

# Raising Llamas Brought Them Back To The Farm

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— Donna Thrush is a farmer. Born and raised on a dairy farm near Elizabethtown, Lancaster County, farming is in her blood.

Curt Thrush is also a farmer. Born and raised on a dairy farm near Shippensburg, Curt's heart is with animals.

When Curt and Donna met and married at Messiah College, farming was not a viable means for them to earn living. Curt had the chance to purchase an insurance agency in Towanda, Bradford County, after graduation from Messiah. The Thrush Agency is now a respected company in the area, and by all standards Curt is a successful businessman.

But, while he operated his business, he longed for the contact with animals he enjoyed while

growing up. So three years ago Curt and Donna Thrush began looking for a way to put the six acres of land surrounding their North Rome farmhouse to use.

### Diversifying Operations

Curt knew there were lots of farmers who were diversifying their operations. After lots of research and reading articles on unusual operations, he decided the best way to learn first-hand which ventures were succeeding and why was to call the farmers and find out.

What he found was that, of all the farms who were branching out, those who had llamas said, "I wish we had more llamas."

To find out more, they attended llama conferences, visited farms in Pennsylvania, Connecticut, New Jersey and Wisconsin, and decided to buy. The decision was



Llamas are highly intelligent, curious animals, which will investigate any newcomer to their territory.

a little frightening, but they had the example of Donna's parents, who moved to a farm in Wellsboro, Tioga County, when Donna was a teen-ager, and began raising dairy beef. Success outside the mainstream of farming was possible.

They purchased three bred females. Soon after, Winding River Llamas, named after the nearby Susquehanna River, was born. For Curt and Donna, raising llamas involves a lot of education to answer the question most frequently asked by visitors to their farm: "What are llamas used for?"

### Camel Family

Llamas are members of the camel family, with its origins in South America. In South America, the llama has been used primarily as a source of wool, leather, meat, and milk, and as a beast of burden.

The Indians of the Andes Mountains believe in using all parts of the animal, much as our native American Indians used all parts of the buffalo and horses.

The Thrush's have not used their llamas for meat, leather, or milk, but have used the wool and the llama's strength and ability to carry (a mature llama can weigh between 250 and 500 pounds) to give rides to children 1/4 its weight.

As part of their education efforts, Curt and Donna travel to fairs, fall foliage festivals, preschools, and schools to teach people that llamas are well suited to life in North America. Out West, llamas are frequently used as pack animals on hunting and fishing trips. At this year's Troy Fair, one of the prizes in the wool spinning contest was a bag of llama wool,


courtesy of Winding River Llamas. The vests Curt and Donna made from their llama wool are "light and toasty warm," said Donna.

After three years in the business, Curt and Donna are very pleased with their decision. They raise their animals primarily for breeding stock, a bred female will sell for \$10,000 and up, an ungedled male for \$2,000 and up. They also emphasize that llamas are ideally suited for pets, and will sell a gelded male for about \$1,000.

### In Its Infancy

The llama industry is still in its infancy. The demand is high and the supply is still very limited. For Donna, "the babies are one of the most exciting parts of the business. It takes about 1-1/2 months

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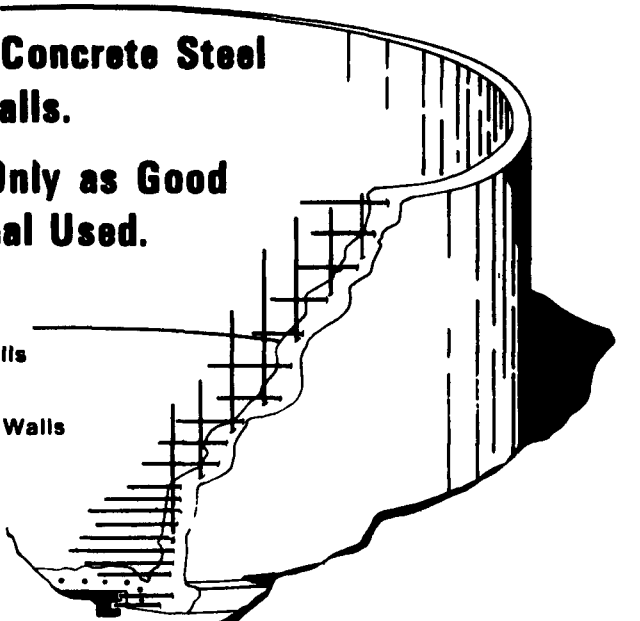


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