

A Herd of her own

Loni Blumerich knew she wanted a hobby farm, but initially did not know what kind of farm she wanted. So, around 2001, she hit the road to find out.

The Duluth, MN Branch 114 member and her husband, Horst, packed up their car and took a seven-hour road trip to Green Bay, WI, to check out an alpaca show. “I went there with no hopes or expectations,” she said, but added that the show was “going to determine if I move forward” with the farm.

There, she met the special animals, and could feel her life about to change. The animals Blumerich encountered

were alpacas, which are a species of South American camelid similar to, and often confused with, the llama—though alpacas are much smaller. They are known for their luxurious coats.

“That’s it—I’m a goner,” the recently retired carrier said of her introduction. “They’re mesmerizing animals. They stopped my heart. I was totally smitten with the alpacas.”

She is allergic to sheep, horses and cows, but had heard that alpacas were hypoallergenic. Owners let her get up close with some of the 250 animals at the show, and she had no issues. While there, she also attended a seminar to gain more information.

Blumerich and Horst spent the next few years reading, researching and learning all they could about alpacas. While living within Duluth city limits, they hunted for an appropriate property to start their farm and soon found one to live and work on.

“The original intent of the farm was to supplement my retirement income,” she said. The couple began building fences on the farm they had purchased in Duluth 12 miles outside of downtown and, by 2007, they bought their first group of six alpacas. They now have 32, a combination of some of the offspring of the originals as well as some new animals. The Blumeriches brought in some new alpacas “to improve and diversify the genetics of our herd,” the carrier said.

“Alpacas are perfect for small acreage,” Blumerich said. “You can put four to six alpacas on one acre.”

They keep their alpacas in a barn on a fenced-in six acres on their 10-acre lot. Alpacas do well in a three-sided shelter, though the Blumeriches put

Some of the Blumeriches’ alpacas at Frosty Ridge farm





The retired carrier participates in a show with one of her farm's prize alpacas.

theirs in a four-sided barn with doors because of the harsh Minnesota winters. “They come and go in and out as they please,” she said, adding that they will cap their farm at 36 alpacas.

While they don't really have to train the animals, Blumerich explains that alpacas “have to learn to behave on a lead.” A lead, otherwise known as a leash, is necessary to get them to one place or another, and the earlier they can be trained, the better. “Once they're mature, it's much harder,” she said.

Blumerich explained that with alpaca farming, “you can make it into whatever you want to do. We have chosen to focus on everything.”

That means that at their business, Frosty Ridge Alpacas, they breed and sell animals, offer stud services and alpaca boarding, and also have an on-site store with hundreds of items. She sells items from vendors who have their own mills in Peru that produce hats, sweaters, socks, toys and pillows—all made of the fleece of alpaca, which is warmer than sheep's wool.

Sales so far are local and word-of-mouth.

Blumerich and her husband also show their alpacas at local competitions. The events are governed by the Alpaca Owners Association (AOA), which sets the regulations followed by all shows in the United States. Alpacas' fiber is analyzed and catalogued with AOA once a year, which is necessary for finding breeding pairs.

Blumerich compares the events to dog shows, and says there are competitions in every state in the country. The alpacas are separated into categories: sex, age and color. Owners then walk their animals into the showroom. “We all line up and the judge does a hands-on inspection,” she said.

Judges look at the quality of the alpacas' fiber, including the density and luster. They make comparisons and then rate the alpacas, giving awards for first through sixth places. The Blumeriches' alpacas consistently place in the top three.

Shows generally take place early in the year, while the animals still have

all their fleece before they're shorn.

Shearing them is quite an undertaking. The most recent shearing required more than a dozen volunteers as well as a professional shearer. The shearing is done so the animals don't suffer heat stress during the summer.

During the process, the alpacas need to be restrained. “They don't want to be told what to do,” Blumerich says. The animals are brought out on a flat surface with their feet held down, and then the shearer shaves the alpacas' fleece, which is separated and tagged by volunteers. The finest harvested fibers get sent to a mill to be spun into yarn, which then is sold in the farm's store. Lower-rated fiber can be used for other purposes, such as stuffing for craft projects, garden mulch and bird nesting material.

In addition to the shearing, annual shots are given to the alpacas, and toenails and teeth are trimmed as necessary.

While Frosty Ridge currently has no other full-time employees—“It's a mom-and-pop operation,” Blumerich

says—they've received lots of offers from visitors to volunteer, and have started taking them up on it. Her favorite volunteer is a 92-year-old man who helps cool down the alpacas during the summer using kiddie pools.

Blumerich, who spent 27 years on and off working for the Postal Service, retired on Oct. 1. She now plans to focus her full attention on her farm and alpacas.

Blumerich said that because of her full-time job, they haven't advertised. Now that she is retired, they plan to upgrade their website to include more breeding information to market their animals and more inventory online at frostryridgealpacas.com.

"Linemen from the electric company buy socks like crazy," she said, adding that alpaca fleece long underwear "is the only way I'd conceive of to make it through the North Country winters."

She is starting to get more letter carriers as customers. Of her former coworkers, she says, "Everybody at work knows what I do. The ones that make it out here love it."

Blumerich also provides space in the shop for local artists and makers—in-

Right: Some of the items that Frosty Ridge offers in its Barn and Farm Store

Bottom left: Cooling off the alpacas in the summer heat using kiddie pools

Bottom right: Blumerich with one of her animals at an alpaca show



cluding the wares of five fellow carriers—such as soap, hand stamping, jewelry, woodworking and candles.

She loves having visitors to the farm, so the couple plans to have more tours come through, including groups of elderly citizens from nursing homes as well as school kids. Frosty Ridge is open to the public every Sunday, and a recent open house drew hundreds of visitors.

Blumerich also enjoys taking alpacas (usually three at a time) to local events like festivals and fundraising walks, and bringing wares to craft fairs or events such as ice fishing.

"I'll be out in the community a lot more," she said. And now that she's retired, she plans to travel to additional and more distant alpaca shows, like the national competition in Denver.

Since Blumerich's favorite animals are "becoming popular in the public psyche," she said, citing a recent Samsung commercial, "I want to educate the public as to what alpacas are—and aren't."

She warns: "They're not pets.

You just want to snuggle with them—but they don't like that." The animals prefer to be admired from a distance.

Moreover, she adds, "You can't buy [just] one—they're livestock." There should be three at a minimum in a herd, Blumerich notes. Having fewer is irresponsible because they live in family

groups. "In their natural environment, they are a herd animal," she said. "They need to be in a herd so that they feel safe and secure. They rely on each other for their mental stability."

More than anything, though, Blumerich just wants to share her love of all things alpaca. "They're wonderful, amazing, captivating creatures," she said. **PR**

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