure.

Closure was not immediate. The referendum allowed for a grace period of months, which allowed importers to collect animals and import them in the period after closure was approved. This resulted in 3,000 animals (about 750 were in the import pipeline when the closure referendum was initiated) being imported in a single year, about 40% of the total number of animals screened for ARI and a number it would've taken ten years to achieve had the board proposal of 300 annually won. The result was that everyone with the desire and means to stockpile animals to sell into a captive market did so. The Canadian and Australian registries followed ARI's lead and closed their registries. In time the Australian Alpaca Association reopened its registry and it remains open. The Canadian registry has remained closed, meaning the entire North American continent will not accept candidate animals into their registry no matter what qualities they have. More than 90% of alpacas living in the world today don't belong to a registry of any kind.

### POST CLOSURE

**S**ince registry closure the market in the United States has continued to grow. Through the use of info commercials and widespread marketing new owners have been attracted to alpacas in droves. Many of the new people have never owned livestock of any kind. There have been public sales with new record high prices and hope runs strong amongst new owners. Animal

shows are heavily relied on to justify price and quality. Closure had the desired result of making this market appear more secure.

When people curious about getting involved in alpacas and llamas ask me how long I think either the llama or alpaca markets (they are different in many ways) will continue in their present states. I say, "I don't know, but I've enjoyed owning these camelids for 30 years and I plan on owning them the rest of my life." I then ask some questions. "What attracted you to alpacas or llamas?" "What are your expectations?" When they finish explaining their thoughts I sometimes suggest a homework assignment about the nature of the business. Is the alpaca or llama business's infrastructure healthy? For example, is the discourse on the Alpaca Chat line civilized or something else? I suggest assessing the level of professionalism of those running the breed and show associations, especially on issues to do with conflict of interest, the willingness of those in leadership roles to provide educational forums with leading experts with diverse viewpoints. Is there a clear commitment to democratic processes, or is something else going on?

I offer the perspective of time. I have been telling newcomers that for more than ten years the turnaround on a registrations for both ARI and the ILR submission was usually two to three weeks and the process was efficient and accurate. I suggest that they phone some animal owners who have been in the business for eight years or longer and ask them to compare the quality of the registry's performance today with what it used to be? The ILR hasn't changed much, but the ARI serology laboratory was changed twice in a year as were the data management entities for the Registry.

When it comes to commitment to democratic process I again offer the perspective of time. I explain that ARI used to allow all members of registered alpacas automatic access to the ballot box on issues of registry-wide importance. However, after the board initiated vote to merge ARI with AOBA failed because ARI members voted not to do it, the board instituted a poll fee soon after. Critics of the board feel this was done to depress the vote in future elections. The last time I checked in 2003 the poll tax had been effective. There were more than 5000 members of ARI but only 1,900 of them were registered to vote, meaning only 950 (less than 19 percent) can constitute a majority.

For anybody entering the world of camelids on this continent the quality of the process should matter because in the end it influences the bottom line. For ARI or the ILR the questions are the same. Is the registry responsive, stable, easy to use, and efficient? What is the turn around time for a registration? Is the turn around measured in weeks, months, years, or maybe not at all? Is the information on the certificate accurate? Is the data safe?

We then move on to fiber, the medium of the show ring and the end product of all camelids. The newcomer has often heard things about fiber. Many of the llama people often don't realize there is value in their fiber, especially if they breed for fiber quality. Llamas are generally two-coated but there are single coated llamas with low microns, and the undercoat on some two coated llamas is very fine and even. To the alpaca people I say do a reality check on what you may think you know. Visit a couple of mini-fiber mills and ask them about processing fiber and what you need to invest to make your fleeces into yarn



*The Silversmith, owned by Tom Hunt and Jurgen Schulz, became a legendary sire from the second importation into the United States in 1988.*

and what kind of financial return to expect. With regard to finished yarns or rovings, find out who will buy what and for what price and at what prices do baby quality yarns sell compared to coarser yarns. Getting answers to these questions is often harder than one would expect.

Lastly, I suggest finding out about research. Is there an ongoing investment in science-based animal husbandry and improvement, like that found in other types of livestock? Who is funding research? Are the pressing issues being funded? For llama breeders this means checking in with the groups (mostly regional) that still fund research. With alpacas it means checking out regional projects and the Alpaca Research Foundation ([alpaca-research.com](http://alpaca-research.com)). The Alpaca

Research foundation is unique in its professional structure and in how the organization goes about its peer review process to responsibly fund research projects that will help all alpaca owners. I suggest to the newcomer that they check out one of the studies ARF commissioned such as "Fiber Characteristics of the Huacaya Fiber" by Christopher Lupton PhD, Angus McColl, and Robert Stobart PhD. This first of its kind technical paper spells out the characteristic parameters of alpaca fiber. The paper has been reviewed and accepted by the *Small Ruminant Journal*. It can be downloaded by accessing the website [www.sciencedirect.com](http://www.sciencedirect.com).

Usually most newcomers, once they are made aware of the existing organizations and how they perform their roles, conclude that some organizations are more helpful than others. Currently, The Alpaca Research Foundation leads the way in this regard. Human behavior aside, camelids will always be a wonderfully designed and noble group of animals, that have out-lived all human organizations thus far, including the might Inca Empire, the Conquistadors and animal promoters of all kinds.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Eric Hoffman is the primary author THE COMPLETE ALPACA BOOK, Revised Second Edition. He has written articles on camelids since 1979 that have appeared in leading nature and conservation magazines, plus trade publications. He also helped open the national parks to llamas, wrote the Alpaca Registry and was AOBA's first elected President. He served on registry boards for seven years and has helped develop animal registries in several countries. He often works overseas screening alpacas for export from South America to other parts on the globe.*