

Fools' Gold

by Jo Ann McGrath

Every quarter I vow to be Little Mary Sunshine, and then something assaults my sensibilities. This morning I found the first nettle while reading online newspapers and cable reports. This from MSNBC:

"The increasingly low-profile-V.P. [Cheney] was taken to Pittsburgh by Air Force Two earlier this week where his 'security detail loaded him and his favorite shotgun into a Humvee,' and went to Rolling Rock Club in Ligonier Township, according to the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. There, he and nine other hunting buddies shot at 500 ringneck pheasants, killing 417 of them. The V.P. was credited with offing 70 of the birds, as well as an unknown number of mallard ducks."

This was a "canned" hunt, other sources report. Canned hunts take place at fenced-in ranches - some even smaller than this 400-acre Pennsylvania site - stocked with animals, sometimes exotic animals, which they raise to get blasted by shotgun/rifle/pistol-toting people willing to spend a lot of money.

Another report says: The people who run the hunt think of it as a form of farming. [Sheesh!] The Humane Society says: Most states allow canned hunting, *but they are most common in Texas*.

Does this explain why all those guys in cowboy hats hang out at the second rate auctions where our industry rids itself of its over-production, or cops out of its humanity?

ALSA's Choices

There are changes occurring in the llama showing community. In order to stanch the bleeding of cash, the **Alpaca and Llama Show Association** (ALSA) has announced it will undertake some belt-tightening and revenue enhancement (see financial report from the minutes, page 6). We think the added fees imposed on those who show will dampen the enthusiasm for competition.

But even more unsettling is the contemplated proposal to outsource its news organ *Showring* to the publishers of *The Banner* who will offer their services gratis....getting in return all ad revenues. It sounds like a

good deal, but this is the very same move made by the defunct **International Llama Association** (ILA), a decision that served to further alienate an already suspicious and disillusioned membership who believed ILA operated for the benefit of the elite.

Maybe the wrong entity is being outsourced. Considering that the **International Llama Registry** (ILR) is likely to suffer financially from having lost **The Alpaca Registry, Inc.** (ARI) account (see below), perhaps ALSA should support its industry's registry by moving its record keeping office - reportedly an \$81,500 yearly expenditure - to the registry.

Course Change?

Changes are occurring within the alpaca community, too, and they are sufficiently massive as to alarm members who have been around long enough to remember that some of these very same "changes" are what contributed to the demise of the ILA.

In this issue, alpaca breeders **Eric Hoffman** and **Tilly Dorsey** both question ARI's dismissal of ILR as ARI's service provider, and **Alpaca Owners and Breeders Association's** (AOBA) choice of an out-of-the-industry management firm to replace its longtime association managers.

A similar move to a commercial management firm - assessed by the last ILA board to be a cost-cutting measure - was its death knell. If camelids were canned hams or chewing gum, a disinterested management operation might work.

Information is Everything...Almost

In 1996 or 1997 we saw alpaca owners disappearing from our pages. For several years these "newcomers" to the industry had often taken up half the editorial copy and more than half the advertising space. However, the alpaca market was in its ascendancy and many breeders felt they wanted their own, unshared pages - and we did nothing to discourage them. Today, there is greater parity between llama and alpaca growers - in prices as well as in shared problems.

This winter issue, **LLII, No. 68**, is being sent to a number of smaller alpaca breeders as a gift. For two reasons. The first is to help promote our contributing alpaca editor, Eric Hoffman's, estimable new book (see review by **Melanie Forde**, page 16), and because we have become aware that none in the legions of new alpaca owners is provided with a publication that is not overseen and managed by those who have a vested interest in keeping new owners ignorant of any negative aspects

of the costly careers they have embarked on.

The llama phenomenon is older than the alpaca phenomenon and it has a history alpaca owners should have learned from, but it appears they have not. Those who have been around for two or three decades are aghast to see that history repeating itself - in almost every single wrong-headed instance - including monkeying around with the registry and the national organization.

And On a Crasser Note

As regards marketing, I can recall some of the earlier market savvy llama breeders recommending potential buyers mortgage their homes to get into the hot llama market.

That market, and the currently still fairly hot alpaca market, are very reminiscent of "Tulip Mania." The following is taken from an account on the Internet at www.tulipmania.com) by Mark Tarses:

"In 1637, fascination with a tulip bulb brought in from Turkey in the 1630s, swept over Holland, Dutch traders bought and sold tulips at staggering prices. In smoke-filled taverns all over Holland, tulip bulbs were bought and sold at prices that rose, often dramatically, nearly every day.

"People made their food, including breads, cakes, and sausages in the shape of tulips. Many Dutchmen sold everything they owned and then borrowed as much money as they could in order to speculate on tulip shares and tulip bulbs.

"The word 'bourse' (stock exchange) derives from tulip mania. Those who speculated on tulips held their trading sessions at the offices of the Dutch noble family Van Bourse. How high did tulip prices get? Unbelievably high! *Some wealthy people traded everything they owned for a single tulip bulb.*"

Things don't change much. Tarses quotes the philosopher, Hegel: "The lesson of history is that men learn nothing from the lesson of history."

Say 'When'

AOBA reports that its rolls are expanding by 25 to 50 new members a week. This has created more than 5,000 alpaca breeders in the U.S. - many of whom have been "sold" by idyllic TV commercials extolling the virtues of alpacas as investment. What is somewhat promising is the focus of the commercials appears to be on selling "lifestyle" rather than "riches," but the subtler intimation is "investment opportunity," and the web site confirms it.

The losers will be the people who weren't lucky enough to get in at the bottom and are paying premium prices - sometimes over four

years - just as the prices may be showing sufficient decline to move entrepreneurs in new directions.

What *is* hopeful is the decline in the average prices. If anyone is truly serious about establishing a fiber industry, it won't be on the backs of \$20,000 to \$30,000 animals.

'A Viable Fiber Industry'

(Where the Fiber Bearers Cost More Than Houses)

The year is 2002 - Our Australian correspondent **Sylva Barns** reports: **Ian Watt**, president of the Australian Alpaca Association (AAA), is passionate in his belief that the alpaca industry can become a viable fiber industry in a few years if bold decisions are made now. He said, "We are the pioneers of a new agricultural industry, under-resourced but collectively committed to this fiber and the animal that has caught our attention in a big way. No other animal industry in this country has the opportunity to do what we are proposing, nor, I suspect, would any other industry have the [cajones] to do it. The question is, do we?"

Apparently not...because....

Leaving the Ship

The year is 2003 - Subject: Alpaca Dispersal Sale - Ian Watt (the same Ian Watt as above) and Briony Rogers. "Attached is a catalogue of superior alpacas being offered for sale as we disperse our herd to pursue other opportunities."

Hmmmmmm? I've heard "other opportunities" from several people who abandoned failed enterprises. What "other opportunities" are there for livestock entrepreneurs? Let's see - sheep are too cheap, goats are troublesome, horses are hard, llamas are established, alpacas have peaked. How about canned hunts?

From the Sublime to the Ridiculous

Prices at a recent perfectly organized and advertised sale were so high they strained credulity. In fact, they were so out of whack with anything anyone recognizes as reality it has prompted us to resurrect a piece on auction practices by attorney **Terry Price** (see page 7) to remind us of what is possible.

However, foolishness reached a zenith in Virginia in November when a family held a

llama auction of 12 llamas that was kept so successfully "secret" that nobody came. No advertising that we can find, no e-mail alerts, no grapevine calls, no Internet ballyhoo. Just the family, a hired auctioneer and two old guys who decided they might as well buy a llama as not. And, since they were only \$100 a piece, because no one was there who either knew anything about llamas or wanted one, they took two.

It might have only been the clueless owners, and the hapless llamas, who suffered, except for the fact that the local newspaper covered the "event" - replete with pictures - and made anyone who is involved with buying, selling or owning a llama look like a kook.

Happy New Year

Here's something to think about in this season of brotherly love.

"I love llamas" or "I love alpacas" or "I love horses" or "I love dogs."

These are words you see printed on T-shirts, stationery, web sites, cups - even on people's cheeks and checks.

How about engraving them on our hearts?▲