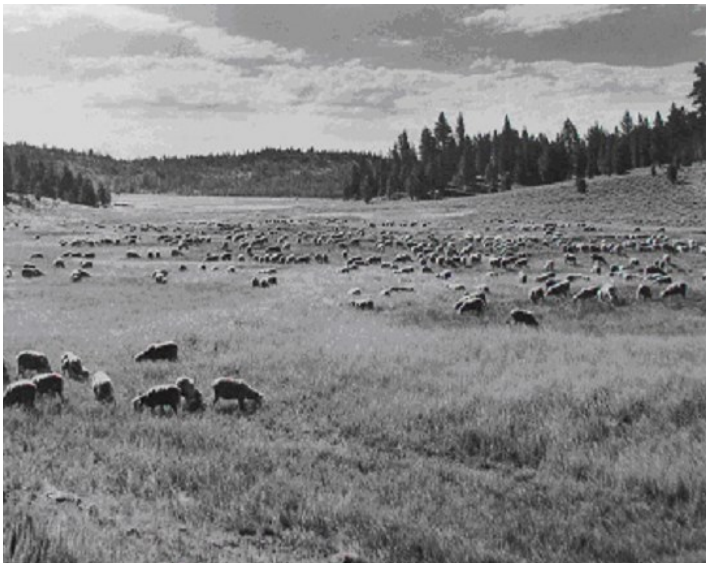
Tahoe National Forest

Sheep Grazing History

Ranchers have grazed sheep and cattle on the Tahoe National Forest since the Gold Rush-era. Many new arrivals turned their attention to selling meat as the mining communities rapidly grew in the 19th century. Ranches were soon established throughout California, including the Sierra Nevada and the open lands of Nevada.



Sheep grazing on the Tahoe National Forest, courtesy of Terry Graff.

In late spring, as forage dried up at lower elevations, sheepherders moved their flocks into higher elevation meadows and valleys. At the beginning of the 20th century, as many as 100,000 sheep were grazing in the Tahoe National Forest. By 1907, Forest Service rangers were working with stock ranchers to regulate grazing because of over use by sheep and conflicting grazing rights. They created "allotments," defined by geographic barriers like ridges and streams, limited the number of sheep in each allotment, and assigned them to specific ranchers. Each year, the effects of grazing were monitored so the health of the range could be maintained.

Some higher elevation areas, such as the White Rock Allotment near Mt. Lola, were gradually phased out and closed. Other allotments remain active today as part of the agricultural economy of the region.

Sheep Raising

Raising sheep is a year-round job. In the spring, at valley ranches, sheep are sheared and ewes give birth. By June, flocks are moved up into the mountains. There they remain all summer, gradually moving to higher elevations as they follow the forage. In the fall, after the lambs are shipped to market, the remaining sheep are taken back down to the valleys. They often feed on stubble in harvested farm fields. In the spring, the cycle begins again.

Each summer, owners divide their sheep into bands of 1,000 ewes, each with a lamb. A herder and his dogs stay with the band all summer, moving them every few days to new feeding areas. The lambs are sold in the fall. During summer, herders never leave the sheep. 'Tenders' bring food and supplies up to the herders. A single tender is responsible for as many as eight herders at a time. In the past, tenders lived in summer base camps known as "sheep camps." These sheep camps were the center of the sheep rancher's operation during the summer months.

Basque Sheepherders

In the early days, tenders and herders were usually Basque men. From the 1890s to the 1970s, Basque herders dominated the sheep industry. Basques from Spain and France immigrated in search of better job opportunities in the sheep country of the Western United States. Many worked their way up, eventually becoming owners who continued to hire Basque workers.

By the 1940s, nearly every sheep camp on the Tahoe National Forest had a hand-built traditional Basque

outdoor oven on-site. Every five days, the tender baked as many as ten loaves of bread in the oven using a 50-pound sack of flour. Making bread was hard work, requiring baking skills and strong muscles to knead the dough.

More information about Basque history and sheep camps in the Sierra Nevada can be found at the University of Nevada Reno Center for Basque Studies website at www.unr.edu/basque-studies.

Today, there are roughly 6,000 head of sheep grazing on the Tahoe National Forest, less than a tenth of the number of a century ago. The days of the summer sheep camps and baking bread in the ovens are over. Tenders now stay in nearby towns and deliver store bought food and supplies to the herders. The herders, in turn, have given up their tents for trailers.

Historic Sheep Camps

A sheep camp used by the Wheeler Sheep Company (1910-1960) can be found at the Kyburz Flat Interpretive Area located off Highway 89 North between Truckee and Sierraville. A reconstructed Basque oven built in 1991 by Dr. Jose Mallea and volunteers from the Center for Basque Studies at the University of Nevada, Reno, stands at the site. Sheep camps with standing structures are rare in California. There are only four recorded sheep camps on the Tahoe National Forest. The historic camps that remain today are an important part of our local and state history. They remind us of the role that Basque sheepherders played in the history of the Sierra Nevada, and preserving them honors their memory.

Irene Gallues-Giossi with her husband Ernest in front of brick oven with a fresh loaf of bread at Wheeler Sheep Camp, courtesy of Irene Giossi.