



tales from The Kentucky Fiber Trail

Fall 2018



Alpaca Awesomeness at River Hill Ranch

by Sarabeth Parido

As our Tales from the Trail tour continues, we visit River Hill Ranch, located in Madison County, Kentucky. River Hill Ranch uses restoration agriculture techniques to grow "alpaca awesome" clothes. Founding rancher, Alvina Maynard, spent six years in the Air Force before switching to the Air Force Reserves and motherhood with a hefty side serving of running a business and fiber farm. Alvina chose alpacas in 2009 because they were weird and so is she (her words!).

Are you originally from Kentucky? If not, what brought you to Kentucky? If so, what is it about Kentucky that made you stay?

No; Alvina thankfully married into Kentucky. I'm originally from Southern California. I met my Clark County-native husband while serving on Active Duty. At the time, my heart belonged to Colorado. We searched for years for the perfect piece of land there that we never found, all the while visiting family in Kentucky. It wasn't long before Alvina fell for the Bluegrass, with our long growing season, rainfall, rich history, and welcoming agriculture community.

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We found the perfect piece of land within minutes of family. I am grateful for the fantastic support we have in Kentucky, from our government and education institutions to our neighborhood and visiting consumers that appreciate our products.

What do you as a producer do with your fiber (ie: send it off to a mill/process it yourself etc)?

We keep approximately 50 pounds back that we hand process ourselves or in partnership with local artisans. One example is Blue Fiber Arts' Denise Coonley: using a FeltLOOM, she creates wearable art with incredible color and texture. Alvina enjoys dye work, spinning, and weaving alongside daughter Aidyn. The rest of our clip goes to domestic manufacturing companies that can achieve greater economy of scale. The North American Suri Company is a fiber broker in St Louis; some comes back to us as fine yarns to be woven into our scarves while some gets freighted overseas to be made into fine hand-knotted rugs. The New England Alpaca Fiber Pool operates like a bank: we have an online account that tracks how much fiber we've submitted to them, which is deducted as we order finished products manufactured from it. New Era Fiber in Gallatin, TN uses 3-D CAD knitting machines to print garments from our harvest. We happily support all these American artisans and companies for the fine way they convert our harvest into the quality products we offer in our gift shop.



How much work goes into your farm and fiber production?

A ton. From spring through fall, we move electric fence, minerals, and stock tanks almost every day to keep the herd on fresh grass. This not only helps the animals, but helps the grass and soil, allowing the grass time to regenerate and cutting down on the amount of chemical de-wormers we need to combat parasites. In the winter, we throw five to eight bales of hay per day and put out straw for deep bedding. On a good day, that's the minimum. On other days, the herds break through fences/gates (we have some that can open gate latches), water freezes, invasive species start taking over our forest and fields, alpaca births need assistance, and thunderstorms send trees over fence lines. On those days we laugh through the crazy.

How much fiber knowledge did you have before starting to raise your own fiber animals?

Zero. My background is in Law Enforcement. But my passion for the environment, my children, animals, and community service, coupled with the heart of an eternal student have served me well in my fiber ranching adventures.

What was the most valuable resource for you as you were getting started?

The Suri Network. This breed association for the Suri alpaca was

invaluable in the networking and resources they provided to start on the right path. Through the conversations generated at the annual Summer Symposium, I was able to define what success looked like for my farm and how my goals fit within the national strategic goals.

If you had the chance to do it all over again, is there anything you would do differently?

I would've researched regenerative agriculture techniques extensively and would not have installed permanent fencing apart from the ranch perimeter.

If someone came to you and asked you for your best piece of advise about getting started in fiber farming, what would that be?

Don't try and do everything and don't do what everyone else is doing. As with any business, you need to figure out what your strengths and weaknesses are. Work your strengths, outsource your weaknesses, and find your niche where a demand isn't being met.

River Hill Ranch is passionate about facilitating an intimate connection with nature and reversing global warming by sequestering carbon in the soil with regenerative agriculture. They offer a variety of alpaca textile goods as well as tours, summer camp, and workshops. You



can find more alpaca awesomeness on their website, or locally at the Lexington Farmer's Market.

www.riverhillranch.us

Sarabeth Parido, is the Director of the Kentucky Sheep and Fiber Festival. She raises her own small flock of sheep in Clark County, Kentucky along with her husband and four sons. She spins and dyes her fiber into yarn and has taught knitting classes for 14 years. Sarabeth is passionate about Kentucky fiber and wants to see great things happen for Kentucky wool producers.



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