*Bedford Farmers Club*

*Minutes from the Meeting of October 19, 2022*

*Faraway Farm Alpacas, Yorktown Heights, NY*

President Mary Farley welcomed members and guests to Faraway Farm Alpacas, with a special acknowledgement to President Emeritus Jim Wood who was in attendance.

Treasurer Roger Vincent led off the business meeting. After confirming the Club’s solvency and passing the clipboard for sign-in and payment of dues, Roger gave his annual accounting of how our $10 in membership dues are spent. He pointed out that the BFC operates on a volunteer basis with almost no expenses, and that the venues and speakers throughout the year do not charge the Club either. In appreciation, $7 of the Club’s membership dues are given as donations to those wonderful non-profit organizations – such as Boscobel, Teatown and Hilltop Hanover Farm – to help support their ongoing work. Hosting the BFC website costs each member $1 a year, and another dollar goes toward the occasional capital expense such as the purchase of a loudspeaker system. And while refreshments at each meeting are donated, the remaining dollar of dues is earmarked for special delights, such as the delicious oysters that were served when we learned about the Billion Oyster Project at Bedford Historic Hall.

Secretary Sheila Crespi presented the minutes from the September 14th meeting at Our New Way Garden in Purchase. ONWG’s mission is to promote the development of local food systems in Westchester, and to make produce available to people with insufficient means or opportunity to purchase or grow their own. The Garden has farm operations at several locations, including their solidarity share CSA program at Old Oaks Country Club in Purchase. People with shares buy produce and then make a tax-deductible contribution which enables ONWG to donate substantial amounts of fresh food. Currently, the farm produces about 20,000 pounds of produce, of which about half is donated. The minutes were unanimously adopted.

First-time attendees were introduced before Ellen Best’s presentation of Timely Tips. Ellen talked about nurturing healthy soil during the winter months. Key to that is keeping the soil covered with straw, leaves or other plant material, and planting perennials to keep roots in ground that will in turn promote healthy microbial activity. Good choices include herbs, comfrey, sage and elderberries, with greater plant diversity providing greater benefit and helping pollinators as well. Onions and garlic are also good fall crops. Ellen also shared some interesting new information she had learned on the correlation between butternut squash and its seeds, with more perfectly shaped specimens yielding better seeds to save, plant and pass along better genetic attributes (e.g., tastier flesh). The same correlation applies to other plants too – save seeds from plants that have the characteristics you want to see in your future plant growth. Ellen, who is President of the local chapter of the Bionutrient Food Association, circulated a sign-up sheet for the BFA email list for anyone interested in its programs and newsletters.

While Historian John Stockbridge couldn’t find references to alpacas in past BFC minutes, as they were only brought to the United States in 1984, he did find several references to sheep. At the December 1915 meeting, Club President Mr. James Wood introduced a discussion on whether there was a place for sheep in Westchester County. An emerging trend was the purchase of land by city dwellers. Much of the land fell out of agricultural use and became overgrown, the excuse being that labor was expensive and competent managers difficult to find. However, it was possible for one man to keep several hundred sheep to his advantage. Sheep manure far exceeded the value of other manures for producing soil fertility. The sheep enjoyed eating bushes and noxious weeds, resulting in cleaner fields than “any high-priced labor of man could make.” Further, there was always a market for sheep and lambs – and the earlier the lamb, the higher the price.

In January 1891, speaker Charles Haymes addressed the question, “Can sheep husbandry be profitable on our farms?” which he answered with an emphatic yes. A couple of months earlier, in November 1890, Club members tackled the issue of “How can we best destroy bushes and running blackberry vines?” Mr. J.S. Holmes said that if bushes were allowed to grow large along the fences it was best to pull them out by the roots with a team, but other members concluded that the grazing of sheep was the most effective way of keeping a farm clean.

In a perfect segue Leda Blumberg, co-owner of Faraway Farm Alpacas with Steve Cole, then took the floor. She related how her own parents bought the property in 1951 and moved from Brooklyn to “upstate New York” to raise their family. They were captivated by the beauty of the area which was then more rural with farms and woodlands; all their friends commented how faraway, faraway, faraway they were going! While her parents weren’t farmers, they had about two dozen sheep to mow all the fields. Leda was born on Faraway Farm and grew up there raising sheep; the building that houses the farm store was once the sheep barn. Part of the main residence on the hill dates to the late 1700s. And the barn where the BFC was meeting, built in 1938, was – and still is – used to store hay.

Leda and Steve acquired their first alpacas around 2007. They were motivated by the desire to keep Faraway a working farm and were looking for a viable farming business. They didn’t want to rely on animals that would be killed or on crop cultivation – even though they do have a huge organic garden which is fertilized with alpaca manure (better than sheep manure!). Their interest piqued by a friend who talked about alpacas, Leda and Steve visited over a dozen alpaca farms in the Northeast and fell in love with the animals and the fleece products made from their hair.

Leda gave a brief introduction to alpaca etiquette prior to our going out into the pen which, she explained, would not include a petting experience. We would be visiting the females, most of whom were born at Faraway Farm. The alpacas will approach and even nuzzle you, but she advised us to keep our hands to ourselves as they don’t like to be touched. And, while not aggressive, Leda also warned against approaching them from behind to avoid getting kicked.

Steve then took the floor. When the BFC last visited Faraway Farm Alpacas in June 2011, they were heavily into breeding and showing their alpacas, some of whom were champions. They’ve since changed their focus, with Steve being interested in research and education. In fact, besides being an alpaca farmer, he is trained as a research and experimental psychologist and is on the faculty of Emory University in Atlanta. One area of interest was coyotes and safety, so in 2007 – 2008 they became part of a study at Cornell University. Working with Dan Bogan, who is now on the faculty at Siena College, they set up safe snare traps at various sites in the lower Hudson Valley after identifying areas where coyotes lived. They caught three adolescents, who were fitted with tracker collars and released. Within a year, these three coyotes were gone, either kicked out by their parents or somehow killed. They learned that it’s best to leave coyote families intact.

In 2012 Steve and Leda got involved with the Watershed [Agricultural] Council for New York City, which works with farmers and forest landowners in and around the NYC reservoirs to protect water quality. The Council helped Steve and Leda manage drainage issues and the accumulation of alpaca manure. They built a pad and a drainage system outside the pad, which went on to win a NYS design award. Leda has now been named Chair of the East Hudson Committee of the Council and is Secretary of the Westchester County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Board.

Another question to be researched was the safety of alpaca manure. Alpacas are susceptible to meningeal worm, which causes paralysis and death, and they need monthly inoculations for protection. What happens to the medications as they leave the systems of the animals? Steve designed a study and received a grant from Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) to examine this issue. The study found that the medication stayed in the animals’ systems for a full month, so fresh manure was definitely not useable as fertilizer. To test whether it was possible to mitigate the presence of the medication, Steve created two separate manure piles: in one pile he allowed the manure to just sit, and in a second pile of the same dimensions he added hay and turned the manure. Samples were sent monthly to the University of Pennsylvania for analysis, where it was determined that the pile of turned manure showed significant degradation of the medication; in fact, the levels got so low they had to design a new test to measure it.

Leda stepped back in with a brief history of alpacas, who are closely related to llamas. Alpacas are the smaller of the two animals, weighing between 150 and 200 pounds; they are raised just for their fleece. Llamas are larger, between 400 and 450 pounds, and are used as pack animals, primarily in South America. Their fleece can also be used for clothing but it’s not as soft as alpaca fleece and is better suited for rugs and blankets. The animals share a common ancestor going back about 5 million years. Some of the animals migrated north and went across the Bering Land Strait into Asia, where they became camels. Others migrated south into South America, where they became vicunas and guanacos. About 5,000 years ago, the ancient Incas began domesticating them, with vicunas becoming alpacas and guanacos becoming llamas. Vicunas and guanacos still live in the wild.

Our group then adjourned to the fields, where photos and videos would do more justice to the experience than words. As Leda and Steve herded the female alpacas from a distant field, we were thrilled to watch them gallop with surprising speed and grace into an enclosed area near the barn. We then joined the gentle and adorable females in the pen, where they were a little curious about us – but not nearly as much as we were enthralled by them! Leda told us which two girls would allow us to caress their necks. The deep softness of their fleece put cashmere to shame.

Faraway Farm alpacas feed on a diet of high-quality hay and free-choice minerals which are offered in the barns. In winter a few of the older animals are given some grain. Alpacas have a gestation period of 11 ½ months, but babies are standing and nursing within an hour. They can live about 20 years.

Alpacas are modified ruminants with three-compartment stomachs. Food goes into the first compartment, the rumen, which acts like a fermentation vat to break down all the fiber in the hay. Later the alpacas will appear to be chewing but not eating. This is the process of re-chewing the food they’ve regurgitated from the rumen, before swallowing it again. Now the food will work its way through the other two compartments of the stomach dealing with moisture management and stool formation. Because of this ruminating process, alpaca manure makes excellent fertilizer, though Leda and Steve compost theirs for 18 months due to the presence of the medication for meningeal worm.

Leda explained that alpacas are shorn once a year but, unlike sheep, they are less cooperative about the experience. While Leda assured us that it doesn’t hurt, the alpacas are laid down onto a gym mat and restrained as an expert shearer does the job in about ten minutes per animal. As Leda put it,”That’s essentially their stress for the year.”

In response to a question about spitting, Leda said the alpacas do spit, often while being sheared! Also, she said the alpaca boys like to engage in neck wrestling, running around in chase, and spitting at each other. Females are quite a bit friendlier and need a reason to spit.

Many photo ops and videos later, we returned to hay barn to cap the day with refreshments and shopping at the farm store, where a gorgeous array of hats, gloves, sweaters, socks and other fleece products were on sale.

*Respectfully submitted,*

*Sheila Crespi*