

AMERICAN LLAMA

**Preserving our History
Promoting our Industry**

**Issue One
August 2018**

Photo: GNLC Maven

www.llamamagazine.com

Before We Begin...

A few notes about this magazine

This edition features only the Great Northern Ranch and Swan Mountain Outfitting articles from issue one of American Llama.

To view the full issue visit:

www.llamamagazine.com

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GREAT NORTHERN RANCH

A FARM TOUR AND INTERVIEW
WITH STEVE AND SUE ROLFING

by Kyle Mumford



“I almost gelded Merlin at one point!” is one of the first things Steve Rolfin says after I have pressed the record button on my laptop. Speaking over our audible gasps Steve tells me and Jerrika, “He was big, tall, and was going to make a great packer.” This was in response to my wife Jerrika's comment that it must be nice to have enough land to keep a group of young males and watch them develop until two or three years of age.

During our long ride from Montana back to our home in southwest Washington I had time to reflect on all of the things Steve said, including the fact that he almost gelded GNLC Merlin. I came to the following conclusions that I hope to explain in the coming paragraphs: I believe him when he said he had plans to geld Merlin, and if they had gelded him I believe they would find themselves in the same position they are in today, atop the llama world with their llamas in high demand.



As we pulled up to Great Northern Ranch, a farm logo affixed to a snow-plow battered mailbox was the only clue that we were in the right place. The Rolfin home, barn, and llama herd are hidden behind rolling hills and tall trees. We drove through an open gate, over a cattle guard, and started up the long, winding gravel drive between split pine rail fences, pointing out certain llamas like Hollywood tourists on a celebrity home tour.

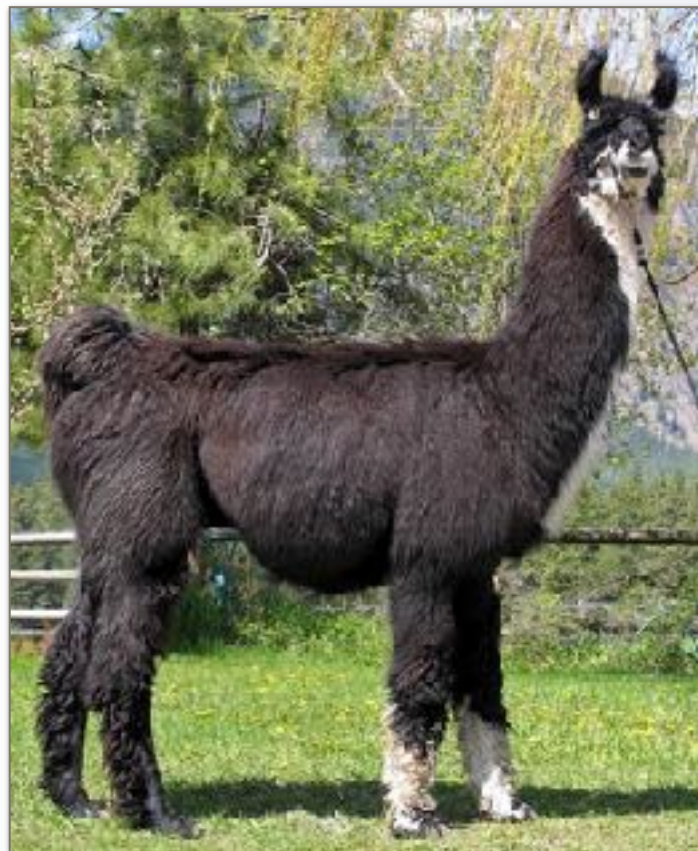
First to greet us was Maddie, a well-behaved English Springer Spaniel. Steve was close behind to shake our hands and welcome us to the ranch. Their home is a gorgeous log cabin with immaculate, but not overstated, landscaping. The lawn is peppered with mature aspens, old-growth ponderosa pine and Douglas fir, with colorful flowers and shrubs planted strategically. The house overlooks the pastures and barn from atop the gently sloping property. We haven't traveled 600 miles to admire their beautiful home, so we head toward the llamas without lingering.



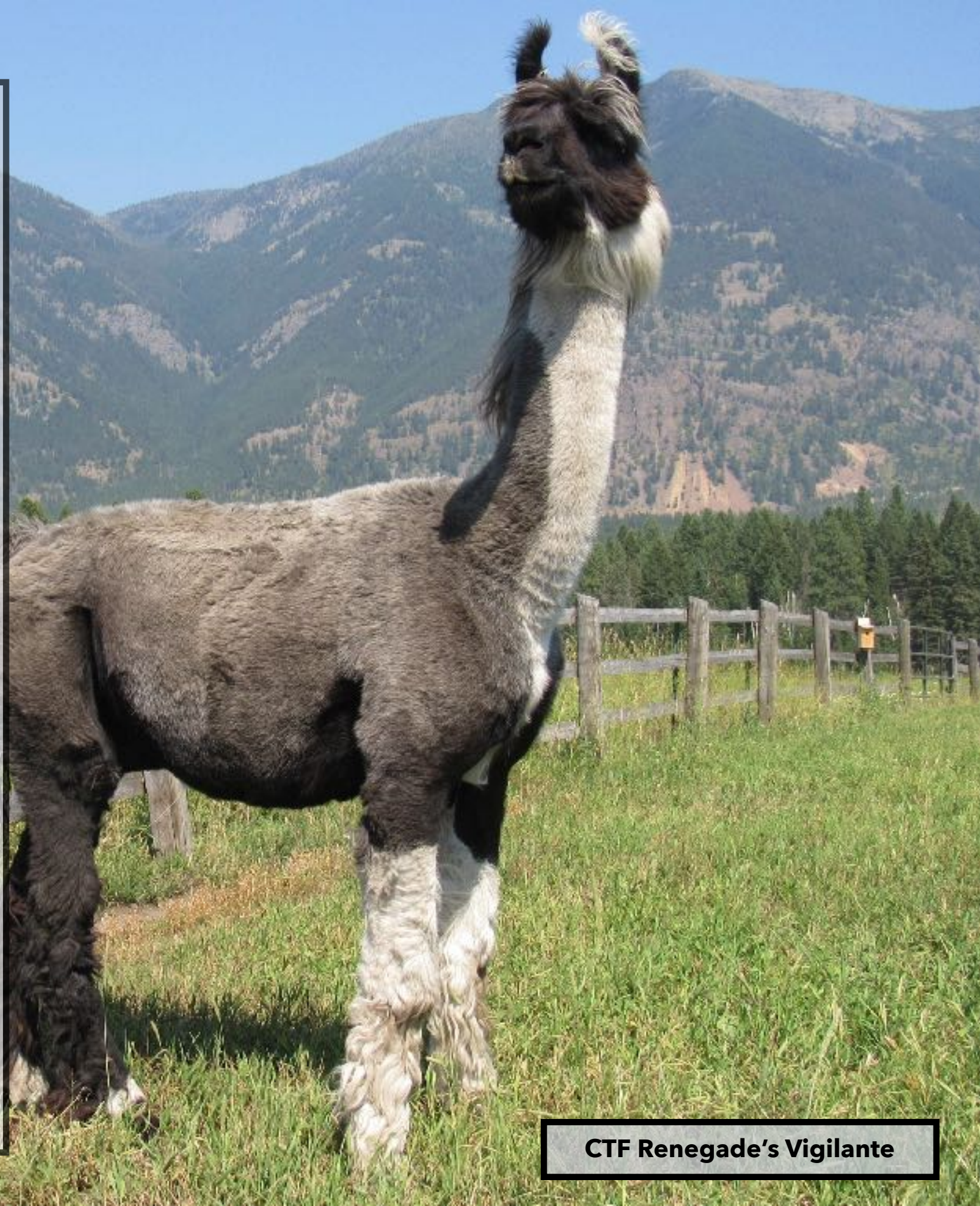
The first llama we come to is GNLC Hightower, and what a great place to start. The striking black and white suri has his neck outstretched, hoping to impress onlookers in the female field. He is athletic in build with a great top line, strong bone, and suri locks down to his lower legs. His refined face and draping suri fiber mask his true size, tricking you into thinking he's similar in size to other suris you've seen. It isn't until you walk up close that you realize how aptly named Hightower is, at 48.5" at the withers, over 400 pounds and 7 feet tall at the tips of his ears. Steve calls Hightower "the coolest animal on the planet," and he has reason to be proud of this stunning male whose bloodlines trace back to the earliest days of the Great Northern Llama Company program.



Above: GNLC Hightower **Far Left:** Hightower's Sire, GNLC Merlin.
Left: Hightower's Dam, GNLC Silver Lining



Next up was CTF Renegade's Vigilante, the other half of the Rolfings' stud lineup. Vigilante was a high-profile purchase made in partnership with Wil and Sherri Tallmon in 2017. The \$19,750 sales price has certainly been a boost to the industry, so it is fun to see the llama behind the hoopla. Vigilante is another striking paint, clearly a theme at Great Northern Ranch, with lovely silky fiber. Steve prefers suris and Sue prefers silkies, so it is fitting for them to have one breeding male of each type. Vigilante has an athletic build that fits right in with Hightower, and has exotic fiber coverage down his legs. He has a perfect head and ears with ear fringe and bangs. Vigilante was added to cross with the Rolfings' Merlin and Hightower daughters, so it will be exciting to see what that mix produces in 2019.



CTF Renegade's Vigilante

After seeing the studs we moved across the drive to the female fields. Great Northern Ranch is actually several connected properties that combine to over 240 acres. During nearly 30 years at this location, when an adjacent property has come up for sale the Rolfings have jumped at the opportunity. Seventy acres is timberland that Steve selectively logs using his forestry background, some is used for growing hay for the herd, and the rest is available to rotate the llamas between large fields. The side of the property dedicated to the females has a central barn without a large footprint, but which is actually huge with a hayloft, main floor, and walk-out basement on the sloped side.



INTUITION AND THE BREEDER'S ART

Sue joins us among the females who are keeping cool in the shade of large willow trees. Moms quietly chew their cud as the crias get a bit restless and wander off. The Rolfings had 18 crias this year and not a single one is solid colored. They are silver, black, and white, some with speckles of color, but all of them fitting in the wide "paint" category. This year's cria crop features five Hightower offspring, two from GNLC Silvertone



(who passed away in 2017), one from Vigilante, and 10 from Sijama Ikandy. The Rolfings and the Wynias swapped studs in 2017 as Hightower went to Oregon for a few months and Ikandy spent time in Montana.

Steve explains, “It gave both of us an opportunity to get new blood and to trade offspring to strengthen and diversify our herds, which have similar goals. I fell in love with Ikandy at Cascade (Llama Show) some years back when he and Hightower showed as juveniles.”

As we discuss which crias Steve might sell or keep, it is clear that the Rolfings have many more interested buyers than they will have llamas for sale. While Steve could probably sell all 18 crias tomorrow, he is hesitant to say who will be for sale, who is a future packer, and who is a future GNLC foundation animal. With plenty of space for young males, he is cautious not to sell them too young, making sure they develop the quality his buyers will be happy with.

Regarding which young females might stay he says, “I look for what I like phenotypically but I also have to think, ‘Does it fit with my stable of herdsires? Can I breed it to Hightower? Will its traits be a good nick with Vigilante?’” Steve says his breeding decisions largely come down to one word: intuition. “That’s where the art of the breeder comes in. For an artist, whether you’re painting a picture or breeding an animal, it’s not all science. At some point it just feels right or looks right.”



Ikandy Female

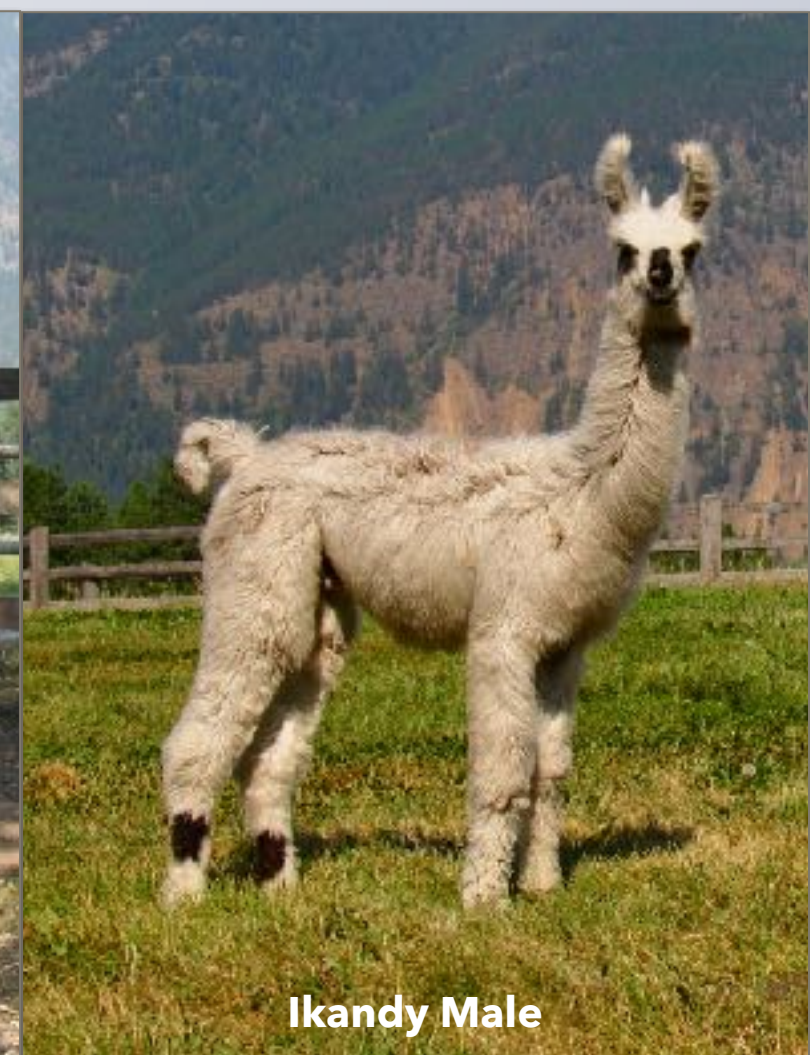


Ikandy Male



Left: Ikandy Female

Right: Hightower Female



Ikandy Male



Silvertone Male



Hightower Male



Ikandy Female



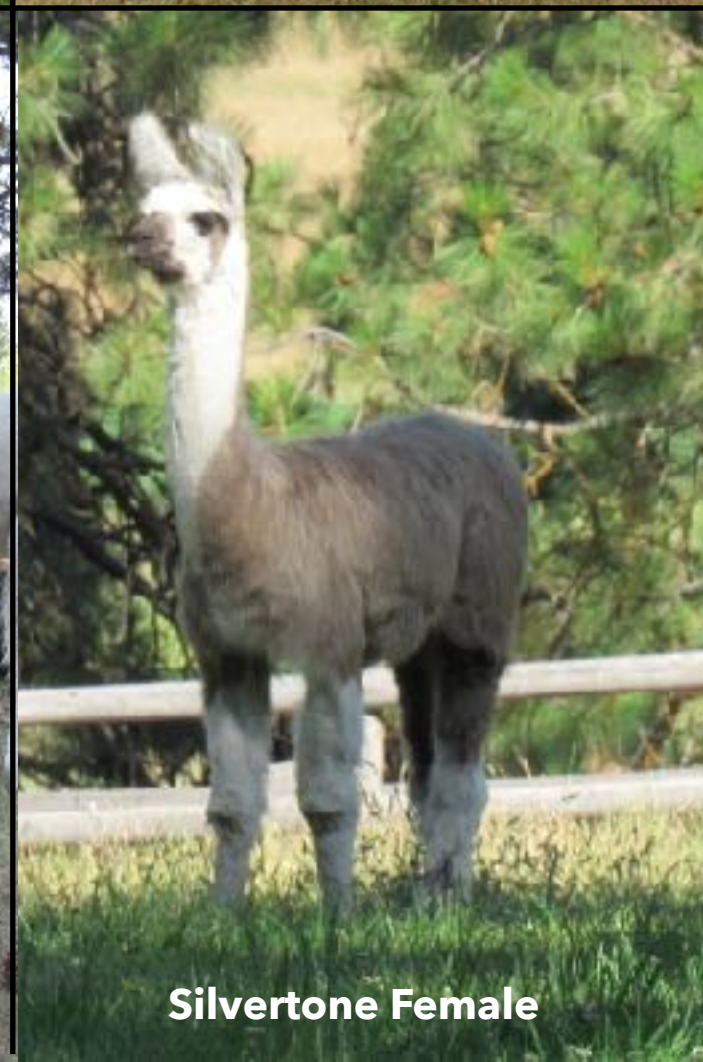
**Ikandy female
with her dam,
GNLC Divina**



Hightower Male



Ikandy Male



Silvertone Female



Ikandy Female

As the females start to stand up to check us out or wander into the field, I am struck by the herd's consistency. Yes, there are some things that vary like color, fiber type, and coverage, but the herd is consistently tall with long necks, beautiful heads, and ears. Their bone structure and build, too, is remarkably consistent. The majority of the females can be traced back to Steve and Sue's original llama purchases. Steve pointed out one cria that can be traced back 10 generations in the GNLC program. Each generation was an improvement on the last as they selected for their ideal llama: athletic, tall, good bone, good personalities, and beautiful. Whether in his herd or someone else's, Steve's goal is that his GNLC production will "breed true."

In recent years, in an effort to make the herd ever more consistent, Steve has been doing some minor linebreeding. He is not shy about discussing breeding animals with a shared grandparent or great-grandparent, but he has some reservations about calling it linebreeding. "What I'm doing is on the fringe of linebreeding and some geneticists wouldn't even call it that." It's important to note that this is an intentional decision that Steve has researched and monitored, and uses cautiously to perpetuate desirable characteristics of superior ancestors.

He calculates the fraction of genetic influence of a particular animal in a hypothetical cria just as one might calculate how much Argentine or Chilean blood is in an animal. His cutoff point is $3/8$. "I try to stay right around that, and would only rarely cross to a higher degree to lock in a special trait."

Linebreeding is a topic I researched further when I returned home. The $3/8$ rule appears to be commonly used in other livestock; the logic behind it being that an animal naturally receives $1/2$ of its genes from a parent. It is only when you cross the $1/2$ threshold, where an animal is getting an unnatural percentage of its genes from one source, that you have the potential to run into problems.

Steve has also researched the down side of linebreeding. "One of the first things you may see is reproductive issues: not getting pregnant, a lot of spontaneous abortions, reabsorption, all that. We don't see it (in our herd)."

Steve points out that linebreeding is just one tool available to llama breeders, and that outcrossing is another tool that's available. "If a person's going to linebreed, there should be a plan, a reason to do it, not just 'I don't have any other options.' One reason is if you've got a great dam that you want to turn into a male. If I can get her genetics concentrated in a male, now I can make 10 babies a year out of her instead of just one. Linebreeding is a way to take a great dam and try to get a great male from that line."

**WHETHER IN HIS
HERD OR SOMEONE
ELSE'S, STEVE'S
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WILL "BREED TRUE"**

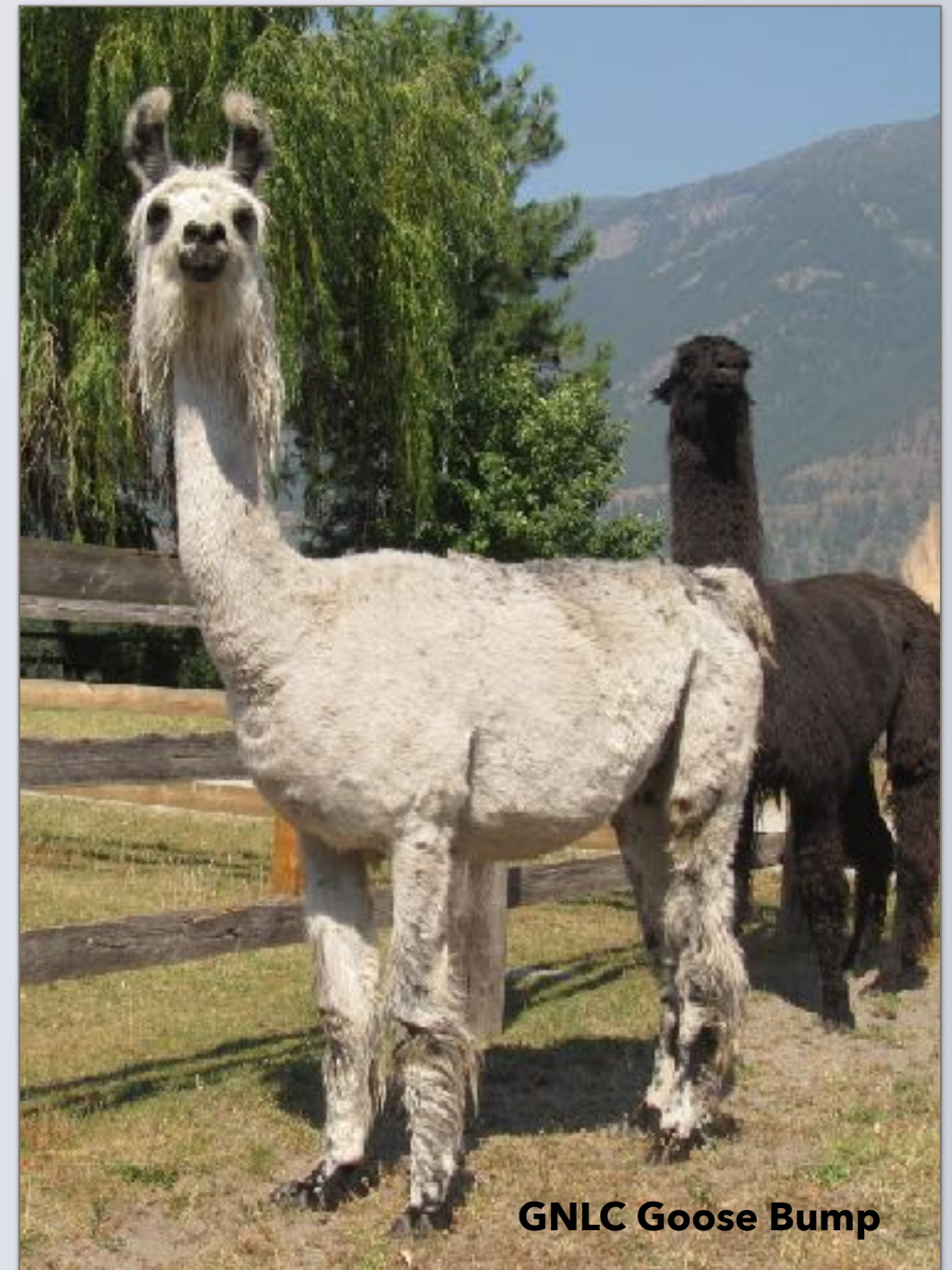
IT STARTS WITH THE DAMS

As we stand in the female field Steve talks about a lesson imparted to him by Dick Patterson: the overlooked importance of dams in a successful breeding program. When the Rolfings started, it was widely known that anyone serious about breeding llamas needed to get on the Pattersons' sales waitlist. At their peak Dick and Kay Patterson had over 500 llamas in Sisters, Oregon, and they are credited with kicking off the llama "industry." Their experience in selective breeding predates their pioneering entrance into llamas as they had already successfully raised Arabian horses for years.



Ripcurl's Maggie Mae

While answering my questions about breeding decisions, Steve often referred to conversations at the Patterson ranch in the early 1980s. "Dick told me, 'You've got two males you're thinking about buying and they're pretty close. I'd take the lesser animal with the better dam line over the better looking animal with the poorer dam line.' Over the years I've liked a number of males but I just couldn't get behind their dam line. If he's clearly an outlier in a dam line, I'll pass him up no matter how great looking he is. It's going to throwback to, regression to the norm, to that dam line." Whenever I asked about a famous GNLC stud, its dam line was sure to be brought up in Steve's answer. In the paragraphs to come I use the GNLC herdsires to mark various periods in the Rolfings' breeding program, but the strength of their program and the reason for their success is undoubtedly their dams.



GNLC Goose Bump

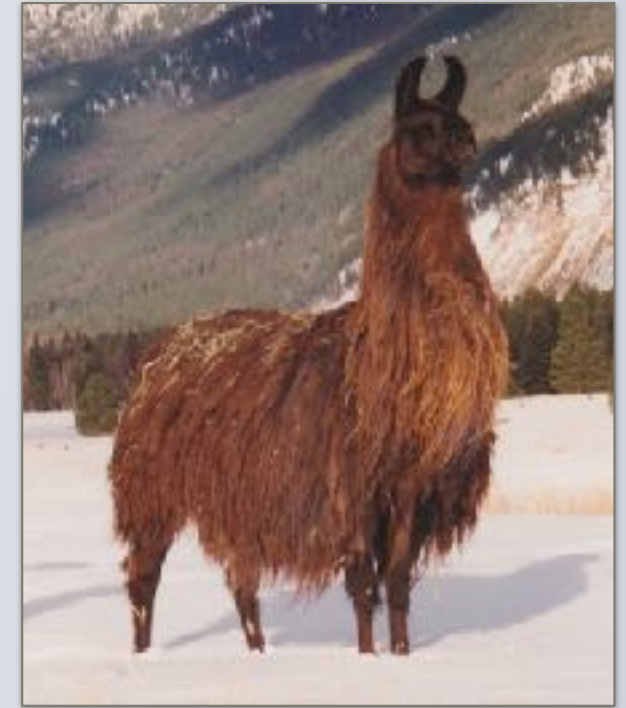
An Emphasis on the Dam



Catherine's Gigi- 1978 female
Dam of Queen Liliukalani



GNLC Queen Liliukalani- 1984 female
Dam of Ninko



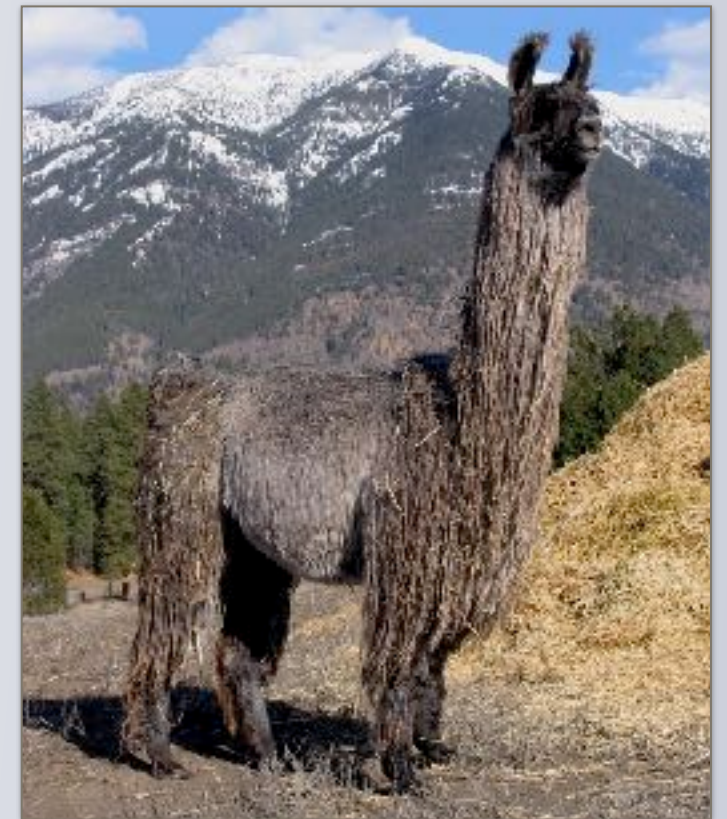
GNLC Ninko- 1994 female
Dam of Queenie and Silvertone



GNLC Queenie- 2001 female
Dam of Soul Shaker and Merlin



GNLC Soul Shaker- 2005 female
Dam of GNLC Lady Luck



GNLC Lady Luck- 2007 female still in
production, dam of Valentina and Binjin

MR. ORGANIC

Another characteristic of the herd is something Steve calls “**thriftiness**” – a llama that is virile, hardy, and thriving. This trait is obviously rooted in the GNLC herd's inseparable connection with packing. The Rolfings' original animals were packers, they ran a llama outfitting business for 30 years, and they still train packers today, so it is important that their animals are healthy and strong. Selecting for thriftiness through all their generations has led to success in both breeding and on the trail.

Steve's minimalist approach to herd management, which led Marty McGee Bennett (of Camelidynamics) to dub him "Mr. Organic," also contributes to the thriftiness of the herd. During Montana's long, snowy winters Steve plows paths to open-air feeding areas and hay sheds to keep the animals moving and out of the barn's still air. He believes strongly that they need to stay active to stay healthy and prevent birthing problems. Their sprawling, gently sloped pastures also keep packers well conditioned year-round. It's hard to argue with the results; every animal is very near a perfect weight, even nursing mothers.



**One of multiple hay feeders
outside the main barn**

Feeding, birthing, and weaning are also managed to avoid unhealthy stresses. "I put several mothers and babies in a weaning field for a couple weeks. When moms go back to the main herd, the crias stay in a familiar place among weanlings they already know. This makes it easier for everyone." Feeding is spread out so that every animal has a place to eat without shoving and spitting to get their fair share.

"It's natural to anthropomorphize into the animals what we as humans would like, especially if it makes things easier for us. But unnecessary human interventions can stress our animals and cause more problems than we know," Steve said, using birthing as an example. "I learned long ago that I have far more problem-free births if I let the girls stay with the herd, and don't close them in just so I can watch them more easily."

DOUBLING DOWN

While Steve may be an advocate for keeping his management very close to what llamas experience in their natural state, he shared two stories that show how deeply he cares for the llamas he helps bring into the world at Great Northern Ranch. The first happened in 2012, as Steve arrived in the pasture one morning to find a white cria that appeared to be dead. His exact words were “cold and lifeless.” After spending a few moments kicking himself, wishing he had been there earlier to assist he decides to try mouth to mouth resuscitation. After several minutes the motionless cria showed signs of life, and thanks to Steve’s efforts GNLC Gracie is still alive today. Steve points her out as he recounts this story and says she has his breath in her lungs.

The second story dates back to 1986, the heyday of the International Llama Association, in which the Rolfings were leading volunteers. The ILA would later help form the International Llama Registry. Steve and Sue co-chaired the 1986 ILA Conference near their ranch, in Kalispell, which was attended by 550 people and dozens of llamas.

Steve: "The conference was a big deal in our lives! The day before it starts, Sinopah delivers a weak, 13-pound, white male baby, the lowest common denominator on the value level, and we're totally stressed out. I thought 'Alright, if I can't throw everything I have into saving this struggling animal, then I have no business raising them, no matter what they're worth.' So I made that commitment: I'm going to stand by this animal. Nine hours later the key speakers all arrive at our house for dinner. I'm out in this little modified chicken coop we have for a warm room, giving a bottle to the new baby along with Murray Fowler (DVM, UC Santa Cruz), LaRue Johnson (DVM, Colorado State U.), and everybody. I say, 'Hey look, here comes the placenta!' and LaRue goes over and says, 'There's a nose in there!' And boom, Sinopah pops out another baby! A 15-pound, black and white male. So now I've got tiny twin male babies. I felt that was God saying, 'Alright Steve, you made the right decision, but I'm going to double down on you. You're going to have two to take care of in the middle of this event.' So not only was it a bigger burden, but it was really special, too."

GNLC Sinopah went on to produce seven sets of live, fertile twins, including four females (two sets of twins) in just 355 days while the market was booming. It's hard to argue with Steve's assessment that God was testing him, and I would say he passed with flying colors.



Sinopah with her 1991 female twins Thelma and Louise

WAITING IN THE WINGS

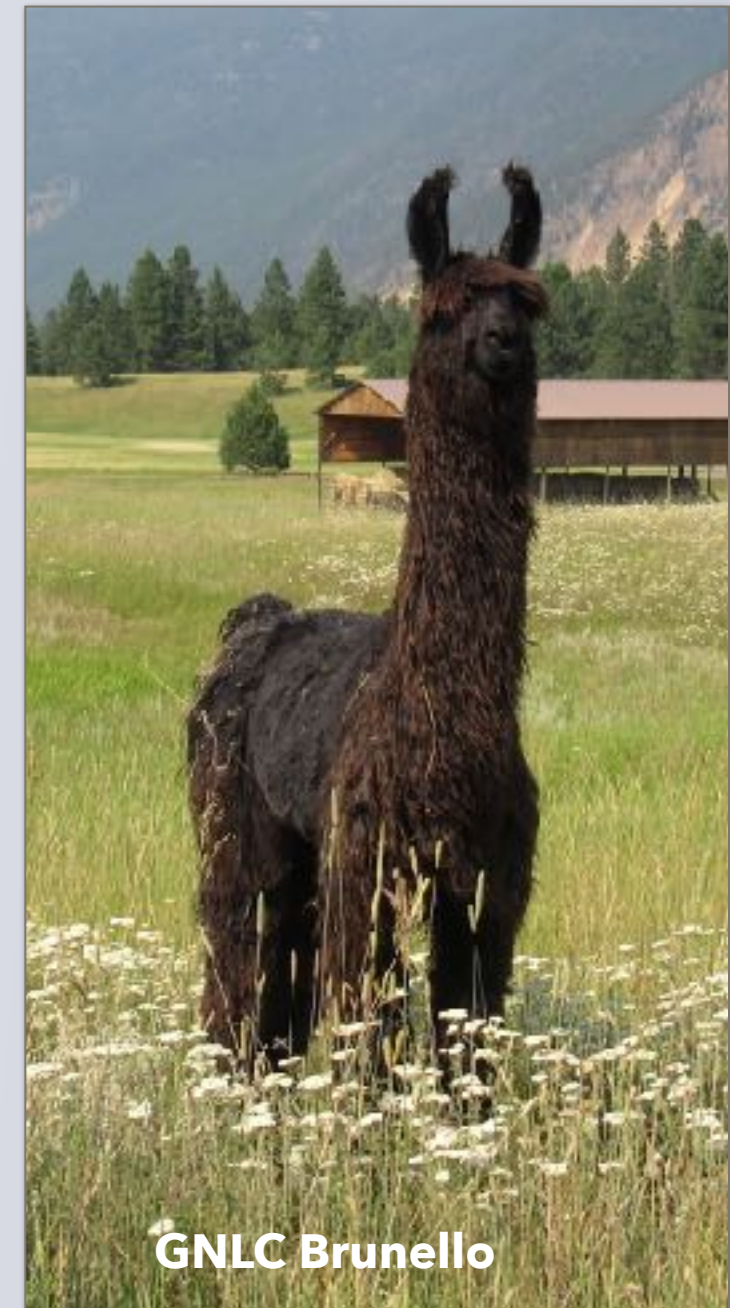
After surveying the females we adjourned to the house where Steve and Sue patiently chatted with us as my two pages of questions turned into three hours of conversation about their journey with llamas. After the interview we stretched our legs on the long driveway and looked at the pack geldings and young males. The boys were off in the shade somewhere so Steve rattled a bucket of grain to draw them closer. Soon after they came barreling over the hill.

A couple of large packers and two yearling

future packers all have the same haircut: strip-sheared except for a mane Steve leaves down the back of their neck. All are robust with large frames. With them are three yearling suri stud prospects Steve is watching develop, including a paint son of Hightower and a jet black suri named Brunello, the last Merlin cria. Steve does not discuss the sentimentality of the last cria from his legendary herdsire, but rather focuses on his dam line. "I'm especially interested to watch Brunello because of his mother. Valentina is super cool, from a great dam line and stands 82" at the poll. She's the tallest llama on the place."



Future Packers



GNLC Brunello

While we are surveying the young males the one who catches my attention is GNLC Edgy. He is an athletic suri with two-tone brown and black coloring and a flash of white on his head and neck. He has an extremely long neck and stands with commanding presence. Edgy came from the Rolfings' 2015 lease of Eskalero from Buck Hollow Llamas, and his dam is a Merlin daughter named GNLC Minx. Steve is somewhat cautious about saying whether he will retain Edgy as a GNLC herdsire, but it may be worth noting that the great GNLC Merlin was not bred until he was three years of age, presumably because Steve was still making up his mind about him. I for one will be watching to see what becomes of the promising, young GNLC Edgy.

THE DAY WINDS DOWN

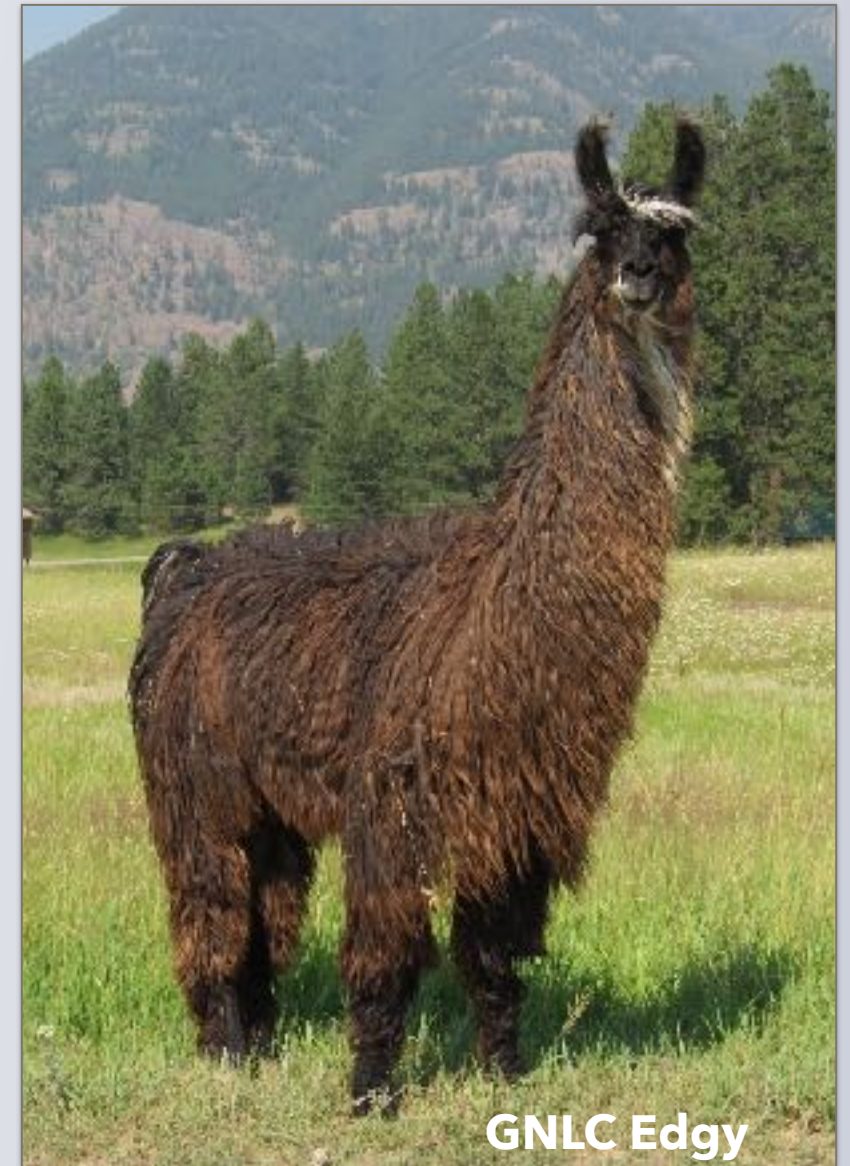
During a long, last look at the female herd I am struck again by its consistency: consistently tall, consistently strong, consistently beautiful. Back at the house we discussed the llama industry and what might be done to help get more people involved. Eventually we thanked the Rolfings for being so generous with their time, and headed back to our hotel.



GNLC Valentina



GNLC Lady Luck



GNLC Edgy



GNLC Pink Martini

GNLC Trutina

At the beginning of the interview, when I heard Steve say that he once had plans to geld Merlin, likely the most important herdsire of the last decade in llamas, I scoffed. To me it was on par with the Chicago Bulls saying that they almost released Michael Jordan from the squad. During several of Merlin's 11 years of life he stood as the most well known and impressive male in the industry. Now, after his untimely death, he has passed that title to a couple of his incredible sons. The name GNLC Merlin belongs in the conversation of the most impactful llamas in the history of American llama breeding. But after everything I learned and saw – their beautiful pack geldings, a gorgeous 2-year-old male Steve isn't quite ready to commit to – I now believe Steve when he says "I almost gelded Merlin."



GNLC Bella

I also think that the Rolfings would still find themselves on top of the llama world even if they had gelded Merlin. To pin their recent success solely on the arrival of one male, impressive as he was, ignores the fact that the strength of their program is in their female herd. GNLC Merlin and the offspring he produced were not the result of luck or chance, they were the culmination of 40 years of hard work and innovative thinking that has led the Rolfings to where they sit today: breeding the most coveted llamas in the country.



**3 generations: GNLC
Mags, GNLC Goose
Bump and GNLC Ten Gen**



GNLC Minx

A white llama stands in a grassy field, looking towards the camera. Behind it is a wooden fence and a large, forested mountain. The text "PART II THE HISTORY OF GREAT NORTHERN RANCH" is overlaid on the right side of the image.

PART II

THE HISTORY OF

GREAT NORTHERN

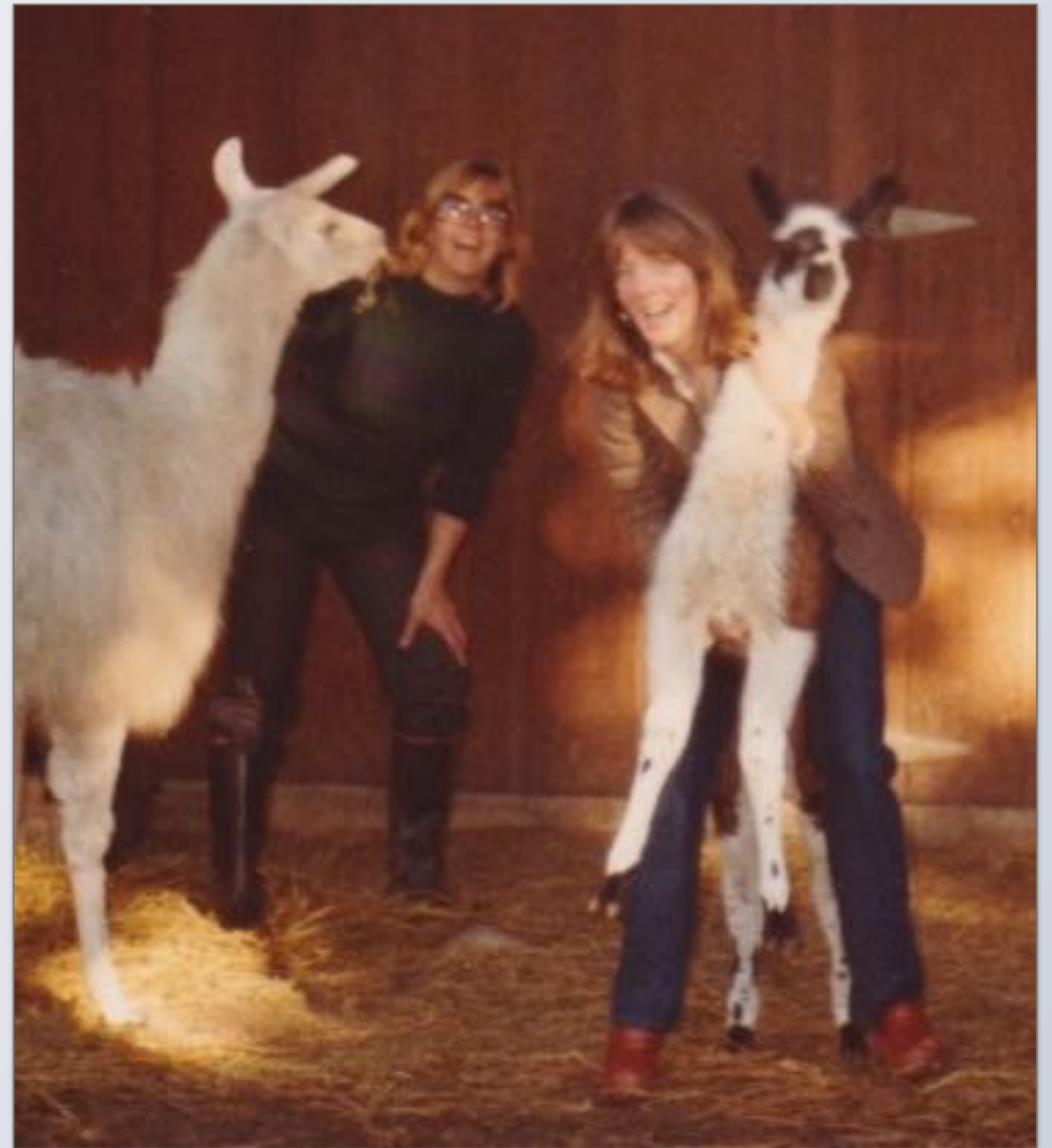
RANCH

WHERE IT ALL STARTED

Steve and Sue Rolfing were high school sweethearts who moved from northern Illinois to northwest Montana in the 1970s. Sue said, "I should have seen this ranching thing coming. On our first date he took me to the Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago!" In Montana Steve pursued a career in forestry while Sue worked as a writer. In the late '70s Steve began to experience chronic back pain that prevented him from carrying his work equipment and threatened his career path.

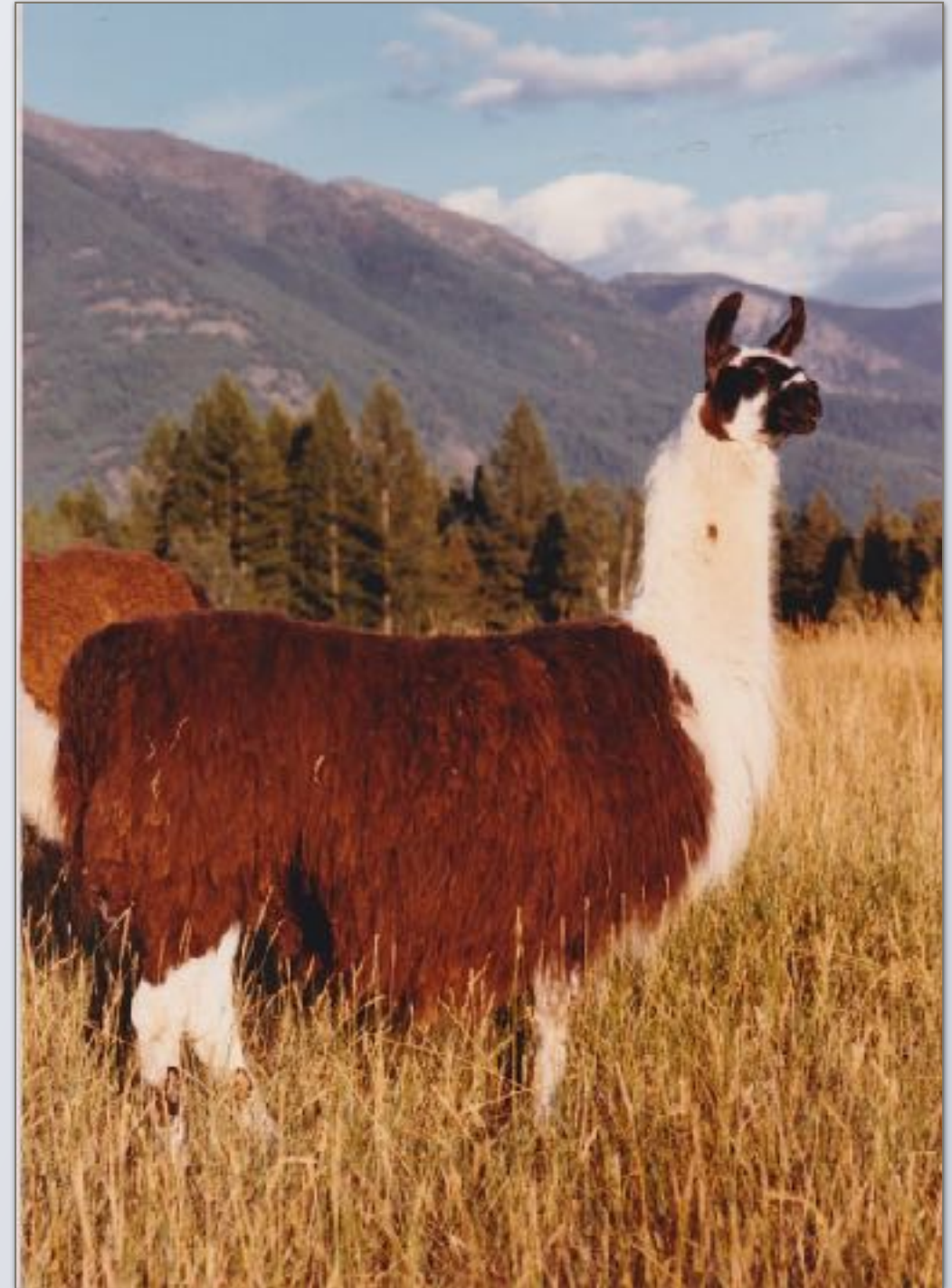
Sue remembered, "We told a friend, a veterinarian, what was going on. He said 'I know some people who have these animals who carry your stuff but you don't ride them.' We found them just 20 miles away, put a deposit on a baby, and then tried to find more." Given that this was 1979, the process involved many phone calls and long car rides, and they heard "Yes, we have llamas, but none for sale" quite a few times.

Sue: "That Christmas (in 1979) we were at (Steve's) mom's house in California. Her hairdresser also did (Hollywood actress) Kim Novak's hair, and she told Kim about us. Kim and Bob (her husband, veterinarian Bob Malloy) invited us to their home in Carmel where we bought a baby female and two trained pack males. They did so well in their first season on the trail that Steve immediately started applying for permits to guide backcountry llama trips." He also destroyed Sue's sewing machine making llama packs before any were manufactured.



Left: Kim Novak, Right: Sue Rolfing and their first female, GNLC Mistletoe

Kim's weanling grew up to be the Rolfings' first foundation female. "Mistletoe" produced multiple herdsires and her offspring sold for a total of \$280,000 including Montana Kid Currey, winner of the first U.S. llama futurity. In time the Rolfings' breeding program became as successful as their outfitting business, which was featured numerous times in print and broadcast media including the NBC Today Show, Dirty Jobs and Trailside on PBS. In the early '90s Vice President Dan Quayle and his family joined Steve on two pack trips. He was accompanied by a large secret service entourage and White House communications equipment. On one trip they were joined by the infamous nuclear football, because President George H.W. Bush was overseas at the time.



Above: GNLC Mistletoe at 15 years of age

Left: While serving as Vice President, Dan Quayle and his children (center) took two llama pack trip vacations with Steve (far right). Steve's brother Mark (far left) and his wife Debi (pink shirt) were also on the Quayle family trips.

Throughout the early '80s the Rolfings added to their llama herd from notable programs such as the 'Tillmans' and the 'Pattersons'. At this point in the journey, their female llama selection process was as follows: 1. Is it a llama? 2. Is it for sale? Sue uses the term “dumb luck” when discussing their first decade of llama breeding, feeling that they lucked into purchasing beautiful animals and producing beautiful offspring in the early stages of their program.

A huge smile comes to her face as she tells about a particularly memorable purchase in their early, nonselective llama buying days: “Oh my gosh, Andy (Tillman) didn't have much to let go of and we felt sorry for this one that was kind of a cripple. It didn't occur to us that she was not an ideal animal!” Sue laughs as Steve points out that it was an old injury and not a genetic problem.

As their herd slowly moved toward 10 breeding females, their place on the Patterson wait list came up and the Rolfings took a trip to Sisters, Oregon. With the largest herd in the country, Patterson stock was in high demand. Steve credits his conversations with Dick with helping him move from being a llama collector or reproducer to being a true llama breeder.

Sue: “I've noticed as Steve talks with you that he mentions Dick Patterson a lot. Dick was influential not only to the whole llama industry but to Steve as a young man willing to just sit at Dick's feet and listen to him.” Dick started Steve's first buying trip with a look at his horses. The Pattersons were well known in the Arabian horse world long before they ventured into llamas. Their world-famous stallion Negatraz was on the hot-walker, and Dick had Steve watch him move. Reflecting on the grace of the Patterson Arabs, Steve muses that horse-like movement is one the goals not yet fully achieved in his llama breeding program.

Steve recalls that their visit to the Pattersons was the first time they had a chance to be selective about which llamas they would buy. "It was like 'OK, Steve, your name has come up on my list. Here are 10 animals and you can pick two of them.' Then there were other 'maybe' animals that you could negotiate on, but price didn't matter. You couldn't go in and offer \$10,000 for something not on the sales list. Every female on the list was \$3,000 plus you had to pick a male, who was always 500 bucks.” The practice of selling male/female pairs at a set price was something the Pattersons started, and it was adopted as a business practice industry wide. The Rolfings, too, initially sold their llamas in pairs for a set price when they had built up their herd to a point where they could begin offering some for sale.

**...PRICE DIDN'T MATTER...
EVERY FEMALE ON THE
LIST WAS \$3,000 PLUS YOU
HAD TO PICK A MALE, WHO
WAS ALWAYS 500 BUCKS.**

GAME CHANGERS



Steve in a cart race at the 1986 ILA Convention

In their early days, visiting with other owners was the best way to learn about llamas. Sue: “There was virtually no information in English, it was all in Spanish, so we just winged it.” Steve added, “For me that was attractive. There was nothing to do wrong, because nobody knew what was right. That was kind of fun.”

Sue credits the arrival of llama auctions and conferences with bringing selective breeding to the industry as a whole. “It was easier for us, it was easier for everybody. We all started coming together with our animals. Otherwise you had to literally go driving all over the country trying to find what you were looking for. With the advent of auctions and shows at big conferences, people paid attention to how they were breeding and they could find the ingredients they were looking for.”

During the high dollar days of the mid 1980s to the early 1990s, Steve and Sue Roling were right at the center of the booming llama industry. “I don't know how we did it,” Sue laughs. In their early 30s, they were self-employed parents of two young children, independently running Steve’s outfitting business, and were involved with several other llama-related endeavors. Steve served two terms as president of the International Llama Association (ILA). Sue wrote catalog copy for national retailers, and a column for the new *Llamas* magazine, and features for *Llama Life* and *Llama Banner*. She oversaw the ILA's newsletter, its educational brochure series, and the ILA's national conferences for owners and veterinarians. The couple was instrumental in founding a local llama club and the ILA's North Rockies Chapter. Through the ILA they helped promote llamas, defend them from federal actions that threatened ownership and backcountry use, change llama classification from exotic to livestock, and merge several start-up registries into the International Llama Registry. As the new registry, on whose board Steve served, and the ILA's regional affiliates grew in strength and number, the ILA yielded to them and eventually disbanded.

When the first Hartman llama auction occurred in the mid 1980s, the Rolfings chose not to participate but a Canadian customer took his GNLC male to the inaugural event and sold it for five figures. As Sue tells it, "He bought Pippin from us for \$500, because every male was \$500. He grew him up, changed his name to something much more manly, took him to Hartman's . . ."

" . . . and sold him for something like \$45,000!" Steve interjects.

Sue: "We thought, 'If he can sell our animal for that kind of price, we ought to be able to do it, too.'" And they did. At Hartman's second auction, Montana Kid Currey topped the sale at \$70,000, plus won a \$10,000 futurity prize. Both Pippin (a.k.a. Moses) and Kid Currey were out of Mistletoe, the Rolfings' first female.

Sue calls these early auctions "a real game changer" as suddenly the firm ceiling of llama prices, established and advocated by the Pattersons, was soaring into the sky. Looking back at the Rolfings' llama journey, their decision to move aggressively into the llama industry in the early '80s was similar to someone buying Microsoft stock in 1986. As Steve remembered it, "When the llama market busted loose, and others were continually collecting, we had been breeding long enough that we were ready to sell. It was a great thing to be debt free at a young age because people were paying cash for our animals. We sold Kid Currey, then went and paid off the mortgage."



Steve with Montana Kid Currey, being handed
handed a check from Fred Hartman.

MAKING WAVES

Kid Currey was the first of many high-profile sales for the Rolfings. They again made waves at the first Celebrity Sale, in 1989, by consigning their lead herdsire and one of the most popular studs of the day. GNLC Catman was bred by Patterson and purchased by the Rolfings in 1985 at the side of his dam. Steve recalls that as Catman developed at the Patterson Ranch, prior to being transported, Dick called to say he had second thoughts about letting go of the striking, jet black male, but Steve held him to their agreement.

For Steve to sell Catman in 1989 is akin to him consigning Hightower to an auction today. Catman was featured heavily in advertising and females were being shipped to GNLC from all over the country for outside breedings. That first Celebrity Sale set auction records for both male and female llamas that would stand for over a decade, and both animals came from Montana. Mirabelle, bred by Taylor Llamas in Bozeman, sold to Iris Christ of Llama Wood Farms. The Rolfings

reminisced about Iris boldly standing with her hand in the air, fighting off all bidders until the gavel fell at \$170,000. Catman was purchased a few lots later for \$175,000 by the Taylors along with four partners in Bozeman. They had all been buying outside breedings to Catman, and didn't want to see him hauled off to another part of the country.



Left: Sue, Steve, GNLC Catman, Mirabelle, and Iris Christ.

To the far right is the trailer the Rolfings were awarded for consigning the high seller.



GNLC Catman sold for \$175,00 in 1989.

**When adjusted for inflation that is more than \$350,000 today,
higher than Newevo's record breaking price.**

The sale of Catman was a great moment in llama history – one that almost didn't happen. As Steve tells it, "The first Celebrity Sale was going to be in October. We consigned Stage Fright, a weanling female that was just gorgeous. I had been offered a lot of money for Catman, like \$125,000 but I was cocky and said, 'No, he's making us a lot of money for stud service, I'm not going to sell him.' I was pretty proud of him. He was my guy, you know? Then came a big thunder crash in our pasture early one June morning. I go out there at 7:30 and there's four dead llamas including the one we were going to sell." The ground was so saturated by rain that a mother, her newborn baby, and two other llamas, including Stage Fright, were all killed by one lighting strike.

"Tim Vincent had been bugging me to consign Catman and I always said no. Then (the lightning strike) happened. It was like God hitting me with a stick and saying, 'Steve, you idiot! Sell that llama, take care of your family, put the money in the bank.' About a week later I called Tim and said, 'Yeah, I'll put him in the auction' and he sold for \$175,000. So that was just a clear message that you've got to hold everything loosely." Sue adds, "Don't hold it too tight, because it's not yours. Ultimately anything can be taken away from you."

The Rolfings would follow up the sale of Catman in 1989 by selling their next two lead herdsires for over \$150,000 each. GNLC Prospectus was a Fiduciary son, owned in partnership with another Montana ranch, who sold at the 1991 Celebrity Sale. GNLC Liberty Valence, a Mistletoe son, was sold off the farm in 1992. That same year they bought raw land and started creating the ranch they call home today. They moved into their new log home in 1993 along with daughter Katie, then 11, and son Jamie, 8. They called it “the house three llamas built.”

I asked the Rolfings about selling herdsires that are still in their prime, a

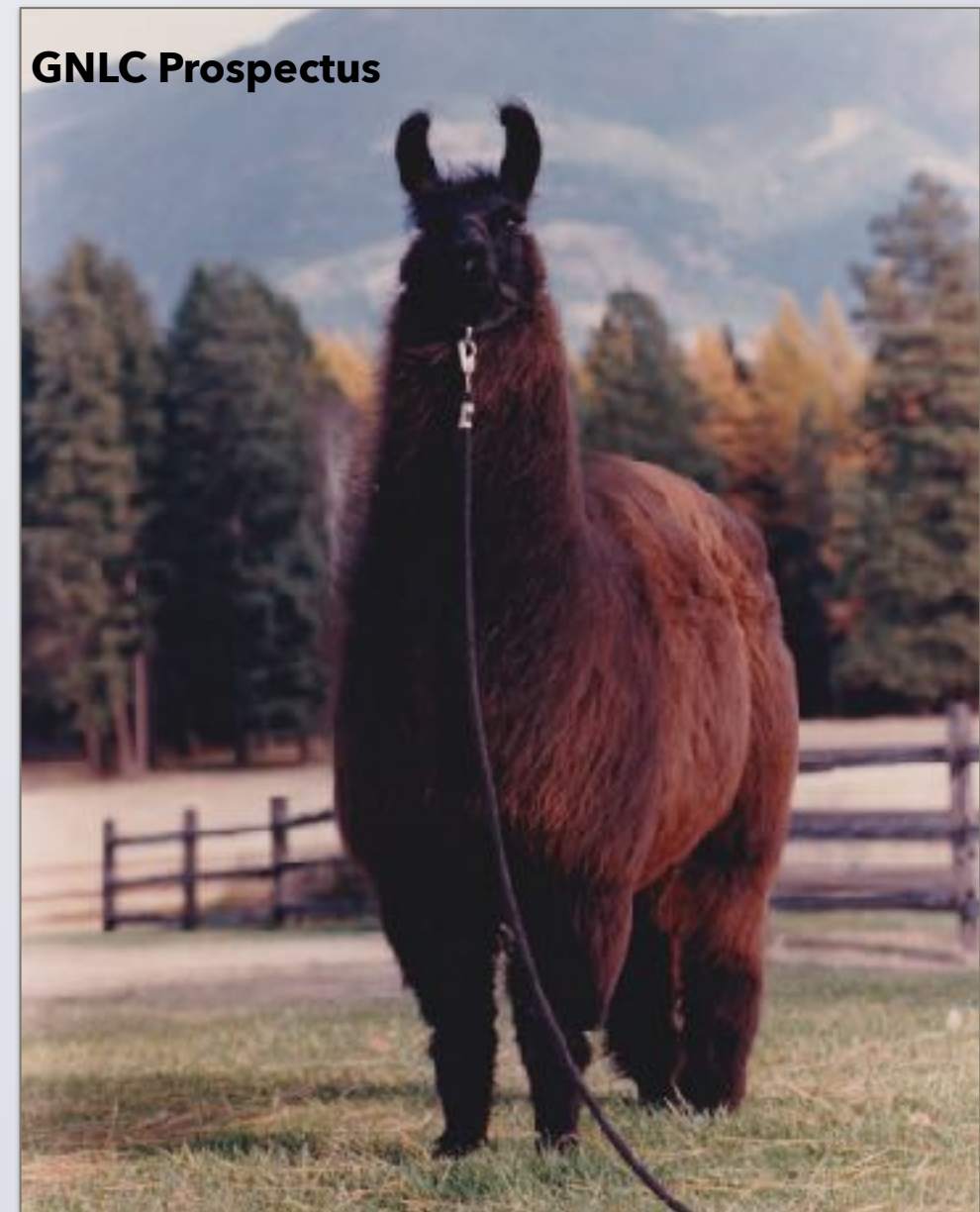
habit they have changed only in recent years. Sue: “It’s because we have so few females. We always keep a few babies, sell a few older girls. We were keeping (our studs’) daughters so we had to let them go.” Steve added that, “It was also intriguing to me to switch to a new stud

after three or four years, while at the same time capitalizing on a previous one before he became old news. This had the effect of moving our herd type forward rather quickly, and helped keep the ranch always profitable.”

The Rolfings credit God with their well-timed entry into the llama world and the success they have experienced in it. Sue: “This is where the God thing comes in. It looked like the end of life as we knew it when Steve’s back started breaking down. He wasn’t going to be able to make a living the way we thought. The bad thing led us to llamas, which became an explosively good thing. It’s the epitome of a blessing in disguise.”



GNLC Liberty Valence



GNLC Prospectus

BREEDING BEAUTY IN THE BEAST

At some point in their first decade with llamas, the Rolfings' early “dumb luck” was replaced by experience on their own farm, ideas pulled from conversations with luminaries like Dick Patterson, and Steve's drive to become a true llama breeder. “A breeder needs vision,” Steve says, and his vision of the ideal llama started on the trail: a large, athletic animal with a strong build, perseverance, and an easy-to-work-with personality. The Rolfings’ first llama was a packer and I suspect their last llama will be a packer, too.

For many years the GNLC slogan has been Breeding Beauty in the Beast. Steve: “We coined that phrase in 1986. On the trail we sing that Rolling Stones song ‘I’ll never be your beast of burden.’ The core really is that llamas are a beast of burden. We started a llama packing business in 1980, so then it was just how to make that a beautiful llama. I wanted to breed a beautiful, athletic pack animal.” Sue joins in, “There’s nothing wrong with a packer being beautiful and, yes, it can have a lot of wool. You just shear it off. You don’t have to breed them without the wool, we all have clippers!”

Throughout the Rolfings' 40 years in the llama industry, the definition of what makes a beautiful llama has changed. Certain colors were in and out of vogue, then imported blood was all the rage, then suris took over, Argentines became popular, and so on. Through all of these changes, the fiber type or color of the GNLC foundation herd may have changed but the bodies underneath have only gotten bigger and stronger, because llamas will always be the Rolfings’ beasts of burden.



FOLLOWING A DIFFERENT DRUM BEAT

After Great Northern's high-profile, six-figure sales in the early '90s, the llama market experienced a big shift as the prospect of high prices caused a flurry of importations. Suddenly sires like Catman and Fiduciary, who were bred from original North American bloodstock, were less popular than Macho Camacho and LW Kissam, who were imported from Chile and Bolivia. Concerns over having enough genetic diversity to sustain the U.S. llama population long term fueled the craze for imported outcrosses, and animals of unknown pedigree claiming to be "Full Chilean" or "Full Bolivian" became the new high sellers at auctions.

The Rolfings, on the other hand, were in no hurry to add imported stock and have never based breeding decisions on country of origin. When I asked Steve why he stayed away from imported genetics he said, "I didn't touch it at all. Unpredictable, random, not big, not the size animal I wanted." He also mentioned his seven trips to South America, between 1982 and 1996, where knowledge of best breeding practices were lacking and he found alpacas and llamas running together in many herds. Steve places a strong emphasis on lineage, so the idea that a llama was imported with a blank, "unknown x unknown" pedigree was a reason for the animal to be worth *less* to him, not more.

GNLC Switchfoot GNLC Merlin X Wild West Blue Moon

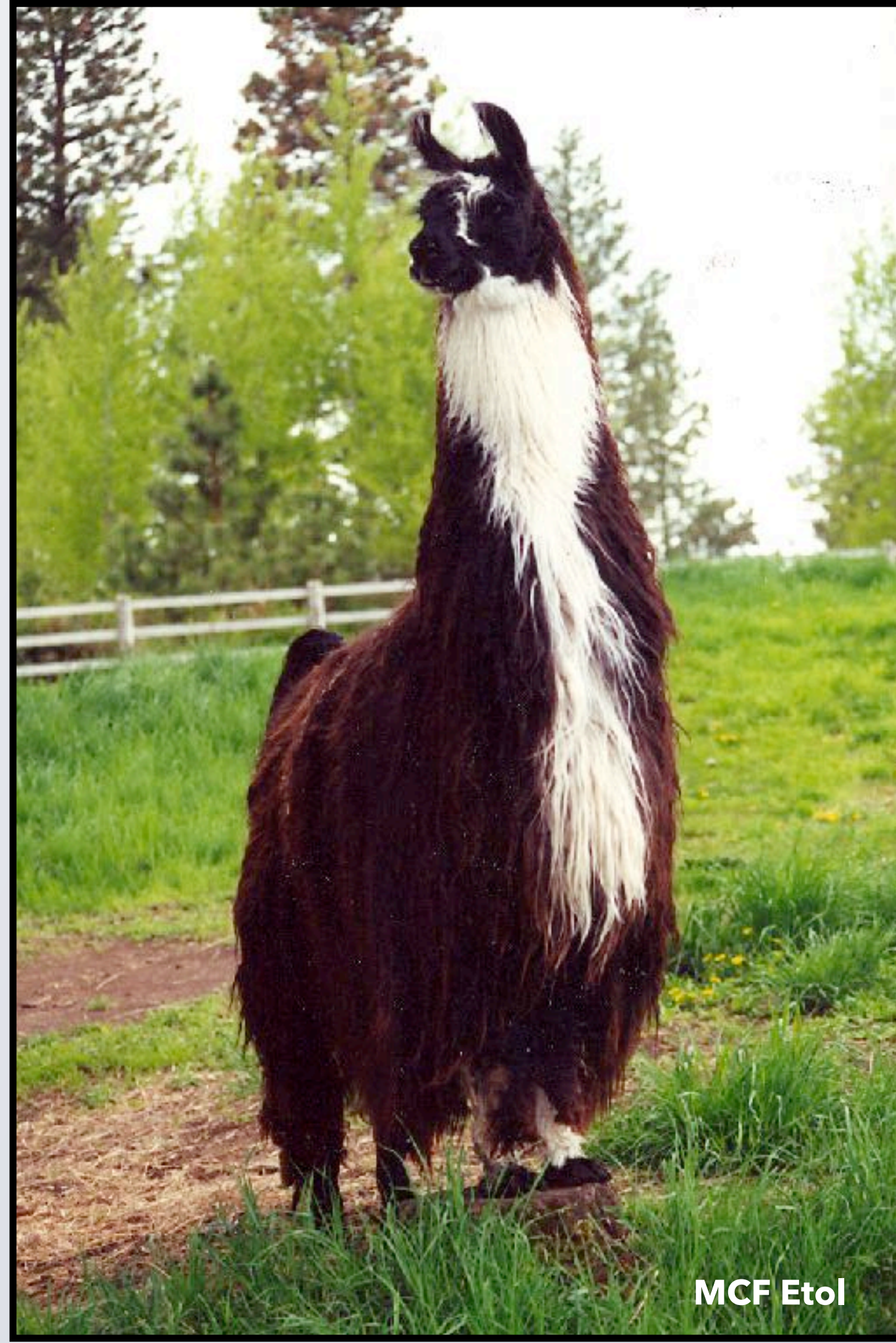


Our thanks to Harvey and Lisa Pool for helping us add some GNLC genetics to our herd.

Kyle and Jerrika Mumford of Ridgefield, WA
www.VolcanoViewRanch.com

In 1994 the next herdsire of merit joined the GNLC program, an exemplar of the type they hoped to produce with a long pedigree of well-bred North American stock behind him. At the Hoffmasters' Mill Creek Farm auction, a yearling male named MCF Etol captured everyone's attention. "He was the prettiest llama ever!" Sue exclaims as soon as the name "Etol" has left my lips, "He was a rich, dark brown with a tuxedo that made him look even stretchier than he already was. *Everybody* was drooling over Etol. He was the best animal there." They decided they could spend up to \$40,000, but given all the buzz for this promising herdsire prospect, they figured they would come up short.

Steve explained that Etol was early in the sale and fell in a "hole" with a lack of lively bidding. Sue can't hold back her Etol enthusiasm and interjects, "Patterson had gone to the bathroom! He really wanted him, but he missed it! Etol came up but bidding on him was *really* slow, which had everyone confused. I think nobody expected they could afford Etol, so they just weren't bidding. We were shocked that we got him, and for just \$20,000!" They weren't the only ones who were shocked. Steve says that after the sale Dick Patterson offered him \$20,000 for half interest, which they declined.



MCF Etol



Llanero de Temuco.
Selectively bred
full Chilean import.

Llanero de Temuco
ILP# 144285 - Born 11/1/92
Boris x Pocas Pecos

Unlike most imported llamas, with "Unknown x Unknown" pedigrees, Llanero's parents were hand-picked on the Altiplano and selectively bred in Temuco, Chile. Llanero is a uniquely typed, large and statuesque llama with beautiful, silky wool to complement our breeding programs.

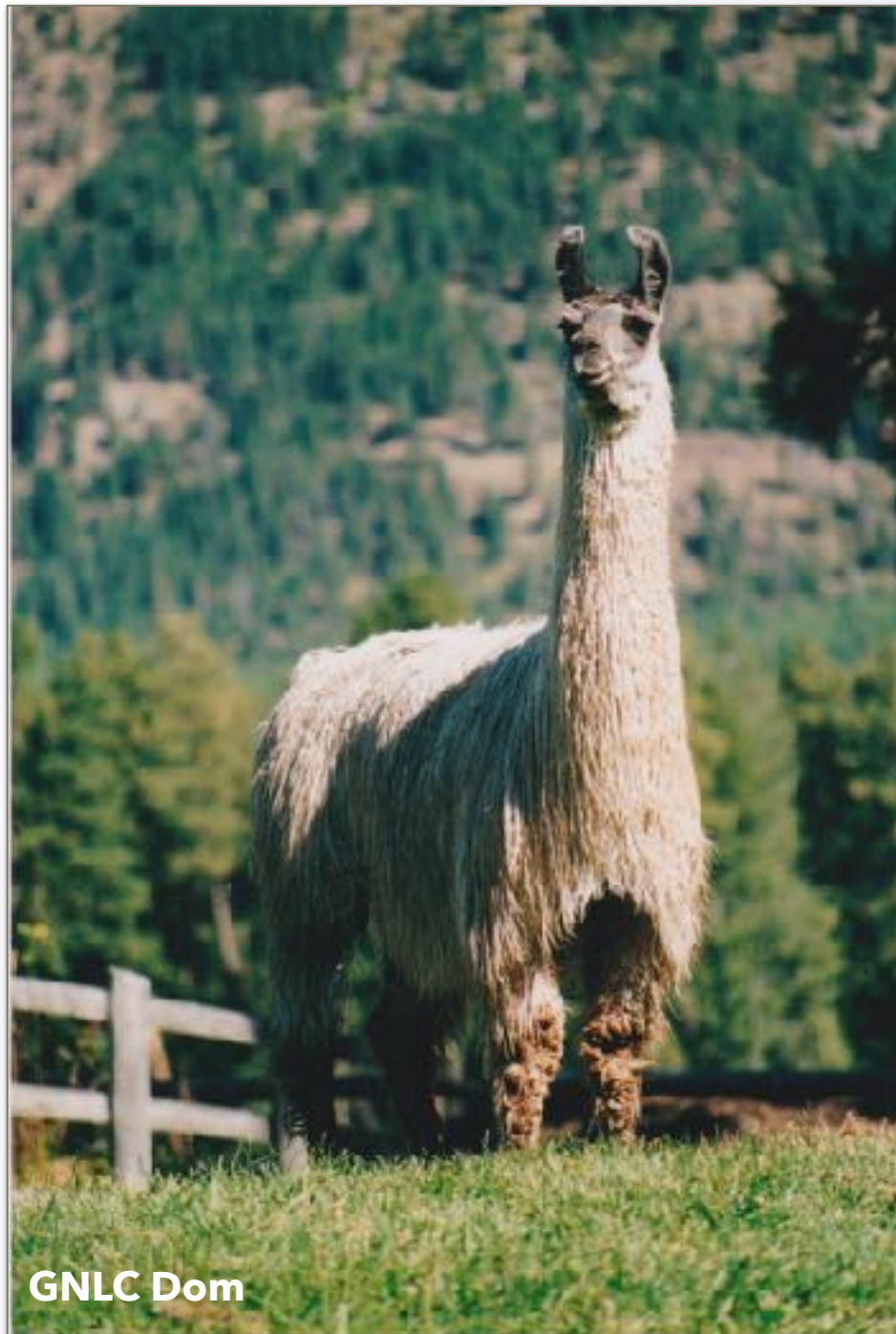
Proven sire. \$1,500 stud fee. To make arrangements contact:

Steve & Sue Roling • 600 Blackmer Lane • Columbia Falls, MT 59912 • (406) 755-9044
Paul & Sally Taylor • 14666 Horse Creek Road • Bozeman, MT 59715 • (406) 686-4723

In 1995 the Rolfings purchased their first imported animal, a Chilean male named Llanero de Temuco, in partnership with Paul and Sally Taylor. Steve knew both Llanero and his parents, so was comfortable adding this import of known pedigree to his herd. Llanero came from the Taylor's Temuco project, in which Steve played a role by traveling with Paul to help select the finest llamas in Chile for a selective breeding program. Of course imported genetics were not the only reason Llanero became one of Steve's main herdsires.

"He had enough size, and that really crisp topline. That was an ingredient that I wanted. He proved himself, he was a really good sire, he passed on his top line. Another great thing was you could breed him to a solid black or solid brown animal and he'd throw a paint every time. An animal gets a short leash to prove he can do what I want him to do, and he did." Obviously Llanero proved himself because you can find his name peppered throughout GNLC pedigrees, sometimes more than once.

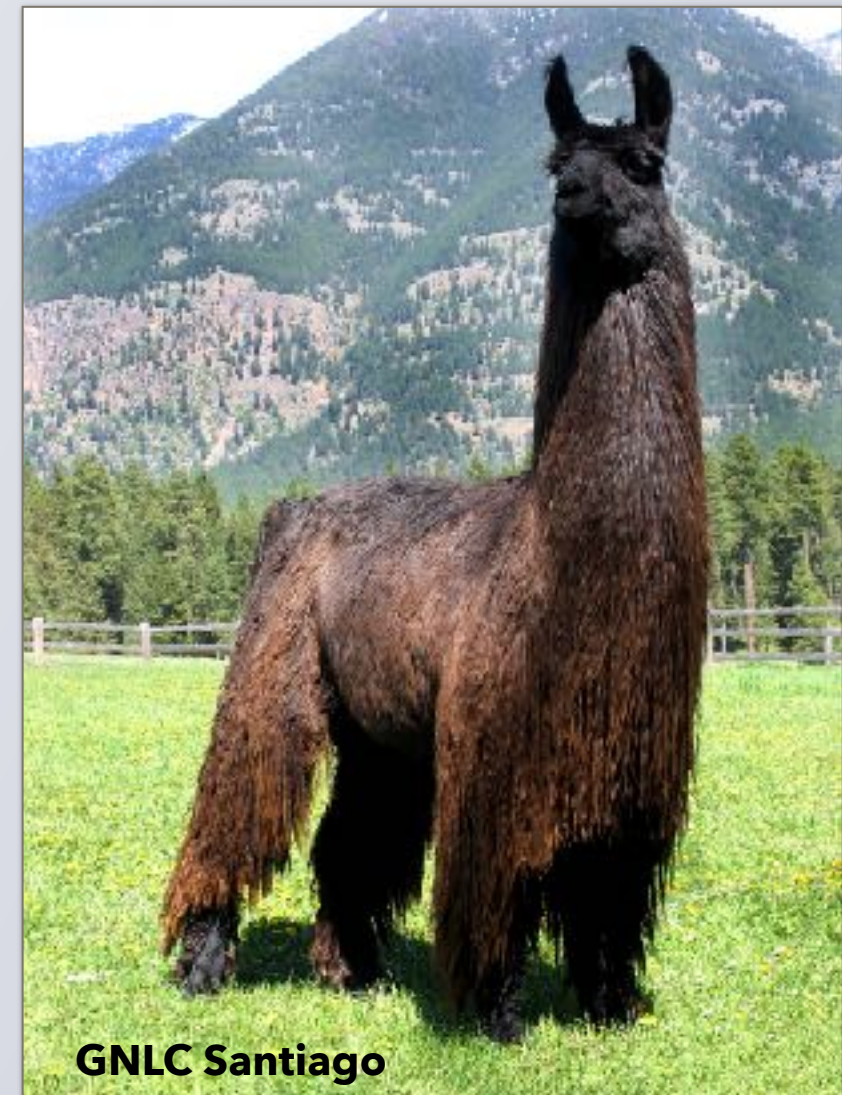
Left: Original Llanero de
Temuco advertisement

**GNLC Dom**

NEW MILLENIUM, NEW LLAMAS

With the new millennium came excitement over a new type of llama: the suri. At this point the Rolfings had kept many Llanero and Etol daughters and were on the hunt for the next males to lead the GNLC program. In contrast to their hesitancy to join the import craze of the early '90s, they were early entrants into the suri llama world which was dominated by Kantu, a striking gray male from the first Peruvian importation. They co-owned Peruvian Doc Martin, one of the first Kantu sons, with Brad and Jandy Sprouse in Michican. They also sent one of their best Llanero daughters (GNLC Charada) to be bred to Kantu, from which GNLC Dom was born.

Both males performed exceptionally well, producing several hersires of note. Doc Martin sired GNLC Starbucks and GNLC Ballistic. Dom sired GNLC Caspian and GNLC Silver Lining (dam of Hightower, Crocket and more). Dom also produced a pair of males whom the Rolfings kept as their next generation of studs after both Doc and Dom had been sold: GNLC Santiago and Dom's Cordillero (co-owned with Taylor Llamas) would lead the GNLC program until they were sold in 2010 and 2012.

**GNLC Santiago**

Discussing this time in GNLC history I get the feeling that Steve is somewhat conflicted. He certainly does not view the addition of suris to his program as a mistake, in fact he says that suri is his favorite fiber type. He likes that you can easily see a suri's build and conformation, even when it's in full fleece.

"Suris are a breeding success story," Steve says. "Some of the first suri imports were really scary. But as a group or industry we got away from it so fast, and put that lovely fiber type onto big, North American-style llamas."

An important thing to note is that while the Rolfings added a few suri sires, their female herd was full of Llanero and Etol daughters with pedigrees dating back to their original stock. You will find animals in their herd today sired by Dom, Santiago, and Maddix who all have pedigrees built on the strong foundation of their program dating back to the early '80s. While Steve is happy with the results of this suri breeding success story, I get the impression that today he would not be willing to take the time and effort to span the generations from Kantu to Dom to Silver Lining to Hightower.



Right: GNLC Charada. Charada was a daughter of Llanero de Temuco, and out of one of the Rolfings' original dam lines. She was bred to Kantu P5, producing GNLC Dom.

Left: GNLC Hightower, a grandson of GNLC Dom.

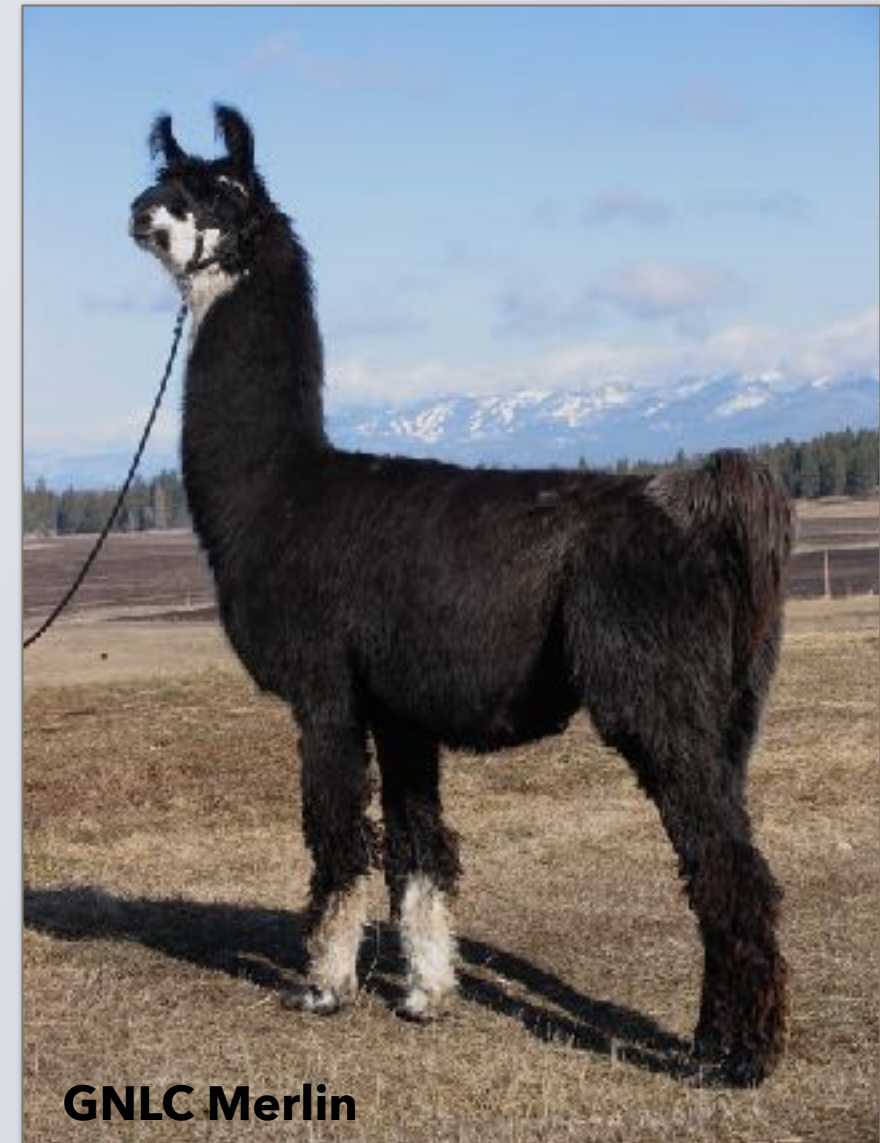


MULTIPURPOSE MERLIN

In 2006 the late, great GNLC Merlin was born. His sire was GNLC Prospero, an appaloosa Etol son, and his dam was GNLC Queenie, a Llanero daughter with a dam line tracing all the way back to GNLC Mistletoe.

You likely remember the “I almost gelded Merlin!” quote from the start of the article. When I asked why he didn’t initially see Merlin as a stud Steve said, “A lot of traits were nice, but he just wasn’t exotic, I guess. I wasn’t grabbed by that.” He wasn’t sure Merlin would have that “something special” he wants in a lead herdsire. As their “Breeding Beauty in the Beast” slogan suggests, Steve and Sue pride themselves on beautiful llamas, including their pack geldings. We found out just how true this was the next day when we saw their entire pack string, which they lease each summer to Swan Mountain Outfitters. Over time, Merlin’s something special developed as he put on size and fiber, turning into a huge, athletic male with exotic, silky coverage. “It was Mark Smith who turned my head on Merlin. He was out here and he said ‘You better watch him, he’s going to be a game changer.’ Because nobody was breeding animals that size.”

Steve’s prediction that Merlin would make a great packer also proved to be true. “Merlin was a gentle giant in my commercial pack string. He was a vigorous breeder yet he was an easy-going gentleman around open female packers and would give children rides. You get a whole different perspective on these animals when you pack with them. You’re really relying on them, and for your clients this is the trip of a lifetime. They’ve come a long way, spent a lot of money, and I’m under pressure to pull this off and make it a special experience. Maybe it’s a hot day, maybe there’s a thunderstorm coming and things are going south on you fast. And these llamas get you to camp and save your bacon. You just say ‘Thank you. You guys made this happen.’ It’s a whole different relationship than just enjoying them in the pasture. You’re depending on them for safety and welfare and providing a great experience. Merlin was one of the more famous show sires in the country, but when I could also bring him on pack trips, that’s when he and I got really bonded. I depended on him.”



MERLIN'S LEGACY

In Steve's estimation the Merlin sons at the top of the industry today are an improvement upon their sire. When asked which Merlin son he would pick now if he could he said "I'd take Hightower" without hesitation.

Having owned and bred almost all of Hightower's pedigree, including seven of his eight great-grandparents, Steve is intimately aware of each individual's strengths and sees them in his phenotype. "I look at Hightower and say 'there is Merlin and Catman's gentle temperament, there is Etol and Silver Lining's beautiful coat and intense color, there is Prospero's heavy bone, Queenie and Merlin's height, Dom's fiber, Ninko's pretty head, and the fantastic topline and neck set that earned Ripcurl Best of Show at a huge Fort Worth Stock Show.' Grasping this concept and then using its understanding in breeding becomes the thoughtful question."



MERLIN'S LEGACY

Foundation GNLC Merlin and
GNLC Hightower Daughters



Left to right: GNLC Goose Bump, GNLC Divina, GNLC Bella, GNLC Minx, GNLC Binjin, GNLC Pink Martini, GNLC Trutina

Merlin passed away in 2017, leaving Hightower and a group of daughters as his legacy in the GNLC herd, and many notable offspring spread across the country. As the genetic makeup of their herd tightened up, the Rolfings leased proven sires from outside herds for a couple breeding seasons. But clearly it was time to make a purchase. Steve has always been very particular when adding any animal from another program, especially a male. After many years' participation in Fort Worth alongside CarolAnn Tallmon, who had purchased GNLC Ripcurl, Steve admired her herd and the CTF breeding program. He was therefore comfortable purchasing CTF Renegade's Vigilante for \$19,750 during the 2017 CTF dispersal. Sue recalls, "Sherri Tallmon, (no relation to CarolAnn) started it. She called and said, 'Hey take a look at this male.'" Steve and Sherri were already used to visiting each other's herds, and chose to partner on Vigilante.

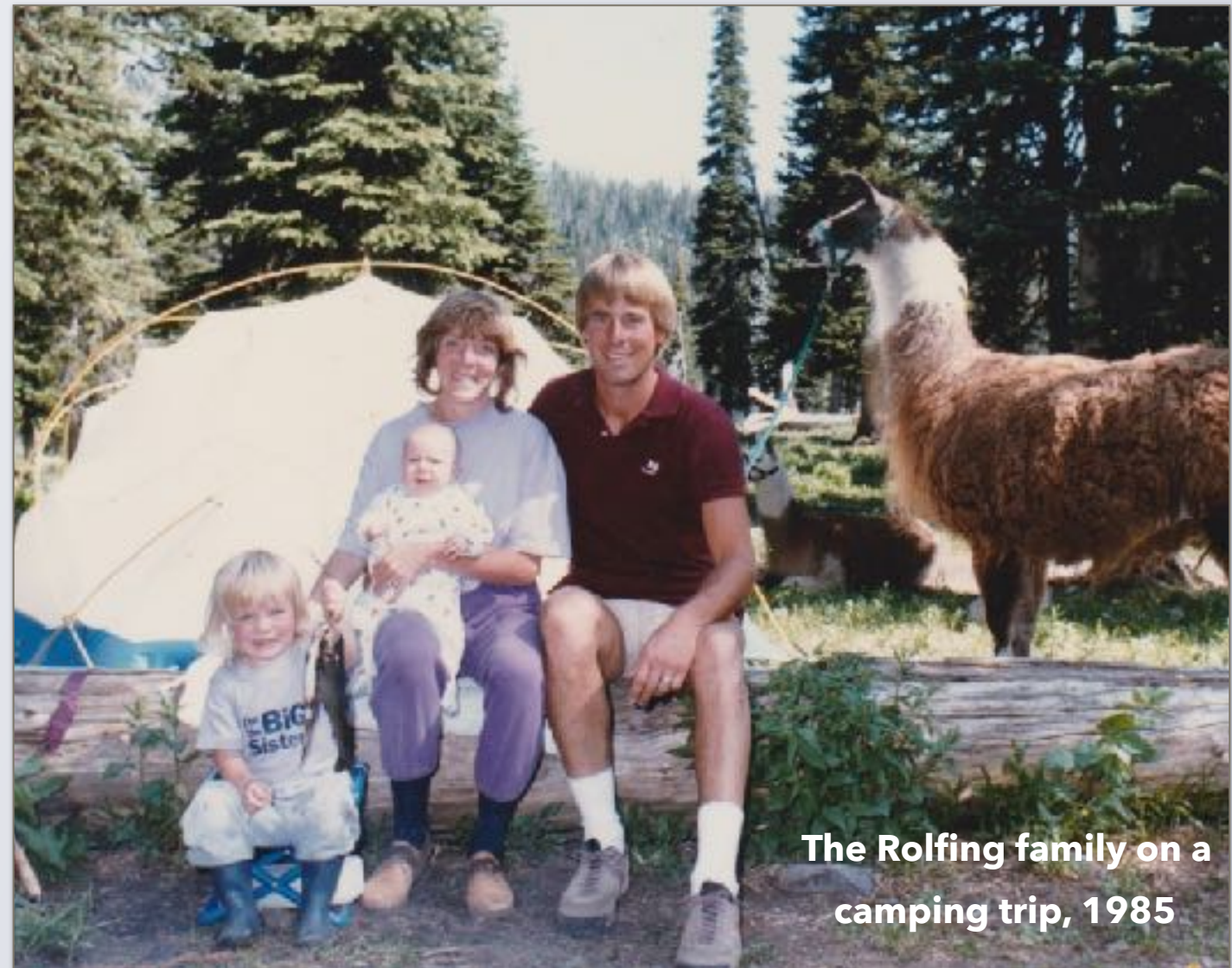
Steve: "It's not really about the price, whether he was a good deal, a bad deal, or too expensive. He was the right animal at the right time with the right partner for me, so it was good for us and it was good for the industry."

LOOKING BACKWARD AND FORWARD

Toward the end of our conversation I asked them to reflect on the past 40 years, on their remaining goals, and to each name their proudest llama-related moment. Based on everything you've read so far, your expectations for their answers might be similar to mine. I thought of selling Catman for a record price, being self-employed through their outfitting business, or perhaps where they find themselves today with so many top programs having sons of GNLC Merlin, GNLC Hightower, or GNLC Crocket as their main herdsires. The answers they gave, however, were very different from what I expected.

Steve told a story from his outfitting days: "I've got an email pinned up in my office. I got it about 14 years after a woman went on a pack trip with me. She said 'Steve, do you remember me? I was a recently divorced mother with four boys. One of my boys was a diabetic and you did all these great things to make the trip wonderful for us. I just wanted to let you know that he died four years ago. He always talked about that pack trip and his older brother spoke about it at his memorial.' So 14 years later I'm thinking 'Gosh, I had a big impact on this family.' That's a real human moment, feeling grateful that you impacted someone's life for the rest of their life."

He continued, "Paul Taylor once told me that I was the only llama person who seems to have successfully kept one foot in the high profile, big auction sales and breeder end of things, and the other foot in the llama packing and commercial outfitting arena. When he said it, those places were at polar opposites in the llama community. I really appreciated that, because I have always tried to be down to earth and grounded in what I feel is the real important stuff in life."



**The Rolfing family on a
camping trip, 1985**

Sue wiped a tear or two as she shared her answer, which was also grounded in life's important stuff. "I think what I enjoy most is all the generations. In my office there's a picture of my dad, who's gone now, leaning over the fence giving a bottle to a baby llama. Mom's still alive, she's 92, and they just thought this was the most incredible thing. They would brag on our llamas to their friends all the time. And Steve's grandmother, we used to take llamas down to her cabin on Flathead Lake and picket them in the lawn next to her chair. Our kids loved growing up on a ranch and have wonderful values from working with the herd and on the trail with us. Now we have grandchildren who can't wait to get here. Theo is three and Coco is six. They wear their Carhartt overalls and troop along after Steve, just totally getting into it."



Steve and Sue's son, Jamie

ENDING WHERE THEY BEGAN

As our conversation moved toward the future, it was clear that their 10 year plan is written in pencil, not chiseled in stone. Sue said, "When you turn 65 and go on Medicare, you have to keep the endgame in mind. Or at least start thinking about it. We've talked about, 'what's our plan?' but we're still in the middle of that talk. We don't know!" and ends with the easy laugh that she has had throughout our conversations.

Steve joins in, "We'll probably slowly start whittling the herd down. I enjoy it so much I can't imagine not doing it. But the selling and support takes a lot of work beyond just having babies and marketing 20 llamas a year. It would be nice to get it down to where it's a little simpler to work with, but it's great to be in a business where you don't have to be, like, 'Boom. Done. I'm retired.' I can change it from a business to a hobby gradually. That's a wonderful position to be in."

Sue adds, "We're already semi-retired in that we used to have a three-part business with the llamas, the alpacas, and the packing. Now two-thirds of that is done so we're really back to what we love the most, and that's the llamas." Their outfitting business was sold in 2010, though they continue to own and lease the pack llamas to the outfitter. The alpaca herd they maintained for 23 years, until 2015, "was like a farmer adding a second crop," says Steve. "Plus it helped fund my llama habit."



Steve mentions a llama breeder he admires who is nearly 20 years older than him. This breeder is still very active with llamas and was due to join them later in the week for a three-day hike in Glacier National Park. Reading between the lines, Steve clearly would love to be raising llamas and hiking Montana's trails until past his 80th birthday, too. Sue continues to speak about the future as she says, "Having this property that Steve can work on, that's our retirement plan. We're not going to sit in a condo on Maui or anything like that. He'd be miserable. He can move around here constantly, which is the main relief for his back pain, and having the animals is a reason to get up and go outside every day. It's a really healthy way for us to live. We started when we were in our 20s, but it's going to be just as healthy for us when we're in our 70s and 80s." Steve leans over, looking like he might have something to add, but instead knocks his fist on the wood table we're sitting at, and everyone laughs.



Steve and Sue Roling have been trail blazers in the llama community. Hearing about their journey over the last 40 years deeply impressed me. They started an outfitting company and have lived almost the entirety of their adult lives as self-employed, small business owners. They pursued llama breeding with a vision and success that is unmatched in the llama world, with the exception of their early mentors, the Pattersons. What impresses me the most is that they have made their mark among the most important breeders in the American llama industry with a small herd that produces just 15 to 20 crias a year. Reflecting on the problem that caused them to buy their first llamas Steve said, "It would be nice to have a pain-free life and not have chronic back pain, but I wouldn't trade for a second what it has led me to: raising kids and living like this with llamas, and outfitting. Clearly God's hand is in this. It led us to and through this whole llama business."



Steve and Sue Roling with GNLC Merlin



THE LAMA

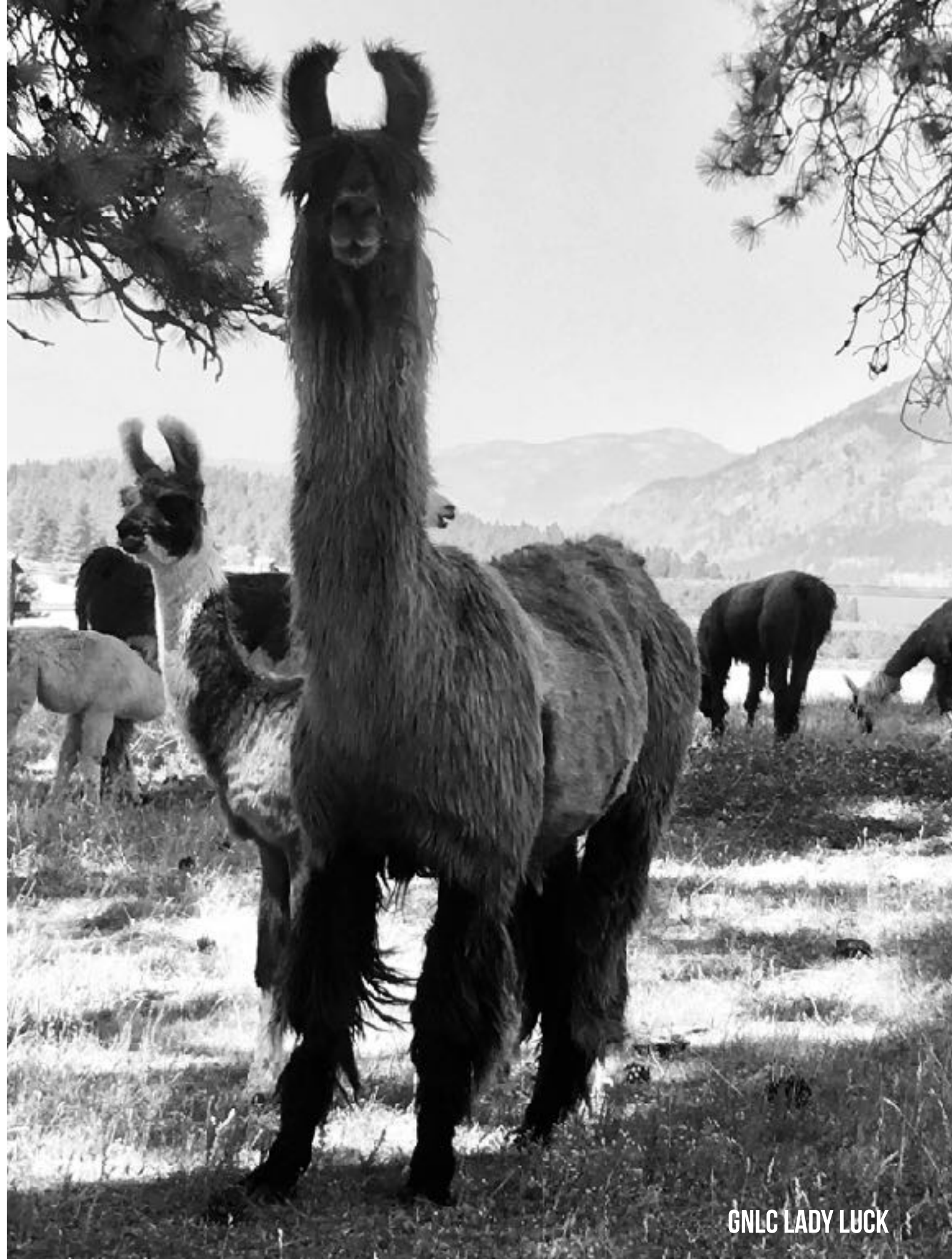
BY ODGEN NASH

THE ONE-L LAMA,
HE'S A PRIEST;
THE TWO-L LLAMA,
HE'S A BEAST.
AND I WILL BET
A SILK PAJAMA
THERE ISN'T ANY
THREE-L LLLAMA.



STEVE & SUE ROLFING
COLUMBIA FALLS, MONTANA
WWW.GNRRANCH.COM

BREEDING BEAUTY IN THE BEAST
SINCE 1979

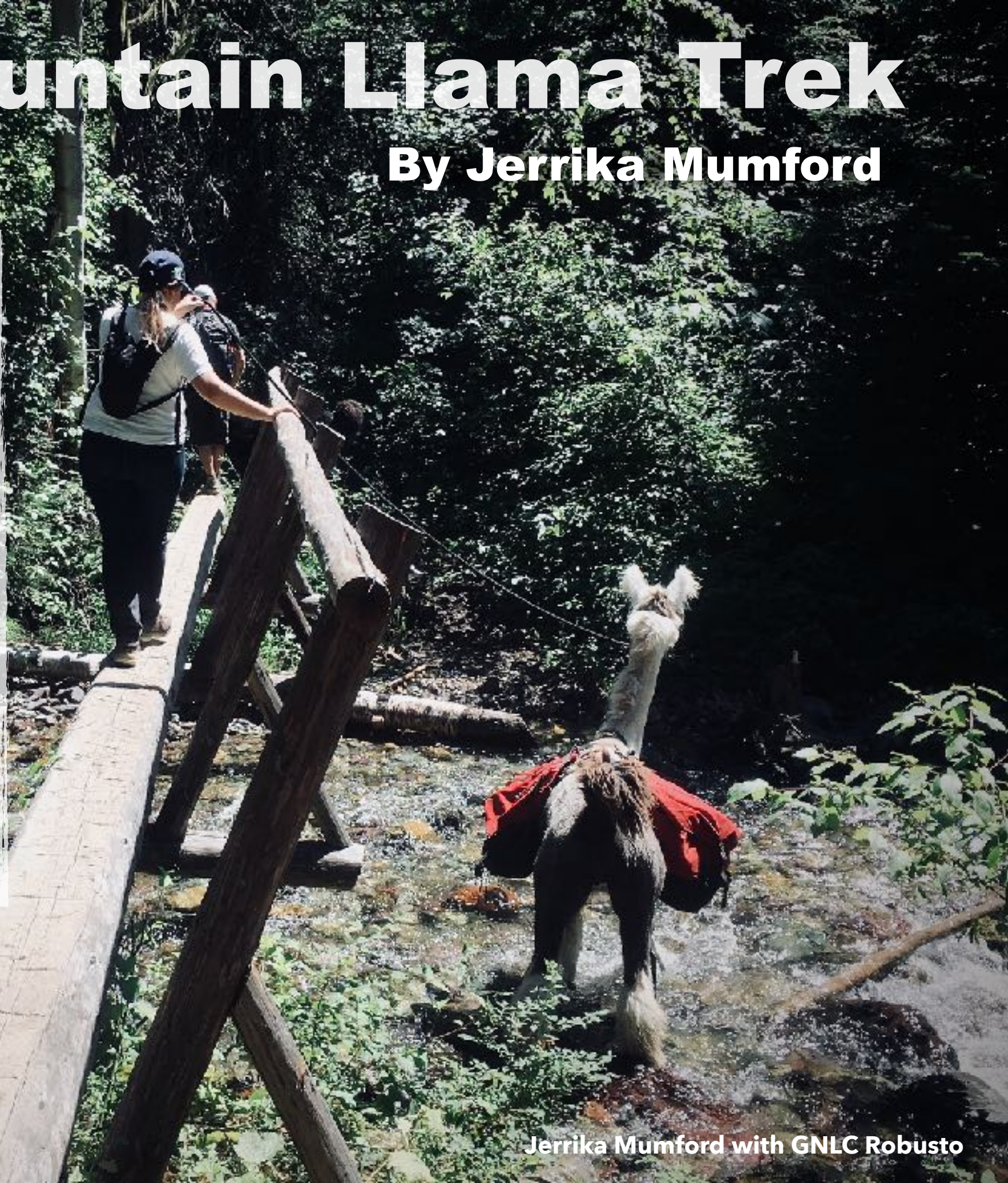


GNLC LADY LUCK

Swan Mountain Llama Trek

By Jerrika Mumford

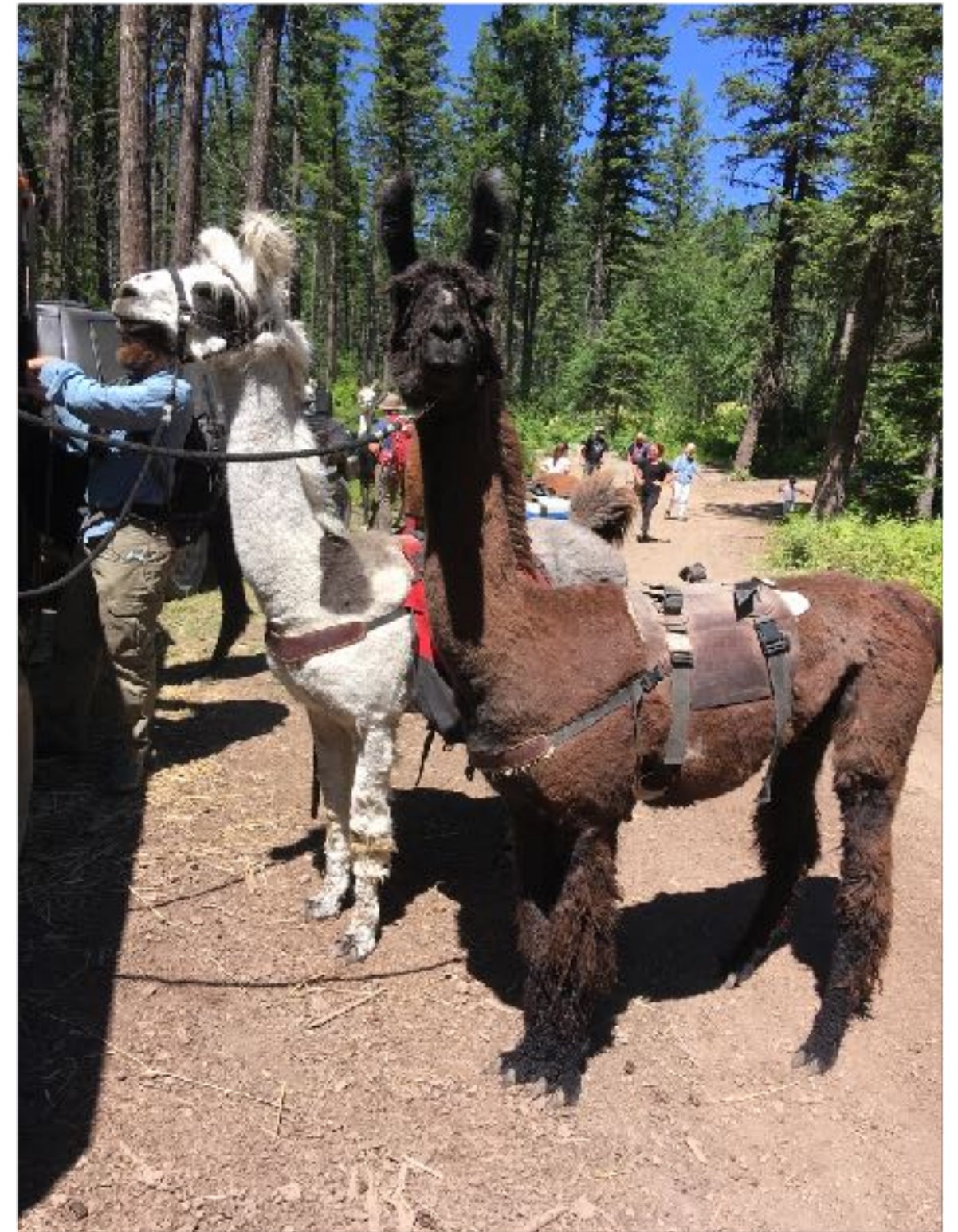
During our trip to Montana to visit Great Northern Ranch, Kyle and I thought it would be fitting to include a llama trek with the outfitting company the Rolfings lease llamas to. Swan Mountain Llama Trekking offers multi-day llama packing trips as well as shorter day or half day treks. We had a busy week, so the half day trek worked best for our schedule.



Jerrika Mumford with GNLC Robusto

After arriving at Swan Mountain Ranch we were greeted by our guides for the day, Tucker, Dan and Lola. As fellow llama enthusiasts, Tucker and Dan were excited to hear that we owned llamas and knew Steve and Sue Rolfing. While we waited for the trek to start Dan gave us a quick tour and introduced us to a few llamas he owned that were at the Ranch.

After arriving at the trailhead, the guides unloaded the trailer and out came the statuesque pack llamas leased from Steve and Sue Rolfing. After the day we spent at Great Northern Ranch, it was a great experience to see the llamas Steve has been breeding for in the purpose they were intended. Steve had reiterated throughout our visit with him that if you are going to have pack llamas they might as well be pretty. The llamas in the pack string were tall and athletic with good fiber and long necks topped with beautiful head and ears. They were great representatives of Steve's breeding program and goals. After the llamas were loaded up with gear and a quick safety demo, Kyle and I had the opportunity to pick llamas to lead on the trail. My choice was a black and white paint, GNLC Robusto "Buster", and Kyle selected a beautiful reddish brown suri, GNLC Wapiti, both sired by GNLC Merlin. These two geldings could have easily fit into a breeding program as lead herdsires.



Our llamas for the day: GNLC Robusto and GNLC Wapiti



Kyle Mumford with GNLC Wapiti

Our pack llamas knew the trail well, and were calm and able on the hike. I was very impressed with their disposition and willingness; the llamas seemed to love their jobs. Buster, Wapiti, and the others didn't hesitate as they were led through narrows trails, up inclines, and through a creek, all while carrying gear. One of the most impressive things I saw is when Buster wandered slightly off the trail to "use the restroom". It was a spot the llamas knew to go to when they needed a bathroom break. I loved that the llamas knew to keep the trail clean.

After two and half miles we arrived at Bond Creek Falls, a lovely setting for our lunch with rocks to sit and climb on, a beautiful waterfall, and a chance to dip our feet in the clear, cool water. The llamas got a break to munch on the various leaves and plants while we ate, relaxed, and enjoyed the scenery. After our break, the llamas were packed up again and we made our way along the trail back to the trailhead.



GNLC Robusto



A group of pack llamas



Bond Creek Falls

We enjoyed talking with our guide, Dan, about llamas and hearing about his plans to continue packing and guiding in other areas of the US while he continues to build his own llama herd. The opportunity to experience first hand the ideas Steve and Sue spoke of the day before left an impression on both of us and we believe this will have a positive impact on our own breeding program going forward. Kyle and I thoroughly enjoyed our trek with Swan Mountain Llama Trekking and we are looking forward to packing more with our own llamas closer to home.



Jerrika Mumford with GNLC Robusto



About the Author

Jerrika Mumford is a llama enthusiast and an owner of Volcano View Ranch along with her husband, Kyle Mumford. She is a certified public accountant in the beautiful state of Washington with a Master of Accounting from Washington State University.

Kyle Mumford with GNLC Wapiti





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BREEDING BEAUTY IN THE BEAST
SINCE 1979

But wait, there's more...

This edition has featured only the
Great Northern Ranch and Swan
Mountain Outfitter articles, to view
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