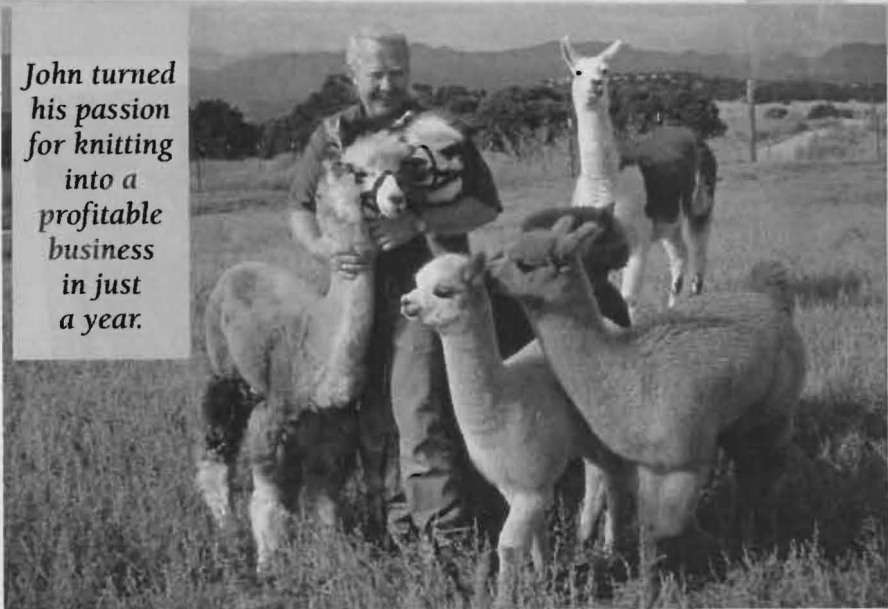


John turned his passion for knitting into a profitable business in just a year.



The Rocky Mountains are a dramatic backdrop for John Vollmecke and a few of the alpacas in his herd.

Real Men Do Knit

by Sandy Dexter
Canon City, Colorado

Do you know what a nibby-knobby is? John Vollmecke does. It's just one of the many things he needed to learn about when he decided to turn



John shows off one of his knit scarves and matching headband.

his passion for knitting into a business.

John has taken the idea of "cottage industry" a stage farther than most. Not only does he raise alpacas, he also harvests their wool, hand cards and spins it, then machine knits scarves and sweaters which he sells to boutique shops in Aspen and Vail.

It is easy to see why John and his artist wife, Glen, (a delightful English lady) chose Colorado as home for their thriving Alpaca herd and knitting enterprise. The Rocky Mountains are the perfect setting.

It took John one year from knowing nothing about spinning and weaving, to putting out a finished product. He admits to flunking the spinning class twice. "My loot and hand coordination was the problem," he said.

John now owns a carding machine,

spinning wheel, knitting machine, and yes, a nibby-knobby.

John was looking for an investment type of pastime, never dreaming it would become his passion.

The Process

Alpacas are shorn yearly. Each spring, on cue, Mark, a displaced New Zealand sheepshearer arrives. It takes him approximately 8-10 seconds to shear each animal. He starts at the back and works toward the head, rolling the alpaca over to get the blanket (prime fleece)

The harvested wool is gently cleansed in a tub of tepid water with shampoo, hung on a rod with weights, and left to dry for 24 hours. When

John cards the fiber, he often cards in flashing or firestar, which adds a glitter to the wool and enhances the appeal of the finished product.

John spends up to 4 hours a night spinning. He says, "There are several motions in life that are hypnotic and pull stress from your body, and spinning is one of them. It becomes addictive and you feel like you have to spin every day."



The Beginning & The End (John's spinning wheel & a knit vest)

And here's where the nibby-knobby comes in. The spun wool is wrapped on the nibby-knobby which puts it under tension. It is then tied off in four sections in figure eight loafs and left for another 24 hours.

It takes 8 ounces of spun wool to make one scarf and between 16-24 ounces to make a sweater. Once John sets up his knitting machine, following pattern instructions, and doing a tension swatch to calculate stitches per inch and rows per inch, it takes only minutes to create a beautiful sellable piece of knitwear.

What John does to add a personal touch to his products, is include a picture of the animal the wool came from with the item sold.

Love At First Sight

Alpacas are cute, cuddly, and very curious. "It was love at first sight for me," said John. He was looking for an

investment type of pastime, never dreaming it would become his passion.

Ancient Incan Indians believed alpacas were a gift from the gods and only high priests and royalty were allowed to wear material woven from their wool, which is incredibly soft, strong, and water repellent.

Alpacas are also great stress relievers. The only sound they make is a low-pitched hummmm. "It's great," said John. "My job is high stress. I'm a corrections officer at the penitentiary. I come home, spend a little time with these guys, and I'm completely relaxed."

There are several motions in life that are hypnotic and pull stress from your body, and spinning is one of them . . .

"The guys," who are Chilean alpacas, have free run of the fenced-in ranch along with a llama named Cal who protects the herd, some goats, and a few guard-dog peacocks. The alpacas' inability to vocalize makes them extremely vulnerable to attack by wild predators such as coyotes and mountain lions.

Meeting Cocoa, Topaz, Cinnamon, Paco, Star, and Cochita, was a special treat. The animals' natural curiosity soon overcame any fear of a human and they delicately nuzzled food pellets



Alpacas are cute, cuddly, and curious.

from my hand. Chilean alpacas, such as these, are multicolored, ranging from light beige or tan, to brown, to black, and all colors in-between. Peruvian alpacas on the other hand, are white, bred that way so their wool can be dyed in the bright, natural colors so loved by South Americans.

John is the only male in his Kwik Knit Club in Pueblo, Colorado. He says the ladies are great about sharing their knowledge with him. His mentor is Rose, an 80-year-old woman who often gives him one-on-one tutelage.

So, now you know that real men do knit, and you know what a nibby-knobby is. If you have any questions for John, he can be reached on the internet at ALPACAS@RIS.NET.

Photographer: Don Dexter



John spends many hours at his knitting machine.