

SHEEP, PREDATOR CONTROL AND THE MISTAKES WE HAVE MADE IN THE PAST

In the late 1980's, I interviewed Loyd Sorenson and Raymond Mendive, both having experience running sheep during their lives. I thought it important that we again, consider their testimony.

LOYD SORENSEN

As a young man I was determined to get a start on my own. Went to work for a sheep outfit as a camp tender and overseer. I took sheep for pay. I met Alta Hinton in Hurricane, Utah. In 1925 Alta and I were married and we started on our own, we ran our sheep on the Arizona Strip.

I was the first to haul water to my sheep. We were better able to take the sheep to where the feed was that way. I knew the country and I knew my sheep and we were right with them. When the Taylor Grazing Act came in we didn't have any base property or permitted water rights. They told me I had 30 days to get out. We bought pasture in Idaho that summer then bought a part of the old Adams and McGill outfit south of Ely and that fall we had our first real outfit. It was small at first but we saved our money and our outfit grew.

In 1949 we sold our holdings in White Pine County and bought the Griswold's sheep outfit in Elko County. I wanted to get further North where we could raise 80 or 90 pound lambs. We built a new home in Elko. I wanted to be where I could keep an eye on the Forest Service and B.L.M. I'd seen what the Forest Service had done to a lot of small outfits in Southern Utah and I'd made up my mind that they would not run me out of business.

All this ruckus over ranchers overusing the range – it's not true. I can remember in those early years when we would winter our sheep in the breaks on the North side of the Grand Canyon. There were small Plateaus where no animals other than those that could fly ever got to. Once, when I had a little time, I climbed up an old Juniper Tree and was able to climb out from it and get on top of one of those little mesas. I wanted to see what the feed was like where it had never been used. "All that I'd been told and had read had led me to believe that if you didn't graze an area, everything would thrive." "On the top of that mesa was the most unhealthy plants I ever saw!" Big clumps of dead grass with very little green to them. Big dead brush, "It was worse than a desert." It was then that I began to realize that for a range to be healthy it had to be used.

Just recently they have made our summer range (in the Ruby Mountains) a Wilderness Area. "And already they're dragging their feet, not letting us control predators, as we need to in order to survive. We can't operate." They're putting us out of business." "When we operated South of Ely, we would kill 40 or 50 of older sheep each year and inject poisons (strychnine or 1080) into the meat to kill the coyotes. Everyone benefited. Deer and Sage Hens were everywhere.

Since then Government restriction and regulations have been getting worse and worse. Sheep operations just don't work anymore. At one time we ran 12,000 sheep. We converted a lot of our outfit to cattle after they outlawed 1080. We've been down to about 2,500 sheep for several years now, and we will sell the rest before Spring if we can.

RAYMOND MENDIVE

Right now, I'm disgusted with the B.L.M. and Forest Service. They do everything they can to find things that make ranchers look bad, but when it comes to things that are important and could help everyone, they can't seem to see it. We have less deer and sage hens every year but you can't tell them that. They tell the Public what they want told, not what is actually happening.

In the 40's and 50's when the coyotes and lions were kept under control we had a lot of game. We lost more deer in the Owyhee Canyon during the winter of 1948 and 49 than we have in the whole North Fork Country today.

It's not hard for coyotes to catch sage hens. Once I saw a coyote after a bunch of little sage chickens. They were just big enough to fly 20 or 30 feet and that coyote was catching them one after another. I tried hollering at the coyote to run him off but he wouldn't quite until I ran right up on him. Even the old hens themselves are not hard to catch when they are trying to distract predators from their young. When my dad had sheep, we used to have trouble with our dogs catching the old hens. We had to keep an eye on them to see it didn't happen.

It's their own policies that have been hurting wildlife. If they would support programs to control predators and work with ranchers in implementing range improvements, we'd have the kind of wildlife we had 30 years ago.

Now I understand the Forest Service plans to reduce grazing on the Eastern side of the Independence Mountain. They say they need to protect the Lahontan Cutthroat Trout. The Lahontan Cutthroat Trout is not endangered. Fishing has always been good in those creeks. I'm afraid this program will end up like most Forest Service programs, they'll end up hurting the fish instead of helping them. It's not the Cutthroat Trout they are concerned about, they want the rancher off the range.

In the 1970's Loyd prophesized that should the sheepmen ever be driven from the range, so would go the deer herds of Nevada. Sadly Loyd's prophesy has come true. More and more people are coming to recognize the part that the sheep industry played in bringing about the great deer herds of the past. It was the sheepmen in the early 1900's that insisted that effective predator control practices be implemented. All through the 1930's, 40's 50's and early 60's - from California to Ohio - and from Texas to Montana – all across the land, predator control was in vogue. Deer, sage grouse, pheasants and even song birds flourished. But then in the 1960's and late 70's, public sediment began turning against predator control and industry. Soon changes began to emerge - and today few sheepmen remain.

But what of other effects? Were the sheepmen of the past right when they said that sheep provided other benefits? Recently Fred Fulstone of Smith Valley took me aside and explained the importance of grazing impact on black sage, and how such impact improved the health and productiveness of the plant for the benefit of not only sheep but for deer and sage grouse as well.

Ray Corta told me the same thing. Ray explained that sheep don't like it when they are forced to graze in areas that have not been touched for two or three years. When black sage and other desert shrubs

are not routinely grazed they stagnate and cease sending forth new tender and nutritious growth, which feed is important to wildlife and sheep alike. Which is why mule deer and sage grouse are not doing as well as they did in the past. It sure makes me wonder - many of the actions that we have taken in the past - maybe we're not as smart as we think we are at times.