

BUSINESS: York Region couple makes \$400,000 investment in llama-type animal whose fleece is coveted by textile makers

Alpaca lightweight fleece in high demand

BY ROY GREEN
STAFF WRITER

They're cute, fluffy and friendly and they're as valuable as pedigreed horses. They're alpacas, a sort of mini-llama, and they've just moved to York Region in a big way.

An Aurora couple, Judy Loukras and Pat Harrison, have opened Qolmesa Alpaca Farm. With 33 of the animals on their 40-acre farm on the Oak Ridges Moraine, the ranch is already one of the largest in Canada.

"Most people get into the business with two or four animals at first," said Judy Loukras.

"But we jumped in with both feet. We intend this to be a big business with a fairly big income."

Native to South America, the alpaca is a recent arrival on the Canadian agriculture scene. Of the 4,000 animals in Canada, only 200 can be found in Ontario.

Loukras and Harrison sold their medical supply business in Aurora — Special Health Systems — in 1996 and went on vacation in Australia.

While visiting a sheep ranch there, they became attracted to the back-to-basics lifestyle.

"But sheep and cattle didn't really interest us. When you get around an alpaca, they're just really pleasurable to be around, really gentle. We've had them here for three months and I hate

to leave the farm now."

Loukras and Harrison spent a year investigating the idea before making the investment, which Loukras said amounts to about \$400,000.

"But we're creating a big alpaca operation. We could be earning up to \$300,000 a year, starting in about four years."

Alpacas produce a fine cashmere-like fleece, which is highly sought after by textile makers in Britain, Europe and Japan.

"An alpaca sweater can run between \$300 and \$500," said Loukras.

And now alpaca coats are becoming popular. The fleece is even being marketed into the golf industry, the material is so light!

"And now alpaca coats are becoming popular. The fleece is even being marketed into the golf industry, the material is so light."

The demand for the fibre far outstrips the worldwide supply, Loukras said. "No one's really worried about the demand. Europe can't meet the demand for the fleece."

Which might explain why the query "alpaca ranch" resulted in more than

60,000 hits on an Internet search engine.

The association (Alpaca Owners and Breeders Association) was only formed a few years ago — we haven't even had time to join yet — but it's really taking off now."

But the real investment payoff with alpacas is breeding. "They only produce one offspring per year and more and more people are getting into it, even in a small way," Loukras said. The animals can easily fetch up to \$30,000 on the market.



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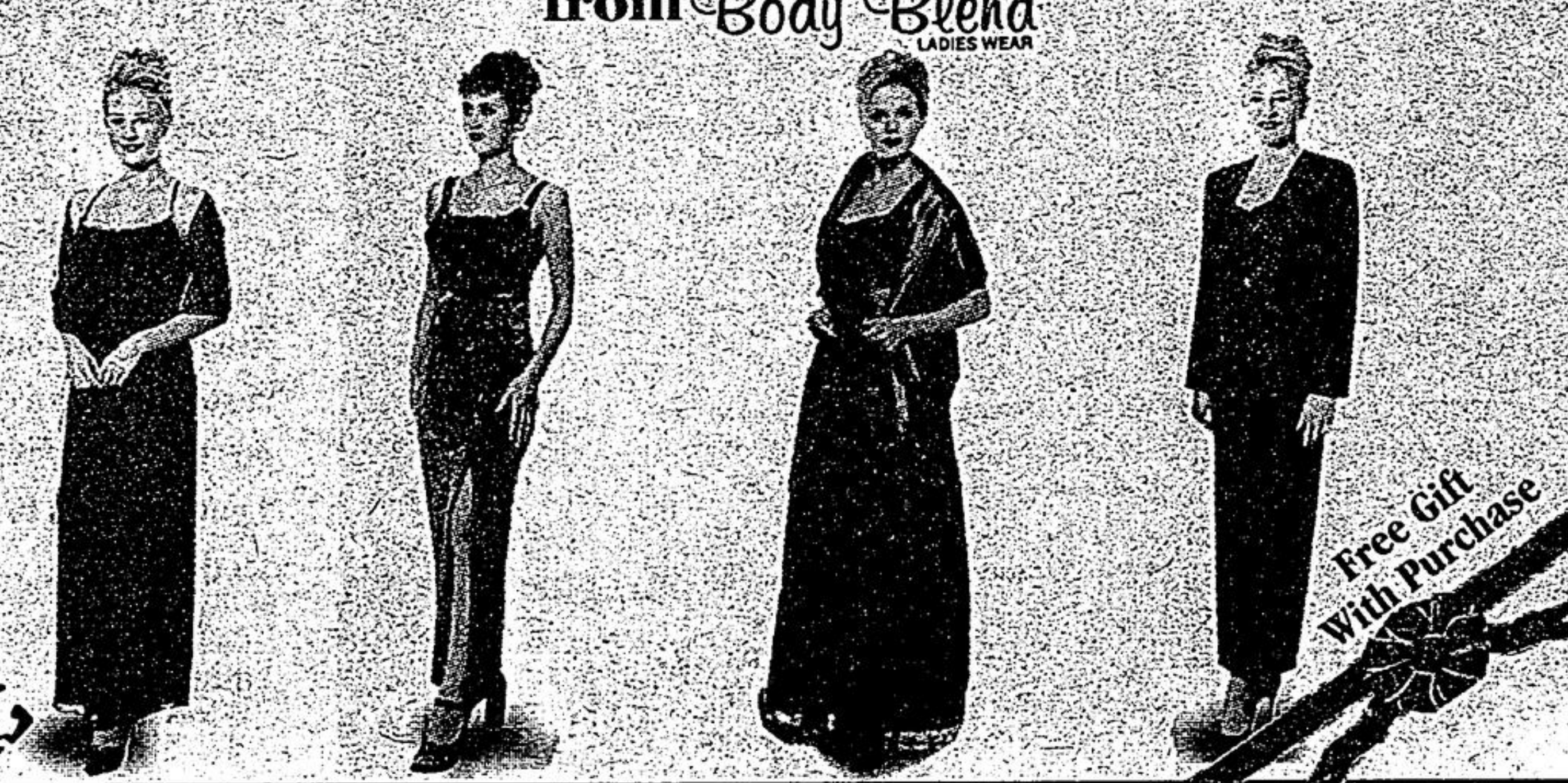
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