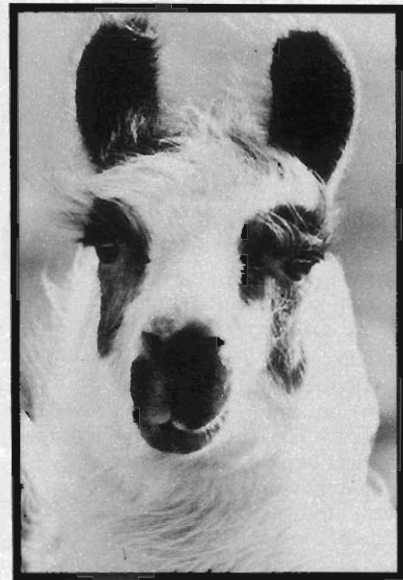


FOR THE LOVE OF LLAMAS

The Incas worshipped them, Kim Novak loves them, Steve Wozniak plays with them, Pete McCloskey hikes with them and the Hunt brothers get even richer with them.

By Eric Hoffman



[Andy Tillman]

WHILE TRADITIONAL pet owners may discuss the resurgence of the cocker spaniel, the minimal care needed for goldfish and parakeets or the ravishes of feline leukemia among the neighborhood's house cats, there's a whole new crowd gathering around the old Inca standby, the llama. In a curious combination of chic, high finance and ecological ethics and economics, llamas have cast their special spell on a cross section

of Americans whose better-known fans include singer Michael Jackson, billionaires ~~Clare~~ and ~~Betty~~ Hunt, Apple Computer whiz Steve Wozniak, movie director Mike Nichols, former Congressman Pete McCloskey, actress Kim Novak and human-bunny-packager Hugh Hefner.

If the amount of money someone is willing to pay for a llama, and its increased value over the last twenty years, is the litmus test of the animal's staying power,

then it seems safe to predict that llamas will have more to offer than the hula hoop, and possibly even the cabbage patch doll. In the early 1960s the largest llama breeder in the U.S. sold males for \$100 and females for \$400. Today males sell for from \$600 to \$5,000 and females for from \$4,000 to \$10,000, with many breeders forced to put customers on waiting lists because they can't keep up with the demand.

To an outsider, the llama may appear to be an animal designed by a committee working from a spare parts room for the world's menagerie — padded feet like an ostrich, wool finer than sheep's fleece, the running grace and agility of a deer, height of a small horse, eyesight of a hawk, eyelashes of a movie starlet, a powder puff tail resembling a smurf and banana-shaped ears that twist and turn independently of one another.

Steve and Candi Wozniak bought four llamas to

Continued



Llamas use ears, nose, body and tail to communicate. At right, the black-and-white female begins a courtship with the white male, while two black females display aggravation. Above right, Kim Novak and husband Robert Malloy stroll with llamas near their Carmel home.

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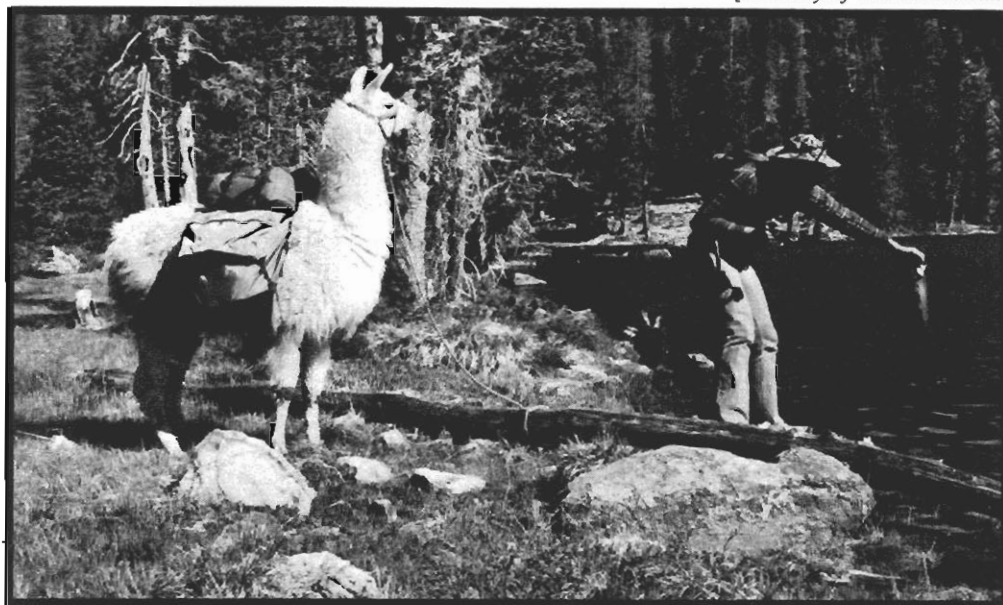
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ANIMALS

[Courtesy of Shasta Llamas]



Commercial llama packers are gaining popularity in California wilderness areas.

Continued

trim the grass around their spacious spread atop a mountain outside Los Gatos. Says Candi Wozniak: "I read about llamas and liked the idea of an animal that was low-maintenance and different. We like them fine, but the reason we own them is pure and simple novelty." Similarly, Michael Jackson and Hugh Hefner have included llamas in their personal menageries. But probably Kim Novak's twenty-year love affair with llamas has done the most to score their chic rating. Novak and her veterinarian husband, Bob Malloy, have turned a one-animal habit into a twenty-animal habit and a lucrative side business run from their Carmel Valley ranch. Kim likes to speak about her woolly friends' personalities which, she says, "vary as much as any random group of people. Llamas are harmonious creatures, and one can share a jog, a walk or just a loving look with them."

While looks and associations may account for some of the attraction, the ecological and economic angles probably play a bigger part. Compared to traditional pack animals, whose heavy hooves punch platter-sized craters in fragile alpine fields and whose appetites denude trees and meadows, llamas offer an ecological alternative. And in the winter, there are the high boarding costs and hefty food bills owners of traditional stock have to contend with. Llamas tread lightly on padded feet. They browse rather than graze and will even settle for leaves and pine needles in a pinch. They consume about one-fourth as much as a horse or mule and rarely overeat or over-drink. They can be transported in a small pickup truck or Volkswagen van and are often housed in average-sized backyards (local ordinances permitting). They can carry only 100 pounds, but their intelligence and agility allow them to

negotiate terrain and situations that would give a horse fits. Scotts Valley veterinarian Bill Arnold remembers hiking with a llama whose intelligence impressed him. "When tied out to graze on a lunge line, the llama wound his rope around a small tree and eventually found himself nearly snug to the trunk. Instead of panicking and struggling like a horse, he carefully looked at the rope and slowly backed around the tree until the rope was free again."

Another testimonial to their back country savvy comes from ex-Congressman Pete McCloskey, who enjoys llama trekking in the high Sierra: "A llama can carry everything four people need for a weekend. Llamas can handle steep inclines covered with snow and loose rubble. They are silent companions and hardly leave a trace."

Llamas hardly left a trace in North America when they disappeared from this continent. Their ancestors departed before the last Ice Age. Some died off; some migrated to Eurasia and evolved into the dromedary (one-humped) and Bactrian (two-humped) camels. Others wandered off to South America, re-emerging as the wild, fine-fleeced, deer-sized vicuna and llama-sized guanaco. Llamas, and later the smaller, heavily woolled alpaca, evolved from selective breeding practices of Andean Indians who worked from captured guanacos or a now-extinct camelid over 4,000 years ago.

The llama was the only beast of burden in all the Americas when Pizarro arrived and conquered the Incas. Under the Incas, llamas were treated with reverence and anyone found molesting the royal herds was executed.

Llamas regained a foothold in the United States during the 1800s and were exhibited by several East Coast zoos. But today's population is mostly attributable to the efforts of

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William Randolph Hearst, who used them to decorate his palatial grounds at San Simeon during the 1930s. Unlike zoo animals that were exhibited alone or in pairs and often not allowed to reproduce, Hearst's free-roaming herd grew rapidly. Even when he tired of caring for his huge menagerie collected from all over the world and dispersed most of the animals, the llama herd was sold intact and continued to proliferate. Until this year, when international wheeler-dealers began importing them, llamas have retained a static gene pool dating to the Hearst's animals.

In the early 1960s, a far-sighted Oregonian, Richard Patterson, armed with an M.B.A. from the University of Chicago, bought most of the Hearst herd from an East Coast animal park. Patterson's herd now fluctuates between 450 and 600 animals and his corner on the market has allowed him to steadily raise the price from hundreds of dollars per animal to thousands. In the 1970s, substantial herds began popping up in California, Washington, Oregon and Colorado. Their owners commonly undercut Patterson's prices; even so, prices continued to rise, making importation economically feasible.

Possibly to keep a step ahead of the competition, Patterson imported a small group of alpacas from England (alpacas are a llama cousin, well-known in the wool business but a rare sight in North America). The price tag for a pair of alpacas is \$20,000. Following Patterson's lead, Indianan Herb Kesling talked Chilean and American officials into allowing the importation of llamas and alpacas from South America. Kesling claims his profits were eroded by diseased animals destroyed in quarantine and the sea of red tape on the South American end. But ~~the~~ ~~rule~~ and ~~Bucky~~ ~~Hunt~~, based in Texas, aren't discouraged. They've taken out a permit and are importing 270 alpacas and llamas from Chile.

You would think the specter of imports flooding the market would give domestic breeders the jitters. Not so. Says Santa Cruz llama breeder Cecile Champagne: "First of all, it's only profitable to import if most of the animals brought in are alpacas, and alpacas aren't llamas. The marketability of alpacas hasn't been proven yet. They don't breed as well as llamas, aren't as manageable and can't carry a pack. The South American llamas offer a new genetic makeup, but because of poorer nutrition and herd

management they are one-third smaller than North American llamas."

Without a doubt, Patterson, the Hunt brothers and others are cashing in on an affable animal. Llamas are usually gentle, tractable, rather aloof and always curious. Baby llamas, called crias, are so cute owners bring them into their homes — they are easily house-broken — and generally spoil them by over-fondling. (With females this kind of treatment does no harm, but when males are over-fondled they often lose their fear of humans and may treat them as sexual rivals, or at least a partner worthy of sparring practice — which can create a real handful when they weigh 400 pounds.)

But, with proper upbringing, even the occasionally feisty adolescent llama can be trained. "We watched our young males trying to establish dominance by biting each other on the knees until the loser sat down," recalls Sally Taylor, whose successful llama-breeding allowed her husband to give up his Petaluma dental practice for full-time llama-breeding. "We started training all our llamas to lie down upon command and there was a dramatic increase in manageability and cooperation. We proved domination in a way they could understand." Horse trainer Phyllis Tozier has trained llamas to pull carts for their owners and gives them high marks in mental quickness. "They learn about seven times faster than a horse. In one day I can often teach a llama to obediently pull a cart, while it usually takes a week to get the same thing out of a horse."

Llama owners have also noted a wide range of entertaining behavior from their animals.

[Larry Minden]

Los Gatos accountant Carol Smith loves swimming in alpine lakes and found her pack llama likes lake swimming as much as she does. Says Smith: "He [the llama] would always watch with curiosity when we disappeared into a lake and finally his curiosity got the better of him. He followed and seems to enjoy it as much as we do. It's quite a sight. He looks like a furry miniature version of the Loch Ness monster, because just his long neck sticks out of the water." Other owners talk of llamas that seem to like

watching television. Bonny Doon artist Jeanne Rosen says, "It's not that they understand what's on tv, it's more that they seem to like the constantly changing imagery."

Shepherders in California, Idaho and Wyoming have harnessed a more pragmatic side



Steve and Candi Wozniak with their pet, Cuzco, outside their Los Gatos home.

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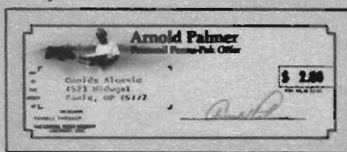
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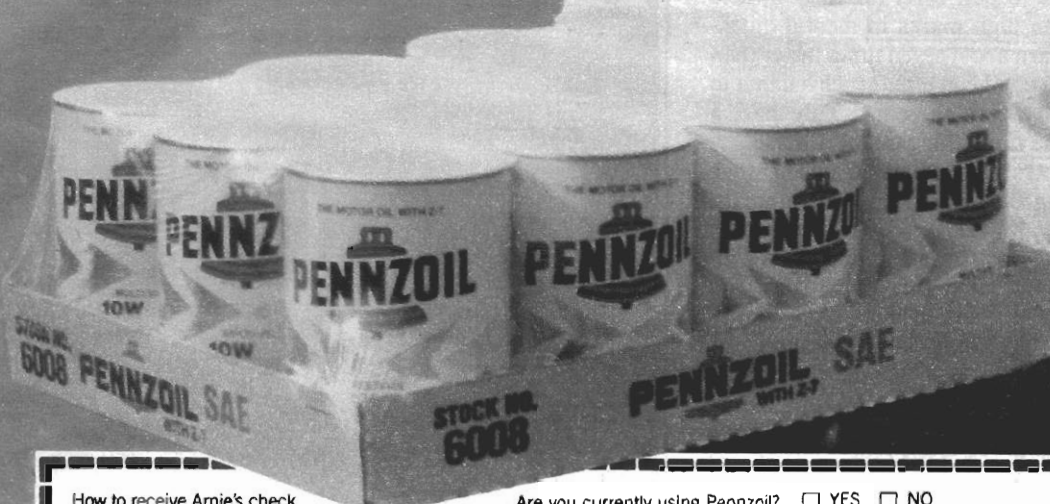
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of llama behavior. Llamas, particularly males, are very alert to the designs of predators, especially dogs and coyotes. Instead of taking flight, llamas often charge a predator; dumbfounded, the predator usually scampers off. Even if predators arrive in packs, which would make charging an act of suicide, llamas will do their best to bluff or let out a piercing whinny that alerts anyone within a mile that something is wrong.

Santa Cruz llama breeder Cecile Champagne explains what understanding llama behavior can accomplish. "My husband has trained quite a few llamas as pack animals. With reliable ways to manage such a beautiful animal, people have turned to llamas as packing companions that are also pets." Champagne's husband proved how tough a llama can be in a grueling 110-mile trek. In nine days he and his llama crossed the southern Sierra and climbed Mount Whitney (14,496 feet), the highest peak in the contiguous U.S. On the last day of the return trip, trying to outrun an intense storm, the llama climbed two major mountain passes with a total vertical rise of nearly 6,000 feet and traveled 26 miles through every conceivable kind of terrain: snow, swollen streams, sharp, loose rock and glaciated granite.

Llama lovers feel they've found a nearly perfect companion, but there are a few difficulties. Although llamas generally are hardy, when they become ill many local veterinarians don't know how to treat them; others are reluctant to, since llamas carry such a high price tag. To help, Dr. Murray Fowler, the Chief of Zoological Medicine at the UC Davis vet school, has put together a crash course in llama care for interested vets. Besides Fowler, veterinarian Bob Malloy has made advancement in surgical procedures with llamas, but the information from these pioneers in care is slow to get into the hinterlands, where most llamas reside on small ranches.

From some national parks there has been unsuspected resistance to the llama craze. Horse and mule packers with lucrative park contracts have lobbied against their use because they are viewed as unwanted competition. And even though Park Service field biologists give llamas high marks for minimal impact, top park officials consider them a potential threat to rare Sierra bighorn sheep which, through careful management, are beginning a slow comeback from the jaws of extinction. It seems llamas are capable of carrying the scabies mite which was responsible for killing large numbers of Sierra bighorn, which came in contact with mite-carrying domestic sheep pastured in the high Sierra.

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The amicable discussion between llama owners and park officials is focused on assessing the risk to the sheep, which will most likely result in banning llamas from areas used by wild sheep.

One other peccadillo is of their own making — they spit. However, this habit seems to be grossly exaggerated. Says Valley Ford breeder Beula Williams: "A properly treated llama will spit on a person about as often as a dog bites its owner. Sure it can happen, but mostly llamas reserve their spit for each other — to keep an over-anxious male at bay, or to punish an animal crowding at the hay rick. Unfortunately, many people assume llamas spit on anyone because of the behavior of zoo llamas who have become distrustful after spending years dealing with teasing and other insensitive human behavior."

Whether they spit or not, Placerville teacher and commercial llama packer Francie Greth regards her association with llamas as almost a spiritual experience. "There's no better companion in the back country. They approach the day with a stoic dignity that is all their own. Their padded feet and hawk-like eyesight allow them to travel silently, but always seeing all that is around them. It's like sharing the awareness of deer. It's pervasive and allows you to see and experience more than you would if you traveled alone." Their silent ways have also attracted hunters in Montana and Idaho who have begun using them in place of louder pack animals that scare off game.

Two organizations, the Llama Association of North America and the International Llama Association, were founded in the past three years to coordinate and disseminate information on llamas. Both organizations invite public participation in their annual meetings. This year the Llama Association of North America meets in Grants Pass, Oregon, from July 12 to 15; the public is welcome the last two days. The International Llama Association, which includes most of the star-studded membership, meets at the Santa Cruz Coconut Grove from June 24 to 28; the public is invited to attend shows and demonstrations at the Watsonville Fairgrounds on June 28.

Breeder Beula Williams, who'll co-chair the Santa Cruz conference, predicts unflinchingly, "Someday, llamas will be a common stock animal in North America." Her confidence may simply be fueled by riding on the cutting edge of another American fad. But then again, any animal that can flutter its eyelashes at a total stranger is bound to make plenty of friends. □



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