

Episode 1 Transcript: The Land That Made the Industry

HOLDEN: Hello, my name is Evelyn Laila Holden. I'm the summer intern at the Community Library Center for Regional History in partnership with the Trailing of the Sheep Festival. We are located in Ketchum, Idaho and are dedicated to preserving and promoting local history and culture. The Trailing of the Sheep is a yearly festival in October, which celebrates the long and diverse tradition of sheep ranching in the Wood River Valley. The weekend is full of music, storytelling, lamb filled cuisine and to finish it up, a parade down Main Street where thousands of sheep are herded through Ketchum. This summer, I've been working with the historical archives that holds years worth of audio and video recordings from the beginning of the festival in 1996, and my job this summer has been to go through and listen to everything, selecting the most compelling narratives that celebrate the history and culture of sheep ranching in Idaho. Welcome to the first episode of Sheep Stories Season two. In this episode, we'll be focusing on historical accounts to investigate how the land has continued to sustain sheep ranching and the wood River Valley for generations. The Wood River Valley has an extraordinary landscape which allows sheep ranching to be so successful. The mountains, prairies, forests, rivers and lakes create such an expansive area for migration, particularly in the spring and the fall. The landscape agrees not only with the sheep but with the herding industry as a whole. The Wood River valley is expansive.

HOLDEN: It stretches across the south central Idaho through Blaine County and its four major towns Bellevue, Hailey Ketchum and Sun Valley. At the center of the valley is the Big Wood River, which gives the area its name. The river and the landscape around it has played an important role in making the valley a good place for sheep to thrive.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: I'd like to say just a little bit about the industry, for those of you who aren't involved in it.

HOLDEN: John Peavey discusses the relationship between the landscape and migration patterns of sheep outfits at a crowd gathered for the Trailing the Sheep Festival Evening Stories in 2001.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: In the Western Range country. It's a very nomadic, uh, kind of an operation. Uh, we migrate very large distances, 100, 150 miles, maybe more, north and south from, uh, the spring range to the upper country, the late summer country, the August country. We try to follow the springtime so that the ewes are always on fresh green feed, and they can give lots of milk and produce a very fat, high quality, uh, fat lamb that will make the the grade for slaughter without going to a feedlot quite often

and um, more important than 150 or 200 miles that they travel north and south and they go up and then they go all the way back in the fall. So it's about a 400 mile trip, 3 to 400 miles, but they climb a mile vertically and they follow that springtime from about 400 zero foot elevation up to eight, nine, maybe even 10,000ft in August. And that that's kind of the cycle of life and the the operations sort of ebb and flow with the with the seasons. Uh, the ranches look much like hourglasses. And this is one of the very narrow spots here in Ketchum.

HOLDEN: The majority of sheep outfits in Idaho migrate seasonally, meaning sheep bands are always moving to find a better area. However, the large scale migrations happen in the transitional seasons, the fall and the springtime to always get ahead of the non-desirable weather and chase the best environment possible. As the weather warms up for the summertime, the Wood River Valley landscape provides mountain meadows where green plants grow to become the perfect snack for sheep, and fresh streams become the perfect place to cool off or take a sip. Herders prepare their bands of sheep for the wintertime by making sure they have as much access as possible to good, hearty food. That means that by the time they need to move down from the mountains in the fall. They are prepared for winter.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: The sheep are fat and wooly from a good summer in the mountains, and they seem happy to be launched on this week long trek that will take them down the wood River valley and then over the hills to the home ranch.

HOLDEN: The sheep migrate to lower landscapes to avoid the plants that will inevitably freeze in the cold or get covered in snow during the winter months. Once the bands have migrated down, they indulge in eating sagebrush, woody plants and dry grass where they are finally able to relax for the winter. Like clockwork, the sheep make the long journey to travel back through the Wood River Valley during springtime to catch the warmest months in Idaho. Idaho became a hot spot for sheep herding because of its unique geography and the climate of the state, which allow successful seasonal movement from lower to higher elevations and vice versa, which many other states cannot fulfill. In September of 2000, the Flat Top Sheep Company was featured on the Food Network show Ming's Quest. Ming Tsai, a celebrity chef, discusses the remoteness of sheep herding and the types of people willing to live outside of civilization in the West. We can't listen to the clip directly, but I'm going to walk you through what happened and give you some context along the way. Since the beginning of time, men has followed sheep, and the same holds true nowadays. In order to find a flock with a shepherd, you have to go far away from civilization. One of the most critical skills in isolated shepherd must possess is the ability to handle solitude. I mean, it's got

to be lonely. The shepherd is in the middle of nowhere. It's really terrible, lonely life. A lot of people can't do it. In fact, right now, we got three of them that are stuck ten, 15 miles from the nearest road. I mean, they're out there in these mountains, way high in these mountains. What do you do when you need to get to them? Well, we take a pack string with a horse and pack their supplies in and then move them around as needed. The shepherd usually stays with the sheep wagon. These things have remained pretty much the same for hundreds of years. And when the wagon can't make it up to higher elevations, the shepherder takes his horse and a campsite and goes up. He can spend up to three weeks in the high country, and the only contact he'll have is with the sheep tender, who comes and visits once a week to replenish supplies. The herding industry has changed quite a bit since it truly developed in the area. Some of the first herders in the Wood River Valley were Scottish and then the Basque. Like we learned in the first season of Sheep Stories. However, today many originate from Asia and South America, particularly Peru.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: We truck them down along about the 1st of December, begin lambing. Along about the 1st of January on the alfalfa's we take our men who are Peruvians, and I might mention, if it hasn't been mentioned at some time, our shepherders come in under the H2 program. Uh, the vascos that were associated with the sheep beginning in the late 1800s, I suppose, and were heavily involved until perhaps 1960, but better stated, into the 50s at least. And so with this H2 program, why they come over under a three year contract, and then they return at the conclusion of that and come back if everything is amiable between employer and employee. And some have been here on numerous contracts anyway. Having given you that indoctrination, why we have our given number of men that are with us year round. And so they accompany the sheep to Arizona with lamb there. Of course, as I said, and then return to Idaho to the Bruno Desert, the balanced rock, the balanced rock area. If you've ever heard of that famous rock where the desert begins, and along about the 1st of April, late March, perhaps we're fortunate. The sooner we can return home, the better we like it, although that's nice down there too. But home is always home.

HOLDEN: If you can believe it. There are traditional sheep hideaways. Generations of sheep have traveled down from the mountains to the prairies in the wood River valley. These sheep have traveled nearly the exact same trails since sheep started to be raised out here on the West.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: Years ago There was so many sheep going up through here, we just considered it kind of like a road. Over 200,000 were making the trip. Today there's one, two. Three bands come out over the summit coming out this way. So. So you can

see there's not many sheep left trailing on down through the valley here. You've seen remnants of the trail. It's more than remnants, but it's being developed. You see berms on it in places down by Golden Eagle. But that trip, uh, kind of a was fenced on both sides in part of it, part of it's never been fenced on the west side. And that's, uh, well, they got the gas line on there. Now there's, uh, bicycle paths and places. But all that is just an easement. And if we lose the trail and the sheep, there's no more easement. It goes back to the property owners and recreation district could be in trouble in places because, uh, they're, they're at our, uh, we're just because of our pleasure, you might say. Yeah. Maintain the right of way that goes clear down to, uh, Bellevue along the railroad track. And, uh, that was established in 1936 by Hassel Blankenship. He was the main commissioner at that time for Blaine County. He, uh, his grandsons, at least some claims out west to Hailey from him. He always told me that was his, uh, major accomplishment as a commissioner was getting the sheep through the valley.

HOLDEN: What John Faulkner is trying to convey is that there is a long standing easement across the wood River Valley that allows sheep to migrate freely. Additionally, he is highlighting the need for continual support of sheep outfits and the traditional way of operating. Coming up is Diane Peavey, who thought up the trailing of the sheep Festival with her husband, John Peavey to preserve the trailing pass, as well as educate newcomers and tourists to the community and the landscapes. Historical connection to sheep ranching.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: And I started inviting the community to join us herding our sheep through the valley. We go north in the spring and south in the fall every year, just this time. This is not a reenactment of history. What's going on this weekend is really our story and our living history. So we invited people to come out and help us herd sheep. A lot of them were a little concerned about the new bike path that had gone in on top of the sheep easement, and they were concerned that there were some droppings that were getting caught in their bike wheels and their roller blades. So we decided it was a goodwill move to have them come out and help us herd the sheep and help the, um, help them keep the sheep off of the bike paths. And it worked.

HOLDEN: Since its inception, the festival has steadily grown and this year in 2026 marks its 30th anniversary. The celebration this year will last five days from October 7th to the 11th, highlighting the town and the community's connection to the sheep industry. We'll dive even deeper into the community's cultural heritage in the next couple of episodes as we explore sheep herding, ongoing relevance and influence on the town of Ketchum.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: It is had a wonderful heritage growing up in the sheep industry, but more than the memories, more than what it was, it's what it gave me. It's what it's given to those of us, and it's what I hope we never, ever lose. And that is the grit, the grit and the hard work and the dedication of a fair deal. And a deal is a deal. And your handshake is your word, and your word is your handshake. And we believe in hard work. We believe in integrity. And God damn it, we love the land.

HOLDEN: Thank you for listening to the sheep stories. I'm Evelyn Laila Holden.

OUTRO: Sheep Stories is a podcast from Boise State Public Radio. Made in partnership with the Community Library's Jeanne Rodger Lane Center for Regional History. Evelyn Laila Holden is a 2026 summer intern at the Community Library in Ketchum in partnership with the Trail of the Sheep Festival. The Savvy Traveler audio used in this episode is with the permission of Minnesota Public Radio. All rights reserved. Additional recordings in this podcast were made by the Idaho Commission on the Arts. Music in this episode comes from Hal Cannon and Leonard Coulson as part of the Deseret String Band.