

Episode 1 Transcript: Home Sweet Home in the Wood River Valley

HOLDEN: Welcome to the second episode of The Sheep Stories Season two. If you have yet to listen to the previous episode, I implore you to. My name is Evelyn Laila Holden. I'm the 2026 Summer intern at the Community Library Center for Regional History in Ketchum, Idaho. Today, we are looking at some historical testimonies to understand how sheep ranching helped shape the community we now know as Ketchum. Sheep ranching wasn't the first industry in the area, but left its lasting mark for generations, the sheep industry has helped to build a close knit community and a way of life that's still a big part of Ketchum today. There is a real sense of pride in the town and a desire to protect the people, traditions and lifestyle that grew out of the sheep industry. We can see this especially clear when we listen to people's memories of places like Lane Mercantile. So remember to smile and wave. And welcome to the second episode of the second season of Sheep Stories.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: We are on the edge of Ketchum, the town that borders Sun Valley Resort. We're surrounded by multi-million dollar homes and a perfectly manicured golf course. My wife, Teresa, and I wait on the side of the road with Denny Burkes, who looks a bit nervous. His eyes are glued to a hilltop high above town. He's looking for sheep.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: Come on. Sheep. Hey.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: Denny Burkes manages the flat top sheep operation, a job his father held before him and his grandfather before that. Every year at this time, the sheep move from summer pasture to winter ground. In the old days, they used to trail right through the center of town. And this year's festival seeks to reestablish that tradition. Denny Burkes knows sheep, which, come to think of it, is why he's jittery right now. He has promised the Chamber of Commerce that 1500 head will mob Main Street at nine this morning, and almost the whole town has turned out to watch. But it's 915 and the sheep are nowhere in sight. So do you think those sheep are wearing their wool X watches?

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: No, as a matter of fact, they're not. That's what's got me troubled.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: And then, over the rise of the hill.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: They're right there. Thank God for small favors.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: The flock of sheep covers the steep hill like a huge woolly blanket. It's a scene from the 19th century descending on this jet set community. Today's festival is the brainchild of John and Diane Peavey, who own the Flat Top Sheep company. For years, they have watched Sun Valley grow into a posh resort community increasingly divorced from the area's past. This fall, they thought, why not turn the annual sheep migration into both a celebration and a history lesson?

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: The sheep will continue on their trek to the home ranch for several more days, but the official festival ends tonight. The trailing of the sheep has been a great success for the town and folks head to local restaurants to eat Idaho lamb. The next morning, Teresa has to get home for work, but I'm still not satisfied. I've seen the public life of sheep, but I need to know more. And I'm especially curious about the men who tend these flocks. I asked sheep manager Denny Burks if I can accompany him as the drive continues. It's early the next morning as we creep up a steep dirt trail in Denny's four wheel drive pickup. So where are we headed, Denny?

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: Oh, this is called, uh, Parker Gulch, and it's about, uh, three miles out of Sun Valley. And we're going up this sheep camp, and we're going to hook on to it and move it to a new location.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: We're heading to the spot where a herder and his flock spent the night. He lives in what is called a sheep camp, a traditional nomadic home that looks like an old time covered wagon. The herder stays with his flock, guiding them to fresh forage. He left camp at daybreak and will move with the sheep all day. We're here to pick up his camp and move it to where he'll bed down tonight. These accommodations are spare, to say the least, and the sort of men who live in these wagons have changed over the years.

HOLDEN: The sheepherders that have operated in the Wood River Valley have varied over the more than 150 years of ranching occurring in the area. The sheep industry has always brought together people from a variety of backgrounds, most recently the Peruvians, before them, the Basque and still earlier the Scottish. Of course, sheep ranching isn't the only reason people come into this area. Over time, the region's industries have changed dramatically. It never began nor succeeded with sheep alone. Today, the Wood River Valley is widely known for the Sun Valley ski resort, as people travel from across the country and the world to ski where the first chairlift was created in 1936. However, that wasn't the first time people from all over traveled into the area.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: My name is Jerry Seifert. I was the mayor of the city of Ketchum from 75 to 88. And and I didn't know if everyone recognized the historical connection. And had it not been for the grazers, very likely what we know as Sun Valley would not be here now. Um, the Union Pacific and the Barela was 1892. They demonetized silver and the mining industry in these areas collapsed. Uh, it was the grazers and the summer business that kept the railroad alive up here. And the those days, everybody came for the waters, and then the grazers began to bring in the sheep. The stories you've heard. And it was that traffic that kept that Union Pacific line open. They were running a couple of trains a week during the 1920s, and it was that traffic that kept that line to catch em open. So when Count Schaffgotsch was commissioned by Harriman, who was the chairman of the Union Pacific Railroad to find a ski area, He was told, oh, there's that miserable place up in Ketchum with all this snow. And the rest was history. Harriman came in, and within six months they built the resort, and he said he never built it to make money. It was made to be a perfect place. And the grazers were always part of that.

HOLDEN: The railroad was placed directly in response to the Wood River Valley mining boom in the 1880s. The operations in the area were mining for lead, silver, copper, zinc and whatever else they could find. However, mining in the area did not last long when mineral extraction started to diminish. Sheep ranching took over the railroads. For the first time, sheep operations did not have to rely on automobiles, which led to a massive increase in sheep shipping. Before long, Ketchum, Idaho, became the largest sheep shipping site in the country and only second to Sydney, Australia, globally. Thus, the city of Ketchum, in the area around, became a hub to the booming sheep industry. Lane Mercantile is the most significant illustration of the community that grew as a result of the railroad, which made the town, sheeping and the wood River Valley more accessible. The Lane Mercantile Building still stands today on the corner of Sun Valley Road and Main Street. As you watch people walk by, you're taken back to the Old West. When sheep ranchers ran the town and were walking around with spurs on their boots in a flash, you're taken back to the 1980s, when the town was running wild, partying until dawn, doing God knows what, God knows when. Eat more lamb. It's delicious. Used to be plastered across the side of the brick building. Now it's faded away. You can still see glimpses of it, of course, but like sheep ranching, it's disappearing from plain view. Despite its influence on the community, even today, if you look hard enough, though, the community culture that prospered as a result of shipping is always going to be there. During an interview archived with the community library. Dennis Burke, who was born into the sheep industry, explains the ongoing of Lane Mercantile.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: And when I was a young boy living in the 50s here, that was the center for all the sheepmen to buy groceries, buy supplies. That store was a classic old store. It was, uh, all the groceries were behind the counter and and it was dealt primarily with dealing with sheepmen. Uh, and so you'd go in there and buy your supplies and you could buy groceries, hardware, Stetson hats, Levi's, cases of dynamite, double trees. I mean, it was a pretty much a buy all store. But as Jack Lane, the owner, got older, he started tending or catering just to sheep people, and I was relegated to a small circular bench around a center post in the store, and the sheep men had come in, and they'd sit in the window over in one corner, and Jack had his great big, overstuffed white leather chair that he sat in, and they'd tell sheep stories. And if I'd had a recording. Folks, you cannot believe, because these were the original sheep people in this country. And I'd sit and listen to the stories. I couldn't say a word, but I could sit and listen. And it was just a remarkable experience. But I would get so nervous when a non-sheep person didn't walk in that store because it was a long, U-shaped store. You walk in the front door and down one side and back up the other side, and if a stranger would walk in the door, I'd just start shaking and they'd walk down this through this door and nobody would say boo to him, no, no clerk, no nothing.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: And and they'd kind of figure out that Jack was the owner should be waiting on him. And, uh, most of them would get so uptight as I was that they'd just walk out the front door. One time a lady said, do you have egg beaters? What in the hell would we do with the egg beater in the sheep camp. Out the door she'd go. One time a guy came in and he sold cigarettes, cartons and cases, and a big display guy came in and walked around the whole store. And there's these 4 or 5 sheep men sitting in the corner talking to Jack. He said, could I buy a carton of camels or whatever? He said, I don't sell them. And here's this enormous display of cigarettes. It actually. I heard several people talk about it later that it was actually a fraternity almost. I mean, you if you weren't a sheep man, you weren't really very welcome in that store. And, and as he got older, he could care less what he sold anything or not. You know, it was more a headquarters to find out what was going on. He I think he had a direct line to Ogden, Utah, where most of the lambs at that time were were going so that everybody knew the market that day he had called down there. And anyway, it was quite an experience and quite a store. And he. He was quite a man.

HOLDEN: Dennis Burke is a multigenerational shepherd. His grandfather, Sam Burke, started working at the Flat Top Sheep Company in 1933. His father followed, and Dennis, or Denny, followed them and later retired in 2007. They spent their entire lives working for the Peaveys. Lane Mercantile was not just a store, but a place to gather for

sheepherders, where they were able to come together over generations and be supported like the neighbors and the friends they were.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: These are the boys of Jacqueline's Lane Mercantile. And these guys, these guys who sat around and bullshitted all day, you know what I'm saying? They provided all the sheep supplies and the clothing and the market reports. It actually. In 1915, Jack Lane opened his general store in Ketchum, which is now romantically. Starbucks coffee. It was the headquarters for all these guys sitting around and talking about everything. And they they talked about the weather and range conditions and the weights of the lamb shipments and the markets, and how the government was just screwing them every day.

HOLDEN: And while the Lane Mercantile building may not be a Starbucks anymore, the iconic building is still there. It's now home to the restaurant Enoteca. And in a way, the sense of community that grew around Lane Mercantile has carried on throughout Ketchum. Even with all the changes the town has gone through, there is still a strong sense of pride in its history and in the community that has grown there over the years, and sheep ranching remains an important part of that history. The industry, along with the traditions of trailing and herding sheep through the valley, is still deeply connected to Ketchum's identity. Coming up next in the third episode, let's dive even deeper into the inner workings of those same sheep men who would relax by putting their feet up and chatting with old friends and neighbors in Lane Mercantile. We will be looking at some of the pressures that ranchers have encountered as of relatively recently, that have put their lifestyles at risk. Many sheep outfits have come and gone through the Wood River Valley, and we'll hear from three different sheep ranching families about their experiences and their challenges.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: The sheep numbers in Idaho had dropped dramatically, it's true here in the Wood River Valley. The numbers of sheep that, uh, used to funnel through Ketchum and go up into the forests around Ketchum and up north or down by about 90% since 1920.

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

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