

Episode 3 Transcript: Under the Western Skies Herders Still Count Sheep

HOLDEN: Welcome to the third 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, and I am the 2026 Summer intern at the Community Library Center for Regional History in Ketchum, Idaho. Today, we'll be looking at historical narratives surrounding the pressure sheep ranchers face as the industry changes throughout the late 20th and early 21st century, and how these changes put their livelihoods and their way of life at risk. Many sheep outfits have come and gone through the Wood River Valley. Some have focused on lamb, others wool and lanolin. We are going to hear from three different sheep ranching families, each with their own story on how they got started, why they kept going, and in some cases, why they eventually left the industry altogether. Welcome to the third episode of Sheep Stories Season Two.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: One of the newcomers in the industry is put together a one whale of an outfit is Brian been here in the front row? There are a lot of people who are curious about what your intentions are. I was questioned about it on the radio the other day, and I assured them that, uh, you just like sheep and you wanted to have a sheep outfit, and, uh, you did.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: And I think we, uh, we've put together something, John, that we're very proud of at this point. And, uh, we think that, uh, given the substantial reduction in number of sheep in Idaho from roughly about 2.65 million ewes, breeding ewes in the late 1920s to about 260,000 used today. So about only 1 in 10 in the days of James Laidlaw. Uh, as we saw earlier, that it's a way of folk life that deserves preserving, uh, that there's a lot of Idaho history that is wrapped around the sheep herding, uh, that the sheep husbandry have done properly, uh, can be gentle on the land, as I think, uh, many of these operators have proven over decades and generations of experience. And we feel privileged to be able to be a part of this, uh, particularly in this great country, uh, and to perform this act of stewardship along with our colleagues, the Faulkners and the Peaveys.

HOLDEN: Sheep numbers in Idaho have been declining for a long time now here in the Wood River Valley, the number of sheep that funnel through Ketchum up for the summer and down for the winter has dropped by about 90% since the 1920s. Many sheep operations have come and gone. Interestingly, larger operations often seem to have a harder time sticking around. Running a big sheep ranch means dealing with a huge number of animals, high operation costs, and the ups and downs of the market, just to

name a few. Smaller operations. On the other hand, can sometimes be more flexible, meaning there are likely to outlive their larger neighbors. While Lava Lake Ranch was recently sold, the owners. Since the 1990s, Brian and Kathleen Bean worked to outlive the modernization and conservation work they were able to achieve, meaning they looked to find a buyer committed to upholding the conservation and the success they were working towards in the industry and on the land. Brian and Kathleen Bean sparked great developments to the industry through their commitment to leaning on both old and new experts.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: Lava Lake Land and Livestock operates on about 24,000 acres of private land owned by the company. In addition, we operate on a total of approximately 900,000 acres that includes BLM, State of Idaho, land leases and Forest Service allotments.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: Commonly, good management begins with good communication and cooperation.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: I think the parts of what we do that are very relevant to any operator, particularly anybody using public land, is the relationship building that we've engaged in, and there's some very practical benefits to that. I think I'm most proud of the way that a very diverse group of people has worked together to run a good operation, solve for a lot of problems, and create a pretty amazing legacy on the ground, both in terms of, of the, the sheep ranching part of it, but particularly in terms of the habitats and the wildlife populations that we all see ourselves as being stewards of.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: When we bought the the ranch, we worked really closely with the previous owners who had been grazing in this landscape for 60 years. And we relied on the advice and the wisdom of our herders of Pedro and his crew, who knew the the landscape like the back of their hand. And we could bring that information, overlay it with the science. And that gave us a really good whole picture of how to how to use the land.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: It's been very important to us to maintain the relationships with the prior landowners. I have told Pete this, but I mentioned to Pete, Santa Rosa many times that he's forgotten more about sheep grazing and sheep ranching than I will ever know. I think that's clearly the case. But because of our collaborative approach, these folks, to our great benefit, have been delighted to to continue to participate and are in touch with our herders and our ranch management.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: One thing that sets lava, lake land and livestock apart from the crowd is their use of innovative science and technology to help them improve their management. They use GPS to help them monitor their sheep movements, and they use GPS technology and specially designed fences to help protect their sheep from predators.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: We do extensive monitoring on a couple of different fronts. We do quantitative monitoring in sagebrush, aspen and riparian systems. We also do quite a bit of monitoring on the grazing use itself.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: This is a GPS collar. We put in one sheep, I mean one ewe. And we track with this. We we know where the sheep been like bedding time. Then, uh, if let's see if they come into, uh, to the water to drink water, they show us where they've been. Yeah. After we, we finish the season, we download this on the whatever, you know, on the computer. And then we see, uh, and put them on the map where the sheep been, you know, if it's, I mean, if it's a, if we need to, to correct for the next season, season, let's see, could it be We spend more time on the bedgrounds or on the water on the creek, and we need to correct for for the next season.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: And that's an incredible learning and teaching tool for us when we work with our sheepherders, who we really see as key partners in this whole effort. You know, they're the ones managing the Sheep Band's day to day, and they are the ones making those on the ground decisions about where to graze and for how long. And so the GPS collars, as well as a very significant amount of time that we spend on the ground with them, has really helped us improve our grazing practices.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: These public lands provide for multiple uses and are valuable to many members of the public that enjoy or use them for the wide variety of goods and services they can provide.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: And I like to see it rich. I'd like to see it in healthy shape, and I'd like to see it remain as a working landscape, raising very high quality, grass fed meat for the, um, uh, consumption and benefit of consumers.

HOLDEN: Ranches, especially sheep operations in the Wood River Valley, are often family-run, with longevity closely tied to the family's involvement. Sometimes that family connection is precisely what helps a ranch thrive for generations. But other times, disagreements, changing priorities, or younger generations choosing a different path can make it difficult to keep the ranch going. And eventually, the operation is sold. An

illustration of this is found within the Oneida Family Ranch. Let's listen to Ben and Kathleen Oneida, who were interviewed at the Trailing the Sheep Festival in 2015. They discussed how family ranching can become complicated and break apart not only families, but generations of business.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: My great grandfather came here in 1911 to herd sheep right here, right in Shoshone.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: From the Basque Country. Uh, came out on a whim, came out by himself.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: Came out by himself because, you know, times were real tough in Spain at the time. And they they came out here for a better life, to make more, to make money.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: And your great grandfather had some experience with livestock. Not at all. So was he.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: They did. They did live on a farm. But what business were they in over there? But they were mostly farmers. But I don't think they had any livestock experience.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: Okay. So.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: I mean, they might have had a cow, a milk cow. You know, most of them had a few things like that.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: But yeah.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: Not on the scale. They know when they came here.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: So he learned he had to learn everything from scratch.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: And it wasn't too many years that they started their own outfit here and had a really big outfit in its heyday.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: Yeah.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: And so, so my dad didn't really want to have a whole lot to do with the outfit. He did work in the outfit, of course, you know. Um, but he went in the army, and when he got out of the army, he got jobs in town. Of course, he came back and forth to the sheep outfit, but I don't I just don't think he really cared for it much. So he didn't spend a whole lot of time after that until the last years before the outfit went out of business. And then my they were having problems with getting along between my grandfather and his brothers who were running it at the time then and then, um, you know, got into a big family feud and that's what ended up killing the outfit eventually.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: Okay. So that caused some tension. Oh, yeah. There was a lot.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: Of problems for several years. Well, then we were end up, then we ended up with what we called the Lane Ranch. Every time we they bought a ranch. They just called it the previous owner's name, you know. And the Lane Ranch was the big one. It was 800 acres. And that's what our share was. So it was me and my dad and my grandfather then.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: Okay.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: And we had that ranch until my grandfather died, which wasn't too long. And when he died and my dad, I was 20 something. He just wanted to get rid of it. He didn't want to have nothing to do with it.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: He got married, then he sold it.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: And I had no say in the matter. And. And, uh. So he sold it. And then I'm left with nothing.

HOLDEN: The Oneida Ranch now focuses on cattle, which is generally more profitable than sheep ranching. Even though sheep can reproduce at a higher rate and often have multiple offspring. The beef industry in the United States brings in far more revenue and has a much more established and stable market. That's one reason why sheep ranchers often transition to cattle, leaving sheep behind entirely or using cattle to help support the sheep they still raise. It also helps explain why some smaller sheep operations are able to outlast the larger ones. Smaller ranches can adapt more easily and find a niche in the market without having to carry the same scale and expense as their much larger neighbors. The Next family illustrates why later generations have ultimately decided to step away from the ranch. This interview occurred at the Trailing the Sheep Festival in October of 2005. Even though the family has now stepped away from the industry, they

are supportive of the industry's historical importance in the area. This is Ross interviewing the Laidlaw family in October of 2005 at the trailing of the Sheep Festival.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: Do you all know why the the family decided to get out of sheep ranching?

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: Well, it. The business has changed a lot. And, uh, after our grandfather died, uh, my dad and Sandy split the ranch and we moved to another creek, but. And Sandy kept the grade sheep and the Aberdeen Angus cattle, and my dad kept the purebred sheep, the suffix and the panamas and started the Panama registry. They. My grandfather started the breed quite a few years earlier, but it never bothered to get them registered. And dad did that.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: Oh wow.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: Our grandfather and then dad always supported the sheep program at the University of Idaho and. And it just got tougher and tougher to run a big outfit. And my dad's health was failing. So Sandy sold first and then dad sold chunks at a time. He sold it off and was cutting back a few years, and then finally sold the home place after my mother died.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: Mhm.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: And, um, and his health was pretty bad by then, so.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: Mhm.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: Um, it was, and my brother, um, went into a whole different area of work. So the people that knew the sheep were Gone really to to run the outfit.

HOLDEN: Let me be clear. The Laidlaws are no ordinary family. The early generations of the family created an entire new breed of sheep that is still operating today throughout the West.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: My grandfather developed a Panama and he was looking. He herded different kinds of sheep and and he, uh, experimented a little when he first started buying his own sheep with different breeds. And he decided that what would make most sense is a really hearty good range sheep, uh, that had good herd instincts was he'd try a cross between a Rambouillet ram and a Lincoln. You. And so in 1911, he

bought a little flock of Rambouillet rams and had the first cross that winter. And then, um, the next fall, he bought another little lot from another breeder of Rambouillet rams. And from then on he he he that everything came from that foundation flock, all the panamas, and he. He pulled very carefully. If they didn't meet the standard for the right characteristics, then they went. He was very meticulous about that, and my dad continued that the grandpa Jim had really perfected the sheep, and then grandpa. But dad worked a little more on getting a uniform fleece because the fleece of the original cross, their fleeces were a little different and dad wanted a really uniform fleece, so. And he, he really. He and daddy both were just. They really cared about quality livestock. It. Besides, it was their living. But it was also something that they were passionate about. And so they really had fine sheep.

HOLDEN: The sheep ranching industry is shrinking in the Wood River Valley and around the United States. There are many reasons for this, and a few of them directly relate to the operations being primarily owned by generations of families and the challenges that occur as a result. Younger generations of sheep ranchers are sometimes pushed out by their other family members or leave voluntarily due to the instability of the industry, or not feeling connected to the industry enough to take it on. There are so many more reasons that have compounded over generations and generations of ranchers, resulting in the industry looking as it does today. Sheep ranchers have come and gone. The Faulkners, Little Oneida, Peavey's, Laidlaw, Brass, Ford, Beane, Purdey, Breckenridge Lane and so many more many ranches have intertwined with each other as well. Flat top was bought by the Peavey's from the laidlaw's and that's occurred many more times. The only contemporary large outfits in operation in the wood River Valley today are Hensley, Koets and finally Jazz Ranch. Jazz ranch is the operation whose sheep will be participating in the parade this year at the Trailing of the Sheep Festival. Despite the number of sheep and ranches that have changed dramatically over the years, some things have stayed remarkably consistent. The sheepdogs. And for a quality sheep, you need quality dogs. Dogs are the backbone of sheep outfits. Keeping a close eye on the bands of the sheep day and night. Join me for the fourth episode coming up, where we will be listening to incredible stories and learning more about Border Collies and Great Pyrenees.

HISTORICAL ARCHIVES: And so I think early man found a wolf pup at some point, probably 10,000 years ago and taught it to hunt. Brought it home, raised it, taught it to hunt with him. And in the beginning, I'm sure they, you know, the wolf would help him catch an animal, probably a bighorn sheep, because they were tamer and, uh, kill it. But eventually they, you know, they evolved and evolved and, uh, they started to herd those sheep. And it was a wonderful combination. I think it was probably the first agricultural

enterprise that man was able to accomplish. I tell people that if, uh, you know, those wolves becoming a border collie, if they're ever in charge of a Noah's Ark, they should put a couple of sheep on first. And if you want to save yourself 10,00000 years or so, you put a couple of border collies on behind them.

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. 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.