

Episode 4 Transcript: From Border Collies to Great Pyrenees: A Herder's Best Friend

HOLDEN: Welcome to the fourth 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're going to be turning our attention to one of the most important parts of a sheep outfit. Their dogs. Sheepdogs, both Border Collies and Great Pyrenees, are the backbone of the industry. They complete extraordinary feats that astonish the most senior herders, which isn't too surprising once you realize that sheepdogs are bred to do so, and even more extraordinary deeds. So let's hear from the people who have worked with these dogs, and learn a little more about the incredible role they play in the sheep ranching industry. Welcome to the fourth episode of The Sheep Stories Season Two. In September of 2000, the flat top sheep company appeared on the Food Network show Ming's quest. While we were unable to listen to the clip directly, I'm going to talk you through it. Counting sheep does more than help you snooze. It's how you keep tabs on a flock. Since sheep have no natural defense, they wouldn't even think of biting or picking or scratching another animal.

HOLDEN: Have you ever heard of a sheep bite? Predators are the real concern. And the coyotes especially. They like lamb, just like we do. Coyotes are quite an adversary. Without dogs watching 24/7, the flock would be in real trouble to prevent coyote attacks. The Great Pyrenees is planted inside the flock. The dog at night keeps them separated. They Wolf and a coyote is a very timid animal. So this wolf wolf all night keeps the coyote away. They're just a primary deterrent. They spooked them away. The Great Pyrenees dog is raised with a sheep from Puppyhood and thinks of himself like a sheep. A sheep that barks, that is. The sheep pay no attention to the dog at all. He could walk right through the middle of the sheep and they barely get out of the way. Great Pyrenees are an ancient breed of outstanding intelligence and bravery. They are a legendary breed for livestock operations. Their guarding instincts make them an excellent choice for sheep operations in the Wood River Valley. Great Pyrenees are bred for working with sheep and performing extraordinary deeds. But of course, a dog's success depends on who and how they were raised.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: When we first started with guard dogs, they said, don't play with them, don't make pets out of them. And I wrecked a couple of them, I did, I made them my pets, and then they guarded me diligently. They guarded me. But now we've kind of found a medium to, um, because you've got to be able to catch them. You've got

to be able to treat them. And so you have to have some socialization with them. But if you bond them early to the sheep, they know what they're there to do. So they really are amazing. And we've tried different breeds. Our sheep prefer all white. We've tried some, um. Oh. Those mastiff. Hungarian mastiff, I think. And they had spots on them. The sheep didn't like the spot, so we painted the dogs. Literally we painted the dogs white. But the sheep knew. They knew. It just didn't work. So we we continue to go back to the Pyrenees because they just blend right in. They just do. It's it's just amazing how that is just inbred in them.

HOLDEN: Herders have shared remarkable stories working alongside Great Pyrenees, whose dedication to their flock is unmatched. At the 2021 Trailing of the Sheep Q&A, three experts talk about their experiences with sheepdogs, primarily guard dogs.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: Uh, there was there was one dog, Dolly. She she just kind of on the skinny side that's in her genetics. But to the average tourist coming by, they see one rib bone and they think, oh, no, that's that's abuse. So I pull her out, bring her all the way home. And it's a two hour drive 20 miles through the back country. Get her dewormed, let her out in the yard. It's fenced. It's dog proof, right? No. She hopped out in the middle of the night as soon as I wasn't paying attention, and the herder called me the next morning. Hey. Dolly's back. Did you actually take her 20 miles? Yeah. Through the wilderness here in the Sawtooths. In one night.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: One of the problems in this area and every area where there are, are sheep and guard dogs and a lot of, quote, tourists that don't know. They'll see these dogs away from the band, and they'll think they're lost, and they'll pick them up and take them home or take them in. And that is a continuing problem. These dogs do tend to wander. They if they hear a coyote barking off over the hill a mile, they're going to go investigate it.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: Sometimes they have one lamb just. That's all it takes is one lamb that got left behind in the sagebrush. And that dog is staying in the vicinity, hoping the herder will come back or bring the band so that lamb can rejoin. They are so unbelievably talented at choosing those situations where they know they're needed. Um, Lily, who is actually the mother of Dolly and I was just talking about a minute ago, we lost her this summer and I cried and I cried and I thought, oh, my favorite dog. What happened? Did she get eaten by wolves? I don't know. A week later, Herder found her a couple miles away, sitting on one lamb. She hadn't come back for food in a week. She stayed by his side. So if you if you hear somebody who picked up a dog, try and help connect the rancher and and maybe ask exactly where that dog was found, because I

guarantee you there may be a couple sheep right there that were left behind when somebody took that dog. And the sheep are unguarded. Now.

HOLDEN: For the majority of herders who travel between the mountains and prairies, weaving their way through never ending aspens and forests of brush. Their only companions are their sheepdogs. These man's best friend save the herders from being swallowed up by the wool. These dogs not only provide herding and guarding support, but company to the people who haven't seen civilization for many months. Put yourself in their shoes. If you had to leave your community and focus on sheep all day and all night, wouldn't you start counting sheep in the daytime and not out of need, out of insanity? But with the dogs there. While they're not focused on you at all, they're there to support you and drive you through the seasons. There are two types of dogs working within a sheep operation with two extremely different roles, but nonetheless equally important. Guard dogs live amongst the sheep and protect the herds from predators, while herding dogs are an extension of the herder themselves and their needs as the band moves through terrain. Herding dogs come in all shapes and sizes. However, the most notable breed is the border collie. The border collie is a premier herding dog because of its obedience and agility.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: You know, sheep herders brag about their dogs and cowboys brag about their horses. And we have both. So I can do both. But, uh, surely that is one of the really great things about this industry is being able to watch the animals and how they perform and do amazing things. And in the process of leaving the lower elevation ranges, uh, they, they had this dog that disappeared and, uh, they got to where they were supposed to go and open the gate and put the sheep in and set up camp and thought the dog would show up by noon. We'd gotten a real early start. And, uh, no dog at noon, no dog that night. And he was still missing the next morning. And they were really, really worried because he was an exceptional dog. And so they went back to a longer trail, and there had been an abandoned homestead in that area with a lot of tall sagebrush. There was a home site with a basement, and the basement was walled in with cement, probably 7 or 8ft high and no way in or out. And there's 12 sheep in this hole who were going to die because there's nothing to eat, nothing to drink. And the dogs lying there in the shade of sagebrush, waiting for somebody to come back and help him get those sheep out of that hole. You know, just incredible performance. And I had no idea how you could set it up and set out to train a dog to stay away from his master. No food, no water, no other dogs for companionship, just concentrating on what he had been bred to do his duties.

HOLDEN: There are a lot of different tasks for herding dogs, not just in a traditional sense, but also in dog trials. These competitions are a way to celebrate and preserve the instincts and abilities these dogs have been bred for over generations. Every year during trailing of the sheep, the National Point Qualifying Sheepdog Trials occur, which features over 80 of the most talented herding dogs. Paired with their top handlers. The dogs and their handlers will travel into the wood River Valley from across the United States and internationally to compete during the Trailing of the Sheep Festival in 2005. Patricia or Trish Lewis, was interviewed during her break between sheepdog demonstrations. She discusses the partnership between Herder and Dog. Listen closely.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: But it sounds like you've had some history with dogs in your life.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: Well, yes, because working with sheep, I automatically had to work with dogs. And I don't think I was very good at it, and certainly not until I came to this country. And then I, I got a border collie. So I've always had border bold colors and got a border collie when I came to this country and I got a very good one looking back on it, a very good one. And, uh, but I didn't really know what I was doing, but it worked for me. Fine. And but now, uh, since I really since we've been up in Idaho, um, I have paid more interest in learning the finer points of it. And, uh, because I did trial quite, quite a while too.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: Have you apprenticed with somebody or how have you learned those things?

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: I did clinics, there's lots of people that give clinics.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: Okay, so here's a here's a naive question. Are the clinics for the, um, handlers or for the docs?

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: Well, both. Both because they've got to work with the dog and then they've got to work with you to teach you how to handle that dog. And um, and it's a sport where you have no contact, uh, like with it's similar in a lot of ways to cutting horse, but with a cutting horse, you're you're on your horse and you have contact with that horse, with your dog and your sheep. They're all out there in never never land. You might be several hundred yards away from where the dog and the sheep are. So they have to learn to really respect you and listen to you. The role of the dog is to control the sheep and to bring them to you, and without causing unnecessary hassle to the animals. Because anybody that's worked with stock and you don't want to. No barking,

no biting, no biting, you know, no running. Just so you teach a dog to try and be soft and keep the nice pace going with the sheep.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: And and then what's the role of the handler? What's your role as a handler of the dogs?

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: Uh, to try and think like a dog and to know stock, to know sheep. Think what the sheep are going to do and think what the dog's going to do, and try and be an intermediary of the two.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: And then how do you communicate with the dog? What do you do to make your intentions known?

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: Yeah. First of all, your voice close hand and then your whistle afterwards.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: Okay. Can you describe your whistle to me? I'm just imagining people who can't see you right now who are listening to this.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: Yeah, it's just a little half round with a hole in it. And the dogs can hear it, you know, a long way off, whereas you can't be shouting a long way off. But the dogs are taught voice commands first, then you add the whistles afterwards.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: And what kinds of commands would you give?

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: We have a lap when for them to go to the right, when to go to the left, when to stop, when to walk up. When to look back in case there's more sheep behind him. And, uh, you can use any it's customary to use away and come by, but, uh, I, I had one dog that I got in in Wales and he was come here and get get. So as long as you're consistent, it doesn't matter. You can say right or left if you want, but as long as you're consistent. Same with whistles. My dogs are on slightly different whistles.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: And then it sounds like, um, you do demonstrations and trials and things like that.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: I don't trial anymore, but I just do a few demos, demonstrations.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: And then how does that differ from actually working dogs who are out on the range trailing or.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: Mostly when they're trailing, they're just plumb driving, just driving, whereas we have to send the dog to get the sheep and then do some driving as well.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: And what part of the classic herding work does that begin to come into play when you come in for shipping or when you.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: Yes. Any practical work? Yes. Everything on the trial field is is done. You know, it shows something practical. You had to put them in a pen and you have to bring them around you on the post, which shows the power of your dog, because the sheep don't want to come usually close to a person.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: I'm trying to get a sense of the difference between the structured competition or trial, and then the sort of natural setting on a ranch or out on the range.

Speaker 7: A good, uh, a good, um, what we call ranch dog that does ranch where it doesn't necessarily make a good, um, trial dog and vice versa. With the trial, they have to be, uh, very much more, um, uh, it's more specific, um, because they have to have dead straight lines and go through panels and the dog has to react to those sheeps so expertly. And whereas on the, on the ranch, I mean, if you know, they don't have to be that perfect. In other words.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: How do you train the collies? What do you do to get them used to the sheep?

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: You just, you just follow their natural instincts and, and, uh, which is to go around the sheep. And then of course, you've got to have them listening to you and add a little obedience to it. And you can get them being really obedient. But then when you take them to sheep, they don't even know you're on the planet. Most of the time.

HOLDEN: Times, sheepdogs are a pillar of the industry. Without them, sheep operations simply wouldn't be able to function the way that they do today. Guard dogs protect the sheep from predators while herding dogs manage them, and move the bands. Ranchers rely on these dogs just as much as they do the people on the ground. Dogs are a man's

best friend for a reason. There's a symbiotic relationship that has developed built on mutual respect, trust, and generations long partnership. For many ranchers, the dogs aren't just a tool of the trade. They're an essential part of the operation and the ranching family. Thank you so much for joining me for season two of The Sheep Stories. I hope you had as much fun as I did listening to and learning from the narratives that celebrate the history and culture of sheep ranching in Idaho. The. Patricia Crandall Layne Trailing the Sheep Festival archives. Whole years worth of audio and video recordings from the beginning of the festival in 1996, Documented by the Folk and Traditional arts director of the Idaho Commission of the Arts. You have now listened to just a snippet of the history on sheep ranching and herding in the Wood River Valley. Thank you so much for supporting the Trailing of the Sheep internship at the Community Library. Center for Regional History in partnership with the Trailing of the Sheep Festival. My name is Evelyn Laila Holden. Thank you so much.

OUTRO: Sheep Stories is a podcast from Boise State Public Radio, made in partnership with the Community Library's Jean Roger Lane Center for Regional History. Evelyn Laila Holden is the 2026 summer intern at the Community Library in Ketchum, in partnership with the Trailing of the Sheep Festival. Some 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.