

The Evolution of the Alpaca Industry by Cindy Lavan, Chase Tavern Farm

I woke up the other day to realize that I was not a passive breeder of livestock, but a conduit through which an industry is building. Going into our 11th year of breeding alpacas, we have seen the industry change and turn in different directions. The one thing that has emerged from all the twists and turns over the past years is the fact that the alpaca industry has a strong hold in the United States and is becoming a flourishing, thriving industry.

Whether it be in a livestock trade or a fiber trade, the evolution of the alpaca and its associated business are growing becoming more widely accepted and recognized. I have to tell you honestly, we when began years ago, it was a chore to explain over and over again the justification of what I was doing to any person I would meet – a passenger on an airplane, while waiting for the car to be serviced...wherever. It was almost as if I didn't want to tell anyone what my husband and I had persued as a business for ourselves and our family in fear of being considered - a. a person who throws away money, b. a target for animal welfare and rights groups and/or c. a raging lunatic.

Now, that's all changed. Alpacas and the industry that has been 'criated' in the United States has reached a new stage and considered no different in the livestock world as another mainstay and growing industry. When meeting and talking with breeders of other livestock, I do not feel as if I am different, but equal to them in my goals for wishing to achieve a stronger and healthier industry. Growth of the alpaca industry from husbandry to fiber will remain steady as long as we continue to build on the quality and improve generation to generation. This concept is no different than if we were breeding dogs, cattle or even birds.

I was a Board of Director the national association, AOBA from 1995 to 1997 and then served as Chairperson for the national marketing efforts of the association. I remember clearly having a multitude of discussions related not only to marketing our industry and attracting new and interested people to the business, but how great it will be to one day elevate the fiber side of the industry and build in a new direction. While attending the first newly named 'Winter Nationals' in Las Vegas last year as a speaker, it hit me while sitting down for lunch. Not only was I a livestock breeder, I was in the fashion industry as well. A friend who is a breeder in PA approached me and asked, "How does it feel to see your child growing up?" At first I was a bit confused with her question as I couldn't image what prompted her to ask on the human children while watching a fashion show, but then it hit me. She was referring to the alpaca industry. The baby was growing up, not just taking baby steps but toddler sized steps for such a young industry. We all wish our children to be overachievers at everything they do in life and its amazing to see the alpaca industry achieving so strongly at such a relatively young age for any industry.

To let some of you know where we will be going as an industry over the next few years, you have to understand where we have been. Learning from our past will only ensure us a smooth and easier ride into the future.

The New England market was slow to grow based on the alpaca population in the rest of the United States. I should say western U.S. and Ohio in particular. The first alpacas imported into the U.S. came from Chile beginning in 1984. “Here come the Americans with money to spend,” the Chileans thought and we bought everything they had to offer. Most of these alpacas found homes in the U.S. in the northwestern states and the Ohio region. The first Peruvian stock did not enter the U.S until February 1994. The importing group of Camelids of Delaware, Pet Center and Stackowski Alpacas held the first sale of Peruvians in Michigan. During this time, the number in farms in the New England states were very few with only one or two farms in each state. Maine for example was home to only about 20 alpacas at two farms. This was early 1994.

As the importations continued, the quality of the alpacas improved due to screening methods developed by the Alpaca Screening Committee of AOBA. The ARI grew out of this committee into the partnering association we know today. While a part of AOBA, the committee worked to develop phenotypic screening methods to ensure the continued strength and quality of our growing national herd as importations were to continue for another 5+ years.

Importations of alpacas continued till 1998 with an average of 550 Peruvian alpacas being imported each year and another 600-900 +/- of Chilean and Bolivian origin. Some years there were no importations from Chile. The industry was growing rapidly and the marketing based more on the selling of the animal versus the use and long-term value. New farms were beginning all over the U.S. and the number of farms in New England more than doubled in one year. From roughly 300 members of AOBA in 1994, the number grew to over 600 in one year. Growing pains of an industry this young were sure to follow and they did. Many major decisions such as closure of the registry, formation of the registry as a separate entity and the development of a governmental framed fiber cooperative emerged.

With closure of the ARI (registry) to imported alpacas pending quickly, last minute numbers of alpacas were imported from all countries of origin – Chile, Bolivia and Peru by multiple groups of different importers. One of the main reasons for closure was not only the politically driven wish of association members but due to the fact the U.S.D.A was closing its main point of entry of quarantine in the U.S. due to lack of use and cost for upkeep. While importations could still continued through points up north such as Pierre-Michelon and then come in through Canada as long as accepted by the ARI for certification of parentage. No reciprocity agreement was made with the Canadian Registry (which is run by its government) with the ARI thus making that point of entry invaluable to the commerce of the industry.

With the registries closed to new bloodstock, it was up to us to build a national herd based on what we had here...older Chilean stock, newly imported Peruvian and Bolivian stock and other importees via England, Australia and Canada. The U.S. born or as I liked to call it, “melting pot alpaca” emerged. It took awhile for this alpaca to fully emerge however. Emphasis via marketing was placed on certain countries of origin being ‘better’

than others for whatever reason the messenger wished to send. Many people developed breeding programs not based on what they themselves felt important, but what the industry or market might have demanded at the time. While each country of origin has something to offer, it's the quality of the alpaca first and foremost that should be addressed. If that means breeding with a Chilean line, then so be it... a Peruvian line, then so be it or a Bolivian line, so be it. A judge in the show ring does not and can not ask what lines or countries have come into make this alpaca standing in front of them today. Quality first and foremost is the future of the industry from a breeding standpoint and a fiber emergence standpoint. This seems to be more of the 'rule of thumb' in the breeding process of today.

But there are two sides to the fiber equation and development of that side of our industry. The mainstay of the New England marketplace has been a cottage industry market for the alpaca and its fiber. As the national herd grows, we are beginning to breed for more of a commercial market – more pounds, more yarn made and more income. Which is right and which is wrong? Up to you and what you plan on doing with your fiber and business.

While the cottage industry will remain the commercial industry is what will take the word and fiber of alpaca to the mass population. With over 2 million people in Maine, less than 100 people own alpacas. Looking at those numbers means we have a long way to go for our industries – breeding and fiber.

The really neat thing is – we are taking those steps. With more and more interest in these industries comes more of a knowledge base. With lessons learned in the past, we can adapt those ideas that worked and even those that didn't work since maybe a bit ahead of the times and help re-shape and build the future.

Without question, we have been a long way since 1984. A question we get from many farm visitors because we have been around the yearly alpaca calendar a few times is "With what you have seen, will the market stay and for how long?" Well, my crystal ball will always be at the cleaners being buffed when asked this but the truth of where we have been speaks for where we might go. We are a livestock based industry that has grown solidly in a positive and successful direction for over 20 years. We are a growing fiber industry with market development and research ahead enabling us to maintain the growth of the livestock side of the trade. We are an education based community continuing to grow the knowledge base of the husbandry needs and requirements of our producing stock. We are a national industry that has emerged as one of the strongest internally supported livestock organizations in the United States and abroad.

We are alpaca owners and breeders and we are here to stay for many more years of prosperity and growth as an industry and home-based business – breeding and fiber.