Wallowa History Center

Preserving Our Past for the Future

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

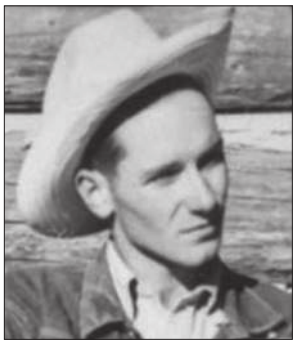
Author's note: I am writing what I recall from 72 years ago, and all mistakes or errors of facts are entirely mine, but just as I remember them. Also, I met a number of Basque men through the years, and I am sure that I will spell all their names incorrectly, but I will write them as I heard them and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

Part II

(Continued from Winter 2017 Newsletter)

Trailing the Sheep

The sheep spent the winter somewhere on their winter range, often the breaks of the Snake or the Imnaha River. The Basque operation revolved around Cherry Creek and Dead Horse Springs. In addition to the bands of ewes, the sheep men owned a small herd of rams, although we called them bucks. They had about 500 as I remember, and were kept in pastures many miles from where the ewes spent the summer. The bucks were well fed and fattened up for their winter's work. Sometime around the first of January, all of the bucks would be driven home and mixed in with the ewes in anticipation of many lambs coming sometime in April.



Jack Goebel at Standley Guard Station

In the months of July, August, and early September, during which time I lived and worked with the sheep in the high mountains, those summer months were like a vacation for the herders. They often told of the really long, hard, miserable work they had during the lambing season. The lambs came in late spring when the weather was often cold and rainy. The herders slept little during the lambing nights, often chasing off nearby coyotes, helping young ewes with their first lambs, and feeding the ewes a rich and nutritious supplement called "pea cake," which was shipped up the Snake River on the mail boat to a landing downriver from the mouth of the Imnaha River, and then by mule over to Cherry Creek. It fattened the ewes and helped them produce more milk. They also had to catch each lamb and "mark" it. That meant a sharp pocket knife cut off the tails and the testicles.

Sometime in late May it was time to hit the trail. Some of the spring trails were notorious. On the Idaho side of the river, the trail was a long, hard twenty-four-mile slog. Our sheep had it easier, trailing out to Sled Springs where the shearing plant was set up. Here the wool grown during the past twelve months was shorn and packed into big wool sacks. The shearing was done by professional sheep shearers, often from New Zealand. The best ones could shear almost 300 sheep per day. It was bent-over, back-breaking work.

The Basques planned on the sale of the wool in June to pay all of their operating expenses, and the sale of the lambs in September to make their profit for the year. But this "profit" included the "wages" of the three Basque owners who had just worked twelve months to earn it. Also, they owned the home ranch that provided some hay for their mules and horses, and their summer grazing was rented from the U.S. Forest Service. They always hired a full time camp tender who helped with everything from bringing in supplies from town to putting shoes on the mules.

Branding

When sheep were branded, there were no red-hot irons resting in small fires, no cowboys (nor even sheepherders) sitting on two horses with ropes on front and back feet stretching out a sheep. Instead, the brands were painted on. Most consisted of a simple circle. The Basques used black paint, though the Donahue brothers used green paint. As the sheep left the shearing area—after shearing, the ewes' wool was as short a it ever would be, so this was a good time to paint on a brand—they were forced out through a narrow chute where a man sat with the branding can. It was usually just a soup can with holes in the bottom to allow air out. He had a nearby pan or can of paint and dipped the open end of the can into the paint and quickly pressed it onto the sheep's short wool. I recall Gus painting a black circle about the size of a soup can on the right shoulder of each sheep (only adults were branded because the lambs stayed close to their ewes). This was all that was necessary because the sheep were usually in a bunch, so you could spot the brand at a glance.

Bears

We didn't hunt bears unless they were "problem" animals, meaning one that was killing sheep right now! We had several bears kill sheep over the years, and it was quick and simple to end that. It would begin with one of the herders coming to base camp and telling us that a bear had killed a sheep and eaten half of it during the night. Always it was one sheep only and half eaten. I would saddle a mule and get out the big thirty-two-pound bear trap with teeth and a fifty-pound sack of salt. The salt was to balance the other side of the saddle with the trap.

Arriving at the half-eaten sheep I would take my ax and fall a small tree, about five inches at the base, and limb it out for ten or twelve feet and then cut off the top. The trap had a ten-foot log chain attached to the base plate, and on the end of the chain was a strong steel ring about four inches in diameter. I would slip this ring over the small end of the pole and slide it to the middle so each end balanced. I fixed it in place with one fence staple.

The bear may have killed she sheep out in the open but always dragged it back into a thicket where it would eat. So I cut several small poles about ten feet long and made a V-shaped enclosure with its point against a tree. I then pulled the remaining half of the sheep back into the point of the V and placed the trap right in front, toward the open end. The pole enclosure ensured that the bear would not approach from the side but rather over the trap.

With the trap was always a mule shoe and a big screw clamp. I put the clamp over one trap spring and screwed it down tight, then placed the mule shoe over it to hold that spring down. Then I removed the clamp and put it on the other spring, running it down tight. The trap was then easy to set, the clamp removed and used to retrieve the mule shoe from the other spring. Now the trap was dangerous and although we were eighteen or twenty miles from a road, we always left the screw clamp and mule shoe hanging on a tree limb right over the trap. A person could free themselves that way, although we checked the trap morning and night. I balanced the trap ring so the pole would be drug sideways so no bear ever went but a few yards in the pole thicket. Silvers always had a .30 caliber Luger strapped on for the finish. I think we always got the bear the first night. They were not trap-shy and just walked right in to get the sheep meat. I would guess we got about three bears each summer this way.

Cougars

A bear might kill one sheep in three days, but a cougar would, and once did, kill 34 sheep in one night and ate none of them. This was my first experience with a cougar, and it happened almost my first day at Standley base camp. Silvers and I were up early, discussing the broken poles on the horse corral, the sheep to be treated for "hoof rot," and the two new posts needed for a new hitching post, when over the hill from Dobbin Basin we saw Tony. He was in a hurry, and we knew something was wrong. He told us that a cougar had gotten into his band during the night and killed seventeen sheep. We walked up past the lookout tower and could see down into Dobbin Basin. It seemed like there were dead sheep all over the hillside. We told Tony to use his dogs and gather the scattered herd as best he could, and we would get busy.

First we sent Mack Matheny out to the other two herds to let Gus and Raymond know what was going on. Then Silvers asked the fire guard to get Wade Hall on the phone. Wade was the local U.S. Forest Service ranger and knew exactly what to do. He called the renowned cougar hunter, Alfred Zollman, in Joseph.

The bounty on cougars was sixty dollars, and Mr. Zollman was killing about forty each year, on average, along the Snake River rim. He said that after a cougar had fed during the night and his dog "jumped" it, the cougar never went very far before treeing or stopping. He carried an army Springfield .30-06 rifle but said that he almost always shot cougars with a Colt Woodsman .22 pistol. He never shot for the head, though, because a treed cougar would come off the limb scratching, clawing, and thrashing, and hurt an overeager dog that rushed in. Instead, he put one shot into the cougar's ribs and waited for the lungs to fill with blood and for the cat to slip slowly from the tree and drop limp to the ground. His dog could then bite and worry the cat without danger. While hunting he would "camp out" for three days, building a fire under a tree and cooking cougar meat for him and the dog. This time when he was called, Mr. Zollman relayed back that he would come as soon as he could.

By that afternoon the other two herders were present with a total of twelve dogs. We inspected all the dead sheep. They were each killed with one bite right behind the head. The cougar bit down on the neck, killed the sheep, and went on to the next. With the herd scattered in the dark, it was just like a cat playing with mice. Clearly, it killed any sheep that tried to run or even move.

We moved the sheep over into Lake Basin and had people sitting on both ridges all night, but when dawn came we counted twenty-two more dead sheep. Busy cougar. It was not afraid of us or our dogs. I think it killed thirty-four more sheep before Al Zollman came riding up, trailed by his one big dog. When he looked down into the basin, he guessed where the cat was spending the day. He took the dog down the ridge and by afternoon he returned with the scalp.

This time he had not been able to use his pistol on the cougar because here, above tree line, there were not many big pines where a cougar would tree, so the large tom had backed into a shelter at the base of a huge cliff and waited for the dog. Al had finished it off from a distance with his Springfield rifle. I asked how big it was and he said, "Two army rifles long." (Two years later I hunted with Al and my dog with two of his. We chased cougars from Bear Creek over into the Minam, but the snow was waist deep and we quit. I noticed he wore hip boots, like I would use while duck hunting.)

Coyotes

The coyotes were more "pervasive" than either the bears or the cougars. They were everywhere all the time. The sheepmen hunted, trapped, poisoned, and shot them whenever they could. If they were trapped before January, their hides could be sold. In the days when we had the sheep, there was a three-dollar bounty on a pair of coyote ears. When the camp tender was not busy otherwise, he took time to kill some coyotes using a poison gun called a game-getter. These were placed along a trail, and treated with some bait, and if the coyote bit on one, a .38 caliber cartridge shot a dose of cyanide into its mouth. The herders did not get much sleep in April on Cherry Creek, with over 3,000 ewes having lambs 24 hours of the day and coyotes just waiting over every nearby ridge for a free meal.

Camp Tenders

The busiest man and maybe the most important was the camp tender. The first summer it was Mack Matheny, but he drowned in the spring trying to cross the Snake River in flood time. While at Standley, the camp tender would saddle six or eight mules about every two weeks and make a trip to town. Well, almost to town. Silvers would use the telephone in the Forest Service cabin to order supplies from Shells Mercantile. The store would box up the supplies and bring them out to the barn of Glen Hawkins on Bear Creek. The camp tender would time his trip down with the pack string so he could load the mules there the following day and head back. If the supplies did not fill all the pack saddles, he just put on some fifty-pound sacks of salt so all mules carried two hundred pounds. They made the twenty-mile trip back to base camp in half a day.

Wayne Wilson said his horse and mules made almost six miles an hour coming down empty. My old gray mare seemed to average about half that, or three miles an hour. Wayne said my horse could walk all day in the shade of the same tree. But she was very calm and trustworthy, so much so that on a warm evening I would go to sleep while riding along behind the packstring. I went to sleep one evening about Blaze Camp while riding the old mare and didn't wake up until we were back with the sheep at Standley. I had slept for fourteen miles.

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Wallowa Wagon Road & Toll Bridge

A.C. Smith informs us that on Saturday, M.B. Rees and himself, with 15 in all, will begin work on the wagon road from Indian Valley [Elgin] to Wallowa Valley, which will take about a month. – *Mountain Sentinel,* June 15, 1872

On Saturday, June 22 of 1872 we met the man of the mountains, A.C. Smith at the mouth of the Minam River [site of Smith's bridge, which was under construction], where he was encamped. By fording the Minam—a tributary of the Wallowa—at its mouth, we were allowed the privilege of climbing one of the steepest mountainsides it was ever our fortune to attempt…Before entering the valley and while yet on the brow of one of the greatest mountains [probably today's Smith Mountain], we had the pleasure of witnessing one of the grandest sights imaginable. There, hundreds of feet below us, lay the great Wallowa Valley, running a little east of north by west of south; in its center meandered the purest of mountain streams [the Wallowa River], running at the rate of about twelve miles an hour, and skirted with timber usual to lowlands in great abundance. – *Mountain Sentine*l, July 6, 1872

The great barrier to the settlement of the Wallowa, one of the finest agricultural and stock raising countries on the Pacific Slope, has at last been overcome. The bridge across the great Wallowa River was completed and thrown open to travel on the 22nd of the present month [February], and the thousands of men who are heading in that direction will rapidly fill up and improve, and thus make the Wallowa Valley one of the desirable places in which to live anywhere to be found between the Rocky and Cascade mountains. The grades are still in need of some improvements, and as soon as spring fairly opens a large force will be set to work, which in the short space of a few weeks will make this one of the finest mountain roads anywhere in Eastern Oregon.

– A.C. Smith, in a letter to the *Mountain Sentinel*
dated February 26, 1873, published March 8, 1873