

The Road to Llamaville

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I have been living with llamas for just under two years now. So llamas are new to me, or more correctly I am new to them. I was a teenager when I was bitten by the llama bug and I have had llama fever ever since. Not the raging 104 degree fever that compels people to go out and collect one of each color and style of llama in a years time, but a low grade acute fever that shaped my thoughts on llamas years before I would even see one in the flesh. For years I collected articles and tidbits I had found on llamas, reading whatever I could find. I had spent a lifetime building my dream barn, and assembling my perfect herd in my head. So by the time I did finally buy a farm where I could pursue my llama dream my cerebral pastures were well over grazed and over treaded, and this herd of dream llamas in my head was itching to be made a reality.

So I arrive on the llama scene three years ago fresh, seemingly well informed, and ready to go llama shopping. I would never claim to be the average llama buyer. After all, I spent nearly a year just deciding what breed of cat to buy, and another year settling on a breeder to buy from. So too it was when I decided to buy a dog! So when I set out to do some llama shopping I had planned to apply the same methodical, boring approach I had used with my other companion animal purchases. I would look for consistency in a breeder's program, I would look for integrity in a breeder, and most importantly I would look for a breeder who valued their roll as stewards of the breed and who made their breeding decisions with the breed's best interest in mind. So I put on my conscientious consumer hat and hit the road in search of that herd of dream llamas that had haunted my head for most of my adult life. At this point I was still merely an outsider casually strolling down the road to Llamaville. I had a map and a guide book in one hand and I had my "So You Want to Buy a Llama" book in the other. In my pocket were my check book, my trusty Swiss Army knife, and of course an energy bar as I have never been an endurance shopper. Yet, despite all the preparations I had made, despite all the helpful advice received while walking that road, it wasn't long before I found myself sitting in the ditch: my energy bar long since eaten, my check book not yet opened, and my Swiss Army knife being used to dig the gravel out of my chin from a fall I took avoiding a rather conspicuous, fast moving, oversized van with vanity plates that read "THE LLAMA INDUSTRY."

I just barely escaped becoming one of those white crosses that mar the ditch lines along this winding road to Llamaville. Of course each cross has its story to tell. Most mark the passing of some poor sap that invested unwisely, some tell of longtime breeders with burn out or health problems, but some no doubt mark the spot where some other disillusioned newcomer like me ended his llama quest before it ever really began. In any case my chin was sore and I really didn't feel like shopping anymore, so I just sat there in the ditch giving some serious thought to those vanity plates and where they were headed. 'The Llama Industry'; hmm, I wondered. Who is that? And just where was Llamaville anyway? What was it I was shopping for again? Each road sign along the way seemingly contradicted the next. Was I shopping in a livestock market or in a pet market? If llamas are pets, why the myriad of ads proclaiming them to still be a good livestock investment, and if they are livestock why do we need sanctuaries? I had not been on the road long, but it seemed every farm I passed lacked the uniformity of herd that I craved. Many breeders seem to be chasing after trends and rarities. Every breeder along the way seemed to have been combining all colors, styles, and fleece types willy-nilly for generations, their roadside billboards forever advertising the benefits of their diverse herds, their outcross studs. Some females that in my opinion should not have been bred were even being 'upgraded' by this years model. Some farms actually seemed to be magically producing imports from what I could decipher.

The shows I attended were equally befuddling. Classes based on the amount of wool, rather than on a strict breed standard, and judges supposedly judging conformation, but their choices seemingly reflecting a preference for a certain type of fleece, color, or size - all within the boundaries of correct conformation of course. I set out to do some serious power shopping, but hadn't yet spent a cent. Was I supposed to choose my llamas based solely on today's shiny chrome wheels rather than on what was under the hood, or was I supposed to let an ALSA Judge help me determine the value of a llama? What an absolute mess. The more thought I gave it the less sense it all made. I was beginning to wish I hadn't jumped out of that van's way. What a disenchanting newcomer I had become.

How was I to know what I was buying? I mean really know. Dr. Dolittle, Lopez, Kantu, Rhiny's Grand Slam, etc.: What was it I was buying? As fantastic as these historic llamas might be, they seemed little more than barn cats with grand names and high prices to me. Do they consistently reproduce themselves in their offspring? Do they come from parents that shared common traits like fiber type, body size, ear shape, or correct conformation? So what was it that has made these animals valuable? Would Dr. Doolittle be valuable by today's standards? Will Kantu be valuable by tomorrow's standards? The style and price seems to reflect current trends rather than quality. True these animals are exceptional representations of llama conformation, but how valuable is the perfect barn cat to a Persian cat breeder's breeding program? I myself would never buy a barn cat, and certainly not a dog that was not a pure breed. This is not to say that I would never own a mutt, just that I would never pay for one, albeit I have been known to spend plenty on mongrels once they wiled their way into my home and my heart. I grew up on a Hereford farm, I bred English Budgies for most of my youth, I now have two Cornish Rex cats, and both my dogs are AKC Greyhounds. So when I set out to do some llama shopping I felt like I had stumbled onto a minefield. Unlike all other domestic livestock and pets, llamas did not come in pure breeds. Five years in college studying genetics had not prepared me for the genetic tangle that the llama had become. Nowhere was anyone breeding like to like, establishing groups of breeders with similar breeding standards and establishing breed clubs for disseminating information and promoting the breed. Nor was there an established show system that valued the distinct character of each breed. Rather what seemed to exist was a system that valued a bland mediocrity of type and encourages the homogenization of all llamas into a single breed with three coat types.

Too much thinking, too much speculation, too much digging gravel out of my chin. All I wanted was an easy trip to Llamaville, and maybe to grab a burger along the way. This industry abounds with friendly, intelligent breeders. Many of whom share my frustration with these shifting sands of trend, style, and politics on which the llama industry seemingly thrives. So at least I am not that voice in the wilderness that I once feared I might be. Still I am a newcomer. I have much to learn. Much of the industry history prior to my arrival I have gleaned from other breeders and from what I have read. I haven't lived through all the fads and trends; I can't speak of the effect that the deluge of imports had on the market; I don't share those fears associated with line breeding that abounded back when the gene pool was so limited; I wasn't around to experience the allure of the \$100,000 llama. My perspectives stem from what I have seen and heard during my three short years as an industry newcomer, as well as from a lifetime passion for breeding animals and studying genetics. Finally, I am a llama breeder, my cerebral pastures materialized, and my dream herd becoming a reality. I may forever be wary of conspicuous vans racing recklessly by, but I can think of no better road to travel than this road I have chosen, the road to Llamaville.