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Sheep Shearing in Western Colorado

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THE COVER: Michael White is a self-trained artist, and a retired finish carpenter. He has produced several covers and illustrations for this journal.

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Sheep Shearing in Western Colorado

By Merle Noland*

Shearing sheep is a unique profession and an art. Why a person would want to become a sheep shearer is sometimes beyond comprehension. It is strenuous work that requires strength, endurance, patience, eye-and-hand co-ordination, balance, rhythm, and grace. Despite all this, shearing got into some people's blood. Often a man would learn to shear sheep, then quit, swearing that there had to be a better way to make a living. However, a year or two later, the person would return to the profession.[1]

This paper tells the story of shearers from the North Fork of the Gunnison Valley, Delta, Montrose, and Grand Junction, Colorado. Between the years 1910 and 1960, shearers from these western Colorado towns were a hard-working and fun-loving group. Each believed that he was the best at his vocation, and many were indeed outstanding in their craft. Shearers from Australia, New Zealand, and other parts of the world who came to work in western Colorado were amazed at the number of

*Merle Noland grew up in the sheep industry. As a young boy, he worked first as a herder, then as a tier and tramper, and after high school a sheep shearer. Mr Noland later worked construction and became a heavy equipment mechanic. As a graduate of Mesa State College, Joseph "Merle" Noland earned a B.A. degree and a Secondary Teaching Certificate in 1995. (Drawing courtesy of Michael White.)

animals the local men could shear. One Australian expressed the group's attitude, saying: "I have never seen sheep so big and with so much wool before. I don't know how you are able to shear so many every day."[2] According to this man, the sheep in Australia were smaller, clear-cut, and often bare-bellied.[3] The life and work of the western Colorado sheep shearer needs to be told. Their profession and way of life has all but disappeared.

A History

Sheep appeared in western Colorado during the 1860s and early 1870s, about the same time that cattle were introduced. However, sheep did not reside permanently in western Colorado at that time. The earliest sheep herds[4] were en route to California and Oregon.[5] During the late 1870s, out-of-state ranchers primarily from Utah, started filtering their cattle and sheep into western Colorado to take advantage of the territory's grazing land. Other herds, belonging to "gypsy" owners without permanent bases of operation, moved constantly. These "gypsy" owners moved their herds to wherever they found open grazing land.

In the 1880s, western Colorado was opened to homesteading, and the Western Slope got its first permanent herds of livestock. Many early settlers brought small flocks of sheep, and for a time, most ranchers raised both sheep and cattle. But as time passed, ranchers began specializing in either sheep or cattle.[6] At first, government land was open to use by anyone, but permanent settlement and larger herds increased competition for grazing lands. Most sheepmen considered the land as open range and public domain. However, they resented the "outsiders" from eastern Utah who occasionally passed through western Colorado grazing lands with their herds of sheep. Cattlemen, in particular, resented these intruders. Those in the cattle business believed that they had arrived first, taken care of the land, and made it their home, and that these factors meant that they had first rights to the land.[7] In addition, cattlemen claimed that sheep grazed too close to the ground and that killed the grass. According to the

cattlemen, even the grass that remained was worthless; cattle would not graze or drink after sheep because they left an odor (perhaps even a dangerous gas) that offended cattle. While sheep do crop the grass shorter than cattle, none of the cattlemen's claims were true.[8]

Competition for grazable land caused more hatred between sheepmen and cattlemen than any other issue.[9] Eventually the cattlemen and sheepmen reached an agreement: the Gunnison River was the unofficial boundary between sheep ranchers and cattle ranchers. Country south of the Gunnison was for sheep and land north of the Gunnison for cattle. However, in 1891, the United States government banned sheep in forest reserves and parks, and competition for grazing land resurfaced.[10] Resentment turned into open warfare and forty years of conflict. In 1910, in an attempt to alleviate hostilities, the federal government insisted that sheep be allowed to graze in forest reserves in the North Fork Valley, Muddy Creek, and Taylor Park areas. The government tried to define informal boundaries between cattle and sheep areas, but the federal government did not have an agency to enforce the laws it had created.[11] Adding tension to an already volatile situation "range pirates" shipped thousands of cattle by railroad into Delta and Montrose, herded their cattle into the forest reserves, and defied anyone to challenge them. They were too well-armed, organized, and ferocious for local ranchers to oppose them. As a result the ranchers turned their attention to the sheepmen. Cowboys killed sheep and dogs and destroyed herder's wagons. Because many of the herders were Mexicans or Basques, the conflicts were often shaded with racism.[12] In 1928, cattlemen cut the cables on a swinging bridge over the Colorado River so August Aubert could not bring his sheep into Colorado from Utah.[13] In the end, both sheepmen and cattlemen suffered great loss at the hands of "range pirates" who rustled cattle, killed many sheep and herd dogs and some herders, and destroyed herder's wagons.

The passage of the Taylor Grazing Act of 1934 brought more stability to the range; the state and federal government started managing the lands, which they split into parcels designated for either sheep or cattle ranges. Individuals leased grazing land from the government, which included mountain forest land for summer range and desert land for winter range. Nomadic sheepmen had problems claiming rangeland under the Taylor Grazing Act, which required a permanent base of operations and proof of prior use.

Stock Crash of 1929

During the decade prior to World War I, beef prices plummeted while the sheep markets rose.[14] Colorado's livestock business suffered in the period just before World War I. World War I helped those in the livestock industry, but the sheep industry continued to out gain cattle until the stock market crash of 1929. During the Great Depression, many sheep and cattle ranchers lost everything. The only people to survive and make a comeback were the ones the banks were willing to back. Acquiring land was the secret to successful sheep ranching. Bankers were willing to lend money to ranchers who had plenty of land on which to graze their stock. During the 1930s, times were tough; so tough that many ranchers, who had despised sheep previously, decided sheep did not smell so bad after all, and turned to them as a matter of survival. The Great Depression brought people together; cattlemen and sheepmen worked together to eke out a living, and sometimes even helped each other.[15]

Prominent Pioneer Sheepmen in Western Colorado

Enos Hotchkiss brought the first sheep into western Colorado on a permanent basis, and his family has maintained bands of them continuously from 1890 to the present day. When Hotchkiss and several other ranchers obtained information that western Colorado would soon be opened to settlement, they sneaked into the North Fork Valley in 1879 to locate the best land for their homesteads. In 1881, Hotchkiss, Sam Wade, the Duke

brothers, Danny McIntyre, and a few other partners entered the North Fork Valley and staked their claims.[16] Hotchkiss got into the sheep business largely by accident: he accepted a small flock of sheep as payment for a debt owed him and moved them into western Colorado. The sheep turned out to be a better investment than cattle, so in 1893, Hotchkiss sold his cattle and turned exclusively to sheep—to the dismay of his friends and former partners.[17] During depressions and bad years, Hotchkiss and McIntyre both expanded their holdings on the Muddy country by buying out homesteaders and buying land for back taxes.[18] The Muddy country on the east end of Grand Mesa was one of the first areas designated as grazing land for sheep.

Danny McIntyre was another of the cattle ranchers who turned to sheep. Hurt by the depression preceding World War I, he sold all of his cattle in 1918 and reinvested in sheep in 1920. At that time, McIntyre was a hundred and fifty thousand dollars in debt, a large fortune at that time. Mr. McIntyre was able to borrow money and buy and control thousands of acres.[19] McIntyre became one of the largest sheep owners in western Colorado. At one time, he owned between twenty-four and thirty thousand head of sheep.

Other sheepmen who became prominent on the Western Slope came from outside the United States. Henry "Harry" McKeller's family ran sheep in New Zealand before immigrating to California, then settling in New Mexico where he raised sheep for years, before moving to the North Fork Valley. McKeller, along with a large number of others, lost everything in the 1929 stock market crash. He never recovered his losses.[20]

Paul Etcheverry was a French Basque who immigrated to the United States. According to Etcheverry, the majority of Basques who came to the United States were French and not Spanish as commonly believed. An Englishman named Potts sponsored Etcheverry to work for his large sheep company near Reno, Nevada. Etcheverry worked for Potts until he had saved

enough money to start his own herd in Utah. But like many others at this time, Etcheverry lost everything in the crash of 1929. He then migrated to Grand Junction, where he worked until he had saved enough money to start his own operation near DeBeque.[21]

Peter Jouflas, a Greek who originated from a village no larger than Mack, Colorado, immigrated to the United States in 1907 to work in the mines and on the railroad in Utah. He believed that hard work and owning land ensured success. While working in the mines, he saw a shortage of supplies for the miners and railroad workers, so he and three partners bought sheep and started a herd to feed the workers. The partners rotated turns herding and protecting the sheep. Later, Jouflas split from the others, and in 1914 he migrated to Glade Park in western Colorado. In early 1918, Jouflas moved his sheep up near Basalt in Eagle County for his summer range. He established the first sheep range in Eagle County. Also, Jouflas always maintained winter range in Utah that ran from Thompson and Cisco into Rabbit Valley in extreme western Colorado.[22]

During 1933 and 1934, severe winters in eastern Utah forced sheepmen to return their herds to Colorado. Ranchers found the weather mild near Fruita, and thereafter wintered their sheep near Fruita and Mack. This established the first sheep ranches west of Grand Junction.[23]

After World War I, Piñon Mesa, located southwest of Grand Junction, opened to homesteading for war veterans. Some veterans formed partnerships in order to claim multiple homesteads, but others tried ranching alone. Many sheep ranchers became quite successful, and bought out other ranchers who failed or retired. A few of these ranchers built their herds into several thousand head.[24]

Sheepmen faced some problems. First, generally speaking, mutton did not sell as well as beef. Plus, sheep produced a secondary crop, wool, and shearers were hard to find. There was prejudice toward people in the sheep business; cowboys were

romantic figures, but those who worked with sheep were seen as mundane. The sheepmen's solution was to import French and Spanish Basques, and Mexican Nationals. New ideas came with the immigrants. The immigrants knew a great deal about sheep, including that they could live in places cattle could not.

Sheepmen often ranged their flocks between Delta and Grand Junction, and in eastern Utah. In the early years, they generally employed two or three herders, all armed with rifles and plenty of shells to protect the sheep from predators (wolves, coyotes, and bears) and cattlemen and their hired men. Bears were the deadliest natural predators; they would kill several sheep in an attack. Grizzly bears were the most ferocious: they might kill forty or fifty head of sheep before they stopped. In later years, herding sheep became a solitary affair, a situation where one man and his dogs tended herds. A lone man cannot herd a large number of sheep, but a sheepherder with a couple of dogs at his command can control a herd with ease. Sheepherders often spent weeks at a time in the mountains or the desert without seeing a single person. The only contact with other people came when the owner or his hired men brought him supplies, or when he brought the sheep in for shearing.[25]

Wool Growers Association

Wool growers formed the Wool Growers' Association, Western Region in 1918, and the Colorado Wool Grower's Association in 1926. Like those in the Cattlemen's Association, wool growers met once a year to discuss new ideas concerning sheep ranching and care. They could also discuss problems, and make deals for ranges or sales. The Association also tried to locate shearers, and find the best prices possible for wool and mutton for their membership.[26]

Income and Expenses

The difficult economic conditions in the 1920s and 1930s challenged those raising sheep. During the 1920s, wool brought as much as seventeen cents per pound; however, after the

stock market crash of 1929, lambs dropped to three cents per pound, and wool sold for ten cents per pound. The cost of shearing cut into the wool grower's profits. Shearing cost ten to twelve cents per head during the 1930s. (Of this, the shearer drew five to seven cents, and the plant owner, tier, and tramper split the rest.) Sheep herder's wages ranged from thirty to forty dollars per month during the 1920s and 1930s. A herder had to be exceptional to draw forty dollars per month.[27]

To market their lambs during the twenties and thirties, sheepmen had to take their lambs to shipping stockyards located in most small towns. In 1932 and 1933, McIntyre had his lambs herded to Crested Butte and loaded on the narrow-gauge railroad for shipment to Kansas City. From Crested Butte they were shipped by a round-about way to a wide-gauge railroad, where the lambs were reloaded and shipped to Kansas City. Ranchers also herded lambs over Monarch Pass on the continental divide to Salida, where they had the wide-gauge railroad. It cost less to ship from Salida and it was a more direct route; but it required sheepman to maintain their herds longer. Of course, the sheepmen knew lambs would gain weight while grazing them to the railhead. Regardless of the way the lambs were delivered to Kansas City, they usually sold for seven cents per pound.[28]

In 1935, Paul Etcheverry shipped 2,500 lambs to Denver and received ten thousand dollars for them. They weighed an average of fifty pounds, which broke down to four dollars per head, or approximately eight cents per pound. Etcheverry paid seventeen cents per head for shearing that same year. The ten thousand dollars covered the total available amount of cash for expenses for that year. Grazing on federally owned land cost the sheepman one cent per month per head with a lease.

Hired help was cheap by later standards. In 1938 and 1939, moving a sheep camp by mule cost twenty-five cents per day. Rather than the herders themselves, ranchers' families or other hired help generally carried out the camp moving

activities.[29] Some family members moved sheep camps just for the fun and glory. Younger family members, in lieu of wages, were allowed to buy cowboy boots and other necessities. It made them feel important, and they could show off their boots.[30] Once the camp was set up, the movers' duties included hauling drinking water and firewood for the herder's camp.

In 1940, ranchers paid sheepherders sixty-five dollars and their board per month, and shearing cost thirty cents per head. The price of wool was fifty-five cents per pound for "grease wool."[31] By 1943, grease wool was one dollar and fifty cents per pound, but shearing and herder costs had increased by only ten percent. Lambs, for meat, had a price ceiling set by the government of fourteen and one-half cents per pound;[32] and the politicians also passed a support price for wool. As a result, buyers underbid the price of wool, forcing the government to reimburse the difference to the grower. The United States government revoked the price support for wool in 1995; only then did wool prices jump to over a dollar per pound.

During the 1940s and World War II, the sheep industry, along with other animal industries prospered again. By 1945, the United States sheep population surpassed fifty million head.[33] Due to demand, scarcity of help, and World War II, ranchers raised sheepherders' monthly wages to fifty-five dollars. Later that decade, herders' wages climbed to two hundred and fifty or three hundred dollars per month. Today, a herder receives seven hundred dollars per month plus other benefits. In every time frame, herders always received board and sleeping facilities.[34]

Women in the Sheep Industry

Sheep ranching was a family affair, and the full story about sheepmen's wives would make a nice long article. They were the backbone of the industry, and they were on call twenty-four hours a day. These capable women often ran the ranches, knew how to save, manage, cut corners, and often made the difference between success and failure. Wives did the bookwork,

Frieda Noland and Hazel Harris leaning on wool sacks. Hotchkiss, Colorado, 1946. (Photo courtesy of Hazel Harris.)

paid the bills, cared for the home and children, and often became the extra hired hand needed during lambing and shearing seasons. Because of a World War II labor shortage, some of the shearers' wives would tie the shorn fleeces into bundles which were then deposited in the large wool sacks used to transport the wool to market. Sometimes a pair of women alternated days with each other. Lambing was not just a daytime job; the ewes had to be watched around the clock. Even the rancher's children helped with the lambing and herding. A young sheep rancher looked for another sheep rancher's daughter to marry, because she knew what the business was all about. Other women often could not handle the work that came with being a sheepman's wife.[35]

The Sheep

Sheep are usually bred for either food or wool. Less than twenty percent of all sheep are raised just for their meat, and sheep on the Western Slope were typical in this regard. Lambs are a key part of the sheep industry. Western Slope ranchers raised lambs for both their wool and their meat. Even ranchers who raise lambs for wool, slaughter many of the ewe lambs. A man who kept all his ewe lambs would soon have more animals than he could afford. Only a few select ewes are kept for breeding purposes. All flocks have "wethers," or neutered males raised for their meat, regardless of their breed, and all newborn lambs are docked, and the males castrated to keep them cleaner and help them gain weight.[36]

Several breeds of sheep were common in western Colorado. The Rambouillet, a favorite strain, provided both wool and meat. It is a part of the sheep family group known as Merinos.[37] Rambouillet wool is fine, heavy, and long. Other popular breeds–Corredale, Hampshire, Lincoln, Romney, and Suffolk (or Blackface)–provided a coarser wool for English tweeds. Blackface are generally heavier and raised for meat. Their wool is predominantly used for rugs.

Higher elevations, cooler temperatures, and mountain feed make the meat from Colorado's lambs a valuable

commodity. Over the years, the members of New York's Jewish community have purchased Colorado lambs at a premium price because they regard it as the best lamb available. Because of the high demand for Colorado lambs, Colorado lamb is often not sold in the western United States.[38]

Many in the livestock business found that sheep were more profitable to raise than cattle because cattle gave only one crop each year, but sheep gave two—meat and wool. In a bad year, sheep ranchers only made money on the wool, but on a good year, they made money on both wool and lambs. Feeding sheep is less problematic than cattle because sheep eat plants that cattle shun, enabling sheep to thrive on land where cattle starve. Sheep, in spite of what many think, do not care for grass. Early in the spring, the sheep will eat grass but prefer broadleaf plants such as columbine, wild dill, anise, larkspur, and snowberries. Broadleaf plants help ewes produce sufficient milk for their lambs, and these plants grow in the shade of trees where grass will not grow. Also, sheep require very little water, therefore, they are more suited to a desert environment. Sheep will actually survive on the frost or dew on the plants.[39] In addition, whereas cattle required the additional expense of buying and storing winter feed, sheep could live off of winter ranges of desert vegetation or sagebrush. Sheep actually prefer sagebrush, something cattle will not eat until they were starving.[40]

In some circumstances, such as poor rangeland conditions or the lack of available rangeland, sheepmen did buy feed for their stock. An innovator here was a man who came to be known as "Sugar Beet" Brown. He received his moniker "Sugar Beet" because he came up with the idea of feeding the pulp from local sugar beet plants to his sheep. Other ranchers would not touch the pulp at first because it stank and they did not believe it was good to feed to their stock. "Sugar Beet" Brown teamed up with Edward D. Blodget, a banker from Grand Junction, who supplied the financial backing. Sugar Beet Brown

and Blodget became rich using sugar beet pulp as feed. Prior to this, sugar factories on the Western Slope could not give away this byproduct.[41]

Herders

The time around World War I is an important period for the history of the sheep industry because many herders came to the Western Slope. In 1917, French Basques were imported into the United States to herd sheep in the West, and during World War I, those Basques who joined the U.S. army automatically became American citizens under United States law.[42] As payment for their herding services, many Basques received sheep and a few cash dollars. At first, Basques ran their sheep with their sponsor's herd. When they had obtained enough sheep and range to graze their sheep, Basques often started their own sheep ranches. Peter Jouflas brought in many of his herders from Greece. Like the Basques, they herded for awhile, saved their money, and started their own herds. The early Greek herders spent weeks alone with their herds in the desert or the mountains.

In the 1940s, as times and government regulations changed, herders came from different places. Immigration policy limited the number of herders and the amount of time they could stay in the United States to two years. For a few years, Western Colorado sheep ranchers recruited herders from the San Luis Valley, and they brought in herders from South America and Mexico. During the 1930s through the 1960s, some college students herded sheep during the summer to pay for their tuition. Now, some herders come from Peru, Chile, and Mongolia, and others come from Mexico with "green cards."[43]

In western Colorado, many sheep herders used mules to move their supplies, including tents. Tents were inexpensive, easy to move and set up, and practical in western Colorado. In Wyoming and Montana, tents for herders were rare because of the high winds, forcing herders to use wagons. In modern times, jeeps and pickups made it convenient to use sheep wagons. Sheep

wagons contained a bed, stove, table, and storage bins for supplies and cooking utensils. Sheepherders carried all their equipment, guns, and ammunition. Every herder had at least two or three guns, one which he routinely carried with him to protect the flock when away from the wagon.

Herd Protection

Coyotes, then and now, are the main enemy of the sheepmen. Keeping the coyote population to a minimum was a cost effective way to protect flocks. Eliminating coyotes not only protected the sheep, but helped wild game to flourish as well. Before its proscription, sheepmen used a poison called 1080 (sodium monofluoracetate) to kill coyotes. Use of this poison has since been outlawed. Presently, sheepmen use a variety of ways to protect their sheep, including guard dogs that kill coyotes, llamas that scare coyotes, and professional trappers.[44]

Wool

Wool was harvested in the spring before it became too hot, and while the sheep were being moved to high range. Many of the first sheepmen believed early shearing might result in sheep freezing to death, so they waited until May, June, or even as late as July to have their animals sheared. As time passed, the sheepmen found shearing the sheep early, before lambing season, solved many of their problems.

Long wool created many annoyances for sheep ranchers and for the animals. During the winter months, the wool around the eyes and the rear of the sheep grows long. In the spring when the first green plants appear, sheep often gorge themselves, and get diarrhea that soils their rumps. Sheepmen call the resulting dangling lumps of entangled wool and dung "dingleberries." Unclean sheep can become infested with maggots. Another problem with long wool is that it can grow over the eyes of sheep, obscure vision, and make it difficult for the animals to graze and move around. Long wool also resulted in difficulty during lambing. Afterbirth often caught in the ewe's wool, causing sores

that festered and became maggot infested. Tuft-by-tuft, long-fleeced sheep also lost valuable wool in the brush while grazing. For these reasons, wool growers returned their sheep to the shearing corrals a second time before it started getting cold. By doing this, growers eliminated the inconvenience of tagging (clipping wool from the rumps of the animals) in the fall.[45] For all these reasons, sheepmen kept moving the shearing dates up earlier in the year. Eventually, they wanted their animals sheared as early as the last week in February or the first part of March.

The Western Colorado Shearer

At first, sheep owners did their own shearing. Sometimes a man sheared a flock by himself, but sharing the work with neighbors became common. When the sheepmen worked in groups, the host furnished meals.[46] Their wives were some of the finest cooks anywhere, always prepared plenty of food, and seemed to try to out-do one another in hospitality. They often cooked the meals for the lambing and shearing crews that would put good restaurants to shame.As the flocks increased in size, the owners hired outside help, and paid by the head. Some of those men who learned sheep shearing while working with friends became professional shearers.

Those who turned to sheep shearing to make money typically had some contact with the sheep business. They came from small towns, or were farmers or sons of farmers. Most either started shearing because their fathers sheared, or to make money. Many shearers started learning the trade by either tying wool or tramping wool. After catching up on their own work, they would shear sheep, at noon or before starting time in the morning, under the supervision of a shearer. The shearer, whose hanger and tools the tier or tramper used, would advise the novice and the shearer would receive credit for the sheared sheep. This profession did not require much education, but it did require a strong back and a long apprenticeship. It took at least three years to become a top shearer, commonly defined as one who could shear over one hundred head consistently each day.

When professional shearers replaced the sheepman-shearer, the tradition of feeding the crew continued. Part of the reason for this was that shearing corrals were often located many miles from towns with cafes and stores, so owners found it practical to furnish meals for their work crews. This is probably where the tradition of furnishing the crew with their board started. If the wool grower furnished three meals per day, the shearer worked for approximately ten percent less per head. Seldom did ranchers furnish rooms, but they allowed the crew to camp on their ranches and use all available facilities

The men could work anywhere a shed with corrals existed. Any setup that gathered sheep together for shearing was called a "plant." Some shearers worked alone with small flocks, and tied and sacked the wool themselves. When a shearer did all three jobs, he would, as a rule, shear five or six head, then tie the fleeces, toss the fleeces to the side, and at the end of the day he would tramp the wool in the large burlap "wool sacks."

By the 1920s, crews were organized and shearing sheep was a profession. Growers paid about eighteen cents per head to the shearer. The tier and tramper each drew one cent per head, and the plant owner (the man who owned the machinery and other equipment needed to shear sheep) drew two and one half cents per head. Many shearers used blades, but during the 1920s "line shaft" shearing machines powered by machines were introduced. Shearing became more centralized with the sheep from surrounding areas being brought to a shearing shed. The Great Depression caused wages to drop to five cents per head to the shearer. The plant owner then earned one cent per head, and the tier and the tramper one quarter cent per head each. By 1935, the shearer drew seven to eight cents per head, and the plant owner got one and one-half cents and the tramper and tier one-half cent per head each.[47] In 1943 during World War II, wages increased to nineteen to twenty cents per head for the shearer. The plant owner drew two and one half cent and the tier and

tramper drew one cent each per head. By the 1950s, growers were paying forty cents total per head for the complete shearing process, and in 1967, they paid fifty cents per head.[48] Today, a shearer can receive from two dollars per head for large herds and up to five dollars per head for small flocks. In some places in the United States, it costs growers five dollars to have their sheep sheared, and the shearer takes the wool.

After three or four years, a shearer generally arrived at the point in his career where he could shear over one hundred head consistently each day. If the animals were clean and free of dirt, a shearer might shear up to one-hundred and fifty to one-hundred and sixty head in an eight-to ten-hour day. Shearers often discussed a crew they had heard about somewhere whose members all sheared over two hundred head every day. This "phantom crew" existed only in wishful thinking. To shear two hundred sheep in eight hours, a shearer had to average two minutes and forty seconds per head,[49] an extremely rare task. Friendly competition was common among members of crews, particularly among those shearers who worked right next to each other. It was always more noticeable and easier to keep track of the count when the shearer next to you turned a sheared sheep loose. Most shearers set a daily goal of one hundred sheep.

During the busy months of shearing, shearers often worked seven days a week. Shearers would often finish a job in the afternoon, then move forty miles away, and be ready to work at eight o'clock the next morning. Shearers could hang their motors and set their equipment up in a few minutes. When taking the equipment down, they stored it on the truck just as quickly.

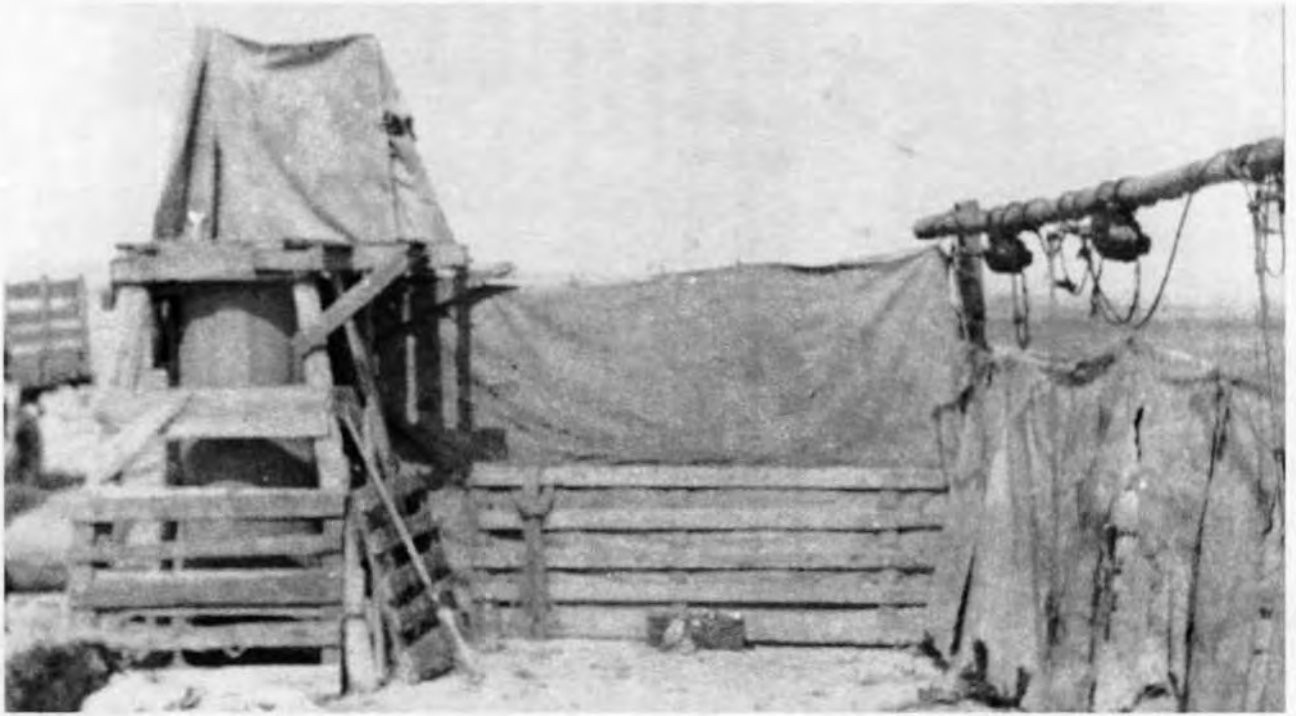
When working close to town, the shearers usually lived in town; otherwise, they lived in tents or trailers. Gypsy-like, shearers moved from job to job and camped on the ranches. When they had a day off, they headed to town to find entertainment. Generally, their first priority was to rent a room and take a bath.[50]

The early shearers worked an average of ten to fourteen hours per day, but later shearers only worked eight hour each day. After the hours of hard work, they played hard. While working they pulled jokes on each other. Oftentimes they would tie the "hanger" weight strings down, so when the shearer tried to shear, his hanger would not move. Sometimes a man would go into the chutes and find the toughest sheep to work with, and put it in a certain shearer's pen. All crew member had nicknames, none of which were flattering. Nicknames included names such as "Pokey," "Swingy," "Pitts," "Gerty," "Dingy," and "Puff."

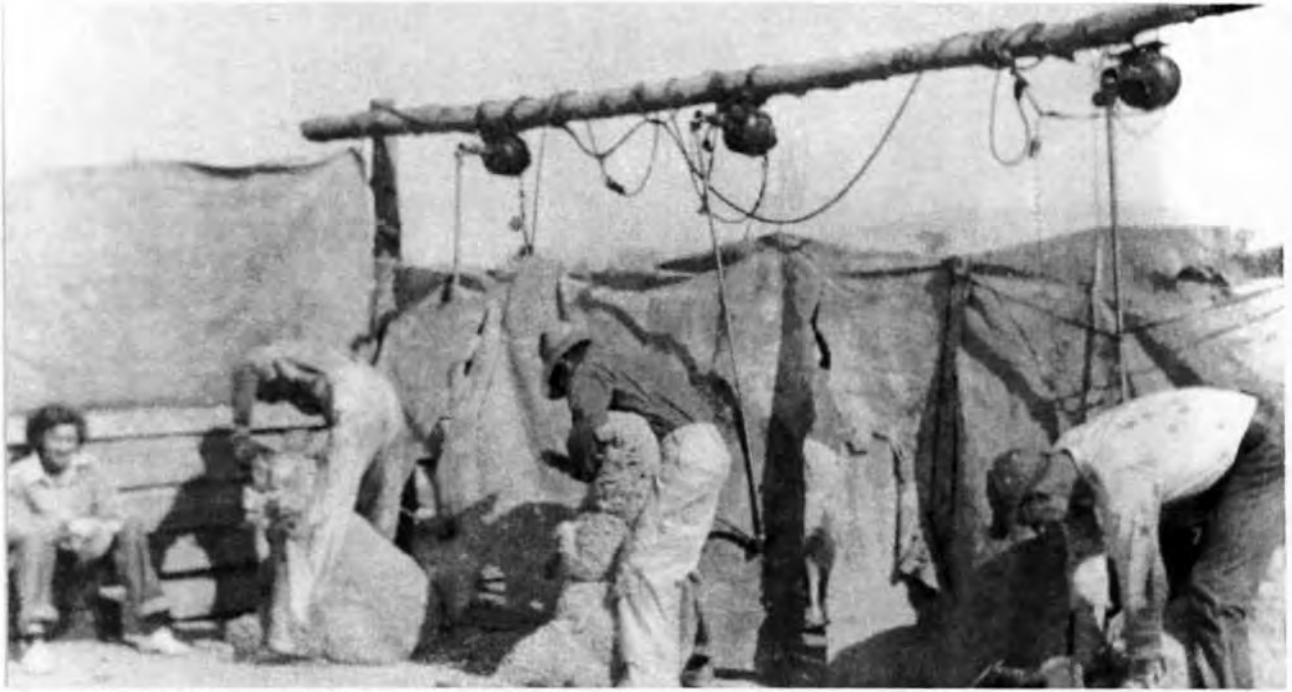
New persons on crews, learned not to be bashful, become angry, or lose their tempers because these qualities made the other shearers harass him unmercifully. Many workers changed their disposition after working with the shearers and always for the better because if a person could not handle the harassment, his only alternative was to quit. Once adjusted to the other shearers, the newcomers were like family. They might bicker among themselves, but if an outsider picked on one of them, he had to whip the whole crew. Sheep shearing crews never experienced a dull day, and saw every day as a new challenge.

Shearing Corrals and Sheds

When it was time for shearing, sheep were brought to shearing corrals with shearing sheds. Most "wool sheds" were permanent structures that could be reused each year, and some could hold two to three thousand sheep. The corrals had chutes that narrowed to the extent that only two or three sheep could stand side by side. In some wool sheds these chutes led directly into the back of the structure. The narrow chutes along the back of the wool shed emptied into individual pens, one for each shearer. The pens each had gates from the chutes, and "wranglers" would push four or five sheep into each pen, and refill them as needed. The front of the pens had divided curtains so the shearer could go through them to retrieve the animal. Usually these curtains consisted of extra wool sacks.[51] Wool sacks were cheap and the proper size for curtains for the draw



Sheep pen and wool stand. (Photo courtesy of Hazel Harris.)



The Lee Trujillo Operation Shearing Pen. Frieda Noand (far left) is waiting to start tying the fleeces. (Photo courtesy of Hazel Harris.)

pens. If the wool grower under-estimated the number of sacks he needed, they would take the sack curtains down and replace them with canvas or whatever material was available

The curtains frightened the animals so they would not pass through them, but made the sheep quickly accessible to the shearers. When finished with one sheep, the shearer turned it into a catch pen in front of the shearing shed. This pen would usually hold several hundred sheep. At noon and again at night, the sheared sheep would be herded to a pasture away from the shed area. The herders carefully kept the sheared sheep separated from the unsheared ones. When mixed, they were hard to separate for shearing. When the sheep did become mixed, they would generally be herded through a chute that had a cutting gate that allowed a person to direct the sheared sheep into one pen and the unsheared into another.

Shearing areas generated a distinct smell. Sheep walking over old, dried-up manure pulverized this animal by-product into a fine powder. It then got kicked up into the air along with a goodly portion of dust. Of course, after the herds were in the chutes, pens, and corrals, the dust would settle down. Originally, shearers worked during some of the hottest weather of the year, often when temperatures soared to ninety or a hundred degrees. The fact that the shearing corrals were generally in unshaded, open areas, and on land unsuited for any other purpose, added to the misery. Also, sheep manure itself generates heat, as do the wool-laden animals, and the sheds were often built in places protected from the wind. All this added up to an almost intolerably hot and odiferous environment.

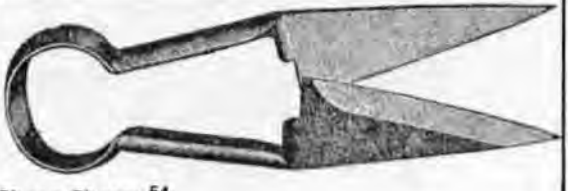
Because early spring weather is very unpredictable, some sheepmen built large sheds to protect the sheep and keep them and their wool dry. When wool is sheared wet, it will mold and rot. Wet wool is also dangerous to the shearer because wet sheep give off a dangerous gas that smells like ammonia, and many shearers have been hospitalized as a result of breathing it.

In one instance, six out of eight shearers had to be hospitalized for five days.

Shearing and Motor Tools

Throughout history, people have used a variety of shearing techniques. Perhaps the earliest method of wool removal was pulling the wool off the sheep, much like picking cotton. Later, people cut wool off with sharp objects like glass and razors used for shaving. The first actual shearing tools were called "blades."[52] The inspiration for them probably came from household scissors. They were crafted from spring steel and honed to a razor-sharp edge. In some ways they looked like giant scissors, but they did not have a pivot center. The handles were rounded and about two inches in diameter. The shearer squeezed the handles together, cutting the wool in the process. With expertise, the shearer moved the blades along the sheep, traveling the length of the animal while closing the blades only once or twice, and cutting wool up to three and four inches wide in a single swath. Each fleece had to come off in one piece. The shearer kept six to fifteen sets of blades and worked many hours of extra time to keep them razor-sharp. Some men could shear as many as a hundred animals a day with these blades, but those days stretched from twelve to fourteen hours.

The mechanical shearing machine and the power to drive it were invented virtually at the same time. The first power unit was called a Wonders,[53] and it was driven by a one-cylinder gasoline engine. Belts turned two shafts, one on each side of the engine. These shafts, called "line shafts," drove another shaft down through the middle of what is called a "hanger." This last



Sheep Shears.[54]

shaft ran the hand-held portion of the machine. The hanger had two weights tied to its middle. Each weight had leather strings tied to them that ran through a pulley, which in turn were fastened to the corners of the holding pen, about five feet up. The weights held the hanger in position for shearing, but back and away from the shearer. The strings were high enough to be out of the shearer's way as he dragged the sheep out for shearing. Over time, the forces driving the shearing machine were updated, but the hanger and weights system did not change in later shearing setups. The mechanical setup is still used but with shorter hangers.

Following the Wonders machine was the line shaft. It came into existence during the 1920s and 1930s and the name, to a certain extent, is self-explanatory. These long shafts ran down through the shed and were powered by a large engine stationed at one end of the shearing shed. The engine ran the shaft by belts which ran from the engine to the shaft. In turn, the individual hangers were run by a belt extending from the line shaft. The hanger had a clutch that the shearer could kick in and out to stop the shearing machine whenever necessary. This setup was large, cumbersome, and permanent. Once the line shaft was set up, sheepmen would have to bring their herds to the sheds. The sheds had to be centered in a community with large herds, or it was not cost effective to build one.

La Garita, Colorado in the San Luis Valley and Thompson, Utah, had permanent line shaft shearing outfits, and the sheep ranchers all drove their herds there for shearing.[55] Shearing crews at these plants generally consisted twenty-five to thirty workers. Shearers from western Colorado traveled to the San Luis Valley, to Utah, and to other permanent plants to shear sheep. These crews could shear three hundred to five thousand head per day depending on the sheep and number of shearers.

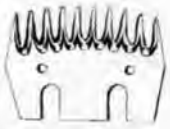
The electric motor brought versatility to the shearing plant. This advancement gave each wool grower the option of

shearing in different places, because now they could move a plant from one location to another. Early electric motors, lacking direct current, could not be tied into local electricity.[56] However, there were "electrical plants" powered by gasoline engines that weighed a few hundred pounds. A person wanting to run a shearing crew would buy one of these power plants, a small truck, electric cable, motors, and hangers. He would then contract several shearers to work for him. He would also contract with wool growers to provide shearing services if the grower did not contact him first. There were always men looking for work, particularly during the Depression.

By the 1950s, ranches and most shearing sheds had electricity because of the Rural Electric Association. Motors powered by this electricity have alternating currents, and as a result, the old direct current motors became obsolete. The availability of electric power and alternating current made the use of motors convenient and affordable. By the 1950s and 1960s, individuals could even harvest the motors from worn-out washing machines that worked perfectly for shearing motors.

While the power sources changed, the hand-held part of the apparatus (the part that actually did the clipping) has changed very little during its history. Originally, the hand-held machine

Tools of the Trade



Ten-tooth comb.

Three-point cutter.

Four-point cutter.

A modern shearing head, cutters and comb. (Drawings courtesy of Michael White.)

came out under two brand names; E.B. and J.B. Both were called four point machines because each "cutter" had four cutting points.[57] The cutter resembled four ends of scissors welded to a bar and ground flat on one side. The other cutting surface was called a "comb" which had thirteen teeth made of hard steel, and was also ground completely flat on one side. The cutter and comb were made to cut on both sides of the teeth. The comb was bolted onto the bottom side of the machine with its sharpened surface up. The cutter sat on top with its sharpened surface down. The hand-held machine had a yoke with little tabs that fit into the tips of the cutter and held it in place. The yoke, in turn, had a rod that came down into a pocket with a tension nut on top to adjust the pressure on the cutter. All of these parts that were actually involved in the cutting had to be sharpened and maintained properly if a man planned to make money shearing sheep.

The shearer bought his own tools, and replacing them was expensive. Constant care made the tools last longer, although maintenance took a considerable amount of time. Shearers removed combs and cutters, and put them on a wire and soaked them in water to remove the lanolin build-up. In addition, he had to sharpen his tools after each day's use. Some shearers sharpened their equipment on grinders during lunchtime or before work in the mornings. The grinder had two large grinding wheels that were flat on one side. The grinder had a different coarseness of grit on each side, one side for the combs and the other for the cutters.

After sharpening the tools, the shearer spent hours "pointing" the comb. The cutting surface of the comb itself had to be sharp, but the points were not because these points had to glide through the wool easily and not pick up the sheep's hide. Occasionally a shearer would cut a vein on the belly of the sheep, which had to be sewn closed so the sheep did not bleed to death. Shearers always carried a curved surgical needle and sewing thread for just such emergencies.[58]

Shearers also owned special-made tools to maintain their machines. Special "hones" were used to work on the tips of the combs. Built like a "V" with one end rounded as in a circle, the hone would not go between the teeth but it would fit so that the shearer could hone down the tips of the comb, and the side of the tips. The comb had to be as smooth and drag free as possible. The less resistance, the more sheep the shearer could shear. After pointing the comb, the shearer would take "crocus cloth" or the Levis he wore and smooth the tips of the comb. Shearers always prepared for the next shearing time.

Improvements came later in the form of combs with only ten teeth, and cutters with only three teeth. The newer design helped the shearer work faster by cutting down on the resistance, but the new designs created problems at first, by causing the cut to be too close to the skin of the sheep. This was called "pinkin' 'em."[59] The manufacturer modified the comb by adding a runner that raised the machine away from the sheep's skin. The runner resembled a sled runner and was placed on the bottom of every other tooth, including the two outside teeth. Although manufacturers experimented later with a nine-tooth comb, it never proved successful. The ten-tooth comb and the three-blade cutter are still used today. Today's equipment looks identical to the old three point machine, but with one difference: it is powered by an electric cord rather than by a mechanical extension plugged into the machine.

Some growers experimented briefly with chemical shearing. Sheepmen fed their animals a special chemical mixture that was supposed to loosen the wool within a few days. It was a disaster. Many sheep died, and those that survived had to be protected from the sun and cold weather until their wool grew back enough to protect them.

Shearing and Sheep

Good shearers handled the sheep with care. When taking a sheep from the pen, the shearer grabbed it by the nose, sat it

Shearing sheep. From left to right: two unidentified men, Bruce Hawkins, Kenneth Noland and Joseph Noland. (Photo courtesy of Hazel Harris.)

Stacking and rolling the wool sacks, Hotchkiss, Colorado. Pearl Hendricks stands in the foreground. (Photo courtesy of Hazel Harris.)

upright, and then dragged the sheep three or four steps over to his shearing machine. Holding the sheep upright between his knees, he sheared the belly first, starting on the brisket. Shearers knew that a sheep upright on its tail would generally sit still. Next, they clipped the wool between the sheep's rear legs. At this point, variations came into play. Some shearers then sheared the top of the right rear leg, turned the sheep slightly and sheared the left leg and ham; others went straight to the left leg and ham. The top notch (the top of the head) was sheared next, and then the shearer went straight up the throat, breaking the wool open. The shearers then moved to the left front leg and left side of the neck. The sheep was then laid down on its back and the full length of its left side was sheared. A good shearer could make a swath greater than the width of the comb. Finally, the shearer sat the sheep up again and sheared the right side from the top down. When finished, the shearer used an expression, "slick as a button" to describe an expertly sheared animal.[60] When sheared this way, the fleece would hold together in one piece, almost like a skin.

Growers paid shearers by the head rather than by the hour, so it was wise for them to work fast. Because the bucks were much stronger and weighed almost twice as much as ewes, it took considerably more time to shear them, so sheep owners paid double price for bucks. J.P. Cooney's band in Montana sheared Rambouillet bucks that averaged between three hundred and fifty and four hundred pounds. They had large curled horns, and they were so strong that when one of them decided to move, a shearer was unable to hold him. Shearers often worked in pairs as a result. It took ten men nearly fourteen hours to shear approximately three hundred and sixty bucks.

Wool Tiers and Wool Trampers

A shearing crew generally consisted of four to eight shearers, a wool "tier," and a wool "tramper." The tier and the tramper (or sacker) were often apprentices to the shearers. The tier tied the wool into bundles with string made from special brown cardboard-like paper which would dissolve in the cleaning

solution used to process the wool at the cloth factories. The tier laid a string across his shoes and pulled the fleece toward himself, putting all loose ends into the center. As the tier gathered the wool, he held it in place with the lower part of his legs, and then crossed the string completely around the fleece in two circles ninety degrees apart. The fleece, if tied properly, could be tossed around like a ball. After tying three of four fleeces, the tier carried them to the tramper who usually worked near the front and center of the shearing sheds so that the tier did not have to travel any farther than necessary. A good wool tier became very fast and efficient at his work, being able to tie eight hundred to one thousand fleeces a day. If the tier was not fast and could not keep up, the crew boss would fire him and find someone faster, or hire an assistant for the tier. If the boss hired a helper, the tier had to split his wages with the new person.

It was also the tier's responsibility to count the strings for each shearer, thereby keeping a head count for each shearer. The tier counted out the strings into bundles of fifty, and hung them on little swing-like hangers, one for each shearer. As the tier worked, he pulled the strings out one at a time to tie the wool.[61] Replacement bundles were always kept handy. Since the shearers were busy concentrating on their work, they did not have time to count. This system was a very accurate way of keeping track of the sheep and who sheared them. The plant owner always tallied up at the end of the day with the shearer and the tier present to avoid possible arguments.[62]

Trampers stood in a large burlap wool sack which hung on the inside of a stand, or sack rack, ten to twelve feet high. Attached securely at the top of this stand, the combined weight of the sacker and the wool held the sack in place until it was filled. When full, the tramper sewed the sack closed with cotton twine and a large sacking needle. The sacks were heavy, holding thirty to thirty-five fleeces, each weighing ten to twelve pounds. Tying the sack and rolling it out of the way often required two men, so

growers sometimes assisted the tramper. Some trampers packed too many fleeces into one sack, making it too heavy to handle. If this happened, they reduced the number of fleeces packed into a sack. The tramper prepared the sacks for moving beforehand by tying ears into the corners. To do this, he took wool tags and put them in each corner of the sack and tied them with twine.[63] Men used these ears to load and then move the wool sacks.

Aggravations

A number of factors affected how many animals could be sheared each day. Sheep carry ticks, which burrow their heads into the animal and live on its blood. Most varieties that bit the shearers would not infect humans or sheep with diseases, but those animals that carried wood ticks could infect shearers with Rocky Mountain Fever. Every night, shearers went over one

Sheep Tick.[64]

another with a fine-toothed comb. Even a shower or a bath was not enough to remove them. Even though sheep were sprayed and dipped to dispose of the ticks, these insects always seemed to find their way back onto the sheep.

Sheep can also carry a disease called "scabies" which causes the wool to "slip," or start to shed all at once, making the wool so thick that a shearer could not shear through it, and so close to the skin the shearer could not get under it. Sheepmen cured this ailment by dipping the sheep in a strong solution of nicotine. Places for dipping sheep, or "sheep dips," are common throughout western Colorado.[65]

Sheep that grazed on the desert carried pounds of dirt that collected close to their skin. During shearing, this dirt dulled the blades, slowing the shearer down in two ways: first, he had to

change tools often; and second, the machines could not move as freely through the wool. Maggots also aggravated shearers. They were often found on ewes, particularly in places where afterbirth had become trapped in the fleece. If the shearer found maggots, he gritted his teeth and cut the maggots and rotted material off along with the fleece. This turned the shearer's stomach, particularly if he was new to the profession. Sheep wool also collected sand burrs, cockle burrs, cactus spines, and occasionally, a piece of barbed wire. If the shearer's hand-piece picked up a bit of wire, it would break the comb and lock-up the machine. When the hand-piece locked-up, it became dangerous. If the shearer could not hang onto it, the tool would fly around like a club.

Lanolin, which is used in beauty creams, soaps, and skin-care products, is abundant in sheep's wool. It softened the hands of everyone who handled the wool and acted as a coolant and lubricant for the shearing machine as well. Without this lanolin, the machines would have become too hot to hold. But even with the lanolin on them, the machines were still hot, making it necessary for shearers to wear specially-made gloves. Shearers and the other workers rejected leather gloves because they were too heavy and became slick from the lanolin. Wool-handling gloves were made of a coarse cloth on the inside and loose wool on the outside. These lightweight gloves lasted much longer than ordinary gloves. The lanolin saturated the gloves and worked like a lotion on the worker's hands.

Lanolin also soaked their clothing, so everyone always changed their clothes before leaving the shearing sheds. When they returned the next morning, the clothes would be so stiff from the lanolin that they would practically stand by themselves! The men would change back into the shearing clothes that were often so cold they would feel like slipping into an ice cube. After they warmed up, the clothes became limber again. A worker generally wore his shearing clothes for three or

four days before taking his clothes to a laundromat. People there saw the clothes and shuddered at the filth and smell. Luckily, the lanolin washed out easily.

Mexican Shearers

Mexican shearing crew usually consisted of illegal aliens looking for work in the United States. They are still referred to as "Texas crews" or "Texas shearers." Since owners usually preferred American crews the Texas crews had to lower prices to compete. American shearers despised the Mexican-American crew bosses. These bosses exploited their workers and destroyed the sheep shearing profession by lowering prices and wages so much most shearers from the United States would not work in these crews. Good shearers could always find American crews that paid better.

When prices forced Western Colorado shearers to look for work, they often found small flocks to shear by themselves. Mexican crews did not want to be bothered with small flocks and often refused to shear them altogether. Colorado crews sheared small flocks, but wanted these flocks brought to places where they sheared the larger flocks. However, Colorado shearers never left the small bunches un-sheared.

The Mexican-American crew master either owned one or two trucks set up for shearing, or worked for someone that owned several vehicles. The trucks were set up like the earlier line shaft machines, powered by one engine. When in use, these mobile shearing plants had adjustable panels: one half laid on the ground and the other half was raised to a horizontal position and used for a shade. Once the panels were positioned, the hangers and motors were exposed and the motors swung out and locked into place. The Mexican shearer then worked at the side of the truck. When moving from one job to another, the shearing hangers and motors swung back into the side of the truck, locked into place, and the side panels were put into place and locked down. The truck was then ready to be moved to the next job.

Mexican shearers worked in difficult circumstances. The trucks were pulled into the middle of a large corral and set up for shearing. A flock of sheep was then herded into the corral, and the Mexican shearer had to chase and catch a sheep and drag it to the hanger where he was shearing. These trucks had short hangers and the Mexicans had to work from a kneeling position. The belly was sheared first, and then the sheep's legs were tied up with a piggin' string.[66] From here, the shearer would turn the animal to different positions and shear the remaining sections. This type of shearing often hurt or wounded the animals. Dragging ewes to the hanger by their hind-legs and hog tying them caused many premature births and the deaths of many ewes. Also, the fleece was torn into several sections, making it less valuable to buyers.

Mexican shearers generally worked at least twelve hours, but sheared only thirty to forty head in a day. Part of this stemmed from the fact that it takes time to learn to shear fast and efficiently, and most of the Mexican shearers were not professionals. Many tried to return to the United States year after year, but that often proved impossible, resulting in Mexican crews made of new men each year. Mexican shearers generally worked for half the contract price, with the other half going to the plant owner. The contractor for the Mexican shearers underbid American shearers by ten to fifteen cents per head. In the 1960s, the western American shearer generally received forty cents out of fifty cents per head, with five cents going to the plant owner and the other five cents being split with the tier and the tramper. Mexican shearers did not mind working cheaply since the American dollar was worth many pesos. If he could save ten dollars per day, he would be a rich man when he returned to Mexico.

The Mexican way of shearing did have its good points. The wool grower did not have to furnish a shed, chutes, or wranglers to pen up the sheep for shearing. Also, the sheep herds did not have to be kept separate, so the sheepmen did not have to pay two herders during shearings. However, the savings were

more than offset by the killing of many of the ewes and lambs and the lower prices for the wool.

Shearers Living on the Road

When on the road, western Colorado shearers often stayed in the nearest town. In Colorado, they were generally located only a few miles from the ranch where they sheared sheep, so shearers rented houses or motel rooms and drove back and forth to work. When in Wyoming and Montana, the shearers lived in camps on the wool growers' land or in town parks because the ranches in Wyoming and Montana were much larger, and the towns much farther apart than in western Colorado. Herds in Montana and Wyoming herds were large, often ten to fifteen thousand head. In comparison, many Colorado herds consisted of one hundred sheep, with three thousand being exceptionally large, although a few Colorado ranchers owned as many as thirty to forty thousand head of sheep.

The relationship between the shearers and sheep owners was usually good; shearers had the run of the ranch, and sometimes ranchers even provided bunkhouses. When ranches contained streams, the ranchers encouraged the shearers to fish in them. This made the crews feel like they were camping in the mountains. Businessmen in towns also welcomed the shearers because they spent money while working in the area.

The Shearing Season

Western Colorado shearers often began their season in the spring around Grand Junction, Delta, and Hotchkiss, then moved to Norwood and Nucla, and finally to areas like Montrose, where growers sheared their sheep a little later in the year. After the shearing season ended in these areas, the shearers traveled to the San Luis Valley where they headquartered in Saguache or Villa Grove, and worked in the surrounding areas for a couple of months. When finished in Colorado, the crews packed up and headed for Wyoming, working their way northward to finish the season in Montana.

The shearing crew at Sunnyside, Wyoming. Back row, left to right: Elmer Noland, Cecil Boardman, Elmer Dove, Kenneth Noland, Bert Riegles, and Lee Trujillo. Front: Buck Kite, Joseph Noland, and Bruce Hawkins. (Photo courtesy of Hazel Harris.)

Before sheep men moved their shearing season to the early spring, many owners wanted their sheep tagged in the fall months.[67] Fall tagging basically did the same things that early shearing accomplished, as well as helping keep winter ice away from the animal's eyes and rear.

The Holly Sugar Company at Delta bought lambs to fatten for market. They had thousands of tons of sugar beet pulp, so they started feeding it to stock. At first, they wanted the lambs tagged. Later on, the sugar company started shearing the lambs rather than just tagging them. This meant many shearers found a winter job shearing sheep.

During World War II, the sheep shearer was in great demand. When shearers came up for the draft, sheep owners requested deferments for those individuals. Often, sheepmen sat on local draft boards; so even if the shearer wanted to enlist, it was practically impossible for him to do so because wool was in such great demand by the armed services.

Once deferred, government agencies contacted western Colorado shearers about shearing herds all over the western United States, but particularly in Wyoming and Montana. The shearing plant owner scheduled his shearing contracts according to the wishes of the sheepmen. When requested, plant owners gave the government the contract schedules and tried to arrange it so crews could shear as many herds as possible.

Records from 1943 show the schedule of a shearing crew from Hotchkiss, Colorado. The plant owner was Lee Trujillo, and he had three other shearers. Trujillo's crew started shearing 29 March 1943 at Hotchkiss, Colorado for Leon Hotchkiss. On 11 May 1943, they started shearing in the San Luis Valley for Gordon Goddard. By 29 May 1943, Trujillo's shearing crew had joined with Joe Noland's crew and started shearing sheep in Lander, Wyoming. In the first part of June, the crew was shearing in Deer Lodge, Montana. At the end of June and during the first half of July, the shearing crews were shearing at Harlowton, Montana for J.P. Cooney.[68]

Shearing Today

The shearing profession in the western Colorado started declining in the 1950s and the 1960s. During the earlier years of shearing, wool growers paid shearers enough to carry the worker over to the next shearing season and to pay for his tools. However, the price paid for shearing dropped to the point where shearers had to find steadier work elsewhere. Most jobs, unlike shearing, offered year-around employment.

During the Great Depression, ordinary laborers received ten cents per hour, and jobs were hard to find. A shearer earned five to eight cents per head; and a good shearer could pocket five to ten dollars a day, so these workers in the sheep industry were making seven to ten times the money of many laborers. But, unlike most laborers, shearers have always had to furnish their own tools. The shearer's handpiece cost fifteen to eighteen dollars, combs eighty cents to a dollar each, and a cutter cost fifteen to twenty cents. By 1967, a shearer drew forty cents per head, and a good shearer made between forty and sixty dollars per day. By comparison, other laborers worked for two dollars per hour, five days per week. The shearer faced problems that many regularly employed people did not. Shearers averaged only one or two day's work per week, and the price of their tools had skyrocketed: the shearer's handpiece cost fifty or sixty dollars each in the 1960s, combs ran three to four dollars each, and cutters set a fellow back forty to sixty cents each. In total, the shearers' wages had dropped by two-thirds between the 1940s and the 1960s.

Originally the price of wool set the price of shearing. If the price of wool was fifty cents a pound, as a rule the wool grower paid fifty cents per head to have their sheep sheared. But as Mexican shearers flooded the job market, the shearing price declined, as did the number of professional shearers. Younger men did not learn to shear sheep because this hard work paid too little. Eventually, mostly crew masters and Mexican shearers

remained. Lacking competition, the crew bosses elevated prices. Mexican shearers received no more money than before, and crew bosses made small fortunes. Wool growers tried to encourage local people to return to the shearing profession in western Colorado, but few did. Wool had lost its market demand, and there were not enough sheep for shearers to make a living here. Today, Colorado shearers are quite rare. It is mostly a lost art and profession among Western Slope men. Professionals imported from New Zealand or Australia shear the few large bands of sheep that are around today. The price for shearing is enough now to encourage a few to try shearing once again, but there are not a sufficient number of sheep being raised to warrant learning the profession. Perhaps in the future, wool will again become popular, if that happens, the art of professional shearing might return to western Colorado.

A few western Colorado shearers known by the author

Lee Trujillo.....Hotchkiss
Joe Noland.....Hotchkiss
Elmer "Pitts" Noland.....Hotchkiss
Kenneth Noland.....Grand Junction and Hotchkiss
Elmer "Pokey" Dove.....Hotchkiss
Alden Dove.....Crawford
Wilford "Puff" Allen.....Hotchkiss
Bert "Swingy" Reigles.....Hotchkiss
Marion Reigles.....Hotchkiss
Keith "Dirty Gerty" Clubb.....Delta and Hotchkiss
Boots Bussey.....Hotchkiss
Tom Hill.....Hotchkiss
Izzie Ankenman.....Crawford
Ankenman brothers.....Crawford
Bruce "Stupid" Hawkins.....Paonia
Juan Sanchez.....San Luis Valley
Juan Sanchez, Jr.....San Luis Valley
Loree Hull.....Cedaredge
Otis Porter.....Crawford
Dale Porter.....Crawford
Levi Williams.....Delta
Melvin Williams.....Grand Junction
Red Dolan.....Montrose
Pinky Smith.....Montrose
Luis Candalaria.....Denver
Buck Kite.....Hotchkiss
Cecil Bordman.....Crawford
Ray Purtee.....Crawford and Hotchkiss
LaVonne "Hoppy" Hopkins.....Granby
Orel McMillan.....Hotchkiss

Notes

[1]The reason I use the male form in shearing is because I have never seen a woman attempt to shear a sheep.

[2]I do not remember the shearer's name, but at the time, we were shearing in Idaho. Australian shearers were touring the western United States to observe shearers of different shearing crews in the United States.

[3]Bare-bellied sheep meant that the wool on the belly had been shed by the sheep or was caught on brush and pulled off. Clear-cut sheep do not have any wool around their faces, or below the first joint on their legs. Sheep in Montana, Idaho, and the northwestern United States were larger than those in southern Wyoming, Colorado, and the Southwest.

[4]The word "flock" is not appropriate for use in these circumstances because of the size of the herds. "Herd" is associated with a large band of sheep. "Flock" is associated with only fifty or sixty head. Western herds generally were in bands of approximately one thousand.

[5]Bureau of Land Management, *The Valley of Opportunity: A Story of West Central Colorado* (Denver: Bureau of Land Management, 1982), 114-117.

[6]Ibid.

[7]Deborah V. Doherty, *Delta, Colorado: The First Hundred Years* (Delta, CO: Delta County Independent, 1981), 16.

[8]Ibid., 26. This statement is found in several different places with slight variation, but no one listed the original source.

[9]BLM, *Valley of Opportunity*, 114-117.

[10]Ibid.

[11]Duane Vandenbusche and Duane A. Smith, *A Land Alone: Colorado's Western Slope* (Boulder: Pruett Publishing Company, 1981), 157. Range pirates hired professional gunslingers who murdered and killed.

[12]Doherty, *Delta, Colorado*, 26.

[13]August Aubert, interview by author, Grand Junction, Colorado, 30 May 1995.

[14]BLM, *Valley of Opportunity*, 159.

[15]Paul Etcheverry, interview with author, DeBeque, Colorado, 19 May 1995.

[16]Vandenbusche and Smith, *A Land Alone*, 148. While in route, the party met U.S. troops escorting the Ute Indians out of the territory. The Ute were removed to reservations by 1882; however, a formal treaty was never signed and currently has not been settled.

[17]Laura Clock, *Cabin on a Clothesline* (Newell, Iowa: Bireline Publishing Company, 1983), 106-108.

[18]Larry McIntyre, interview by author, Fruita, Colorado, 31 May 1995.

[19]Ibid.

[20]Wilma Alice McKeller, interview with author, Greeley, Colorado, 15 September 1994.

[21]Etcheverry, interview. It was common practice during the late 1800s and into the 1960s and 1970s to sponsor Basques to work with sheep. The Basque people were very frugal. They lived on the range with the sheep and never spent a penny of their own money. Within a few years, they owned their own herds. Mostly they kept it a family-oriented business, and within a few years, they themselves sponsored another Basque from France and the cycle repeated. Many of western Colorado's sheep ranchers originated this way. As an added value, bankers loved to see Basques come in for loans, because a Basque seldom went broke.

[22]Chris Jouflas, interview with author, Grand Junction, Colorado, 31 May 1995.

[23]Etcheverry, interview.

[24]Aubert, interview, 31 May 1995.

[25]The information I give is personal. For an article on sheepherders, refer to Luanne Rock, "Life of a Sheepherder

...Then and Now," *Journal of the Western Slope* Vol. 6, No.2 (Spring 1991): 24-35.

[26]Echeverry, interview.

[27]Jouflas, interview.

[28]McIntyre, interview.

[29]Aubert, interview, 30 May 1995.

[30]Jouflas, 31 May 1995.

[31]Grease wool is a term used for raw wool, or before it was cleaned.

[32]Aubert, interview, 30 May 1995.

[33]Jouflas, interview.

[34]Ibid.

[35]Ibid.

[36]Docking is a term used when the male is castrated and all the lamb's tails are removed. In later dates instead of cutting the tail and testicles off, sheep men would use heavy and very small rubber bands. The bands would cut off all circulation and the appendages would eventually fall off.

[37]The Rambouillet was bred and refined in Rambouillet, France, and this was where the name for them originated. The Merinos are the Spanish-bred variety, also known for their very fine wool.

[38]Jouflas, interview. Lamb comes from sheep less than one year of age; mutton comes from a yearling, or older sheep.

[39]I worked for a sheep man in Montana who ranged his sheep for three months during the summer where water was not available. The dew on the plants every morning was the only water the sheep received.

[40]Etcheverry, interview.

[41]Jouflas, interview.

[42]Aubert, interview, 31 May 1995.

[43]Ibid.

[44]Ibid.

[45]Tagging refers to shearing around the sheep's face, around the rear and between the rear legs to keep the animals clean.

[46]Opal Noland, interview with author, Hotchkiss, Colorado, 2 October 1994.

[47]Wilford "Puff" Allen, interview with author, Hotchkiss, Colorado, 18 November 1995. Puff remembered these prices from when he first started.

[48]Some of these prices came from Lee Trujillo's tally record book, 1943. Book now in possession of author.

[49]Joe Noland sheared 187 head in seven hours and ten minutes. He had to quit when the crew ran out of sheep. He accomplished that feat only once in Montana. It is the closest that I know of anyone shearing 200 head in one eight hour day. After I graduated from high school, I learned to shear sheep. Once, I sheared 182 head of sheep in a seven and a half hour day. I sheared over 150 head several times but never came close to shearing 182 again.

[50]Alice McKeller, telephone interview by author, Greeley, Colorado, 15 September 1995.

[51]Wool sacks are large burlap sacks that look like giant grain sacks, but the burlap material makes them much heavier.

[52]The blades are still in use and can be found at local ranch hardware stores. The design has changed very little.

[53]Elmer Dove from Hotchkiss, Colorado gave me a very detailed description of the Wonders. Elmer sheared sheep for years, and had learned the art of shearing sheep from his father.

[54]"Shears," *The New Practical Reference Library*, ed Charles H. Sylvester, vol. 5 (Kansas City and Chicago: Roach, Fowler & Swank, 1909), n.p.

[55]Jouflas, interview.

[56]Electricity was not that widespread during the 1930s and 1940s. Electricity was just starting to spread to small towns and farms.

[57]The original manufacturers called the machines by the name of E.B. or J.B. Shearing, but the shearers started calling the machines four point machines. The name became common, so when the three point cutter was introduced, they were naturally

called three point machines regardless of manufacturer.

[58]In the many years I was involved with shearing, I saw several ewes whose veins were cut, but never did one of the ewes die or become disabled as a result of that cut.

[59]A sheep's skin is quite pink and will sunburn easily if sheared too close.

[60]The button expression meant that the sheep was sheared real even and did not have any ridges or tags showing.

[61]The little hangers looked like tiny playground swings that were hung from the ceiling. The strings were hung about six feet off the floor.

[62]Tallying up was the expression used when writing down the count each day. At the end of a job, when the shearers were paid, the tallies were added together, also called tallying up. When settling with the sheep owner, the plant owner tallied up, too.

[63]A wool tag is a small piece of wool separated from the fleece. The tags generally came from around the face of the lower part of the sheep's legs.

[64]"Sheep Tick," *The New Practical Reference Library*, n.p.

[65]Etcheverry, interview.

[66]A piggin' string is a leather string that is used by cowboys to tie three legs of a calf after he has roped the calf for branding. No one seems to know where the name originated.

[67]"Tagging" is shearing around the sheep's face and around the rear and between the rear legs.

[68]Hazel Harris, 2 October 1994, at Hotchkiss, Colorado furnished the records about 1943. The Lee Trujillo tally record book had belonged to her father who was my grandfather.

Book Review

Michael A. Amundson. *Yellowcake Towns; Uranium Mining in the American West*. Boulder: University Press of Colorado. 2002. Pp. 208. Hardcover, $24.95.

One of the most enduring popular images of the American West is that of the mining frontier—the frenzied scouring of the countryside for riches, the boomtown, and the inevitable disappointments of the failed search for treasures. Michael A. Amundson chronicles one of the last great mineral booms in American history: the mid-twentieth century search for uranium in the American West. This mining boom contained almost all the drama of the old gold and silver rushes but it played out against the backdrop of America's Cold War nuclear needs. The uranium rush of Amundson's story helped create the modern Western Slope.

In the early twentieth century, miners began searching for carnotite in the American West. Carnotite contains deposits of uranium, vanadium, and radium. The first significant carnotite camp on the Western Slope became the town of Uravan. Uravan would boom, bust, boom and fall again according to the nation's radioactive mineral needs. The radium boom on the Colorado plateau gave way to the search vanadium and later uranium. "Uranium was vanadium producers' biggest waste product," Amundson explains (p.7). Thus, the early twentieth search for radium and vanadium foreshadowed the uranium boom of World War Two and after.

Amundson examines four uranium or "yellowcake" (the industry's name processed uranium ore) towns in this study. Two of the small towns were changed forever by the rush—Moab, Utah, and Grants, New Mexico. He also looks at two "company" towns built for various stages of the uranium boom—Uravan, Colorado, and Jeffrey City, Wyoming. All the towns underwent

similar experiences that varied depending on the size of the local uranium strike, degree of corporate or private sector involvement, and town. The two established towns, Moab and Grants, were altered beyond recognition within a few years of major 1950s strikes. The existing infrastructure was simply overwhelmed as thousands of newcomers demanding housing and local services swarmed to the region. The towns boomed as miners, businessmen, construction services, and officials of uranium companies arrived. Almost as soon as the towns began to gain some control over the pace of growth, the federal government's uranium procurement policies changed. In the late 1950s, the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) realized that it had more than enough yellowcake for projected defense needs and probably all it needed for the short-term commercial market as well. New policies were implemented to slow down the rate of production as companies were encouraged to "stretch out" their contracts until the government relinquished total control over the uranium market in 1970. Uranium producers gambled that domestic commercial needs for power production would fill the void left by the guaranteed government purchases.

Amundson carefully traces the impact of changing government policies that drove home the hard reality that the four uranium towns were part of a colonial relationship: the factors shaping any sense of community well-being were well "beyond local control" (p. 124). From 1970 to 1988, the uranium industry was liberated from direct federal control. This "commercial era" of free market competition led to another frenzied boom in the mid-1970s followed by a fast decline after 1979. Amundson again gives the reason for each boom and bust, tracing the impact of this economic roller-coaster on his four case study towns. The federal government's role from 1970-88 went from being the guarantor of markets and prices to the industry's chief regulator. Issues such as the 1970s energy crisis, changing attitudes toward nuclear power, heightened environmental concerns, and a

cutthroat international energy market all impacted the yellowcake communities. The four locales all fared differently, but Moab, because of conscious attempts at diversifying the local economy, emerged strongest. Company towns Uravan and Jeffrey City closed, while Grants has experienced continuing problems in attempting to chart its course, "post-yellow cake."

Scholars are only recently examining the huge impact of the Cold War on the American West. Michael Amundson tells a good story while successfully placing it in the context of America's Cold War era; his book will become a standard source on this issue. For those readers interested in the history of the Western Slope, Yellowcake Towns has particularly valuable information. Amundson writes extensively of the impact of the search for uranium and its sister elements in the Uravan and "West End" Montrose County region. Much of Amundson's research occurred on the Western Slope through extensive use of newspapers, interviews with key local officials and industry workers, and the holdings of the Museum of Western Colorado.

Yellowcake Towns is a revision of Amundson's doctoral dissertation written at the University of Nebraska. He taught at Mesa State College for one year in the late 1990s and is presently an Associate Professor of History at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff.

Steven C. Schulte
Mesa State College

JOURNAL OF THE WESTERN SLOPE is published quarterly by Mesa State College. The purpose of the JOURNAL is to encourage scholarly study (particularly by the students at Mesa State College) of Colorado's Western Slope. The primary goal is to preserve and record its history, anthropolory, economics, government, natural history, and sociology. Annual subscriptions are $14. (Single copies and overseas subscriptions are available by contacting the editors of the Journal.) Retailers are encouraged to write for prices. Address subscriptions and orders for back issues to:

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Farewell

With this issue the *Journal of the Western Slope* ceases publication.

Publication began in the winter of 1986. In the first issue the editors suggested that the publication would serve many useful purposes: a depository for Western Colorado history, an outlet for scholarly and artistic work and a workshop where students might learn research, writing and editorial skills. Over the past seventeen years these goals have been successfully achieved. Over one hundred articles on the development of Western Colorado, its people and its communities have been published, many by students, others by faculty and community persons. For many of these years, students played essential roles in editing the publication which gave them valuable experience for successful careers in history, education and other pursuits.

A review of the *Journal*'s articles reveals a rich collection of material on a wide range of subjects: biography, community history, business history, minorities, immigrants, Native Americans, architecture, ornithology, archaeology, natural history, transportation, labor, education, water development and many other subjects making the publication one of the most important repositories of information on the history of Colorado's west-facing slope.

Few readers without experience in producing such a publication can appreciate the enormous time and labor that goes into the publication of such a journal. To be successful a cadre of dedicated persons is required. For much of the *Journal*'s life, enthusiastic students, faculty and community persons were all ready to assist in reading, editing, proofing, and doing the many other laborious tasks associated with publication. In recent years due to changing interests and priorities such assistance has

dwindled until Paul Reddin and his capable assistant, Janet Mease, were bearing the brunt of the work. Accordingly, after seeking unsuccessfully to transfer the *Journal* to another group interested in history collection, including the Museum of Western Colorado, the decision was made to discontinue publication.

The editors wish to thank all those who have supported the *Journal* over the years including contributors, editors and patrons. Special thanks are extended to the Associated Student Government at Mesa State for its loyal financial support, to Frank Keller, who did yeoman service in keeping the computers up and running and in giving financial advice, and, of course, to Paul Reddin, who conceived the idea of the publication and was its most steadfast advocate and workhorse.

Donald A. MacKendrick
Professor Emeritus, Mesa State College

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We thank the authors, wish them well, and hope to see many of their fine articles reprinted in other publications.

Sheep at pasture. (Photo courtesy of Hazel Harris.)

Lee Trujillo's Shearing Crew in Hotchkiss, Colorado, 1946. Back row, left to right: Hazel Harris, Lee Trujillo, Elmer Noland, Barbara Noland, unidentified. Front row: Frieda Noland, Kenneth Noland, Elmer Dove, LaVonne "Hoppy" Hopkins, unidentified. (Photo courtesy of Hazel Harris.)

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