

100 Years of Conservation and Public Service in the Medicine Bow

"The Shepherd and the Cowboy"

Prior to the formation of the Medicine Bow National Forest, sheep and cattle had been grazed indiscriminately, with larger operations usurping the most range. The sheep industry got underway in the late 1870's and early 1880's. The Savage Brothers were one of the first permittees on the Medicine Bow National Forest. Other sheep enterprises came to the Bow. One of the larger sheep operations was conducted by the Cosgriff Brothers, who grazed as many as 125,000 sheep at peak periods. The Sierra Madres had been so badly overgrazed that in 1916 Supervisor Blackhall stated:

"The grazing industry of this section is nearly extinct, brought on by overstocking; in fact with the exception of that portion which is protected by the long period that the snow lies on the ground, the short summer season and the early advent of winter, it may be said that the country is destitute of all forage necessary to support animal life."

Gradually the Forest Service instituted grazing procedures designed to control the number of livestock using the forest each season and charging minimal grazing fees. Grazing practices involved moving livestock from lower elevation winter pastures to the nearby mountains for summer range. As the number of livestock was gradually reduced, formal grazing districts and allotments were established so that a certain number of sheep or cattle for each outfit grazed in a specified portion of the forest. Stock driveways were established throughout the forest, with counting corrals located at the boundaries.

The major stock driveways in the Sierra Madres were the Savery-Fireline Trail, the Deep Creek-Fireline Trail, the Elkhorn Driveway, the Encampment-Staler Driveway, and a small segment of the Hogpark Trail to Colorado. A definite trailing schedule had been developed by 1914 to avoid delays in entering the forest.

The general grazing period for sheep was set from June 15 to Sept 30. The charge was five cents a head and two additional cents for pregnant ewes. Cattle and horses grazed from April 15 to Sept 30 at 25 cents a head for cattle and 35 cents for horses. The Forest Service initiated management techniques that benefitted both the range and the livestock. The practice of "bedding out" was instituted for sheep (bedding the sheep where they stopped for the night instead of returning them to the same bedding ground; thereby reducing the impact on the forage) and the practice of placing salt for cattle at strategic locations across allotments, so that animals would be more evenly distributed.

Shepherders in Wyoming were often French or Spanish Basque immigrants. Those who earned their wages in sheep often became owners of large sheep operations themselves. The Basque shepherd was probably the hardest hit by the end of open range. In the early years of shepherding, a practice known as "tramp herding" was

developed, by which a herder could earn his wages in sheep, which remained with the employers herd until the herder had enough sheep to start his own business. He would then send for a replacement by calling on a friend or relative in the Old Country. This system stimulated a steady flow of French and Spanish Basques to the US. However, it was dependent on free and open range, since the new Basque owner could not afford to buy or lease lands. The Taylor Grazing Act removed the opportunity for the Basque herder to advance in this manner. As a result of the Act and the immigration quota system the sheep industry experienced a severe manpower shortage after 1934.