

# Sheep in the Mountains

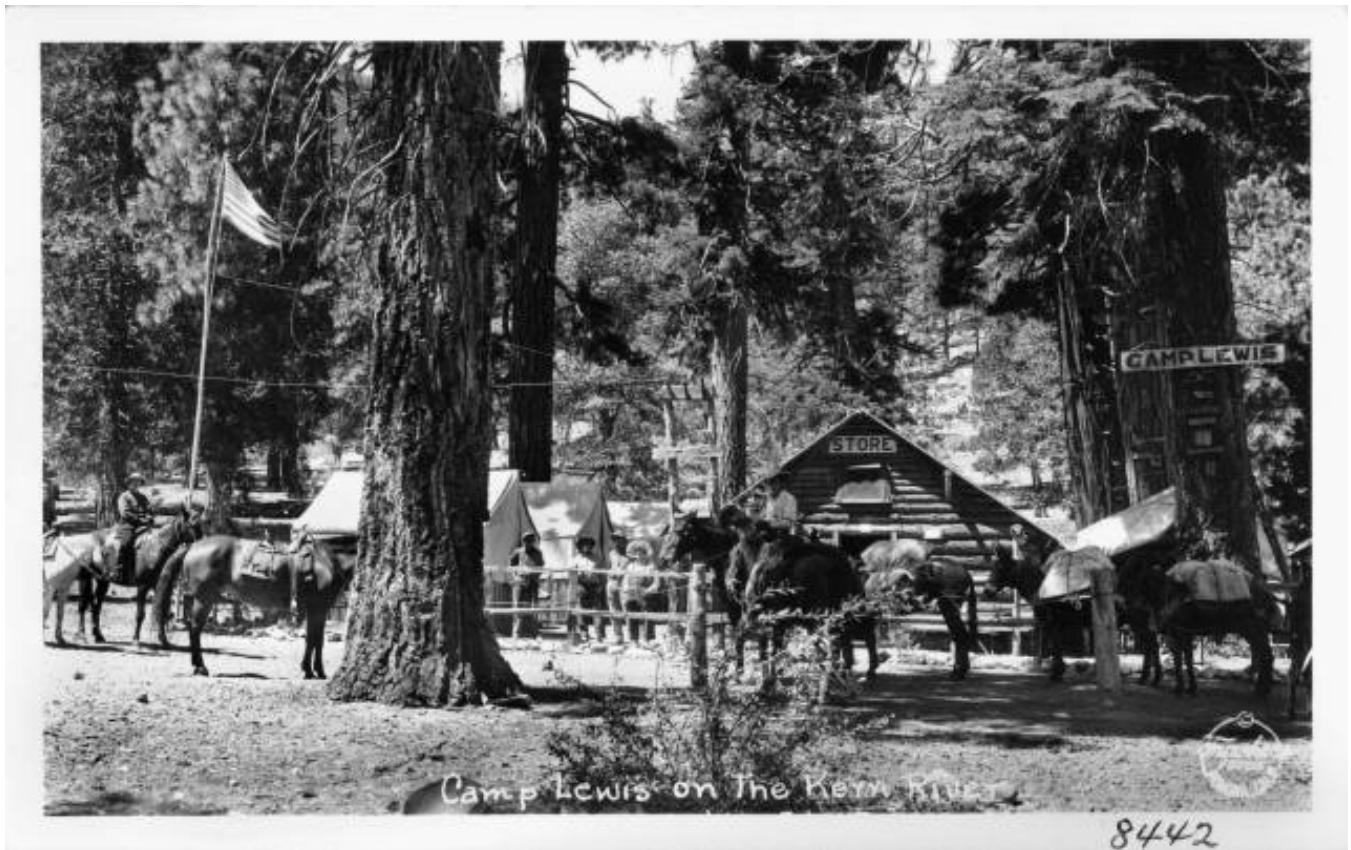
(From the March 1969 issue of *Los Tulares*)

By Henry M. Brown

“So many seasons’ efforts,  
so many suns and rains  
to make a pound of wool.”

-- The Land of Little Rain

Manuel Lewis (1852-1936 - formerly Luiz, a native of the Azores) came to Huron in 1876. He worked a few months on a farm and then acquired ownership of 2000 sheep entirely on credit. Within a few years he had the biggest flocks in the southern valley, and was selling flocks to other men on credit. His own flocks eventually increased to a peak of 32,000 sheep. Needless to say, it required much ingenuity and a wide territory to graze these flocks.



Manuel's schedule was to move half the flocks out of Huron in the fall by barge from Kettleman City to south of Bakersfield, across Tehachapi and up the Owens Valley, eventually reaching the area around Winnemucca, Nevada, where he had grazing rights. This long trek to Winnemucca and back lasted till spring and was marked by hostility and violence between cattlemen and sheepmen. The remainder of the flocks were grazed in the hills west and south of Coalinga until spring.

In the spring Manuel moved his flocks slowly up the Yokohl valley in the direction of the Little Kern. From there he headed over the divide to the Big Kern River and Lewis Camp. Here, the narrow

canyon and limited feed would not have detained him for long, also the Kern Lakes and Lewis Camp were already popular camping spots.



Big Kern Lake – Lewis Camp is about two miles up the canyon.

The sheep continued to move up the Kern river, grazing the watersheds of all its accessible tributaries, finally making their way over the Kern-Kings divide (probably via Colby Pass) into the Sugarloaf area where Lewis made his main camp. From here they moved down to Cedar Grove on the Kings River, where Lewis Creek was named after the sheepman. The sheep were then moved out of the Kings Canyon, back into the Kaweah watershed, and down to Visalia in the fall.

The task of taking large flocks into such rugged country, with its fallen timber, rock ledges, swift river and sharp ridges above timberline would seem overwhelming. To this were added clashes with cattlemen, attacks by predators and, after 1890, a vendetta with army troops in the newly created Sequoia National Park.

The greatest hazard was from the several Indian encampments making their regular summer tours in the mountains. These were probably Shoshones and Piutes from the Owens Valley, and they demanded supplies from the sheepmen. Lewis gave them whiskey as a peace offering, which made a bad situation impossible. After that their first interest was whiskey, and failing to get it, they would kill sheep and the valuable dogs which were essential to herders. As a final blow they would raid the sheepmen's camps, taking everything portable, and making it necessary to send a burro train to Visalia for more whiskey and supplies.

The tendency of the sheepmen to increase their flocks to the limit of the laws of nature made them natural enemies of everyone affected by the depredations of their flocks. The terse comments in the early records of Sequoia National Park give an indication of this. The army was given custody of Sequoia Park in 1891.

1891: "5000 sheep in the Middle Fork (of the Kaweah)."

1892: "Entire season spent in trying to keep the sheep from Park. Sheep most troublesome . . . . the commanding officer was unable to ride out on an inspection tour as there was not a mouthful of feed left in the Park."

1895: "Found that sheep had been moved into the Park when the troops left in the fall."

The sheep business suffered a heavy blow in the drouth years of 1897-1899 and Lewis never grazed large flocks again. The mountain trails were improved and the sheep were gradually replaced by cattle.

Editor's Note: In gathering material on Lewis Camp, Mr. Brown met Nestor Lewis of Hanford, a son of Manuel Lewis, the subject of the sketch above. He furnished most of the information given. Mr. Brown at first supposed that Lewis Camp was named for Manuel Lewis but later learned that this was not true. (SEE LEWIS CAMP STORY)