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Raids find friendly, gentle alpacas a perfect fit

By Ron Johnson, Dairy Editor

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The roots of Frank and Jean Raids' herd don't reach across the Atlantic to the homes of the Holsteins, Jerseys, Guernseys and all the rest of the familiar dairy breeds.

Instead, the ancestors of their stock roamed the mountains of South America. Welcome to Sugar Creek Alpacas, where a dozen of these cousins to camels breathe new life into the old, stone-founded barn.

"They're a unique animal n very, very gentle. I have seven grandchildren. What's a farm without animals?" Frank, a retired Chicago businessman, asks.

The Raids purchased their country place in Walworth County, near Elkhorn, 41 years ago. It was intended as a place to teach their children about rural life and get them "out of the city" once in awhile, Frank recalls. At the same time, Frank and Jean wanted a place to retire to. The alpacas fit into the picture as a hobby and business to fill time and provide daily motivation.

"I've got something to do all the time," Frank says. Contemporaries of mine that I play golf with feel old; they're depressed; if the sun doesn't shine, they don't know what to do. Having the alpacas creates a need, so I have to be out there every morning. I have to feed them and take care of them.

"It brings my wife and I into contact with other breeders," he adds. "We go to shows, seminars. We're both involved in the upgrading of the animals."

Frank is accustomed to keeping busy. He ran the family business of remanufacturing truck parts, selling it to move to southeast Wisconsin.

It was 2004 when Frank and Jean bought their first alpaca, a smaller relative of llamas. He found an alpaca website and became intrigued by the "investment opportunities." Alpacas seemed like a good fit, since the Raids already had farm buildings and 40 acres. One acre of pasture, Frank says, can comfortably accommodate seven alpacas.

Most of Frank's golfing buddies were not as enthused about the alpaca business as he was. Frank says that when he told them about his new business venture, "Everybody laughed. They thought it was a big joke."

Frank and Jean are the ones laughing now. After buying four alpacas in partnership with a friend, the Raids are up to 13 animals now. Jean has since bought out the original partner and the couple is busy upgrading its registered herd.

That means breeding for quality of fiber. Alpaca fiber is measured in microns. One micron is a millionth of a meter. To put that into perspective, a human hair is approximately 100 microns thick.

Alpaca breeders are after fiber much thinner than that n just 20 microns thick. The finer the fiber, the smaller the "prickle," or "itch" factor. Clothing made from very fine alpaca fiber is extremely comfortable and can be worn right against the skin, Frank says.

"The goal of the alpaca business is to breed what they call a "20/20" alpaca," he explains. "The fiber is 20 microns or less and the alpaca produces 20 pounds. Nobody's there yet, but everybody's trying."

But the industry is getting "very close" to reaching that goal, according to Frank. Trouble is, as an alpaca ages, its fiber tends to grow coarser.

By contrast, a baby alpaca n called a "cria," from the Spanish word for "crying" n can produce fiber a mere 17.5 microns wide.

"The trick is to get an alpaca that's 3 or 4 years old and get it to stay at 20 microns," Frank says. Taking an alpaca to 1 and 2 years old while keeping the fiber fine is relatively easy, "But as soon as they get 3 and 4 and 5 years old, the microns go higher and higher," he adds.

Frank and Jean are breeding their alpacas to get fiber that's 20 microns or thinner "consistently" and for a longer time. Selecting a good stud can play a large role.

When contemplating whether to use a particular male alpaca on their females, the Raids and other breeders look at the results of a skin biopsy. This histogram tells them the thickness of the male's hair follicles n both the primary and secondary hairs.

The primary hairs are the thicker and outer guard hairs. The secondary hairs are those that lie underneath and are finer.

A histogram also provides other information about an animal's fiber. There are numbers for the standard deviation, comfort factor, and staple length at shearing.

An example of the Raids' breeding philosophy is to pair a female that grows 23-micron fiber with a young male that has 20-micron hair. The hoped-for result might be an offspring that has 21-micron fiber when it's 2 years old. With more breeding like that, the goal is to gradually lower the thickness of the next generation's fiber.

"Of course, there's a lot more involved in the genetics of an animal than fineness of fiber," Frank points out. Hair density, curliness and length also need to be considered.

Factors other than genetics can affect an alpaca's hair. "Climate can make a big difference," Frank notes. He has also found that what alpacas eat can affect their coats.

For example, Frank recently switched from a feed that had "a lot of molasses in it" to one that is "pure minerals and vitamins." After about a month on the new feed, the fiber diameter on some of his alpacas had shrunk.

"It looks great," Frank says. "But I need another year of data."

Not all of an alpaca's fiber is the best for weaving fine-threaded fabrics. The best is from the "blanket" n the area a saddle would cover. Fiber from the neck and legs, by contrast, is "very coarse," Frank says.

That means alpaca farmers are paid a premium for the finer hair. Fiber less than 27 microns thick might sell for \$3 a pound, while that above 27 microns might fetch \$2 a pound.

Frank says he and other breeders hope the prices will rise, once a market for alpaca products becomes better established. He points out that Pendleton n known for its wool products n has started buying alpaca fiber, so that's a promising sign.

Items made from alpaca fiber possess advantages other than a lack of prickliness. Frank says the hair is "seven times warmer than wool and has a hollow fiber that wicks away moisture." The best alpaca garments are often marketed as "as good as cashmere," he adds.

Alpacas have been in the U.S. about 25 years, Frank estimates. That means the market for breeding stock has changed. No longer are people mainly focused on building the sizes of their herds. Now the focus is on breeding for fine fiber.

"We currently have three babies that were down to 17.3 microns," Frank notes. But Emerald's fiber is now at 19.3 microns, while Scooter's measures 20.6 and Sunnybrook's averages 20.3.

These South American imports are generally easy to tend. Frank and Jean deworm theirs, vaccinate them regularly, have the hooves trimmed, and shear the animals once a year. They also take some to shows and try to attend at least two educational seminars a year.

An adult alpaca stands about 4 feet at the shoulder and weighs about 170 pounds. The average life is 21 years. Crias average 17 pounds and are born after a gestation of 11.5 months.

Unlike llamas, alpacas do not make good guard animals. "They're totally defenseless," Frank says.

Well, maybe not totally. Alpacas can n and will n spit. That happens if they don't want to be caught or haltered, or if they are afraid n perhaps during shearing.

"Ooh! They spit terrible!" Frank exclaims. "Foul. It's really foul!"

Spitting aside, Frank says Jean and he are having a great time with their alpacas. He says, "The more we get into it, the more fun we're having."

Alpaca Days

People wanting more information about alpacas, including a visit to an alpaca farm, are invited to the Raids' Sugar Creek Alpacas the weekend of Sept. 25 and 26. They are among about a dozen Wisconsin breeders participating in National Alpaca Days.

Contact Frank at 262-742-3799; e-mail info@sugarcreek-alpacas.com. The farm's website is: <http://www.sugarcreek-alpacas.com>. For names and locations of more farms participating in National Alpaca Days in Wisconsin and across the U.S., go to: <http://www.NationalAlpacaFarmDays.com>.