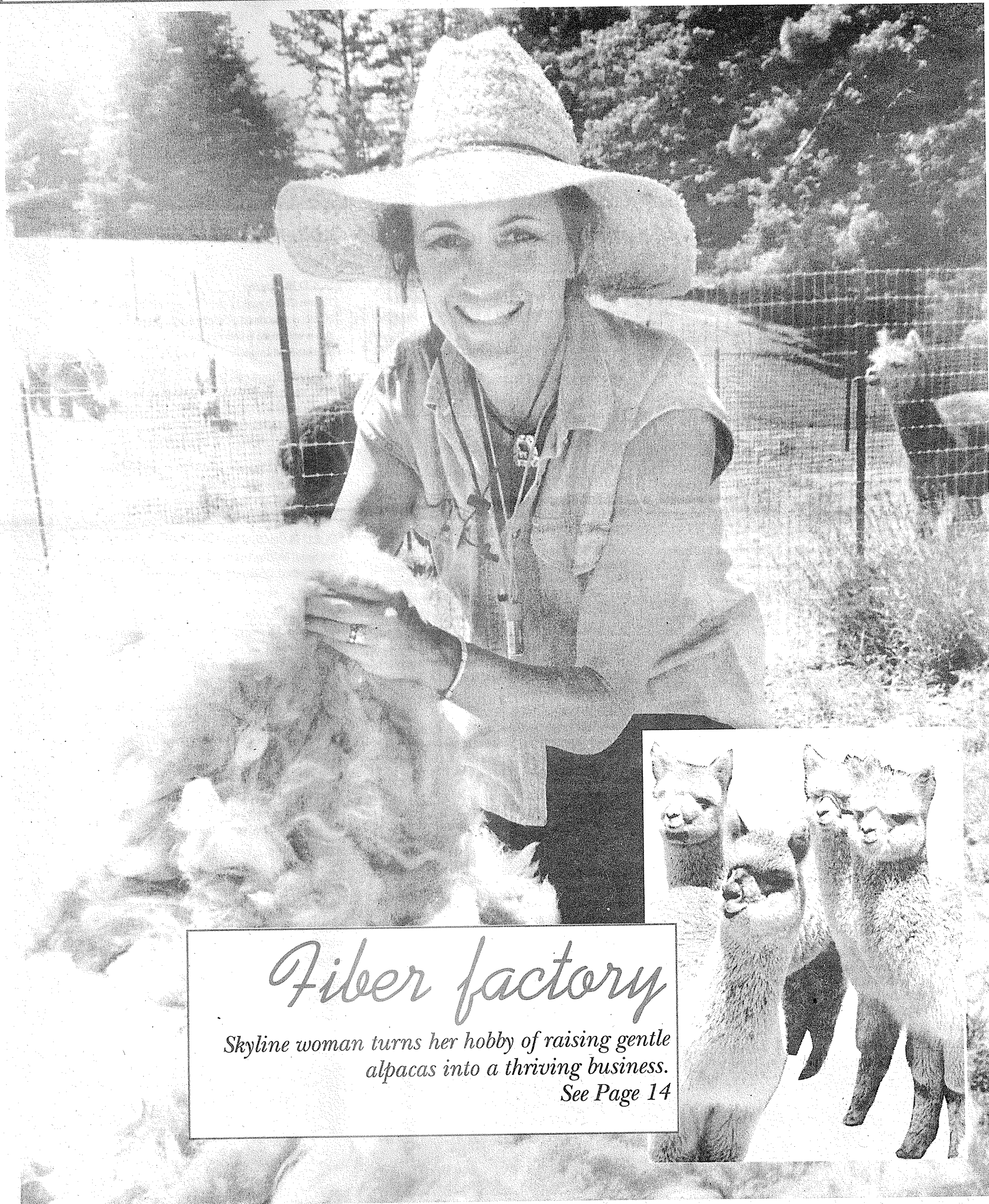


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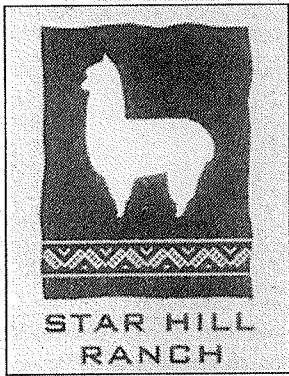
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Fiber factory

*Skyline woman turns her hobby of raising gentle
alpacos into a thriving business.
See Page 14*

Friendly Scarlet appears gentle and sultry before being sheared of her elegant fleece, almost the color of Burgundy wine, at Star Hill Ranch on Skyline, far from her native Andes.



Fiber factory

Alpacas thrive and produce glorious fiber on Skyline as they once did for Inca emperors in the Andes



Photos by Marion Softky

By MARION SOFTKY

Scarlet, with a white face and a luxurious coat the color of burgundy wine, hums gently as she offers to sniff noses with me across the fence. Then her soft camel lips move upward as she daintily nibbles at the brim of my straw hat.

End of encounter. Beginning of my acquaintance with the alpacas of Star Hill Ranch, miles down a winding forest road west of Skyline.

Here Claire Griffin is raising 40 of the elegant creatures — with more babies on the way — on 70 hillside acres overlooking the Pacific Ocean. She breeds them for sale as breeding stock or pets, and for their sumptuous fleece, which can be finer than cashmere.

"They are the easiest-keeping animal possible," Ms. Griffin says. "They are gentle and sweet; they trim your grass; and every year they give you the equivalent of a sweater, a hat, a pair of mittens and a throw rug."

Raised for more than 5,000 years in the high Andes of South America, alpacas and their better-known cousins, llamas, are the oldest domestic animals in the world, Ms. Griffin says. Smaller and gentler than llamas, alpacas have been bred for fiber, while llamas are still used to carry loads in the Andes as well as on American trails.

Alpaca hair — finer, lighter and stronger than wool — provided robes for Inca royalty. The Inca maiden discovered last year, sacri-

ficed and frozen on a high mountain, was dressed in alpaca, she notes. Mummies of ancient alpacas have also been found.

For Ms. Griffin, alpacas have grown from a hobby to a business to a passion.

About 12 years ago, Ms. Griffin, a successful real estate agent and enthusiastic wind surfer among other things, married John Lyddon and moved into the 115-year-old barn he had remodeled on his Star Hill Ranch. The arrival of Marlowe, now 6, and Brendan, 5, spurred her to look at exotic animals for pets, and an article in Alaska Airlines magazine pointed her to alpacas.

After a family field trip to an alpaca farm, she says, "I fell in love. I bought six. Then I went to Peru and bought a dozen."

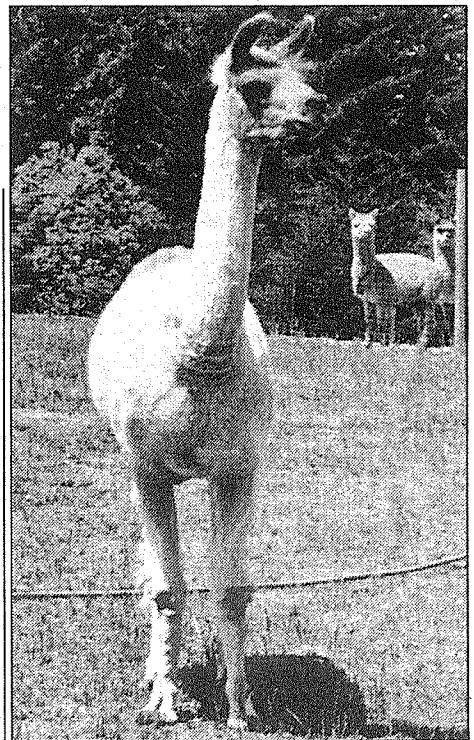
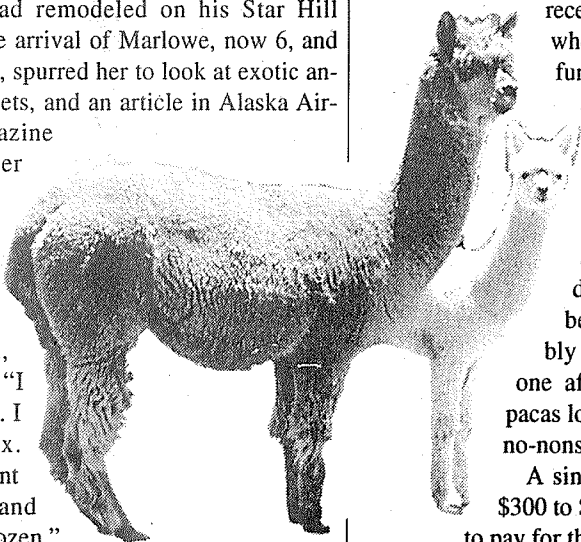
In Peru she was lucky: She got first pick in the lottery and was able to buy the finest herd-sire, Yupanqui, and females in wonderful colors from cream to almost black. One brown female is named "Kamara," or sweet potato. "I have a lot of fun with names," she says.

Ms. Griffin learned the business end of raising alpacas from the late Taylor Phelps of Tunitas Creek Llamas. She started selling the heavenly fibers to hand-spinners, weavers and knitters at the Kings Mountain Art Fair. "It started as a hobby," she says. "Now it's turned our ranch into a business. I love living on a working ranch."

The alpacas were on stage recently on a May weekend when Ms. Griffin put on a fund-raiser for the Friends of Allied Arts and the Stanford Children's Hospital. Peruvian minstrels played music of the Andes and local weavers demonstrated what can be done with the incredibly soft fiber. In the shed, one after another of the alpacas lost its coat to some very no-nonsense shearers.

A single fleece can bring in \$300 to \$500, just about enough to pay for the alpaca's upkeep for a year, says Ms. Griffin.

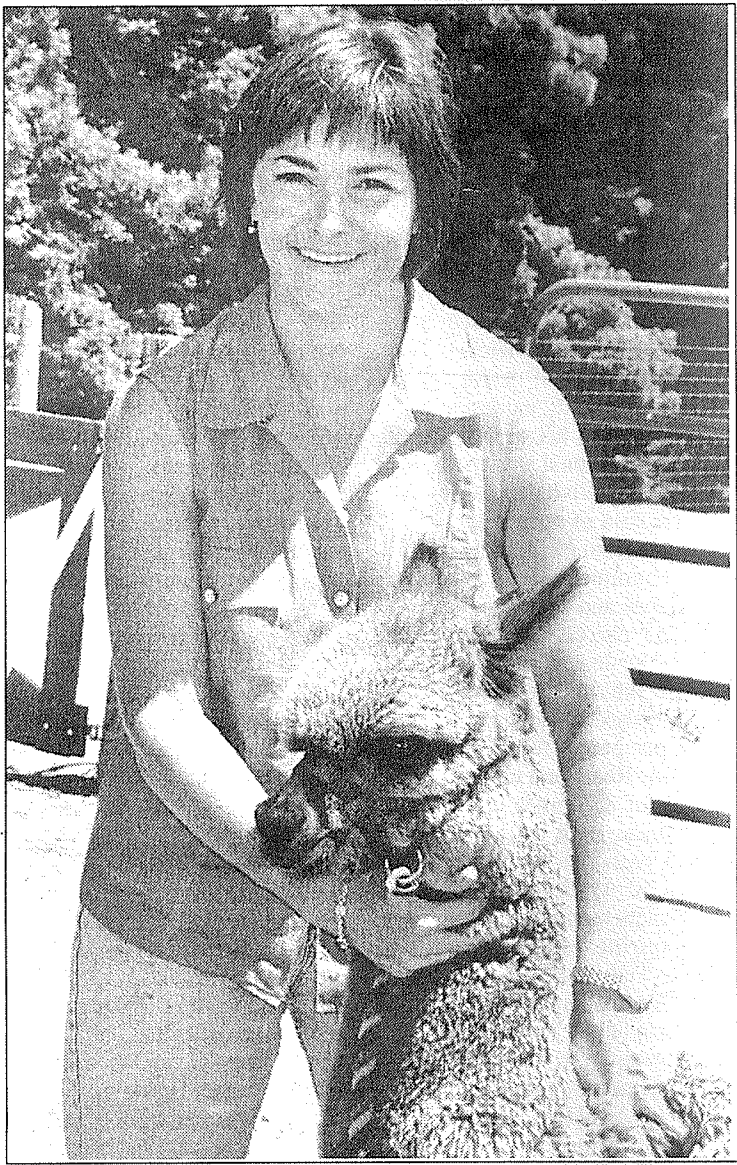
Alpacas are also healthy and hardy. Originating in the high, cold Altiplano of the Andes, they have three stomachs (cows have two) and can survive on minimal vegetation. Like their cousins the camels, they don't need much water. "They're cheaper to feed



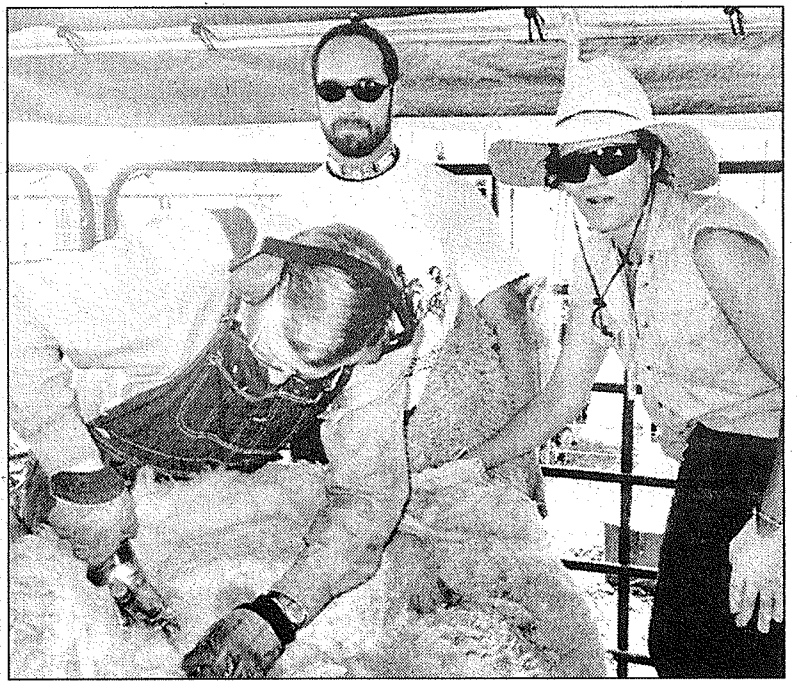
Baba, the guard llama, fends off dogs, coyotes and other predators that might hurt the smaller and more docile alpacas. A born ham, he also likes to get in pictures.

than my golden retriever," Ms. Griffin adds.

Another familiar animal on the ranch is Baba, the guard llama. Larger and more aggressive than the alpacas, he's there to protect them from marauding dogs and coyotes, or even mountain lions. A natural ham with his expressive banana ears, he seems to insert himself in every picture. Ms. Griffin bought him from Trish Stolar of Kings Mountain Llamas. "When I sell a package of multiple



Renee Ray of Woodside, left, is holding Talara, one of nine alpacas she boards at Star Hill Ranch until her own property is fenced. Claire Griffin, above, and helps herd some shaggy alpacas to the shed where they will be shorn of their luxurious fleece, right.



alpacas, I throw in a guard llama as a bonus," she says.

Ms. Griffin relishes the business aspects of her alpaca ranch. She breeds carefully to improve the quality of fiber, and all her animals are registered, with blood type and DNA recorded. With only about 5,000 in the United States — compared with 50,000 llamas — alpacas are still a growth industry.

An appealing male with big blue eyes is not suitable to become a stud because his eyes should be dark. So he will be gelded and sold as a pet, says ranch manager Carl Graham.

Alpacas don't come cheap. Ms. Griffin sells pet-quality males for \$1,200 to \$2,500 each. Breeding females can bring up to \$25,000. They can bear one baby a year for up to 18 years. "That's a great return on investment, especially when you include the fact that they are appreciable," she says enthusiastically.

There are already eight delightful baby alpacas bouncing around the fields at Star Hill

Ranch, with several more expected. Baby alpacas are called crias, males are machos, and females hembras.

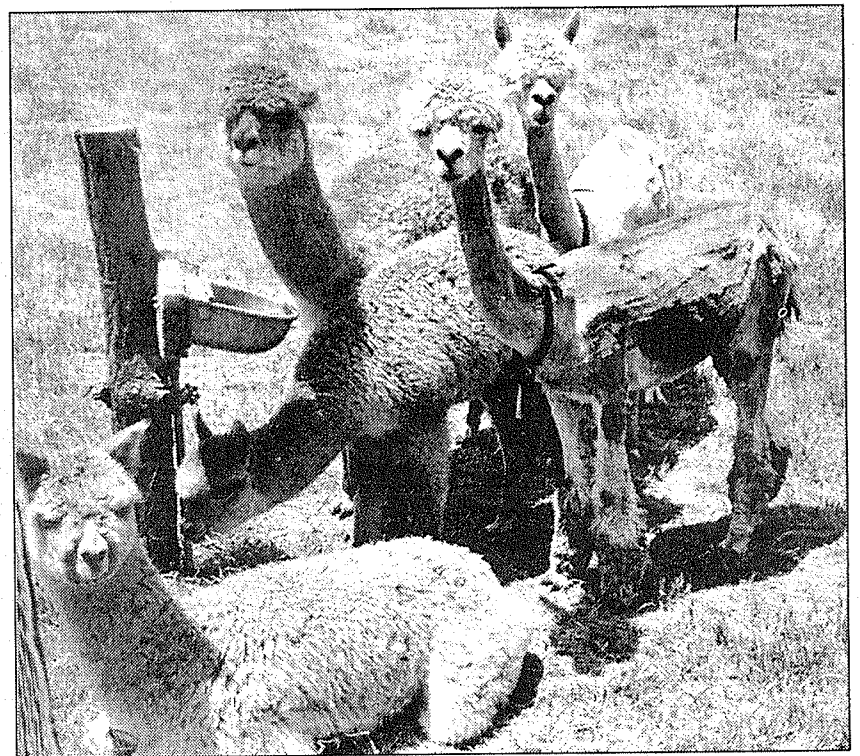
Many of the alpacas are owned by someone else. Gentle Scarlet actually belongs to Renee Ray, who is building her herd of nine alpacas, including four babies,

at Star Hill Ranch until she finishes fencing her Woodside home.

Ms. Ray was looking for a family-friendly career where she could be her own boss. "My herd will grow as my kids grow," she says on a Sunday at the ranch with Elissa and Spencer, both students at Woodside School.

Ms. Griffin's children also love working with the alpacas. Marlowe will show Ernesto — son of Hemingway — at an alpaca show at Geyserville next month. Ms. Griffin adds, "One of our son's favorite jobs is raking paca-poop. It's great fertilizer."

Even at the end of an interview, Ms. Griffin is still bubbling with enthusiasm about her pets/business. "They are perfect family livestock," she says. "They don't eat much. They are easy to care for. They don't challenge fences. They are gentle with children. And you never have to kill them.



Before and after shearing, a group of gentle alpacas keep each other company. They thrive in the hills off Skyline as on the high plateaus of their native Andes.

For information on alpacas, contact Claire-Griffin of Star Hill Ranch at 548-9090. Or e-mail: alpaca@starhillranch.com; website: www.starhillranch.com.