

The Destruction of The Sheldon
Testimony by Cliff Gardner
July 23, 1995

In the Spring of 1989 Bertha and I were invited by Harry and Joy Wilson to visit the Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge, which is located North of Winnemucca in Northwestern Nevada right up against the Oregon line. Created for the purpose of protecting pronghorn antelope, the Refuge comprises a huge area, somewhere around 460,000 acres. The thing Harry wanted us to see was the destruction that was occurring on the Refuge because of mismanagement by federal agents.

At that time the agency in charge, the US Fish and Wildlife Service, was nearing the end of their long effort to rid the Refuge of livestock permittees of which Harry and Joy were among the last. So it had been a frustrating thing for them, as it had been for all the other permittees as they were being forced off - not only from the standpoint of all they were losing as livestock operators, but also from the standpoint of having to watch the ar-a they loved go down hill.

Harry had spent his entire life there in the Virgin Valley, his father having lived there even before the Refuge had been created, so he remembered what it was like before the government created the Refuge. Harry related how abundant the antelope had been in the 1930's and 40's. He said that during his youth it had been a family tradition to count the antelope each Fall as they left the high country and headed for the Black Rock Desert for the Winter. He said at times antelope would come through the valley strung out in bunches of a thousand or more. He estimated that at that time there were at least ten thousand antelope summering on the Big Spring Table each year. (Big Spring Table being a high mesa that lay just North of where they lived). But now, after years of government management, there were few antelope left.

I related to what Harry was saying, for in Ruby Valley our family had similar experiences, only with us it was with deer. Back in the 1940's and even up until the late 1960's, we would watch the foothills above the ranch as the deer migrate South in the Fall and North in the Spring. And they too would migrate through in bunches of a thousand head or more if the weather caught them right. And like Harry, we too had seen the great herds diminish because of stupid government management.

Harry also told of his disappointment in trying to work with the Refuge people - how even though these people knew that putting the cattle off the range was actually harmful to wildlife, they went right on acting as if cattle were harmful anyway. He related, that for most of his life, he and his father had always summered

their cattle on the Big Spring Table, but then in 1985, because the antelope were having their young in the same area that the Wilson's cattle were being grazed, the Refuge people decided that Big Spring was a natural kidding area, and that it needed to be protected. So they decided they had better move Harry and his cattle somewhere else. The next year they had him graze the Gooch Table where there hadn't been any livestock use for some time.

Not surprisingly, the following Spring, the antelope were found on the Gooch Table. Harry showed me a copy of a Refuge Memorandum concerning "Wilson - winter grazing", in which it was acknowledged, (when discussing a proposal to allow Winter grazing on the Gooch Table) that:

"In the spring of 1986, Gooch Table was grazed for the first time since the CRMP was implemented. Antelope use increased markedly the following year."

Within the same memorandum it is stated:

"The area north of highway 140 from Hazelton Lake to the Nevada-Oregon state line has been in non-use since the early 1940's... [In the early years] Big Spring was one of the few waters on this major stock driveway between southeastern Oregon and the railhead at Winnemucca. After it was fenced, this area has had only occasional trespass grazing. The importance of this area lies in its educational value as a study area... Surprisingly little response from non-use has occurred since livestock exclusion."

Yet, as Harry explained, even with their acknowledgement of the benefits of livestock grazing, and the fact that the range did not improve when large areas of the Refuge were excluded from livestock use, the Refuge people went right on pressuring and harassing the permittees until they either gave up and moved off the Refuge or became willing sellers. (Some, including Harry and Joy, had private land holdings within the Refuge at that time.)

The next thing that Harry did was take us to see the old Kinney Camp Ranch. Part of the uniqueness of the Kinney Camp Ranch was its buildings. The house, the barn, and even the chicken house were all made of native stone quarried right there in the Virgin Valley. There had been four of these small ranches purchased from the Dufurrena brothers when the Refuge was created, but the Kinney Camp Ranch empathized, more than the others, what had been lost after the government had taken management. Just below the old buildings was where the meadows used to be. The Dufurrena Family had put up between 250 and 300 ton of hay there. Now the meadows were gone and a huge gully had formed. A gully that gets deeper each year as the Spring runoff rushes to the alkali flats below, only to evaporate in the desert sun.

The green meadows bordered by willow and rosebush that once provided so much benefit to both wildlife and cattle are now gone. The only thing left being a few remnants of dead willow along the ditches. Marge Dufurrena Stephens, whom Harry and Joy introduced us to later that day, said that as a girl she had spent many hours picking wild currants along those ditches so that her mother could make jams and jelly. Today the wild current is gone, the willows are gone, as are the wildlife that once frequented the area.

Marge also told of the great numbers of sage grouse that were all through that country when she was a girl. She said that the Dufurrena Family had relatives in Alturas, California, about 100 miles to the West across the high desert country, and every year her dad, Tom Dufurrena would load up the family and make their yearly trip to Alturas. But the thing that she remembered most of those trips were the great numbers of sage grouse. She said that sage grouse would be in every draw, just thousands and thousands of sage grouse, all across the desert.

That evening, after we had returned to the ranch where we were to spend the night with Harry and Joy, Harry showed me a copy of a letter dated Nov. 5, 1981, concerning a "possible land exchange with the Wilsons". In its contents a comparison was made between the "offered property" owned by Harry and Joy and that of the Virgin Ranch where Harry and Joy had been living, and also the 1000 Creek Ranch, one of the ranches that had been abandoned, as had been the Kinney Camp Ranch - which context lent much credit to what Harry was saying. We quote the language as follows:

"Management of the Virgin Ranch, historically and at present, has been under a Special Use Permit to the Wilson family, first Harry's dad and now Harry. It is our belief that while not providing many wildlife benefits under existing conditions it is providing for some diversity and at the same time maintaining the integrity of the meadows themselves. One has only to look at Kinney Camp or 1000 Creek Ranch to witness the destruction of once productive meadow complexes through the management philosophy of "let nature take its course" as has been prescribed by some environmentalists that have toured the area. Gullies large enough to swallow a freight train are evident at 1000 Creek Ranch where all management was terminated some years age."

This statement does more to explain the reason for our frustration than anything a rancher could say. In the public's mind the BLM, Forest Service and Wildlife folks have held the moral high-ground for years. Few people have wanted to believe that bureaucracy is destructive to resources. So the agency people have been able to go on year after year subtly attacking ranching and mining for their own advantage while carefully ignoring the destruction by their own rank and file.

The agency people know livestock grazing is beneficial to resources and they know the best way of accomplishing successful grazing is via traditional practice. But they're also reminded that collectively they have other objectives, principally to gain absolute and complete control of the land, and they know that if they instigate certain policy, detrimental to private interest, it is only a matter of time until the people will be forced to sale or get out.

And today as I write, every last person who has ever had an interest of any kind in that area known as the Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge has been removed, including Harry and Joy and all of their neighbors.

After Bertha and I had returned home from our trip to the Sheldon, and I had time to contemplate all that Harry had shown us, I got to thinking, in all the time that Harry and Joy had shown us around the Refuge I hadn't seen one antelope. In fact, I hadn't even seen one sage grouse. That prompted me to write for a copy of the current "Season Recommendations" put out by the Nevada Department of Wildlife for that area. I was curious to see what kind of antelope numbers the wildlife agency was listing for the Sheldon. What NDOW's Season Recommendations revealed was that there were only 1,900 antelope on the Refuge. Which was not many at all in comparison to what were there when the Refuge was created.

The data found within the Season Recommendations also indicated why there were so few wildlife on the Refuge. The number of young being produced on the Refuge was far below what it should have been. Fall inventory counts for antelope for the year 1989 indicated only 15 fawn were being raised for every 100 doe on the Sheldon as compared to 42 fawn per every 100 head of does for the remainder of the state. Fall composition counts for deer were little better. Mule deer production on the Sheldon was only 23 young for every 100 does as compared to 44 fawn for every 100 does for the remainder of Northern Nevada. Every management unit surrounding the Refuge had much better production than did the Wildlife Refuge.

Thinking further I concluded that I would call Rich Capurro. Rich was as familiar with the Sheldon as anyone I knew - he and his family, beginning with his uncle and his father, had hunted on the Sheldon for years. When I got Rich on the phone I told him of my recent experiences - of what I was finding and that I had just been up on the Sheldon and had traveled over a good deal of the Eastern half of the Refuge but hadn't seen any sage grouse. Then I ask, "Rich, if you were going to hunt sage grouse on the Refuge, where would you go?" After thinking a moment Rich said, "Well, if you really wanted to find good sage grouse hunting you shouldn't even go hunting on the Refuge. You should go down on Buster Dufurrena's range, that's where all the sage grouse are."

And that's when it first began to dawn on me that what Rich was saying was absolutely right. Wherever sheepmen were still operating in the state was where you always found the most wildlife. That's why there were sage grouse on Buster Dufurrena's range, he was one of the last remaining sheepmen in that part of the country. And why not, isn't it the sheepmen that keep the predators down?

Then I began thinking of all the things my parents had told me over the years, particularly of predator control in the 1920's and 30's. Mom had talked a lot of growing up in Diamond Valley - of the time when she was only 3 or 4 years old, or in 1912 or so, when there had been a severe outbreak of rabies - and how her father had put up a fence around the yard to keep she and her younger brother and the ranch dogs from being bitten - and of the problems they had with the rabid coyotes biting the cattle - and how it seemed that every few days the family would hear a mad cow began to bawl down in the field, and of her father getting his gun to go put the poor animal out of its misery. She said that on the worst year of the outbreak her father lost about 40 head out of the 300 or so cattle he owned.

And so began a major outbreak of rabies across the Western United States, which later resulted in Congress budgeting \$125,000 to the National Biological Survey for a predator control program.

In the years that followed many young men supplemented their incomes by working as government trappers, my Mother's uncles being some of them. Later the program was expanded to include the use of toxins and airplanes. The effect was dramatic. Not only did the use of toxins reduce the numbers of coyotes and bobcats, but it kept the numbers of crows and skunks down as well.

I can remember Dad telling of the great numbers of crows (ravens) that were in Ruby Valley in the early 1920's. He said the crows were so thick they were just like blackbirds. He remembers the crows being so hungry that they were turning over cowpies so they could get at the bugs.

After a number of years of effective predator control the numbers of crows and skunks and many other predators began to dwindle. And as they did, more and more song birds began to appear. The same was true with deer and sage grouse. Where once deer had been so scarce that when someone did find a track they would follow it for days, now they were being seen everywhere. Sage grouse it was said, had become so thick they could be killed by the gunny sack full. And that was about the time that the Refuges were created.

The dramatic increase in mule deer that occurred between 1920 and 1940 is well recorded. In a special publication put out in 1964 by the Nevada Fish and Game Commission, titled *Nevada Wildlife*

Centennial Issue, it is mentioned that the Forest Service's population estimates for mule deer for the Ruby Mountains, were only 10 animals in 1921 and 1922, 30 in 1923 and 1924, and 45 in 1925. In 1926 there was an estimated 115 animals; in 1927, 125; no estimates were made for 1928 and 29. Then in 1930 there was an estimate of 500 animals. In 1932, 750; 1933, 1,000; 1934, 1,250; 1935, 1,325; 1936, 1,500; 1937, 1,600; 1938, 1,750; and in 1939, 3,000. By the mid 1940's the number of deer on the Rubys was incredible. No one knew for sure how many deer there were, but there were thousands upon thousands.

On the Toiyabes', deer populations seemed to increase sooner than on the Rubys. Many residents believed that by the mid-1930's, the mule deer population in the Toiyabes' had reached incredible proportions. Some Austin residents claimed that when the Toiyabe deer herd reached its peak, 500 to 1,000 deer could be counted on almost any Summer evening in Kingston Canyon alone. During the first Spring deer ride, conducted by the US Forest Service in 1938, along the foothills of the East side of the Toiyabe Range, 1,299 deer were counted in a distance of seven miles.

Many people argue that the large numbers of wildlife that were there on the Sheldon Refuge in the 1930's and 40's were typical of what existed prior to the coming of the white man, but no evidence exists in support of such theory.

When John Fremont passed through that country in 1843, his cartographer, Charles Preuss described a harsh and inhospitable land. On December 23 he wrote:

Grass is poor; God Knows how the animals will get through.

On December 31, (while traveling somewhere near the Black Rock Desert) Preuss wrote that on that day:

...they had found nothing but dry, shallow basins, their way "broken by gullies and impeded by sage, and sandy on the hills, where there is not a blade of grass"

And on January 5, he wrote:

The animals are dying one after another.

The only game they had seen since leaving Fort Vancouver some months before were "vast numbers of rabbits near Summer Lake". But then, as they proceeded through the country between the Black Rock Desert and Pyramid Lake they saw mountain sheep "bounding across some high cliffs, but the sheep were too quick for the men to get a shot". This was the only game that the Fremont party had seen on their entire trip from Fort Vancouver. It was not until after they crossed the Sierra somewhere to the South of the Truckee that they found their first real game.

In the book *The Clever Coyote*, by S.P. Young and H.H.T. Jackson (1951) Stockpole Co. Harrisburg, PA and Wildl. Inst., Washington DC p 411 and also in a paper, "*Predator Control and Wildlife Management*" Transactions of the Sixth North American Wildlife Conference (1941) pp 294 -289, reference is made to the effects of a predator control program that was conducted in the 1220's involving the area that was later to become the Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge.

"by 1920 recognition of the effects of predation was becoming wide spread. Estimated antelope numbers that year in south-central Oregon and North-western Nevada were 500 animals. Between 1921 and 1934, 7,500 coyotes and bobcats were systematically removed. In 1935 it was estimated that antelope numbers had increased to more than 10,000 animals."

So its quite clear why the Wilsons and Dufurrenas were seeing so many antelope and sage grouse in the 1930's and 40's. It wasn't because these species had been there forever. It was because of the effects of grazing and predator control.

There is no question that the Sheldon is one of the best possible examples showing the fallacy of allegations of resource destruction at the hands of private interest. The Sheldon is an area that once supported hundreds and hundreds of cattle - where sheep were run by the thousands - an area that was right on the historical stock driveway between Southern Oregon and the railhead at Winnemucca - an area that not only supported thousands of livestock but thousands and thousands of antelope as well - an area where sage grouse could be seen in every draw - where livestock use has been systematically reduced and now eliminated - where the government has had absolute and complete control - where there has never been pesticides or herbicides used - Yet after over 50 years of governmental control and management, with the agency people accomplishing everything they have ever wanted including the removal of all private interest from the land - they produce fewer wildlife then any other area in Northern Nevada.

On our last trip to the Sheldon, Harry gave me an additional document that is quite interesting. The document, which is titled CULTURAL RESOURCES INVENTORY: HART MOUNTAIN NATIONAL ANTELOPE REFUGE, SHELDON NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE, states in its abstract; "This report describes the results of an intensive survey and inventory of eight historic resources located on Hart Mountain Refuge and Sheldon Refuge".

On page 44 of the report there is an assessment of the Kinney Camp Ranch which discusses the importance of the old rock structures from a historical perspective. The discussion is quite interesting. It states:

"The area adjacent to the ranch was once an irrigated, productive wet meadow, supplying hay for ranchers' livestock, and providing habitat for a variety of wildlife species, Now it is an inhospitable greasewood flat with a gaping gully running through it rapidly undercutting the road. The area is used little by wildlife. The site provides a good illustration of the effects of man's activities on the environment especially when compared to other areas on the Refuges where ongoing irrigation and haying is providing wildlife habitat and historic buildings are still in use."

The above describes very well the loss that occurs when private stewardship is removed from the land, but it does not express the injustice to those who are forced to leave their homes and livelihoods. We would do well to ask ourselves, have we Americans forgotten our commitment to justice? Because if we have, then what do we amount to, and how will it end.

MULE DEER

1989 NEVADA DEER SEASON NORTHERN NEVADA HERD COMPOSITION SUMMARY

MGMT. UNITS	1989 FALL HERD		1990 SPRING HERD		
	COMPOSITION		COMPOSITION		
	BUCKS/ 100 DOES	FAWNS/ 100 ADULTS	FAWNS/ 100 ADULTS	PERCENT LOSS	
011,012,013	28	27	18		N. WASHOE & W. HUMBOLDT
014	38	28	11		WASHOE
015	20	37	36		W. WASHOE
021	21	30	30		S. WASHOE
022	41	34	29		S. WASHOE
031	27	44	29		N. HUMBOLDT
032	28	43	26		N.W. HUMBOLDT
033	29	23	20		SHELDON
034	26	34	18		W. HUMBOLDT
035	30	49	35		HUMBOLDT
041-046	34	37	41		PERSHING & S. HUMBOLDT
051	28	40	32		SANTA ROSA
061-065	18	64	40		INDEPENDENCE
066,067,068	21	55	41		TUSCARORA
071,079,081	19	59	42		O'NEIL & JARBRIDGE
101-108	22	59	42		RUBY
111-115	20	41	27		SPRING VALLEY
121	25	44	37		N. EGAN & CHERRY CREEK
131,132,133	15	33	26		WHITE PINE - QUINN
141-146	20	50	29		EUREKA
151-155	23	47	31		LANDER
NORTHERN NEVADA		44	32		
SHELDON		23	20		

SHELDON - "Recruitment of fawns to the yearling age class was below maintenance levels for the population for the third year in a row."
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The above data was taken from the 1990, Nevada Department of Wildlife MULE DEER SEASON RECOMMENDATIONS.

ANTELOPE

1989 NORTHERN NEVADA ANTELOPE SUMMER HERD COMPOSITION

AREA	BUCKS/100 DOES	FAWN/100 DOES	AREA
1A	54	44	NORTH
1B	59	45	WASHOE
1C	30	64	COUNTY
1D	29	50	
3A	38	54	HUMBOLDT
3B	43	51	COUNTY
3C	55	15	SHELDON
4A	44	64	W. PERSHING
5	38	49	HUMBOLDT
6A	38	56	NORTH FORK
6B	19	48	ROCK CREEK
6C	35	30	OWYHEE DESERT
7C	48	57	O'NEIL
7D	51	54	BISHOP CREEK
7E	32	28	BROWNS BENCH
8A	67	60	GRANITE
8B	42	29	PEQUOP TOANA
10A	29	M	RUBY VALLEY
10B	34	M	STEPTOE VALLEY
11A	31	20	ANTELOPE VALLEY
11B	28	20	SPRING VALLEY
11C	43	23	SNAKE VALLEY
14A	M	M	
14B	56	29	LANDER - EUREKA
Northern Nevada average		42	Fawn/100 Doe
Sheldon		15	Fawn/100 Doe

The above data was taken from the 1990, Nevada Department of Wildlife, SEASON RECOMMENDATIONS - ANTELOPE.