



Adirondack Asses

THE LITTLE BURROS OF CRANBERRY LAKE

by Sally Lynch

THREE KIDS, SIX DOGS, seven donkeys and one pony” is how Susan Smith describes the menagerie that is Adirondack Asses, her family’s miniature-donkey-breeding business in Cranberry Lake.

Originally a college fund-raiser, Susan says she “was always on the road and never had any time at home.” She and her husband, Andy, a Cranberry Lake native who is a caretaker for forty properties, wanted to do more as a family and wanted to raise livestock. “We looked at goats, alpacas and even had a llama, but she hated Andy,” Susan says. So, one weekend in 2000, they bought two miniature donkeys in Vermont. A week later they got three more. Gradually the Smiths came to regard the little burros as a business and bought breeding stock. In the meantime Susan switched to a job raising money for North Country Public Radio that allows her to drive to Canton a couple days a week and work from home the rest of the time.

The Smiths have had as many as eighteen asses at once on their five acres. “We

Above: Got any carrots or peppermints? A donkey nuzzles for fave foods.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
Sara Lynch

rescued five—not a good business decision, but a good heart decision. We kept Trixie and placed the others at cost, for what it cost us in veterinary bills. They were seriously neglected and needed a lot of TLC to trust people and to get healthy,” says Susan.

Since they live about thirty-five years, the animals are a lifetime commitment. “We are very selective about their homes, and even if you pass our test, you have to pass theirs. The donkeys pick you. Each burro has a distinctive personality, but they are all pushy,” Susan explains. “Ophelia, the herd queen, picked bolts and lifted latches with her lips.

She let all the donkeys out of the pasture the second day they were there—fortunately we caught them all.” Members of the herd also pull coat strings, stand on shovels to bring chores to a halt, and steal handkerchiefs and brooms.

Miniature donkeys are affectionate and social. The Smiths will not part with one unless it will have another donkey or a horse for



company. The animals can be sold at four months of age; prices range from \$850 to \$3,500. People sometimes buy them as soothing companions for skittish horses. "We mostly sell them for pets; they are like dogs without the hair on the furniture," Susan says. Gelded males make the best pets, she adds.

Michael Schaff, of Parishville, got Sally Spitfire, Harriet and Nacho Grande from Adirondack Asses. "They're less trouble than dogs," he says. "They love attention. If I sit on a step, they nuzzle me. They like to chase me around, and some of my dogs love to be chased by them too."

His pets have different personalities. "Sally Spitfire is the dominant one, and if I'm brushing another donkey she'll get in between us. Harriet is a stinker: she grabs pockets and unties shoelaces. . . . I have five dogs and three cats, and they all get along, although not at first. The donkeys had to establish that they are in charge."

ADIRONDACK ASSES, which also does business as Adirondack Donkey Company, is a family enterprise. "We all built the donkeys' barn and fence. It was part of our reconnecting as a family," Susan explains. "We scheduled donkey births but not human ones. I was forty when [our son] Harris was born, and I was out of commission for over six months. Andy and the boys [Logan, eighteen, and MacKenzie, fifteen] did most of the daily work." Chores take about an hour, Andy says, longer in the winter because he has to shovel paths in the snow. When it's deep, "only the donkeys' ears show above," he adds.

His father, Fred Smith, the town's retired highway superintendent, lives across the street. At seventy-eight, Fred is also a vital part of the business. "He's a lifesaver," explains Susan. "He helps with the dogs, drives the boys to their activities, catches escaped donkeys and even babysits. We couldn't do it without him."

Even the dogs have a role. "We have two miniature schnauzers and



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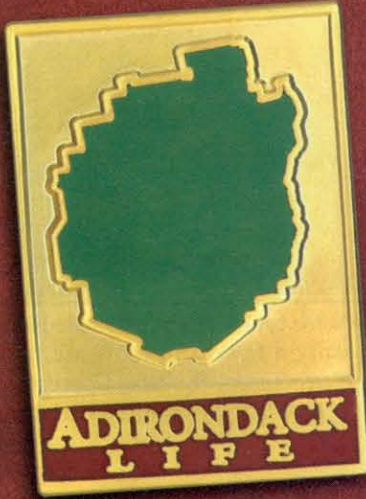


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W O R K I N G

a miniature poodle for two reasons: pets for Logan and Mack, and to acclimate the donkeys to little dogs, which donkey owners often have," Susan says. "Donkeys don't naturally like little dogs."

The Smiths' three other dogs are nearly the same size as the hoofers. "We researched dog breeds and chose Great Pyrenees, sheep herders. We got Natasha and Adirondacks as puppies and raised them in the barn. They are great herd protectors and wonderful with people," she explains. LuLuBella is a St. Bernard.

Big dogs have other benefits. When Andy saw a bear in the pasture one evening, he hopped off the deck, raced over and treed it. "He weighed less than the bear," says Susan. "I didn't think he should have done it, but he loves those donkeys." "It stayed treed for ten minutes, then I chased it across the street," says Andy. "It was after the grain, not the donkeys. We store it differently now." Since the dogs arrived, bears have stayed away.

MINIATURE DONKEYS were first bred as pack animals in Sicily, where the surefooted creatures pulled ice and milk carts in the mountains. Thirty-six inches at the shoulder is the maximum height of U.S.-born miniatures, and they weigh between 250 and 350 pounds—smaller than Shetland ponies. They come in all shades of red (sorrel), black, white, brown, gray and spotted.

The creatures are not shod and are permitted on Forest Preserve trails forbidden to horses. Their hooves should be trimmed by a farrier every eight weeks. They also need vaccinations, which the Smiths have learned to administer. "Vet care is a challenge—large-animal vets in the Adirondacks are few and far between, and if we have real problems we have to trailer the donkey to the vet. Our regular vet comes from Vermont monthly. He's a godsend," Susan says.

The donkeys are happier in winter than summer and love long strolls on frozen Cranberry Lake. "If one gets

a walk and another doesn't, they have a fit—bray, throw themselves against the fence," she adds.

The animals can carry loads of up to 150 pounds, though the Smiths haven't tested them with so heavy a burden. They can also be saddle-broken and trained to carry kids. "They seem to sense that small children are special and are not so friendly-pushy with them," says Susan as Harris, now three years old, hangs from the neck of Iggy Pop while another donkey pulls his shirt. Ranches for disabled children use miniature donkeys as therapy animals. The Smiths' burros visit nursing homes and host 4H, Adirondack Arc and school groups.

The miniatures' needs are basic: a three-sided shed facing away from prevailing winds and at least a half-acre of fenced pasture for exercise, fresh air and grass. Without a big paddock the burros need hay year round. They also require grain supplements for the first two years and plenty of fresh water. Donkeys don't get fleas, but they should be thoroughly brushed at least once a week.

The Smiths breed the animals but won't expand the business much since space is limited. "We could sell more—we're sending people on to other breeders now," says Susan. To date, four foals have been born. After they nurse, bond with their mother and begin walking, the youngsters are given halters and everyone in the family handles them. "Ophelia's baby was stuck in the birth canal," Susan recalls. "The vet was one and a half hours away, and he told me to put my hand in the birth canal to shift the baby's legs. It worked, and I thought, I can do anything."

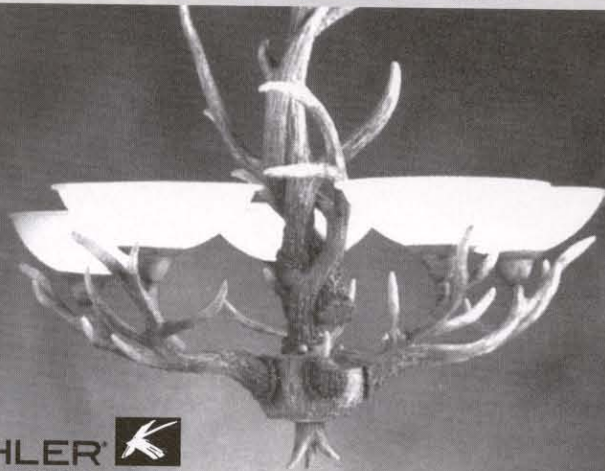
In the Smiths' sixth year of business Susan says, "We love it except on January mornings at six o'clock—and during fly season."

The Short Answer

Adirondack Asses is on Second Street (P.O. Box 726), Cranberry Lake, NY 12927 (315-848-5415, www.adirondackdonkeycompany.com).

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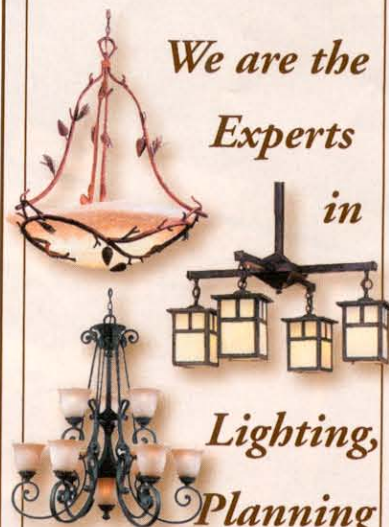
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