

On The Road in Montana

When Sue and Steve Roling purchased their first llama in 1979, most Montanans had never seen or even heard of llamas. The state had only a couple of breeders and you had greater chance of meeting a bear on the trail in Montana's wild areas than meeting a llama. All that has changed today. Montana now has more llamas per capita than any other state. Three llama packing outfits guide visitors through the outstanding scenic areas near Glacier and Yellowstone Parks as well as other wild areas of the state. Government agencies in the area use llamas and offer llama packing courses to their employees. Gatherings such as the Montana State Fair, Winter Fair, and Sheep and Wool Festival routinely include llamas. Much of this is due in no small measure to the dedicated work of Sue and Steve Roling.

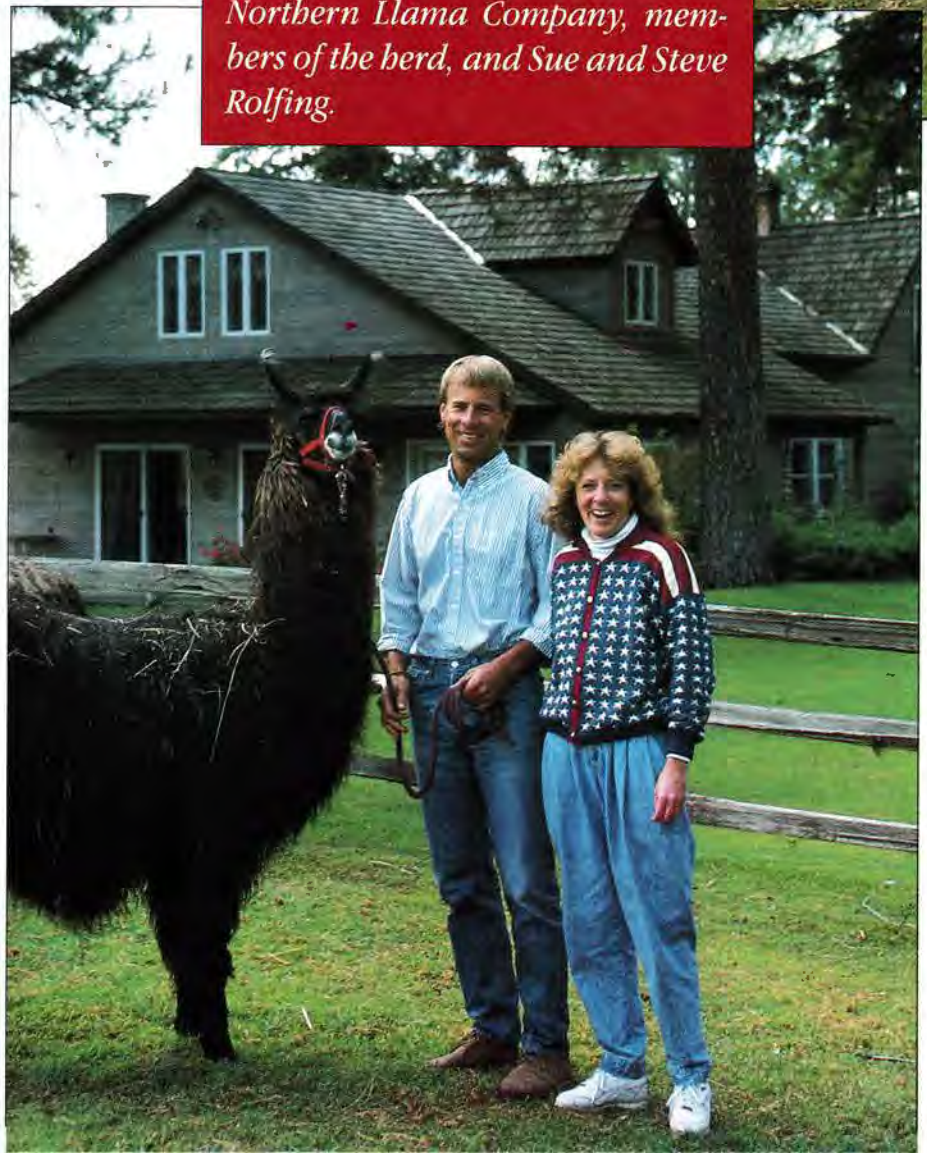
The Roling's first llamas were acquired to give Steve's ailing back a break both at work as a timber cruiser for the U.S. Forest Service, and on personal hiking trips. Poncho, Doc and Snowman soon established their worth. But their bachelor days were numbered as Sue and Steve quickly discovered the pleasures of llama breeding. The possibilities of llamas as a business venture intrigued the Rolings. Here was something they could do together that would actively engage both their talents - Steve's love of animals and the outdoors, and Sue's training in marketing and journalism.

The Great Northern Llama Company started out on the fifteen acres they owned near Whitefish while Steve continued to do contract work for the U.S. Forest Service and Sue worked in town. They had good luck they say in establishing their early breeding stock. The national gene pool was still fairly small at the time and they wanted to avoid the most common bloodlines. From a herd in southwest Montana, they were able to select a number of very good animals unrelated to most lines.

It soon became apparent that their mountainside acres were not adequate for their expanding enterprise. So the search for a new place began. Sue says they'd take



Photos (beginning upper left, clockwise): Entrance to Great Northern Llama Company, members of the herd, and Sue and Steve Roling.



**Text and photos by
Judith E. Strom**



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drives on Sunday afternoons, cruising the backroads of the valley looking for properties. But they always seemed to end up in the same area. It was there they finally bought an old, four room, 1905 farm house and fifteen acres. Remodeling and additions turned the old house into a beautiful home where nearly every room looks out on the llamas. As we visited in the living room, we could see llamas feeding from the hay mangers on the side of the barn. At lunch we sat in the glass surrounded dining area and watched the llamas taking their ease in their own gazebo.

The Rolings obviously get a lot of enjoyment from just observing their animals and their antics. Sue claims the crias have their

own "bewitching hour" when they'll instigate play with one another. Even the adults get caught up in it. It's easy to tell that this is the home of animal lovers. A raucous parrot greets you from the family room. And when you sit down, a cat is sure to take that as an invitation to make itself a home in your lap. The cats and the llamas have formed some unique friendships according to Sue. The cats will sit on the fence and exchange nuzzles with the llamas and they can be seen lying on the feeders as the llamas eat. Out in the pasture with the llamas, you can see Heidi, a Great Pyrenees, the most recent of the Roling's livestock guarding dogs. Although the Flathead Valley is one of Montana's fastest growing areas, the moun-

tains aren't far away and predators, particularly coyotes, are still present. The Pyrenees have done an excellent job in protecting the llamas. The dogs also announce any strange (non-family) human visitors.

Although their llama business is a combination of pack trips, stud service and sales, the Rolings are prime examples of what they feel to be the llama's ultimate use — personal enjoyment. They're also active promoters of llamas at all levels. Locally they're part of a strong club made up of llama owners from all walks of life. This group uses every possible opportunity to bring llamas to the public's attention. And when no ready-made opportunities are available, they make their own.

"It was easier at first when llamas were a real novelty," says Sue. "Now the industry needs to work to stay in the public eye. There's a large number of people out there who want llamas. They just don't know it yet!" The Rolings feel it is as a companion animal, a way to touch bases with the earth and other living things, that we need to promote our animals. To that end, they believe we need to mainstream llamas with information about them in every library, every county extension agent's office, at every vet school. Sue also feels it's important to promote the people who own llamas as a fun group to be part of. Llamas just seem to attract original, intelligent, upbeat people. Through their llamas the Rolings say they've met lots of fascinating people, many who have become close family friends. "It's wonderful," says Sue, "to spend your time marketing and selling such a 'life enhancing' product. It lets you see people at their best."

When they started with llamas, there was little written information and personal contact with other owners was how they learned. Through the years they've amassed a wealth of information by personal experience, on three trips Steve has made to South America, and through service to national and international projects and organizations. Now they take pleasure in being able to help others with their llamas. The phone rings frequently and many folks make Great Northern Llama Company a stop on their vacation. Since not everyone thinks to call ahead, it can make life a bit hectic. Once a friend called Sue and asked if she had plenty of peanut butter. A bit mystified, she assured her she did. Good, she was told, because her friend wanted to bring out the African Children's Choir that was performing in town to see the llamas and she thought they would enjoy having peanut butter sandwiches while there.

The Rolfings' facilities are nice but not elaborate - a conscious choice. With lots of people stopping by, they didn't want to turn off the average person. Steve does admit to occasional attacks of "barnus envious" when he sees some of his friends' facilities. He's working that out now as they prepare to move to a new location. When their neighbor from whom they lease thirty acres put his place up for sale, the Rolfings decided to look for a larger place that would hold their entire eighty plus herd. They purchased 200 acres only a few miles away and a new house and barn are nearly complete. They plan to move this fall, when the packing season is over.

Steve feels llamas are one of the easiest animals to care for. "They're tough - remember they developed in the Andes which is one of the roughest climates in the world." The Rolfings' llamas often don't even head into the barn until temperatures get down to -20 degrees or so. For those new to llamas, Steve feels the current information problem is the reverse of when they started. Now there are so many books and articles that it can be overwhelming. And despite his feeling that llamas are "95 percent idiot proof," most conferences and such concentrate on the other five percent and thus perhaps give the wrong idea. So Great Northern llamas are always sold with plenty of personal attention and heart-felt assurance to call if there are any questions.


Since 1984 llamas have been the Rolfing's sole livelihood. Steve started the pack trip part of the business in 1981. At that time there were only a couple other llama packers, both in California. Steve says the business was helped immensely by excellent publicity from a couple of writers he took out early on. They received coverage in newspapers and magazines, nationally and even internationally. Many of their clients are from the East and there is very little repeat business. "For most this is a one-time thing. Next vacation they'll try another adventure," says Steve. He really enjoys taking folks out and giving them a grand time. The food is gourmet - fresh and homemade - no freeze dried stroganoff or canned spaghetti; instead it's huckleberry pancakes, coffee cake, fresh smoked trout, pizza, fondue. And attention is given to a child's favorite dessert or an adult's favorite nightcap. Most of the clients are families, and Steve particularly enjoys taking three generation trips with grandparents, parents and children. He gears his trips to the capabilities of the participants - young, old, even the physically handicapped.

Although he outfitted in Glacier National Park at first, his trips are now on the Swan Divide of the Flathead National Forest. The four day treks stay on the ridge top from 6,000 to 7,500 feet with spectacular views of Glacier Park to the north, the Bob Marshall and Great Bear Wilderness Areas to the east, and the beautiful Mission Mountains to the west. Camps are made at the area's many high mountain lakes. Because of the elevation and heavy snowpack, Steve's outfitting season is short - July and August. During that time, he is out almost constantly. He has fourteen regular pack llamas including Poncho, their very first llama - now in his thirteenth packing season.

The Rolfings are well known for their outstanding animals which have competed successfully both regionally and nationally. Over the years they have had three of the four top-selling male llamas in the country. Today their herd numbers about eighty. Steve stresses the female side of the herd, and has four generations of several dam lines. At one time he even had seven generations of one line in the herd. He gives reproductive traits a high priority, looking for the strong animals that are easy to care for. In over 250 births, they have lost only one cria.

In striving to raise easy maintenance animals, Steve prefers to stick to natural methods. Montana's cold climate helps him along by keeping worm and parasite problems down. His goal is big strong animals that can pack, but also are woolly and have pretty faces so they'll be a pleasure to their owner's eye. If he wants to pack an exceptionally woolly llama, he doesn't hesitate to shear.

Stud service is also an important part of the business with up to sixty outside animals per year. Most are from the northwest, but they've had animals from as far away as New York and Texas. While maintaining his female lines, Steve rotates studs every few years. This allows him to sell proven males, an almost unheard of thing when he started doing it, as well as young stock.

Where are the Rolfings and their llamas headed? Well, when they get moved to their new facility, Steve plans to expand the herd a bit while maintaining their ease of care and continuing to enhance their beauty. Though the supply and demand have evened out and llamas are no longer the media's "darlings," Sue and Steve are confident there are plenty of people out there who may not know it yet, but would really enjoy a llama. One thing's for sure, Sue and Steve will be right there promoting the joys of llamas via all possible means. 



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