

Nothing could be finer . . .

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George Orwell had promised that 1984 would be a turbulent year, and he was right. And it was as a result of a major national medicopolitical row that Illawarra Alpacas came to be.

Harriet and Ian Davison lived, at that time, in Sydney, as did Harriet's sister, Celia Cook. Harriet and Celia had grown up with horses and dairy cattle on their parents' farm, where they would spend every weekend, whilst Ian had spent much of his boyhood holidays on his Aunt's mixed farming operation in Trundle, in western NSW.

But 1984 saw Harriet marketing sports apparel for Le Coq Sportif, following several years as a high school teacher, and many more in the thoroughbred racing industry. Celia was a qualified Karitani nurse, in private practice, whilst Ian was completing the last of 15 years undergraduate and postgraduate study to qualify as an orthopaedic surgeon. None were contemplating rural life.

It was in this context that the three found themselves in what was to become historically the nation's worst medicopolitical dispute, between the Wran government and the NSW medical profession. "I was expecting to apply for an orthopaedic appointment at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, where I had done much of my training," explained Ian, "when suddenly Neville Wran was threatening doctors who had been my mentors and teachers with \$10,000 fines and imprisonment for refusing to comply with his new health bureaucracy." The result was massive resignations from public hospitals, and total upheaval of the health system.

It was at this point that Harriet and Ian decided to look instead for a new lifestyle in the country, abandoning the traditional ambition of a teaching hospital appointment. A few enquiries quickly identified Nowra, 100 miles from Sydney on the South Coast, as an ideal place to set up a rural country practice, and they moved south in early 1986 after Ian completed a postfellowship year in knee surgery.

It had always been their intention to buy a farm, but the Davisons spent their first two years living in Nowra, with jaunts into the surrounding countryside every weekend looking for a suitable property. An offer on a Berry property was accepted, only to see them gazumped by another surgeon. "We were devastated," said Harriet, "but quickly recovered when another colleague showed us 150 acres for sale next door to him in Cambewarra, between Nowra and Kangaroo Valley. We saw it and bought it within a few days," she recalls, "and called it Consolation Creek to record the history of the occasion."

Thereafter came the question of what to do with the farm, then surrounded by three dairy farms (all since disappeared with impending dairy deregulation). They bought in cattle, and Harriet retired her old racehorse, Jaks, to the farm. All the time, they examined the possibilities of different farming enterprises: cattle, timber, deer, ostriches and horses, but none seemed suited to their experience and lifestyle expectations.

"We had seen alpacas advertised at breathtaking prices in The Land long before we saw one," Harriet explained. "Then we made a point of checking them at the 1992 Sydney Royal Easter Show, where there were a few on display. As soon as we saw them, we were totally captivated by them, and our subsequent reading seemed only to reinforce our enthusiasm." "We had three very small children," added Ian, "and their safety on the farm was one reason we decided on alpacas. Another was the fact that, from our reading, these animals appeared to have a very low impact on the environment. In fact, our subsequent experience has caused us to label them *designer green animals*."

The Davisons bought their first three alpacas from a Victorian herd dispersal, sight unseen, selecting three females from three colour photographs. Celia, still living in Sydney, made the decision to join the adventure, and bought a white male. It was amidst huge excitement that the four alpacas arrived at Consolation Creek, Cambewarra, in August 1992. They decided on the herd code "CCC" to denote their property and village, but called the stud "Illawarra Alpacas" to reflect the fact that these were the first alpacas to arrive in the Illawarra region. Their very young children quickly dubbed the animals

“paca’s”, and so they chose the names Sir Frank, Kerry, Ros and Gretel, all then prominent members of the Packer family. When they purchased a handful of wethers in the next few months to expand their alpaca experience, they were all named after failed entrepreneurs of that era, including Bondie, Skasie and Connolly. They next purchased ten pregnant Purumbete females, continuing the Packer theme with the naming of their progeny, like Florence, Bullmore, Kate, James and Clyde.

By the end of 1993, Illawarra Alpacas had expanded to around 25 head, and Illawarra Sir Frank had won a blue ribbon at their first alpaca show experience, the 1993 Melbourne Royal Show. The excitement was intense, especially when they discovered that Sir Frank was an unusually fine white male, measuring only 19.9 micron on his second fleece. This fortuitous finding has had a dramatic impact, as Sir Frank was used almost exclusively as a sire over the herd for the first two years. “At a time when all the judges were stressing density and almost ignoring fineness, we were using a very fine male with low fleece density,” explained Ian. “As a result, we were producing a herd of very fine animals, but with the low density typical of many early Chilean fleeces. Those fine fleeces, since put to fine Peruvian males, have since become the basis of our reputation for producing fine and superfine stock.”

A failed Peruvian importation by Sumac Australia Pty. Ltd. demanded much of the Davisons’ time and resources between 1994 and 1997, and its failure was a bitter personal and financial blow to them. “We had invested much faith, time, money, energy and passion to this enterprise, which was the basis of our ongoing breeding program,” said Ian. “Its failure left us 18 months behind schedule with our breeding, considerably poorer, and bitter at having been so badly stung. But we then bought into the Jolimont Peruvian shipment, from which we selected some excellent stock, including another superfine male which has given our herd tremendous impetus over the past two years. Jolimont The Don was a Rural Alianza male, which we selected over Barreda males because of his fineness. Coincidentally, he also measured 19.9 microns on testing, but this on his *fourth* fleece. His progeny have been the basis of our very successful show team through 1999 and 2000.”

A highlight of 1999 was the birth of twin female alpacas to the oldest and finest of their Peruvian females, sired by The Don. The twins, since called Ursa Major and Ursa Minor, received wide publicity throughout Australia and North America, and were featured on the front page of The Land newspaper in April, 1999.

This year, Illawarra Alpacas has secured a two year lease on yet another superfine white male, Prestige Valentino, from Prestige Alpacas. The Don, meantime, has moved on to another major NSW breeder, Coolaroo Alpaca Stud. Valentino, still 18 microns on his third fleece, and shearing around 4 kgs, has powerful genetic credentials, and will be put over The Don’s progeny through 2000. The forecast for 2001 is . . . *fine!*

Harriet, Ian and Celia are confident of the longterm future of alpacas. “With Australia’s 200 year experience with fibred animals, our excellent veterinary and husbandry practices, our stable political and economic climate, and our relatively disease-free status, we are poised to do with alpacas what Macarthur did with Merinos before us,” espouses Harriet with obvious enthusiasm. Ian, who is a founding director of the Australian Alpaca Fibre Marketing Organisation, shares her confidence. AAFMO was conceived in 1997 to collect, class and sell alpaca fibre for Australian alpaca breeders, and has so far returned \$45,000 to Australian growers, while establishing international product recognition for Australian alpaca. “We may not be able to compete with Peru on price of raw fibre,” Ian observes. “But we can certainly produce a better product that will justify higher returns on the basis of higher quality, achieved through improved breeding, higher yields and meticulous classing.”

1992 was a watershed in the lives of the Davison family. Their life has never been the same since the arrival of The Paca Family. Celia has since moved down from Sydney and into the old farmhouse on Consolation Creek, and spends her time between her Sydney home and friends, and Cambewarra, where she helps Harriet with the animals, and drives horses. The Davisons have built a new family home and acquired a further 100 acres from an adjoining property. Harriet is now a full-time stud manager to some 200 alpacas, 70 cattle, 20 chooks, 4 horses, 2 dogs, 2 rabbits, 4 goldfish, 1 budgie, and 40 or so finches. Oh, and three children. Ian is in full-time orthopaedic practice in Nowra, specialising in joint replacements by day, and alpacas on nights and weekends. He sees a connection between the two activities: “A man is lucky if his job is also his hobby: I would do orthopaedics as a hobby if I didn’t need it to make a living. But my hobby is looking more and more like a job, in that

alpacas are starting to make returns on the time and money we have invested. That is a job that I hope to be able to pass on to my children, and an industry that we can claim to be building for all Australians.

Now, isn't that better than bridge?"