

Bob Sines – Cedar Hollow 2

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

When you want to re-order a particular variety of product, how do you ask for it? By lot number? Product name? Model number? Today we'll learn about an enterprise where customers ask for the product not by computer code or lot number, but by the name of the animal from which the product came. I'm referring to the high quality fiber produced by alpacas at Cedar Hollow Farm in rural Kansas. It's today's Kansas Profile.

As we learned last week, Bob and Nancy Sines are co-owners of Cedar Hollow Foods. One day in 1999, Nancy came to Bob and said, "Why don't we buy an alpaca?" She had read about these animals and become intrigued. Alpacas are known for their high quality fiber used for weaving into garments.

"You can buy alpacas for different purposes," Bob said. "There are pets, medium grade, and breeding stock." Bob and Nancy decided that if they were going to get into the alpaca business, they were doing to try to get top quality breeding stock and do it right. They began to research what type of alpaca to buy.

"We immersed ourselves in the alpaca business," Bob said. They drove to 22 different alpaca farms across the United States. "Nancy became an expert on bloodlines," Bob said. In 2001, they bought their first animal and produced their first baby alpaca – called a cria. Now they sell fiber, garments, and breeding stock. "One of the best things about alpacas is that they are easy to raise and care for," Bob said. "They are a joy to be around."

The trademark of the alpacas is high quality fiber for spinning and weaving. "For fine garments, cashmere and alpaca fibers mark the top of the line," Bob said. The fleece is shorn from the alpacas, cleaned and processed at various mini-mills around the country. Nancy felts, makes socks and weaves the fleece. She sells the fiber at trade shows and has a store in her home where yarn and various alpaca products are sold. Her products go to spinners and weavers guilds as well as individual spinners.

Alpaca fleece feels light and fluffy, like a cloud. The fiber from the animal's legs and underbelly used to be discarded as less desirable, but a company in Texas found a way to use that fiber for wonderful rugs.

Nancy has sold yarn as far away as Florida. Her breeding stock has been sold to practically every state from Vermont to California. For more information, go to www.cedarhollowalpacas.com.

One challenge about having alpacas in the middle of the beef belt was finding veterinarians who were trained and qualified to work with this unusual specie. Leading Kansas alpaca producers got together to create the Mid America Alpaca Foundation to help support educational and research programs in veterinary care of alpacas. This foundation works closely with the K-State College of Veterinary Medicine.

Four founding farms were part of this foundation, including Cedar Hollow Farm and Bob and Nancy Sines. Other founders came from Gardner, Paola, and the rural community of Hoyt, Kansas, population 573 people. Now, that's rural.

As Nancy's fiber inventory grew, she needed a system to keep track of the various fibers. She started identifying the fibers with the name of the animal from which it came. This became much more than just a way to identify inventory. Customers began asking for the fiber which came from a particular animal.

In other words, a spinner didn't want just any old alpaca yarn. They wanted the yarn that came from Sugar or Lena or Krystal or Top Gun. The spinners knew the alpaca which produced the particular type and quality of fiber they wanted and asked for them by name. Wow.

When you re-order a product, do you ask for it by model number? Lot number? In the case of this business, it is much more personal. Customers are asking for the alpaca fiber by name. We commend Nancy and Bob Sines – and Krystal, Lena, Kayla, and Pandi and more - for making a difference with this innovative business which is helping build the fiber of rural Kansas.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.