

A HISTORY OF ALPACA IMPORTS INTO NZ

by **Kit Johnson**

How did alpacas evolve in New Zealand, where did they come from and who were the major players involved in their establishment in New Zealand? Why do some Australian born alpacas have New Zealand genetics in their background?

These and many more questions started my interest in doing some research into the origins of the New Zealand alpaca industry.

A simple project you would think given the relative young age of our industry but several years of research in both New Zealand and Australia and still there are missing pieces to the puzzle.

My enquiries have taken me to the public libraries of Timaru, Christchurch, Wellington, Auckland, Sydney and Goulburn NSW as well as the Alexander Turnbull library in Wellington and the Mitchell library in Sydney. Then there is the internet and it is fair to say that there have been plenty of late nights spent pursuing my passion of decoding the origins of the New Zealand alpaca herd.



<http://strhistorymatters.blogspot.co.nz/2011/06/charles-ledgers-alpacas.html>

The Charles Ledger Import

Alpacas were first imported into New Zealand in 1865 – a surprise to some of you but there is clear evidence of their existence as far back as 1865.

To trace the origins of these animals it is necessary to follow the adventures of Charles Ledger. Ledger was an Englishman who had spent his entire working life in Peru. He married a Peruvian and taught himself the three principal native Indian dialects.

In 1829, following a particularly disastrous shipment of alpacas to England, the Peruvian authorities decreed that llama of any species were not to be exported. In 1844 a shipment of 16 alpacas were sent to Queen Victoria – this action so incensed the Peruvian Government that the decree was turned into law in 1845. Ledger believed Peruvian laws were fairly flexible and in 1857 he was asked by the New South Wales Government to bring a flock of alpacas to NSW. Aware of the new Peruvian laws prohibiting the export of alpacas, Ledger had to find a way via Bolivia and Argentina to Caldera in Chile, a distance of nearly 2700 kms. He suffered great hardship including blizzards, frost bite, illness and fevers and traversed some of the most inhospitable country imaginable including a 5000 metre mountain pass in the Andes. As a consequence he lost 294 animals out of the 570 animals that started the journey these animals arrived in Sydney in November 1858.

Despite great fanfare on his arrival in Sydney, Ledger started to experience problems. Promises of reimbursement of expenses and the promise of 10,000 acres of land failed to materialize and eventually after several years of failed efforts to establish alpacas in NSW, the herd was put up for sale.

In 1864, 324 animals were auctioned near Goulburn in NSW on behalf of the NSW Government but the auction failed to attract any bids. Many of the animals were given away and for many years the animals were to be found on farms in NSW and Queensland. The last representatives of Ledger's herd were sent to the Sydney zoo.

In 1865 the Wellington Provincial Government who had tried to buy some of Ledgers alpacas several years earlier, purchased 10 alpacas for 15 pounds each and had them shipped to New Zealand for a total cost of 500 pounds.

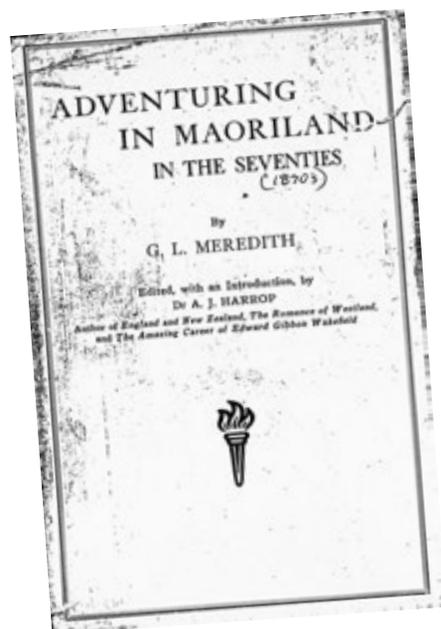
The Wellington Provincial Government was no more successful than their NSW's counterparts and incurred substantial financial losses.

Five alpacas were eventually sold to Robert Heaton Rhodes and farmed at Purau on Banks Peninsula. The Rhodes later sold Purau Station and the alpacas to D.H. Gardener. The numbers grew to 14 by 1873 and then in 1874 they were sold to a John Matson who lived on the outskirts of Christchurch. Two of these animals were then sold to the Otago Acclimatisation Society.

The remaining five alpacas from the Wellington Provincial Government purchase remained in Wellington.

This was where the trail of this first import finished or so I thought until a phone call from Ian Nelson, one of the founders of the NZ alpaca industry.

Ian posted me a photocopy of several pages of a book entitled "Adventuring in Maoriland in the Seventies" by G.L. Meredith. The reference to alpacas below relates to a station at Mahia about 40 kilometres south of Gisborne.



"There is a small flock of alpacas on this run, which of course had to be shorn. These animals have an unpleasant habit of spitting in one's face if treated with too much familiarity, so the Maoris were offered double pay for shearing them. Maoris as a rule are sports and would have shorn them for the fun of the thing anyhow. A great deal of amusement was got out of the incident."

I have been unable trace what happened to John Matson's alpacas that he purchased from Robert Heaton Rhodes or the alpacas that remained in Wellington.

There is a photograph of alpacas being unloaded at the Gisborne wharf and herded down the main street in 1870 – were these animals part of the original Ledger herd and were they the Matson animals or the animals that remained in Wellington.

One wonders just what happened to these animals. Certainly alpacas had proven to be expensive and difficult to breed, leaving a trail of disenchanted owners in both Australia and New Zealand.

Charles Ledger died penniless at Leichhardt near Sydney in 1895 never fulfilling his dream of producing a pure alpaca flock from female llamas mated to male alpacas.

Credits:

The Life of Charles Ledger – professor Gabriele Gramiccia
Ian Nelson – Tauhara Alpacas
Victoria University Library – Wellington
Goulburn Public Library

The Ian Nelson Shipment

The farming of alpacas in New Zealand came about through the efforts of Ian Nelson. The change in status from a zoo animal to a farm animal led to the establishment of a protocol allowing breeders and businesses to import animals direct from Chile.

Ian and Virginia Nelson for many years had had a fascination with South America. A three month holiday in South America in 1981 where they saw large herds of alpacas grazing, convinced them to investigate farming alpacas in New Zealand. Despite extensive enquiries, it became evident there were no alpacas in either Australia or New Zealand. They would have to import the animals from overseas.

Ian was obliged to write an Environmental Impact Assessment report – the report was sent to thirteen Government Departments and other organizations. Finally in August 1985 after many toll calls and visits to Wellington, the Minister of Agriculture granted approval of Ian's application to have llama and alpaca as farm animals within New Zealand. Due to animal health regulations and availability, the Nelson's turned to the United Kingdom. Eventually three alpacas are sourced from the Chester Zoo together with three llamas from Wiltshire.

In December 1985, the Nelsons apply for an import permit only to find that the protocol with Britain was not completed yet. After numerous toll calls to Wellington, the permit was issued just as the animals went into British quarantine.

Arranging insurance, air and land transport, booking quarantine space in both countries and obtaining a CITES permit (endangered species) proved to be a monumental task.

Everything is finally arranged and a flight booked for February 18th 1986. Three days before the flight's departure, the Nelson's learn that their animals will not be on the flight. After many anxious phone calls and a few days later,

Ian receives a call from a MAF vet stating that deer entering the United Kingdom from Hungary had been held in the same quarantine station as the alpacas, thus contradicting the quarantine requirements. The animals had been removed from quarantine and the airline was about to seize the animals as security for non payment of the aborted flight.

Three months later, prepayment of the next flight was requested and the payment is made. There are further anxious moments when it is learned that the permit has got caught up in a British postal strike. Further calls to MAF in Wellington and finally the animals are cleared to leave, arriving in New Zealand on June 3rd, 1986. A male alpaca that should have been on this flight is held back due to a Tb scare and finally arrives 11th of August 1986.

Thirty days in quarantine and finally the Nelson's get to see their animals. Not only has their dream come true but to their sheer delight, a female cria had been born.



IAN NELSON

Compiled by **Dan Carter** – Fernbrook Alpacas
and **Anne Rogers** – Editor, NZ Alpaca



As Ian and his wife Virginia have recently announced their plans to retire from the NZ alpaca industry it is appropriate to record Ian's longstanding involvement with alpacas in New Zealand, and to recognise his important contribution to the establishment of alpaca farming in New Zealand.

Born Ian Didsbury Nelson in Pahiatua in February 1929, Ian grew up on his parent's farm in the Wairarapa. His initial education was by correspondence and then schooling at Masterton and Wanganui Collegiate. Those formative years were difficult times through the Great Depression and rationing etc associated with World War 2. He married Virginia Hyde in Dunedin in 1958 and they had two sons and one daughter.

Ian became a sheep farmer in the Alfredton area in the Wairarapa, obtained his pilot's licence and served on the Eketahuna County Council for 18 years.

In 1984 he planned his retirement from the farm. He had been looking into the possibility of farming alpacas for some time. They were very difficult to source as most outside South America were in zoos. In 1981, after returning from two months in South America assessing the potential for farming alpacas in New Zealand, he drew up an Environmental Impact Assessment for MAF setting up an import protocol. After four years of frustrating delays, finally the then Minister of Agriculture gave Government approval for the farming of llamas and alpacas in New Zealand. This opened the way for the formation of city syndicates to bring alpacas out of Chile.

In 1986 Ian imported his first alpacas from the Chester Zoo in England. In 1988 Ian was presented with an award by the International Llama Association of USA for "paving the way for private ownership of camelids in New Zealand."

In 1989 he was a member of the group which was involved in the formation of ALANZ, THE Alpaca and Llama Association of New Zealand.

In 1997, after discussions with Don and Jude Carter about new genetics, he travelled to Niue Island in February and spent a week there selecting for himself and two other breeders from a shipment of Peruvian animals which were in quarantine there. These were some of the first Peruvian animals to be imported into NZ. The import was fraught with a number of difficulties, amongst which arose the need for a new import protocol and the fact that the animals were initially denied entry into NZ due to a mix up with a Q fever test, so the animals were sent on to Australia, where they spent a further month in quarantine before coming to still more quarantine in New Zealand.

In 1997 Ian was also made an honorary life member of ALANZ for his contribution to the industry.

The May 2001 edition of NZ Alpaca and Llama contains his article "An ex-Sheep Farmer's View of Alpaca Farming" and discusses criteria in breeding alpacas ie selecting for stud animals that have parents and grandparents with good records, not to buy sires on show performance records alone, be aware of advertising hype, as well as advising against using females that are poor breeders. His article emphasises the importance of improving young reproductive rates and selecting stud stock with finer, heavier fleeces.

We wish Ian and Virginia a long and happy retirement and hope that they will still continue to attend Alpaca Association functions when able.

The New Zealand Alpaca industry certainly has a great deal to acknowledge and thank Ian for, as his vision and perseverance established alpacas as a farming animal in New Zealand.

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