



Creature Comforts

How alpacas helped a Florida Daughter make her family's bicentennial farm sustainable

By Lena Anthony | Photograph courtesy of Angel Forbes Simmons

ANGEL FORBES SIMMONS always knew she'd eventually take over her family's farm in Maryland. She's an only child, and her mother had been saving the property for her, though both of them were living in Florida. The tobacco farm had been in her family since 1802, and today it is one of only four bicentennial farms—a designation given to farms in continuous operation for at least 200 years—in the state of Maryland. But when the time came to finally take over the land in 1996, Ms. Simmons still didn't know the first thing about farming.

"I'm a Florida girl through and through, so I knew tobacco wasn't going to work anymore," she says. "The crop is very labor intensive, and you need a lot of acreage. Plus, I wasn't interested in farming tobacco."

After doing extensive research, Ms. Simmons settled on turning the property into an alpaca farm. "At the time, they were quite marketable," she says of the gentle South American animals coveted for their soft fleece. "They didn't

need a lot to care for them, and they're very lovable animals."

To make the farm suitable for raising alpacas, Ms. Simmons had to add fencing, but she has been able to use all of the same structures on the farm, including



the historic carriage house, stables and tobacco barn. An impressive Victorian home built in 1871 by her great-great-grandfather is also on the property.

At first, the farm—renamed Villa de Alpacas—made most of its money through the sale of animals. However, as the Great Recession took hold and demand for the animals went down, Ms. Simmons had to adjust her business plan

again. Today the farm's main income comes from processing and selling alpaca textiles, including vibrant yarns, as well as one-of-a-kind scarves, blankets, sweaters and socks. All of her products, Ms. Simmons is proud to say, are made in America. In fact, most of them are produced on the farm on looms built specifically for her.

Ms. Simmons makes most of her sales during the fall and winter, "when people are thinking about staying warm," which allows her to work on the looms during the spring and summer months.

When she's not tending to her alpacas, processing their fleece or selling textiles, she stays busy restoring the historic home and seven outbuildings on the property.

Her life as a farmer isn't easy. "I haven't had a vacation in about 10 years," she says, "but that's OK, because when I do leave the farm I'm thinking about getting back to be with my animals."

She takes pride in being able to continue her family's legacy, the importance of which was instilled through her membership first in the Children of the American Revolution, then in DAR as a member of the Biscayne Chapter, Miami Beach, Fla.

"I'm very thankful that I've been really active in these organization because I think they've given me the confidence to be successful today."

Ms. Simmons uses her success story to help others—primarily women—start alpaca farms. She helps with business plans and lets other farmers visit and practice on her looms.

"When you think of farmers, you think of men operating big pieces of equipment or tending to hundreds of acres of corn," she says. "But raising alpacas is something women can do very well. I'm proud that I've helped others start their own farms and be successful." 🐼