

The Sheepmen

by Hal Roth

In many parts of the mountains the trails were roughed out by early-day shepherders. In fact by 1890 there was scarcely an alpine meadow in the entire Sierra Nevada that was not known to them. Who were these men? What happened to them? Why have they been so condemned in the literature of the mountains? What is their story?

The start was in 1769 when the Franciscan Fathers of the early Spanish Colony commenced raising sheep at their missions." By 1819, the total of 19 mission ledgers showed a record population of 186,233 sheep. But after the secularization in 1834, the missions were largely abandoned and the animals scattered. When California became part of the United States in 1850 there were less than 20,000 sheep in the new state."

During the gold rush the hungry California miners ate all the animals in sight, at one stage paying from \$7 to \$16 for an ordinary sheep." Large numbers were brought in to furnish mutton, the peak being in 1856 when 200,000 sheep were driven into the state from the Territory of New Mexico, the American Midwest, and from Chihuahua, Mexico.

The real beginning of California's sheep industry came in the late 1850s with wool raising. Finewooled Merino stock was brought in to strengthen the blood lines of the domestic sheep to improve their wool output. It was easy to handle the new stock in large flocks. They were extremely hardy and disease was uncommon. Land was cheap, there was an abundance of pasturage in the San Joaquin Valley, and with the mild climate there was no need for expensive winter shelter. Shepherds were recruited from Europe and paid small wages. The wool growing was profitable-especially during the Civil War-and the flocks increased rapidly.

There were a few men who owned dozens of leagues of land and tens of thousands of sheep and who employed great squads of herders and became wealthy, but the usual arrangements were much more modest.

The term shepherd referred to the man who was hired to tend a flock. His job was a lonely one in rough country and because he camped by himself for weeks or months in a small tent out on the range he was generally unkempt by city standards. He spoke only a few words of English but knew Basque, French, and perhaps a little Spanish or Italian. In an age when a carpenter was paid \$4550 a month, the shepherd received \$25-30, and was allowed to kill a sheep for food when necessary, besides receiving a supply of flour, bacon, beans, potatoes, tea, and coffee. His constant working partner was an expert sheep dog and he carried a rifle to shoot coyotes, mountain lions, or bears. With his supplies furnished and his requirements simple, he was able to save practically all his wages for his announced goal: a triumphant return to Europe to start a small business of his own. Some herders did return; a good many drank up their wages the same week they were paid. A few saved for land in the United States, settled and raised families, and became respected members of western ranching communities."

In the 1860s farmers commenced buying the good land in the San Joaquin Valley and the sheepmen were forced to the San Joaquin and Coast Range foothills or to Southern California. Later there were further pressures on the sheep when the foothill areas were found to be ideally suited for growing grain and fruit. In Southern California the growth of railroads and irrigation made the land too valuable.

In 1865 a writer" pointed out that there were vast pastures in the Coast Range and on both sides of the Sierra Nevada where herds had not been grazed. He suggested that California sheepmen follow the custom in Spain where the great Merino flocks were wintered on the plains of Estremadura and the lowland provinces and were taken to the high mountain ranges at the approach of hot weather - usually around May 1. This was old stuff to the California shepherders and owners, many of whom came from Spain or from the Pyrenees, where migrations up and down in elevation were the usual pattern."

The use of the Sierra pastures was the main factor in developing the sheep industry in the San Joaquin Valley. Several particularly severe droughts had made this lowland unbearable in the summer and more and more sheep were driven to the lush highland meadows which cost the sheep owners nothing. Lean and weak sheep taken to the high pastures returned fat and strong. Often the herders went from the San Joaquin foothills across the range to southern Inyo County, then along the eastern edge of the Sierra, recrossing the crest to the west side in the vicinity of Yosemite Valley, or sometimes as far north as Lake Tahoe, and then back along the foothills or central valley to the winter lambing grounds. Sheep raising became possible on a large scale and even though there was a general decline in world wool prices because enormous numbers of sheep were being raised in South America and Australia, wool was soon a principal product in Tulare and Kings Counties.

Since animal pasturage was the only dollar and cents business in the mountains, a penniless 31-year-old John Muir, anxious to explore the High Sierra, hired out as a shepherd. On June 3, 1869, Muir took 2,050 sheep into the mountains from the south side of the Tuolumne River near French Bar. Working with an assistant and several dogs, his job was to gradually move the sheep higher through successive belts of forest as the snow melted, stopping for a few weeks at the best meadows. Muir was horrified at the damage caused by the sheep which ate and trampled out wide swaths through the boulder-high grasses and flowers. He called the sheep "hoofed locusts" and deplored the devastation they left behind. "The harm they do goes to the heart," he wrote in his journal. In beautiful Tuolumne Meadows he was aghast: "To let sheep trample so divinely fine a place seems barbarous!"²³

In 1876, California's wool clip surpassed fifty million pounds. In 1880, the state had a sheep population of 4,152,349 - the largest in the United States. But with no grazing control the damage to the range was staggering. If the grasslands had been grazed in moderation they could have supported a fair population of sheep permanently. But the herders had little concern for the future. Not only did they bring in tens of thousands of sheep too many, but they took enormous flocks to the highlands as soon as the snow had melted, when the meadows were wet and before the herbage had grown up. The sheep moved faster on the short grass, eating what they wanted and trampling the rest. The animals' feet sank into the wet ground, cutting the soil and exposing the roots of the grass. Soon the ground was dry and bare in many places. Since the meadows were semi-permanent camps the sheep trampled the bedding grounds along with large adjacent areas. Each day the flocks went farther afield to feed, making ratlike trails that soon eroded out.

The worst were the sheep trails - one of the severest land uses known - where the sharp hooves of tens of thousands of ewes and lambs crushed the vegetation and soil twice a year. The plants were grazed closely and then trampled. The bare earth loosened and began to erode. Gullies developed along some trails until they were no longer passable at all.

Because of overcrowding there was a rush every summer to get to the best meadows. Men who claimed legal title to certain meadows or rented them from others arrived only to discover their grass gone and the soil harrowed to dust. "They found their feed devoured," wrote Professor William R. Dudley of Stanford

University, after a field trip on the Kern Plateau in 1898, "and sometimes the marauders holding the conquered territory with shotguns." Dudley was amazed to find that in one year 200,000 sheep had swarmed over the divide through the Tule River region alone."

The fact that sheep raising in California from 1870 to 1900 was considered a fast way to make money tended to make the owner -whether a small herder or a big operator-heedless of the effect on the land. Whether agriculturally naive or simply lacking in concern, the result was the same: ruined meadows. It was only a question of time until the herders would be outlawed by the government or forced out of business by having exhausted the grass.

At least twelve responsible writers working independently in the High Sierra from 1860 to 1910 published strong indictments against sheepmen.

"The Kern Plateau," wrote Clarence King in 1871, "so green and lovely on my former visit in 1864, was now a gray sea of rolling granite ridges, darkened at intervals by forest, but no longer velveted with meadows and upland grasses. The indefatigable shepherds have camped everywhere leaving hardly a spear of grass behind them.

In 1899, Dr. Marsden Manson noted: "The writer once asked an intelligent stockman how many sheep could be pastured on a given area in the Sierras, and he gave, as his opinion, that 8,000 sheep could be pastured thereon without injury - that is without destroying all seed of forage plants and grasses. But, upon naming over the owners and herds which he knew, there were 40,000 sheep accounted for in the area.

"The greatest damage from erosion on the range lands occurs where areas have been badly overgrazed and the ground cover destroyed or seriously impaired," wrote the Agriculturists Sampson and Weyl. "Before the ranges had been overstocked and the ground cover impaired, erratic run-off and erosion were practically unknown."

Some authorities thought the damage was more from mismanagement and not entirely irreparable. In any case the damage was done, both to the meadows and to the shepherders' image in public opinion.

By 1890, the profit incentive was dwindling because of falling wool prices. Emphasis had shifted from high-grade Merino sheep to simple mutton types. The final blow to the sheepmen was the prohibition of sheep in the great Sierra Forest Preserve that was set aside by President Harrison in 1893 to protect timber and watershed lands. The Preserve ran along the west side of the Sierra Nevada for 200 miles and encompassed 4,096,000 acres. Rules issued in 1900 stated that cattle and horses were to be admitted by permit, the number to be controlled by the government, and no sheep were to be allowed at all. In the early days of the preserve there were practically no forces to keep out the sheep, but control gradually came over the land, especially after the Preserve was reclassified into five national forests in 1908 and professional rangers were trained.

"The attempt of the tramp sheepmen to dominate the range resulted in such intense sentiment against them that the government was forced absolutely to prohibit all sheep grazing, " said Will C. Barnes, writing for the U. S. Forest Service in 1913.

Yosemite National Park is perhaps the most famous park in the world. And proper is its fame, for nowhere else are such plummeting waterfalls, colossal granite formations, enormous trees, and beautiful upland country all exhibited together. When the park was established in 1890, it was before the days of the National Park

Service, and the Secretary of the Interior asked the U. S. Cavalry to take charge. The park surrounded Yosemite Valley, then under state control, and was a very large preserve taking in over 1200 square miles. The boundaries reached eastward to the Sierra Crest, south to Wawona, north to include the Tuolumne watershed, and west to the San Joaquin foothills.

People of today who calmly motor across the Tioga Road in an easy afternoon cannot realize what a wild and remote land the Yosemite High Sierra was 60 or 70 years ago. It had few maps and the trails were mostly old Indian routes. A trip to Mt. Lyell, for example, was a real expedition. The Cavalry however soon established patrols to the boundaries of the new park and commenced working out trails and passes, and naming places and drawing maps.

Yosemite was established for the recreation and enjoyment of the American people. Mining, lumbering, bunting, and grazing were prohibited. There was no mining, and lumbering and hunting were easily stopped. Grazing was a different problem. Many of the herders who had used the high mountain pastures in the summer refused to recognize the new park and considered the High Sierra their own, even though they held no title to the land nor paid grazing fees to anyone. These sheepherders, and to a lesser extent some cattlemen, had run their animals into the Yosemite High Sierra for 20 years or more and had an extraordinary knowledge of passes, meadows, and trails. They had nothing but contempt for government control and sneaked their flocks into the park when the cavalry patrols were away.

"The sheep-herders, few of whom are American either by birth, citizenship, or sympathy, care for nothing but the prosperity of their flocks, and where their herds go a desert follows in their wake," wrote Fourth Cavalry Captain A. E. Wood, acting superintendent of Yosemite in 1892.

In 1894, First Lieutenant N. F. McClure of the Fifth Cavalry, stationed at Wawona, wrote of an expedition "to scout for sheepmen, who, were reported to be unusually thick in the vicinity of Tuolumne Meadows." McClure took twelve mounted men along with five mules loaded with provisions and headed for the remote upper Tuolumne basin. Near Mt. Conness he arrested four herders along with their pack train and had them taken back to Wawona. Later in Virginia Canyon, "I suddenly came upon two good-sized flocks of sheep. The herders fled up into the rocks, and we were unable to capture them; so I had one or two shots fired to frighten them. I do not think that they have stopped running yet.... On August 23rd I sent patrols from camp up and down Return Canon. There were thousands of sheep running hither and thither, apparently abandoned by their herders."

The cavalrymen were at a disadvantage because there were no proper penalties for herders who were caught, except to seize their packstock and camping equipment. The sheepmen talked grandly of armed resistance" and boasted of bribing soldiers with whiskey³² but this was more bravado than fact. Under the leadership of able officers, the cavalry soon worked out the plan of scattering the flocks beyond the park on one side and putting the herders and their dogs out on the other, several days' journey away.³³

"From June 25 until September 1, we expelled from the park 189,550 head of sheep, 350 head of horses, 1,000 head of cattle, and captured 27 firearms, reported the acting superintendent for 1898.

The herders fought back by hiring men to watch the cavalry.

"To add to the difficulty then this year, I found that the herders had established a system of spying," wrote Captain Joseph E. Caine in 1898. "A squad could not leave the home camp [Wawona] without the word being carried to remote parts of the park faster than the troopers could travel. Ten or more herders would combine in

employing watchers, who were placed on the main trails to give the alarm upon the approach of the soldiers. By signal fires and other means the herders were warned to get out of the way. Lieutenant Kimball, who made an extensive tour of the eastern part of the park, noticed these signal fires every night, and also found warning notices nailed to the trees along the trails. Notwithstanding these precautions, many of the herders were captured, there being as many as fourteen at the home camp at one time.

Though the sheepmen resisted stubbornly, public opinion and the law were against them and they were gradually pushed out of the mountains. With the outlawing of sheep in both Sequoia and Yosemite National Parks and the restrictions on pasturage in the national forests along the western flank of the Sierra Nevada, large-scale sheep grazing ended.

A footnote came in 1917, 1918, and 1919 when stockmen "due to the war emergency" succeeded in getting temporary grazing privileges in the high mountains. These were canceled after the 1919 season.

The years of the sheepherders were also years of exploration for a few prospectors who sought gold, silver, or copper. At the outset, the difficulties of the long winter, ore transport, and getting supplies to any mines that might have been found would have stopped most men - all in fact except those with the glint of gold in their mind's eye. In spite of prospects from one end of the mountains to the other, little of lasting value has ever been found.

An account of an early party prospecting for gold in the High Sierra shows the foolhardiness of trying to fight the mountains without proper supplies and preparation, and the difficulties of trying to force a passage without maps or scouting. "We struck east," wrote prospector Thomas Keough, in 1864, "hoping to find a way over the Sierras and down again into Owen's Valley, but we could not get any further east - got into the main mountains and then had to back out and work south. We worked south until we got down on to the North Fork of King's River. It was a terrific task working around granite cliffs and over great boulders with our horses. Beveridge and I got down on to the North Fork one day about sundown with the animals. The rest of the boys had gone ahead and had been fishing all day, but could not catch any. Beveridge and I coming into camp with the horses asked the boys what they had got for us to eat, and they pointed up to a rattlesnake hanging on a limb that they had skinned for supper for us.... We held a council and the next day slaughtered one of the horses.... We made a rack out of green willows and jerked a lot of him and roasted a lot more of him in front of a big log fire. After we got everything ready we divided up the jerky and roast meat in our haversacks and struck south. We picked our way along with the animals, but the country kept getting rougher and rougher - deep canons and precipices, a terribly rough, bouldery country -all bare granite. One of our party got part way down a cliff where he could neither get up nor down, and we had to tie our blankets together and let them down and pull him up. It was a several thousand-foot drop down below where he was on the cliff. We never could understand how he got down there. For two days we tried to work south. Finally we got into a canon full of boulders, where we could neither get our horses one way or the other. They were so worn out and hungry that we finally killed them. They would have starved to death in that barren granite. We left our saddles and everything, and took only our clothes and necessary blankets and went on afoot. We lived entirely on horse meat. I don't know how horse meat might be with a little salt, but it certainly is not very nice without salt....

"Traveling without the animals was easier, but the country kept getting even more impassable. In working down into one canon, thousands of feet deep, we had to slide down a water-run. Sometimes we would slide thirty feet and fetch up on a bench, throwing our blankets on ahead. We camped down in one of these canons one night and the next morning, started east in the hope of reaching the summit of the Sierra Nevada at a Place where we could go down the easterly cliffs into the Owen's Valley. By night we had reached the summit at a

place they now call 'Taboose Pass', about eighteen miles north of Independence, and the next day we worked our way down the cast cliff of the Sierras along Taboose Creek into Owen's Valley.'" "

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