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*The Wallowa History Center works to save the memories, stories,  
and images that define the history and culture of the places we call home.*

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## The Sheep Herds and Their Basque Herders on Bear Creek

By Jack Goebel

Author's note: I am writing what I recall from 72 years ago, and all mistakes or errors of facts are entirely mine, but just as I remember them. Also, I met a number of Basque men through the years, and I am sure that I will spell all their names incorrectly, but I will write them as I heard them and remembered them at that time.

### Part I

When I was twelve years old, I had the privilege of going into the high Wallowa Mountains to work with the Basque owners of the Cherry Creek Sheep Company. I worked that summer and the following three summers in the vicinity of the Standley Guard Station.

I can recall there being eleven bands of sheep in Bear Creek, although I was told the allotments left room for a total of fourteen bands. I recall the Irishmen, the Donahues, had two bands in Little Bear Creek. My Uncle John Goebel was camp tender for Ray Johnson's band in Goat Creek. Jay Dobbin had four bands in upper Bear Creek and the Basques grazed three bands on Standley Ridge between Bear Creek and the Minam River.

It all started one July day in the summer of 1945. A man came riding a nice bay horse up the Bear Creek road, and I just happened to be standing in our front yard. He stopped to say hello as travelers always did in those days. My mother came out to greet him. He was a man we all knew and liked very much. We called him "Silver," but his name really was Sebrina Egana. He explained that because most working men were away at war in 1945, they had difficulty hiring help, especially part-time labor, and he needed some part-time help up at Standley until the lambs were shipped in early September. Because I was a six-foot tall farm kid, he thought I would fit the bill. School didn't

start for six weeks, so my mother said that I was welcome to go. So I rolled up a sleeping bag and tied it behind his saddle, and we headed for his camp at Standley, eighteen miles up the trail from our ranch. He was riding his horse and I walked behind, and it never occurred to me (until later) that the sleeping bag was all that I had for the next six weeks. Not even an extra pair of socks! Can you imagine a mother today sending a twelve-year-old boy eighteen miles from a road, back into the mountains for six weeks with only a bedroll?

We arrived at the guard station in late afternoon, and Silver showed me around. It was, of course, all new to me, but it was a small, very small, community that served as headquarters for the Sheep Company for five months every summer. There also was a thirty-two-foot-tall lookout tower on the ridge above, overlooking both Bear Creek and the Minam drainages. The population of Standley was two until Silver and I got there,



Sebrina "Silver" Egana



Standley Guard Station

We had a key to it but only used it for the telephone if needed. Yes, there was a telephone wire strung on the trees all the way from the ranger station in Wallowa up to the Standley cabin. It also was connected to the lookout tower and to a sister tower twelve miles away to the east on Huckleberry Mountain. One small tent set up near Standley Spring was where Silver lived. The nearby spring was the headwaters of Deer Creek that runs down Big Canyon, and it is wonderful, ice-cold, sweet water. Silver had a bed made of poles.

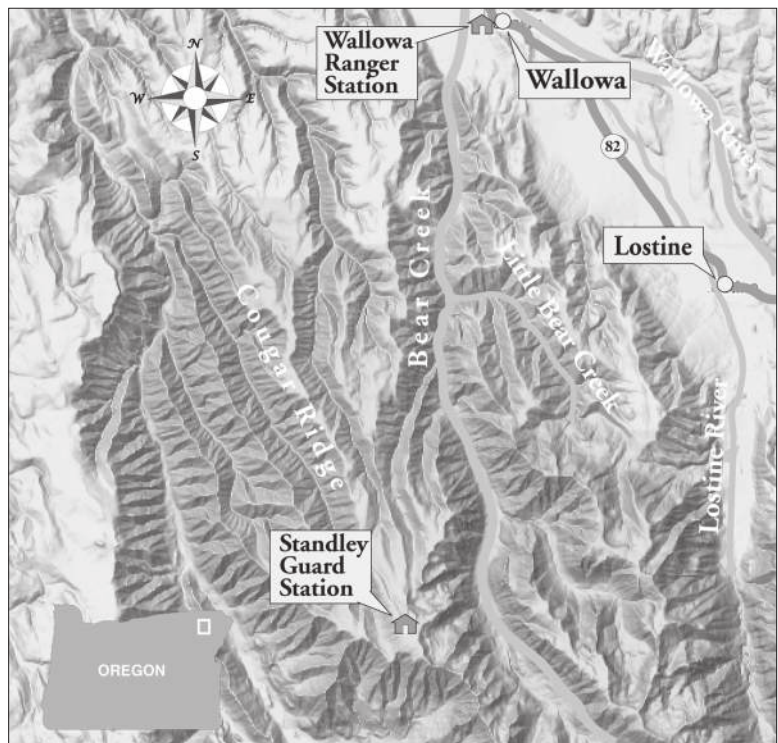
In the tent, which held the small wood-burning camp stove, the furniture was the same as in every sheep camp. It was the pack boxes off the pack mules, turned on their sides as shelves with their tops opened as small tables. The open boxes served as shelves containing all the supplies, and their tops served as countertops. In those were canned milk (condensed), baking powder, baking soda, salt, pepper, flour, jars of strawberry jam, Log Cabin syrup, a dish of butter, a big slab of bacon, chili tepines, matches, and all other things necessary for living in a tent for months at a time.

Opposite this pantry, on the west side of our tent, was a small table holding a bucket of cold spring water. Underneath that was a sack of onions, a sack of potatoes, and Tony's accordion. Silver's bunk was the entire south end of the tent. The first year I had my sleeping bag under the cool, dry limbs of a huge tree just uphill a little from the tent. Upon that tree was an open apple box nailed about head high. Our refrigerator! It contained dozens of eggs and pounds of butter. With the first trip in each spring, one mule would be loaded with a case of eggs, sack of spuds, sack of onions, and a big sack of pork rinds for the sheep dogs. They were the "squeezeings" after the lard was squeezed out of pork fat.

We ate almost the identical meals each and every day. On top of the pack boxes sat a stone crock, about a half-gallon in size. Every tent or camp had one. The cook took the lid off the almost-full crock of sourdough and tested to see if it was too thick for pancakes. It often was, and a cup of cold water was then added to bring the dough almost to the top so it was easy to pour. Silver always added a pinch of baking soda, saying that the sourdough was too sour as-is. Then he poured the sourdough into one of the two eight-inch frying pans heating on the small wood stove. Long before this, the coffee

making it four. The lookout tower was occupied by a U.S. Forest Service man named Ernie Cray, a really nice fellow who instantly became my friend. The other citizen was the camp tender, Mr. Mack Matheney. He was gone almost every day, tending to the three sheep camps. There were only three structures at Standley: the tower, a small 8 x 10 log cabin we used for storage of supplies, and the Standley Guard Station. The supplies stored there were many fifty-pound sacks of salt and one barrel of grain. The salt was fed regularly to the sheep, but the grain was apparently a supplement for the horses and mules.

The actual guard station was a fairly large, single-room log cabin built of good-sized logs.





Jack with his borrowed .22 grouse rifle

off two, one for camp and one for the loan of the rifle. I also was told that once someone had shot a small, fat, buck deer and divided it among the four camps, and within a week it was gone. Fresh meat was a treat.

Every lunch, if we had one, we had leftover biscuits with butter and jam, cold bacon and coffee.

One time Tony visited our camp very early in the morning and put a two-gallon pot of water on the stove to boil. He started a stew with lots of spuds, onions, and meat scraps from a small deer. It was hot and spicy with chili tepines, but it made several lunches and suppers for us.

In the four summers that I spent with the sheep, I only saw them butcher one sheep. Maybe they didn't like mutton. But the third summer we had two bands in the big corrals at the cutting-out place. One evening I saw Gus and Tony lead a really big wether, maybe six or more years old, from one of the corrals and over to a tree, where they shot it. I watched them dress and skin it and hang it from a cross pole between two trees. It looked like really nice, clean, fresh meat. I went back to Standley camp that night, and I suppose the herders and camp tenders ate the meat.

## Handyman Jack and Working Dogs

We had twelve dogs total, all sheep dogs. The adults were well-trained and worked hard. In the next two years we had two hounds with which to chase cougar. Each band or camp had three well-trained dogs, and we had three at base. Our three were a nice blue and white mother and her two puppies. The pups went with their mother and tried to do as she did, learning their trade for life. They were about a foot long and looked like blue and white loaves of bread. They spent all day running, playing, and then sleeping. I had to hide my socks in my shoes at night or else wake up to find them in a tug-of-war between two pups.

Silver did not herd except to relieve a herder. He was sort of a manager and kept everything running. Once he took me down Cougar Ridge to cut a dozen long, straight lodgepoles to patch the corral, and an eight-inch post to repair the hitching post. He rode his horse, I rode Old Sweetheart the mule, and we packed Old Pete. Using a Decker saddle, we tied one end of twelve poles, six on each side of the saddle, and let the other end drag. They were twelve-to sixteen-feet long, and Old Pete didn't care a bit; he just walked along.



In the early 20th century, more than a quarter-million sheep grazed the foothills, basins, and ridges of the high Wallowa Mountains.

pot had boiled, and everyone had a cup with some condensed milk. The other pan was filled with strips of bacon cut from the big slab. As soon as the first pancake came out, a few eggs were broken into the pan. So everyone ate the same meal every morning—fried eggs, bacon, and pancakes with lots of butter and Log Cabin syrup.

Supper was always the same, but the sourdough was left a little thicker, and a dozen hot biscuits came out of the small oven in the wood camp stove. We had lots of coffee and we spread the biscuits with lots of butter and strawberry jam. The only meat usually available was the bacon, but it seemed that quite often something fresh turned up.

One day I took a Royal Coachman fly on a short stick and hiked downstream along Deer Creek from the cutting-out corrals. By noon I had a salt sack full of spotted mountain trout, all I wanted to carry back to camp. Another time, the lookout fire guard had a single-shot Remington .22 and showed me the trail downhill between Black Canyon and Cougar Ridge. A mile walk any evening put several nice bunches of blue grouse sitting on limbs just overhead. Two shots took the heads



Basque camp tenders in Wallowa County

After repairing all the broken corral poles and a new hitching post, Silver and I went for firewood. The small woodstove in the tent that did our cooking sat in the northwest corner of Silver's tent, and out front was a sawbuck for sawing wood into blocks about twelve inches long. Standley is essentially above timberline at 7,400 feet, so we had to go north a couple of miles for any trees big enough for firewood. We felled several dead trees and cut them into blocks about three-feet long. We then placed four blocks on each mule, two on a side for balance, and went back to camp. When I was not needed for anything else, I would put one of these blocks on the sawbuck and cut off twelve-inch blocks from it and then split them small so as to fit the stove.

As you can see, I was busy every day as long as there was daylight. Once a week I cooked the dog food. We had a steel five-gallon bucket (there were not any of today's plastic buckets). I put about two gallons of spring water in the bucket and put it on the stove with a good fire. Then I found the large fifty-pound block of pork cracklings and used the axe from the wood pile to chop off a big chunk. This was tossed into the bucket and, as it heated, I stirred it into a thick mush. Set out by the tent, this was rich and tasty dog food for the hard-working dogs.

We also had about six horses and fifteen mules. Some mules we seldom used and others we packed each week. The camp tender would ride a horse and about three or four mules over to a band and load up the herder's camp onto the mules. The herder would have put away all of his food into the pack boxes and rolled his bed, so the tender only had to take down the tent. The herder and band would already be halfway into the next basin or grazing area. The tender knew exactly where the spring was and the site for the tent. He would find the old tent poles, set up the tent, deposit the pack boxes and maybe collect some limbs for firewood. The mules were seldom shod in the summer mountains but were always shod in winter.

### Rifles of the Sheep Men

The company provided rifles and ammunition to the herders just as they did mules, saddles, tents, and other necessary equipment. Even though the herders all carried rifles, they almost never shot any game. Long before the first summer ended I had surveyed every gun on the ridge and who owned and shot it. Mack Matheney had a Winchester model 94 in caliber .25-35. It was the only Winchester I ever saw in the company. Many preferred the pump-action Remington Model 14. I recall Silver always carried a .30 Remington, Tony had a .35 Remington, and I think Gus had a .30 Remington. I know Tony also had a lever action Marlin .22 long rifle for grouse.

The last year I was there we had a new herder, Mr. Raymond Lazarica. He was a great guy and I loved to go to his tent and visit. The first time I was really impressed because hanging from the extended tent pole was a Model 99 Savage. In the tent he had a Model 14 Remington. He told me he usually had at least three rifles with him, and that the Remington model 14 was a favorite because it fit a saddle scabbard so smoothly.

### The Sheep and the Herders

Silver explained to me that they had three bands of sheep that belonged to the Cherry Creek Sheep Company. He gave me the history. Silver had come to the U.S. about 1916 to live with and work with relatives in Nevada. He said that Gus, Tony, and Raymond had come later, maybe from 1918 to 1924, and they had uncles and other relatives who raised cattle and sheep in Nevada. Silver told me they all had come from the same homeland in Andorra, a country in the mountains between France and Spain. There were three bands out grazing when I got to Standley, and Silver told me that the first band on Bear Creek was herded by Gus, whose full name was Augustov Malaxa

Itcheberia. The second herd was six miles south of us in Sturgill Basin and herded by Raymond Lazarica. The third band, a little north, was under the care of Tony, whose real name was Antonio Martiartu. The spellings are the way they sounded to a twelve-year-old.

These herders got together occasionally to talk business. For several years I thought they were speaking Spanish, but then I found they were speaking Basque, although they could speak Spanish, and I was told that there were Spanish Basques and French Basques. The latter spoke French.

Silver said about 1918 they hired on with Jay Dobbin and Guy Huffman, who owned the Dobbin-Huffman Sheep Company. Jay Dobbin was a friend of my granddad, Pete Goebel. They herded sheep for the company for about a dozen years, and then the Great Depression hit the U.S. The sheepherders were not abandoned because the company still provided them horses, tents, rifles, and all the food necessary to camp with the sheep. The life of a sheepherder in the 1930s was probably better than the life of a college professor. In those days, a good job paid a hundred dollars per month, if you could find one. There was 25 percent unemployment. But the herder lived in his tent with the sheep, and all supplies were provided. His expenses were his tobacco, a new pair of shoes each year, and maybe a new shirt. One of them once told me he could bank 1,000 dollars per year in savings. Few teachers could do that.

The big crunch came after 1930 when the company could no longer pay wages. The herders were still provided the necessary supplies to maintain the herds but were receiving no salary, possibly for years. In listening to them tell this story, I could sense some lingering animosity towards the company even after ten years. So sometime around 1933 or 1934, give or take, Mr. Jay Dobbin made the Basque herders an offer. He owned 629 deeded acres on Cherry Creek with a log cabin and a hay barn. No road to it, but the Dobbin-Huffman sheep had been wintering there for years. He wanted to divide up the sheep into four bands. He would deed the 629 acre home ranch to Silver, Gus, and Tony. Along with that he would give them two bands of sheep, the necessary horses and mules, and all of the equipment that was needed. They accepted his offer with the result that when I got to the summer range on the Bear Creek-Minam River ridge ten years later, there were four bands of Jay Dobbin's sheep in Bear Creek, and three bands of Cherry Creek sheep on the Minam side and on the Bear Creek ridgetop.

Because the Basques and Dobbin and others were grazing their sheep on the National Forest, they were assigned a specific allotment of grazing. Each owner kept his sheep on his allotment, kept them on specific bed grounds and had certain places to salt them. They had to pay a fee for the grazing. It might be something like seven cents per day for each sheep, though I'm guessing at that figure. Each band was around 1,100 adult sheep. The Forest Service put a limit of about 1,200 in any one band, and the owners themselves tried to keep at least 1,000. However, with the lambs there may be another 1,500. If you took them onto the National Forest from private land about mid-June until about October, you might have a hundred days of use, resulting in maybe seven dollars per sheep. This led to the necessity of counting the herd when they went up Bear Creek and when they returned because some had died and some were killed by cougars, bears, or coyotes.

Just watching Silver or Gus count the band was fascinating in itself. It took some practice, but they were good at it. We collected the band at some "choke point," usually a bridge where the sheep would be strung out when passing the man doing the counting. I watched Tony cut a fresh green willow stick about two feet long. Gus was counting the sheep as they rushed past him on the bridge. He told me that he counted them by two's. When he hit one hundred he would shout, "Hey!" loudly and Tony, who had been standing with his pocket knife in hand, would cut a small notch in the willow stick, knowing that Gus had started counting the next hundred. When they had all crossed the bridge, they counted the notches in Tony's stick and had the total.

One September we had a band of 3,200 lambs at the stock yards at Wallowa, next to the railroad. There was a large scale to weigh animals being shipped. The scales had a gate at each end. The animals went in one end, the gate was closed and the weight read, the other end gate opened, and the sheep ran out into holding pens. Two men from Salt Lake City, wearing suits and gold-rimmed spectacles, negotiated with the Basques to purchase the lambs. Gus assured them his lambs averaged 88 pounds each, but the men wanted to weigh some to check. So Gus and his dogs pushed a group of sheep into the scales, read the weight, and opened the other end gate. The lambs rushed in a swift stream of animals, about three sheep wide, past all of us standing there and on into the holding pen. One of the Salt Lake buyers then said, "Okay, now let's count them." Silver just said, "Fifty-seven." Then he looked at me and walked away. So I got Gus, we climbed up on the corral side and counted them one by one—all fifty-seven of them! For the rest of the day, no one asked for a recount on the number of animals in a pen.

To be continued in the Summer 2017 newsletter.

# Wallowa History Center *Preserving Our Past for the Future*

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## Wallowa Population 1890–2010 (And some events that shaped it.)

**1890: 620**

(This figure is for the “Wallowa Precinct” because the city is not yet incorporated.)

1899: City of Wallowa incorporates.

**1900: 243**

1908: First train arrives.

1909: First mill opens.

**1910: 793**

1918: Servicemen return from World War I.

**1920: 894**

**1930: 749**

**1940: 838**

1945: Servicemen return from World War II.

**1950: 1,055**

**1960: 989**

1962-1963 Bate Mill workers strike, mill closes.

**1970: 811**

1975: Rogge Wood Products opens Wallowa mill.

**1980: 847**

**1990: 748**

1995: Rogge Wood Products closes.

1996: Wallowa Forest Products opens Wallowa mill.

**2000: 869**

2007: Wallowa Forest Products closes.

**2010: 808**