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A pioneering carpet maker

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By Gwen Shrift Staff Writer |

When he announced two weeks ago that his company will be weaving rugs from alpaca fleece, Langhorne Carpet Co. President Bill Morrow learned the super-fluffy, camel-like Andean creature has plenty of fans.

Shortly after the company revealed its intentions to use yarn made from the hair of the Peruvian animals, Morrow's email inbox bulged with comments from people who raise alpacas in the United States.

A lot of writers wanted to know, "Why not American fleece?"

That would be fine with Morrow, who with his sister, Winnifred, is the fourth generation of his family to operate the 80-year-old business in Pennel.

"I wasn't avoiding American (alpaca fleece)," he said. "I just couldn't find it."

Even the relatively small square yardage the factory produces requires fleece in thousand-pound quantities, a tall order domestically but readily available from Peruvian herds. To produce what Morrow needs, a supplier also would have to have equipment to scour the fleece and spin it into yarn.

The Langhorne Carpet Co. weaves high-end floor coverings for the luxury market, usually of British or New Zealand wool. Alpaca, a soft, silky fiber, is more often made into costly scarves and sweaters.

While you can buy a handmade alpaca area rug from Peru online, the fiber is not common in American floor coverings. Said Morrow, "As far as we know, we are the first" to weave rugs from it.

This is well out of the mainstream, according to a spokeswoman for the Carpet and Rug Institute. "Wall-to-wall carpet or broadloom carpet is about 98 percent synthetic fiber and nationwide, about 2 percent is wool or other fibers," she said.

Langhorne Carpet's alpaca line originated when a designer sought a soft rug for a client whose young daughter was always scraping her knees on her bedroom carpet. Silk or bamboo viscose also produces a soft surface, but the designer suggested alpaca.

Morrow had his workers weave alpaca rug samples and sent them to his sales force; they showed them to clients. "The response is wonderful," said Morrow, who decided to produce about 400 square yards in two patterns for the company's inventory.

The carpet's colors are the natural soft brown and white of the fleece. The surface is as soft as a kitten's coat. It costs about twice the price of wool rugs.

This is not something you will find in every house, but that's not Langhorne Carpet's market.

"We're not trying to hit a price point," said Morrow. "We're trying to make the finest carpet we can make. "It (alpaca) just sort of fits into us. We're sort of the microbrewery of woven carpets."

Morrow's great-grandfather started the company in 1930, weaving carpets that were sold by mass retailers such as Sears and Montgomery Ward. Today, about 30 workers produce carpeting in widths from 27 inches to 12 feet through mechanized hand-weaving techniques.

Langhorne Carpet is one of two remaining small weavers of high-end carpeting in the nation, according to Morrow. The rug industry is still largely domestic, with 99 percent of the carpet used in the United States made in this country, according to the Carpet and Rug Institute.

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