

Ontario 150 Project “Living Off the Land”
 Edited Clips of Oral History Transcript of Shannon Cassidy-Rouleau

	CLIP 1	
DB	Alpacas are not typical livestock for farms in this area. What made you choose them?	
CR	After my parent had passed away, I remember my husband and I took our kids to the Carp Farmers' Market and I actually have a picture of my kids standing in front of this pen with two alpacas. It was Scorry Breck Alpacas, was the name of the farm, and there was a gentleman there speaking about the alpacas and his wife had a display with knitting, crocheting and weaving and the fiber itself. <i>We thought it was really interesting and we were really curious about the animals. The real interest was that they didn't need a lot of space and they didn't need a lot of care, they were friendly with children, not dangerous to have around.</i> So that was in May and we went back to the fall farmers' market and there was the same gentleman and his wife with the alpacas and we asked if we could visit their farm and that is how we visited there and chose our first two alpacas.	
DB	We're your husband and children as enthusiastic as you were?	
CR	I would say everybody was really enthusiastic but maybe for different reasons. I would say the kids thought they were really cute and they were excited about cute furry creatures. I would say that I was interested in the fiber processing end of it, the knitting, milling, those kinds of things, working with fiber. I would say my husband saw an opportunity to get outside to be able to take care of the property and have something outside that piques his interest. I think it was a good way for the two of us to have interests outside our jobs and day to day life.	
DB	Where and when did you get your first animals?	
CR	We got our first two boys in 2003 and it was at Scorry Breck Alpacas and they agreed that they would keep the animals there for several months until we had the property ready for them to come home to.	
DB	What modifications to the property did you have to make to accommodate them?	
CR	We live on an alvar, which is solid rock and so our bush, we've got bush property in the back which is fine for alpacas except in this area there is a lot of juniper, burdock, and those kinds of things would be very detrimental to their fiber. So we needed to clear by hand probably about a couple of acres of bush that we have closed in for them so we cleared all that by hand, the junipers, and burdock. We cleared some pathways through there, cut the trees to a height that was safe for them. We built one main barn to begin and we fenced in two general pasture areas and that was enough to get them home at first. We just continued to clear land as we needed it and added small paddocks so we could rotate them a bit.	
DB	What kind of living quarters do they need?	
CR	They actually would be fine with three sided shelters, but for us it was important to have a barn because we wanted it to be enjoyable when we managed them, their medical care, bonding with them, taking care of them so the barn was probably more for us, as a comfort for us. They are very hardy. They are outside. They always have opportunity to go in and out of the barn whenever they choose, and they most often choose to be outside. So the living quarters were more... the barn gives them the opportunity to be cool in the summer and warm in the winter if they need it, but it is not a requirement for sure.	

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DB	Now what do they eat?	
CR	So they eat grass and hay, and even though, when the grass is growing in the summer, they will still come back and eat the dry hay. Where they come from, the diet is fairly low in protein and it kind of stalky grasses and they have to forage, travel a lot for it. So a low protein hay is good for them or else they tend to gain a lot of weight on a high protein hay. So we are lucky in the area. We have a farmer who square bales for us and he looks for fields that have a lower protein count. They do have pellet supplements every day. It has the minerals and vitamins they would get in South America that they don't get in the soil here. They also have a free choice mineral with a bit of salt in it that they can eat if they need it. So basically their hay, their grass and their pellets and, of course, treats. Some will do treats. Some will eat apples, some will eat lettuce. It just depends on their taste buds.	
DB	How did you learn all this?	
CR	There is quite a strong alpaca community in Ontario, all across Canada, but specifically Ontario. So we bought our first two animals from two of the original founders of Alpaca Ontario. There was already a network of interested alpaca farmers who were learning more, and they were actually soliciting vets in the area to come and learn with them. So there's a lot of workshops that are available, there's webinars if people can't get to workshops. The most recent one that I did was at Guelph, the University of Guelph Agricultural College. Several vets came and did a weekend long seminar, so I attended that. There was TTouch that was therapeutic touch that was very common for horses. They have changed that, modified it so that it is therapeutic touch for alpacas. We have been to those courses. There's a lot of courses available. You just need to watch for them. There's Alpaca Ontario, an organization that supports alpaca farmers in Ontario. There's Alpaca Canada. So a lot of education magazines that are produced right here in Canada. So a lot of educational material is available.	
DB	What were some of the challenges you faced initially?	
CR	Initially it was the learning. You know when you both work full time off the farm it's that idea of how are we going to manage all the chores, plus our jobs, and the best practices. The alpacas are going to eat their pellets twice a day, for example. We found out that we leave for work maybe at five in the morning. My husband it up at four and maybe gone by five. They were sleeping at five and they weren't interested in eating so we had to say okay, that's not going to work for us. What are we going to do differently. So we decided they are going to eat their pellets at night. So we had to modify the care and the routine to fit our work schedule.	
DB	Were you ever discouraged?	
CR	I would say, like most farmers, the biggest discouragements are those crias , those babies that maybe don't come along the way you expect them to, an alpaca that's not well. We've been discouraged sometimes in the industry because the Canadian Camelid Co-op folded after being in effect for a number of years. So I think the common things, especially maybe as this is a relatively new industry, have been bumps in the road as people are learning in the alpaca industry.	
	CLIP 2	
DB	Do you keep your herd just for wool or do you raise young to sell?	
CR	We have not sold any alpacas but not because we have not been asked. We made a conscious	

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	<p>choice that we wanted to keep all our alpacas that are born on the farm. This would be their forever home. So that's a personal decision, but we do breed for our own selves because we want to have fleece that is at all stages in the alpaca life cycle. The young fleece is good for certain applications. The fleece from older animals might be more appropriate for other applications. We do want to have a variety of micron counts in the herd. But we do actually purchase from other farms if we are looking for a particular colour because that's not always simple to breed for.</p>	
DB	So how many do you have all together?	
CR	We have twenty one alpacas right now but only eighteen are here on the farm because the others are herd sires that we share ownership with three other farms. Three of us all together have ownership. Because we work full time, they're kept at the farm, one of the farms where the farmer is retired and is doing alpacas full time so it works out better to have them housed there.	
DB	So how many babies are you expecting this summer or spring?	
CR	None that we are expecting this summer or spring, but we are looking at breeding this summer so we're making decisions about which females we'd like to breed to which males. We have to be pretty careful about when we breed because they don't require someone to be here when they deliver but we like to work our breeding out so that it's like we'll be home for the birth. But because they've got a very wide gestation area, anywhere from eleven to twelve months, it can be a little difficult to time that perfectly.	
DB	Can you explain about the shearing process?	
CR	We shear every year in May. We run a few different shearing stations. We do some shearing on the ground and some shearing on the table. It takes about forty minutes to do each animal, and when we have each animal on the table or on the ground we do their teeth, trim their topknots, give their toenails a trim, although we will go back and do their toenails three times a year. The fleece is rolled up in brown paper, craft paper, after they are sheared and we put it out on a skirting table and we give it a quick skirting right on the table so we can differentiate the first fleece from the second. Then it's bagged and labeled with the animal's information so then I can go back through every fleece and sort and grade it and determine what it is going to be used for.	
DB	Just out of my curiosity, what do you do with the lowest grade of fleece?	
CR	The lowest grade of fleece, if it is absolutely ready to be thrown out, we use it for bird feeders, we use it in the garden to stop weeds from coming up. If we were going to use it for something marketable, we would have it done as a rug. The stuff that is too short to send to the mill and too coarse can be used as rug fiber.	
	CLIP 3	
DB	What are some of the products you have?	
CR	We have everything from rugs that we mentioned would be used with the fleece at the bottom of the line. If you were going up the ladder in items you might start with thinking of the rugs as the base and then you might get into felted items such as dryer balls, things that are felted by hand. Then we have what we sent to the mill such as roving, back so that's for spinners and felters. The mill might also send us roving turned into yarn so that we got the yarn which we can dye. I also send yarn to knitters. We probably have, well, I counted the other day eleven artisans who either	

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	<p>knit or crochet, weave and spin for us. They are all doing something different. They are all actually in Ontario, all of the artisans who create products for us. So we have those handmade products from our artisans. Then we also send some of our fleece to co-ops. So from the co-ops we'll get back socks, scarves and hats. We might even get from the co-op yarn and Siri fleece since we don't raise Siri alpacas so that's an opportunity to bring in some things that are combinations of fiber from a number of farms. We have have felted things that I create all the way up to things we import. Things with fur on them are 100% imported because we don't do anything with the pelt if an alpaca was to die. We use alpacas for meat but we don't ever use their pelts. We do complete Peruvian imports for those sort of things and right now we're developing some products sort of north meets south. It's our artisans here but we are actually pairing up with some Peruvian fair trade. So maybe they are doing hand spinning for us and we're having our artisans combine it with our fibers and create products that are kind of a combination.</p>	
DB	When did you open your shop?	
CR	<p>We always had products on site and every year we were part of the Rural Ramble, and we would always have products out for people, especially socks and roving and yarn, and pretty quickly people started coming, looking for socks at Christmas and so we were kind of supplying them out of the house. Then about three years ago we said maybe we could convert our garage into a shop so that left us with no garage so we built a garage and it now the fiber studio and our cars are still not in the garage.</p>	
DB	Do you ever have workshops to teach people how to use the wool, like knitting, felting, things like that?	
CR	<p>Right now I teach workshops for Silent Valley Alpaca. So they have a workshop on site and they have a little studio that is set up for teaching and so I will do felting workshops up at their property, and one of the alpaca owners in our group does weaving seminars and workshops. We also have a knitter in the group and a number of us are in a group called Fiber Roads that do workshops. I have done a workshop with Mississippi Mills Textile Museum as part of Fiber Roads in felting so definitely fiber workshops in other places and potentially in the future when I have a little more time here when I am not working so much.</p>	
	CLIP 4	
DB	Do you have any amusing experiences with your alpacas?	
CR	<p>That's a good question. I think they all have their own specific personalities. I think that's where the amusing stories come from. In keeping with those personalities we have one fellow who is very much all about water. We have a video on our website where he is lying in the kiddie pool because alpacas need to be sprayed off a little bit in the summer or they could get very warm. He loves water so we had the great idea we would get a kiddie pool because a lot of alpaca farms have them, but he would not get out of the pool to let anybody else in. And also, every time he got in the pool he would get very relaxed and poop every time he got in. Then nobody else wanted to get in. So there's no more pool. And when he couldn't have the pool he developed an ingenious way to turn the taps on in the barn and the barn would be flooded with water. We had to cut the water supply off to the tap inside. On the girls' side of the barn, we have one girl who turns the lights on and off. So often my husband will finish up in the barn and come upstairs to the house and as soon as he is here we can look back out and we know which one it is, Paloma, she will turn the lights back on again. So we found that when she was doing that quite often, other farms have actual cups that they put over the lights because alpacas are notorious for doing mischievous things like that. The first time we got our two alpacas we went down the first</p>	

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	<p>morning we had them and alpacas are herd animals so the more animals there are, the happier they are. When we only had two, they were a little bit shy and they tended to stay in the barn. When we went down, one of them stuck their head out and the other stuck their head out and we realized that the first night here he had gotten his face full of porcupine quills. Who knew how to take porcupine quills out of alpacas. So we called the vet and he said do it as you would for a dog. So we did it and thought it was great to get that done, and we went down the next morning and we looked at him and he was fine, and his buddy peeked his head out the door and he was full of porcupine quills the next day. So yeah, they are very curious so they're getting into trouble fairly often with new things.</p>	
	CLIP 5	
DB	What do you see for the future?	
CR	<p>So for the future I see continuing to keep the alpacas, and as we get closer to retirement I see the business changing a little bit. We started of with 100% made on the farm items and we got a great following of people who value those. Now there are other people, a broader market who are looking for... they want to support the local artisans as well as just the materials on the farm. So we are able to increase our group of artisans and we have people who want to support the mini mills where our products are made so that's kind of always been our focus. I see that focus expanding in the future to something a little more global. We lost our Camelid Co-op, our Canadian Camelid Co-op. The North American one just closed in order to revamp on a different model, and I think what's happening is that you have a lot of alpaca breeders but not as many product sellers. So people are sending their fleece to co-ops wanting to be paid for it and then the co-op is producing products and there are not enough alpaca farmers taking product back because they are in the business of selling animals. Once the co-op model changes I think we will see more interesting things come out of the co-op. We are really interested right now in a global partnership focus with that idea of north meets south, of us being able to work with some artisans in South America, to be able to combine energies whether it's using South American alpaca. They're using our artisans to combine our fleece so we see it as becoming a little more global because there are a number of people who are interested in supporting a fair trade market and really interested in Eco-friendly fashion and organic farming. I see it growing on the product end of things for sure.</p>	