SHEEPMAN

Idaho's high, wide country is home to Frank Shirts' sheep. He wouldn't want to be anyplace else or have any other job. Words and photos by C.J. Hadley.

Frank Shirts is big and burly, happy in the mountains, and a good rancher. He looks like actor Brian Dennehy—barrel-chested, with a steady gaze and a crooked grin. He's checking his herders and sheep in the Payette National Forest, taking dirt roads higher and higher towards the peaks of Pollock Mountain. "The sheep have already taken their noon siesta," he says, "and they'll be moving higher."

The second oldest and the first boy in a family of 10 children, a lot was expected of Frank. But he expected more of himself. "I sold my first lamb when I was seven years old," he says with an easy grin. "I got $20.50 for it."

Frank's parents live in Weiser, Idaho, 25 miles south of Cambridge. "My dad still works 10 to 12 hours a day and he's 80 years old. He sheared sheep for over 40 years; he traveled all over. He'd shear sheep in spring and then log in the summer. He worked all the time. We were raised pretty tough but we had enough to eat. We were raised in Cambridge, learned what a dollar was, and were taught how to work. None of us ever got in any bad trouble."

Always industrious, at age 15, Frank went to the Aleutian Islands in the summer to tie wool fleeces. He worked for two months. "There were 10,000 sheep out there on Umnak Island and they would graze the rich lush pastures in the summer months and in the winter the ewes would be close to the beach. They never had to feed them, and raised them for wool because there was no way to get the meat out of there. Sheep shearers came from the states to work every year."

Frank Shirts, in the high, brushy country of the Payette National Forest in Idaho. Frank runs sheep in Idaho and Oregon. "The country's rough," he says, "but it's good for sheep, and the sheep are good for the country."

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Fall is shipping time for Shirts Brothers Sheep. Just before dark one evening in the high country near New Meadows, Ron's band comes into the corral. At daybreak, the lambs are sorted and loaded on trucks and shipped to market. The next evening, Frank's band comes to the same corral for shipping the following morning. Photo shows Frank's lambs at the Crooked River corrals northeast of Boise.

The crew boss didn't have much patience and didn't like the kids from Anchorage who couldn't tie the bundles. "One of the shearers said, 'I know a kid who can tie that wool but you'll have to fly him clear up here from the states.'"

Now they just bag the wool, they don't tie it, "but used to be you had a string, kind of a paper twine, and it would melt in the fleece. You would hold the wool between your legs and tie it into a bundle. Then they put it in the bags. There's an art to tying, it takes a long time to learn, and it's hard work."

It rained a lot in the Aleutians and shearing can't be done if the fleece is wet. On rainy days, Frank worked on the ranch, cleaned barns, rode a horse, anything he was asked to do. "I came back both years with about a thousand dollars. It's still in this outfit today. I kept it. I didn't go waste it. I bought sheep."

When they were kids, Frank and brother Bob bought a few Suffolk ewes. They raised purebred bucks. Frank was a natural entrepreneur. "Bob and I never got around to college but my other brothers and sisters did. We worked in the timber. We logged and saved our money."

At 24, Frank went to work for the late B.B. Burroughs, running his purebred outfit of black-faced Suffolk bucks. "Most of them went to the Basques in Bakersfield. Most big purebred Suffolk sheep have Burroughs blood. White-faced ewes and black-faced bucks make big meaty lambs. First time I saw them, they looked twice as big as a normal buck. People would flock in to his ranch to buy those bucks. We sold over a thousand a year to sheep ranchers in California."

Frank, Bob and Tim, all bachelors, ran sheep together for years. "We bought our first band of sheep when I was 25 years old back in 1978," Frank says. Bob was 23, Tim was 20 and the brothers did all the work, including shearing. Tim did most of the herding in spring and summer. "I don't know if Tim liked it; it gets lonely. But when I herded, the longer I was out there, the more I liked it."

The deal worked well. "We went out and made a little money and we just put it in a fund and did that for years; that was until one of us got married and it seemed like trouble started coming." Frank laughs. "Bob always wanted to be a farmer, and was the first to marry. After that, we couldn't agree."

Frank left, taking 160 black-faced ewes and a note for the value of his share. He left behind the Hells Canyon range, three bands of good young ewes and his life till then. A few years later Bob sold his sheep to baby brother Ron.

Frank bought a house in Wilder, Idaho, on a few acres, and built some corrals to raise bucks. "I was going to have 400 or 500 bucks maybe, but it wasn't three months before I had a band of ewes."

It was easy in flat Idaho farm country for Frank to feed sheep on alfalfa stubble in fall and winter, cleaning the fields and spreading manure for the farmers. The sheep were also fed thousands of tons of onions, some bruised, not good enough to go to market.

"Sheep love onions. We spread them in the fields—with some alfalfa because they have to have roughage—and they eat up to 10 pounds a day. If they didn't give the onions to the sheep, they would go to waste and the farmers would have to bury them all."

He says he was crazy to get a band of sheep so soon after he got rid of them. "I had no place to lamb them, nothin', but I found a place to lamb and that next year I got a little grass here and there and that fall, of course, I had to buy another band."

He leased some ground on the Owyhees and ran there for three or four years until the outfit was sold. "I had spring range, and by that time three bands of ewes. I had big lambs

and I was grazing them on the Kuna Desert south of Boise. The Forest Service had some allotments but wouldn't give them to me as promised. I don't know why."

Once again he had no place to run, so he tried to sell his bands but the price was bad. He found places, "over here and over there," and got through the summer. Then he heard that the Stringer brothers were selling their outfit in eastern Oregon. They gave Frank a five-year deal to buy it with enough country to run seven bands on the desert in Oregon in spring. Frank took the sheep back to the mountains in Idaho in early summer and fall. "I never had problems with winter range because I got those farmers' fields."

He bought another allotment from Rob Little in the late '80s. By this time he had eight bands. "I didn't want any more!" But Rob's cousin Brad Little was selling his outfit in 2000 and asked Frank to buy it. "I'm not buying it," Frank said. But a year later Brad (now an Idaho state senator) made Frank an offer he couldn't refuse. That added four more bands. It was country northeast of Boise.

Little's range connected to Frank's, giving him BLM, forest and state lands to run 14 bands of sheep in lots of country. "It's rugged but if you know how to herd it, you make good lambs."

The sheep graze 50 miles into Oregon and across the Boise Front through the mountains to Atlanta, a little mountain town next to the Sawtooth Mountains. "We work the sheep north above McCall to Hells Canyon, bordering my old range that Ron now has."

The reintroduction of the gray wolf into the northern Rockies in 1995 forced Frank to change the way he runs his outfit and the expense of running bands with wolves is escalating rapidly. He now sends two herders with each band, adds Great Pyrenees guard dogs to protect the sheep from predators, and uses border collies to help the herders move them. Camp is moved every two or three days, using three horses and four pack mules per band. The herders stay close to the sheep, gently guiding them to new bed-ground each night, trying to protect them from predators.

"Sheep graze each area once, which is better for the lambs...and we have lots of country to graze and the land is treated with respect. Sheep graze downhill in the morning and come back up to the top of the ridge at night. That's natural for sheep. I think they feel more secure. The next morning they are moved down onto more lush pastures, continuing the whole season, grazing the brushy hillsides. This keeps fire danger down and adds to the health of the forest."

Frank thinks the government workers would have an easier job without domestic sheep. "There are good people in the Forest Service," he says, "same with the BLM, but they have their hands tied and the anti-livestock radicals are after them all the time. The enviros think they are saving the world and all they are doing is damaging industries while destroying the forest."

The herders are mostly rural Peruvian mountain men. "I got guys who are in their forties who have been with me nine or 10 years. They come on a three-year contract, go home, and usually ask to renew. I don't have much of a turnover."

There are 28 herders working for Frank Shirts' outfit. "They are poor people when they come here. I take care of them. After three years, a herder can have $20,000 cash in his pocket. How many Americans can save $20,000? Some guys gain 25 pounds over here. They have a health plan. Their kids can go to college. I treat them with respect and they, in turn, take good care of my sheep."

Herders get housing during lambing; while in the fields they live in camp wagons; on the mountain they sleep in tents. If the herders don't come to the American West to herd sheep, they have few choices back home. "Their kids won't be going to school and they won't be fed enough. And after three years here they can go home. They are happy."

Frank's foreman Angel Montoya is from

PHOTO COURTESY SHIRTS FAMILY

Frank Shirts Sr., sheep shearer, logger, father of 10, with dog Spike as grandson Mike looks on. At 80, he still works, helping his sons with the sheep. This photo was taken in 1997.

Frank Shirts' allotment on the Payette National Forest is underused. Where there used to be dozens of bands of sheep, there are only a few. Predators are taking their toll and the forest needs to be cleaned and logged. This meadow is grazed by sheep, which is why it is so healthy.

Mexico and has been with Frank for 18 years. "I brought him in here green and he's good. He's got five kids back home and he makes good money. I give him a lot of credit for helping to build this outfit."

Angel's job is to check up to seven camps a week, to deliver supplies, to make sure sheep and herders are OK, and fix any problems. "I like it," Angel says. "Every day different bunch of sheep. Herders, border collies and big white dogs take care of it. Frank sets up camp and his herders really well with string of horses and mules. Sometimes we lose some sheep. Maybe in middle of the night, you have a bear or some wolves hit the band. When I started it was one man, one dog and one horse. It's easier for sheepherders now, moving camp."

Loggers worked these mountains regularly. There are many plantations—big pieces of land that were clear-cut and seeded. But logging is rare these days in the Payette—as it is in most national forests. "It's a jungle up here. It's going to burn, and then the enviros will throw lawsuits on the forest to stop the salvage logging from happening and the timber will be ruined before they get to it." Enviros allege they are protecting salmon, spotted owls and bull trout. The simple truth is they

Two herders go out on the range with each band of ewes and lambs in March and return in early November to alfalfa fields in the valley. The sheep are sheared and vaccinated before lambing season begins in January. That's hard work. About a third of the men go home in mid-November after shearing—their contract is up. Most return in three months, signing on for another three years.

don't want the dead trees used.

"Yesterday, a herder told me at McCall I had six sheep killed by a falling tree. They are out grazing and you get a little wind on one of these burns and the trees have been standing there dead for eight or nine years and you know they are going to fall. The sad thing is it was good timber after the burn. There ought to be a law that if the timber goes bad and the enviros lose the lawsuit, they ought to have to pay for that wasted timber. It's crazy leaving that standing. Taxpayers are paying both ways. None of the politicians seem to want to fight 'em and the Endangered Species Act is the best weapon they got."

The cost of running several small countries is spent on endangered species every year. Add to that the cost of lawsuits by environmental groups to stop production, plus endless government studies, and multimillion-dollar academic and environmental-group grants.

"Loggers and ranchers are the real environmentalists," Frank says with frustration. "We care about that land. We were raised on it. We don't want it raped or butchered but used the way God intended."

There are a lot of plantations in Frank's range. "The sheep come into these old clearcuts and graze and it's the best thing for this country. They take the brush away from the newly planted little trees. If the sheep don't clean it out, the trees will choke up and suffer and not grow as well."

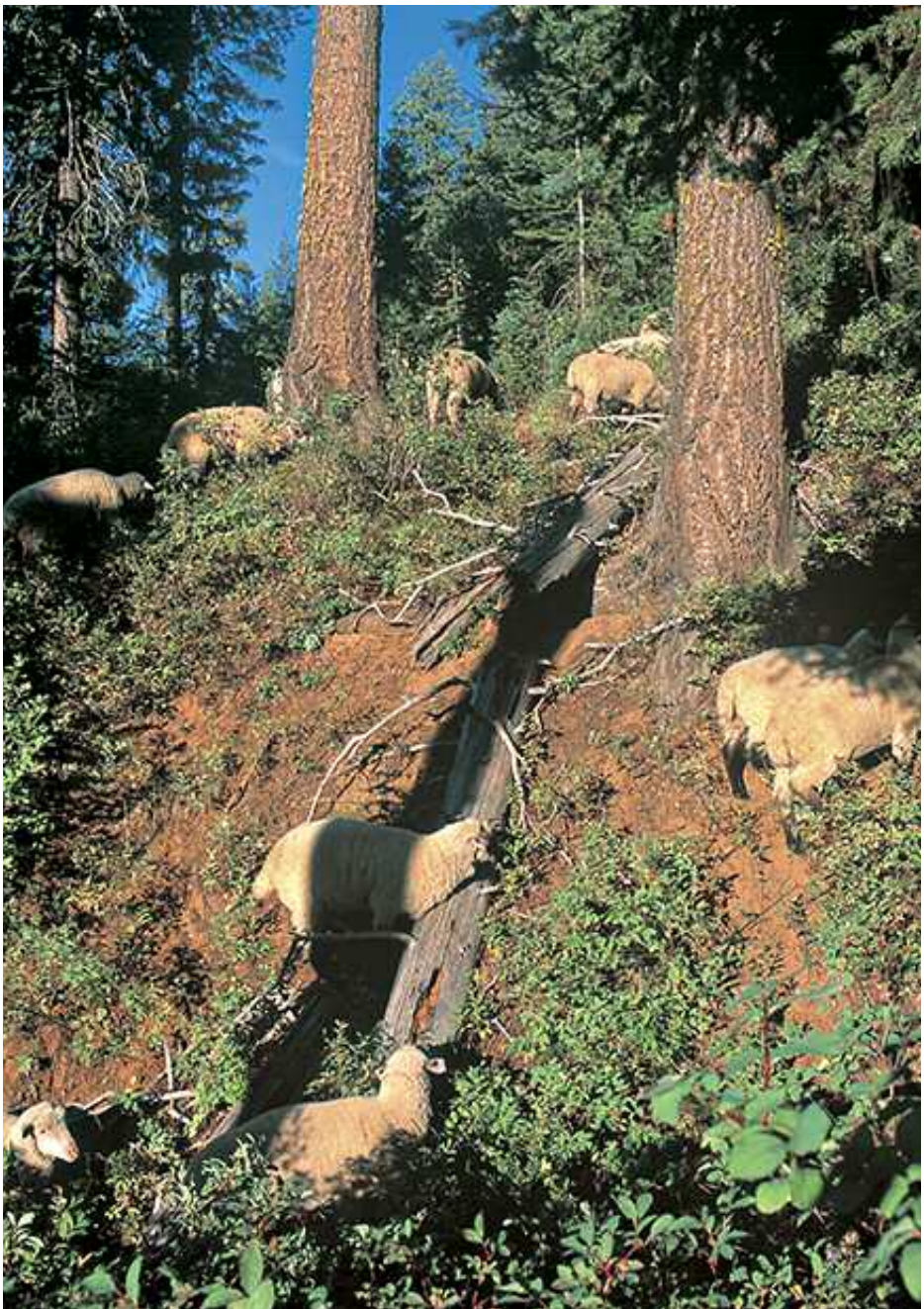
Frank culls his ewes at about seven years old. They twin a lot and sometimes drop triplets, "but a ewe can only raise twins so we try to bond the extra to another mother that might have lost her lamb or only had one." He usually gets a 150-percent lamb crop and they average 130 pounds at shipping time. The band is a mix of Rambouillet, Suffolks and Columbias. All black-faced crosses go to market, "but we want the white because they last longer, the ewes herd better, are hardier, and have better-quality wool with more value."

This is good sheep country, the creek bottoms healthy, because the sheep don't like to hang around. "If you didn't eat those meadows it would be all tall nasty grass and it's like your yard, it'll die. Even with as many sheep as we have up here, they don't hurt the riparian areas. And this time of year, don't you want those firebreaks on top of those ridges?" Where the sheep bed, they disturb the ground and create a natural firebreak. Next spring it grows better, because it has been fertilized and disrupted.

Sheep have been grazing this country for more than a century. Two ridges over is Hells Canyon and the Snake River, old domestic sheep territory where 250,000 domestic sheep used to graze until the feds decided they wanted to replace them with wild sheep.

"They want this country for bighorns. They are trying to take it away from us. I don't know how the bighorns survive with all the predators. We don't ever see them. They are trying to buy my brother's permit where he goes all the way down on the Snake River. Now they want all of my range across from Hells Canyon. They want to close it. Why would anyone want to kick the sheep out of these brushy canyons? My God, it won't be 20 years before they'll be paying millions of dollars to clean it up to prevent fire, and the old sheep men are going to be gone. Who's going to keep the land looking as good as this? The enviros? The Forest Service?"

Logging has been disappearing for decades due to spotted owls, faulty science, litigation, and opposition to salvage logging by people who don't understand renewable natural resources. "Salvaging benefits everyone. All these little towns had mills in them and they had jobs for good, honest people who were producing something for the country. They don't have any good payrolls in those towns any more. We are importing almost half of our lumber right now while our own timber is rotting. It doesn't make any sense. Look at that hill—dead trees, so many



The herders work the band through brushy fingers in little canyons. "They never graze twice any place. Those lambs are just like kids in a candy store; they are looking for different tasting forbs, the flowers and the brush, you know. We raise really good lambs here, but you gotta herd 'em."

"There are so many trees, they need to be logged. And enviros who stop salvage logging, should pay for the expense of not keeping the forest healthy." BELOW: Frank meets with brother Ron and his sister Ann's son, Jason, on a dirt road up in the mountains. Jason, a future sheep rancher, is hauling Ron's cull ewes. Tomorrow they ship lambs.

trees. If they'd let the loggers come in and get those burned trees out, that young timber will come and be more healthy. This is your future old growth."

Smith Mountain at 8,000 feet is the highest peak on the Shirts brothers sheep range. The grass is lush. "If there are no sheep grazing, this country just brushes up and becomes more flammable. I guarantee you there's not any range in Idaho hurt by sheep. Look at California. The brush that keeps burning every summer used to be sheep country. The sheep helped improve the ground."

One of Frank's herders told him once: "You know, Frank, when you get into those creeks that are really brushed up, there's no fish in there. When they open up because of the sheep, you see the fish."

About 10 years ago, when the bighorn planting was at its peak, representatives of the U.S. Forest Service, Foundation for North American Wild Sheep, Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife, Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife, Bureau of Land Management, and the Idaho Department of Fish & Game all signed a letter saying that domestic sheep would never be held responsible for any die-offs, were not causing any problems, and that they would take all responsibility. "They said they would never come after any domestic sheep range. Now they want to come in here and take it over." (See related stories.)

For years there were hardly any elk in western Idaho. When Frank was a boy they planted a few. His dad took him on that mountain when he was five years old, driving cattle north of Cambridge. "I never saw an elk until I was 21 years old and then they just exploded in this country. But these darn wolves are going to kill them all."

Wolves are seldom seen; they are cagey and come out at night. "Half of my bands hear them howling at night. They are afraid. My guys stay right with the sheep. One of my herders near McCall said there were four wolves that came in to his sheep. He shot two or three times and couldn't make them move. Finally he shined a flashlight in their eyes and they took off."

But in 2006 Frank and Ron were not so lucky. In September, during one night of bloody carnage, Ron lost 158 head of yearling ewes and lambs to a large pack of wolves. In the coming weeks, Ron and hunters found 17 of his and Bob's cows and calves dead, with wolf tracks all around—but none of them were confirmed kills by the government. They were short 40 head of cattle at gathering time. And within weeks, Frank lost 86 head of his

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Frank and foreman Angel Montoya, during shipping a few years ago. Angel has worked with Frank for 18 years. "I brought him in here from Mexico, green," Frank says, "and he's good. I give him a lot of credit for helping to build this outfit."

own yearlings, also to wolves, most not eaten but all savagely mutilated.

"We know what killed them, but if you're not there the next day, it's hard to prove, and it doesn't go down as killed livestock in the government's counts, which the wolf advocates use against us. Defenders of Wildlife brags about compensating ranchers for wolf-killed livestock and produces fancy ads to collect money for that, but its payments are nothing compared to the real costs of raising and breeding high quality ewes, which won't be raising lambs for the next seven years. The wolves might kill 30 in a small area and scatter 50 more in rugged country for miles, killing most. The rancher never finds them again. They classify them as missing when they damn well know why they are missing. They never compensate for those."

Even though the ranchers can kill wolves in Idaho if they are bothering the livestock, it's tough to get a shot at them at night. "Enviros talk about wolves killing the old and the sick but I'll bet my guys have counted hundreds of dead elk calves over the years. They eat them alive. Those elk are scared to death, most are bunched up, I suppose for protection. I think that's why there are no bighorn sightings up here. It seems like those bighorns are protecting themselves by moving across Hells Canyon into Oregon."

Seven Devils looms to the east at the top of Hells Canyon. On Smith Mountain there's a Forest Service fire lookout. "There used to be thousands of sheep in the canyon. My dad went down there and sheared for years. They took them up and down the river on motorboats and sheared for six or seven ranches. Good ranches. Sheep wintered in that canyon and they never fed them. A lot of them would trail out in the summer and graze this country out through here. They turned it into a wilderness area and then of course added the bighorn and they bought these ranches out. Now nothing is down in there. Goes to waste. The ranchers sold for a lot but the canyon needs them to be there."

In many places, the country has too much feed. "What they ought to do is graze it a lot harder. There's so much fuel laying around that if a fire gets going, it'll burn so hot that it'll ruin the ground for decades. Best thing would be to log these trees out of here a bit.

"The enviros think they are saving the trees when they are destroying them. Less trees and they would be healthier, not so prone to disease. They want to kick me out of the mountains and I raise a couple of million pounds of live lambs a year. This country's in beautiful shape. Why would you want to import lamb when they are so good here?"

Tinkling bells and baaing can be heard as the sheep climb the mountain. Big, white woolly dogs are scattered about, and border collies keep the sheep together. It's shortly after their noon siesta. Of the 2,300 in the band, there are 840 ewes, 10 wearing bells, and the rest are beautiful, big lambs.

"If I ever just wanted to retire, I'd always want to run a couple of bands of sheep and this is where I would want to run them. I love this country and the bloomy, fat lambs it produces. This lamb is as organic as you can get. It's hard to beat a high mountain lamb."

Shipping lasts from early August until early September—about 30 days. "The herders have known the shipping dates for months. Some have worked the country for years and know where the fine feed is. When those lambs hit that shipping corral they are going to be prime." After shipping, the bucks join the ewes in the mountains for 30 to 60 days, then the bands slowly graze their way home. "We will be getting bucks in and out, meeting the herders. They leave the bucks in till they hit the pastures down in the valley in November. They'll breed hard for three weeks."

If you want to find Frank Shirts, look for his sheep. He doesn't take many days off except when the Boise State football team is playing. "I'm a big fan. I go with my old buddies and drink a little beer."

Of the 10 Shirts children, Frank is the only one left unmarried. At 53, broad and handsome, he's an attractive possibility. "Nine of them had been married but one got divorced a couple of years after I left. That was Bob. I think he wished he'd kept me instead of her!"

Former rancher Brad Little says of Frank: "He could have a lot of girlfriends but if the sheep are in trouble, he's gone. For Frank, the sheep always come first." ■

C.J. Hadley is publisher/editor of RANGE.

A Brother Watches

Heartbreak in Hells Canyon.
By Joseph P. Shirts. Photos courtesy Shirts family.

Today is June 15, 2007, one of the saddest days I have ever experienced. I watch my brother, Ron Shirts of Shirts Brothers Sheep, load his lambs on trucks this morning...maybe for the last time.

Ron at a sheep wagon with very pregnant wife Leslie and their sons Jack and Willy. Wagons are used by the herders in the valley.

My brother's wife has been crying all night, saying, "Please don't sell the lambs." What choice does he have? He has no place to go after finding out on June 13th at 5:30 p.m. that he would not be allowed to take two of his three bands of sheep back on his forest allotment. It has been a long spring, trying to negotiate with the Forest Service and trying to deal with others who know little and care less about the logistics of managing 1,880 head of ewes with young lambs by their sides.

My brother tried to stop the loss of his range, but a Federal District Court judge failed to grant his request to go back to the forest allotment on June 18th. He was out of feed. Every minute that passed without his sheep on good feed jeopardized the health of the lambs, as well as cost him money. The lambs could lose five pounds in one day if he did not act immediately after receiving the June 13th decision. A selling price of $1.13 per pound on 3,200 head of lambs could cost him $18,000...in one day!

More than $100,000 has been spent in legal and consulting fees and related costs trying to maintain his entitlement to go back to the forest allotment on June 18 and to save his 2007 lamb crop—maybe his best ever. He had received pasture in exchange for building two miles of fence through rocky terrain. He had promised to feed a rancher's cows later this summer if his sheep could graze on their pasture now. It had been a stressful spring, routing the sheep over the same areas twice in places that should have been grazed only once, because the first band should have been on the allotment on May 16th, a month ago.

It started quite reasonably. In 1997, the U.S. Forest Service and the Idaho Department

Ron Shirts, age 13, in Hells Canyon, on his favorite mule Jasper. He herded a band on his own.

of Fish & Game and others wanted to transplant bighorn sheep into the Hells Canyon area. Believing that this could be appropriate, all involved agreed that the transplants could occur as long as domestic sheep operators were not harmed due to any claim of disease transmission between bighorn sheep and domestic sheep. All relied upon and followed this agreement for many years.

In 2005, however, the agreement was inappropriately characterized. This resulted in the Forest Service preparing in early 2006 a "risk analysis" of disease transmission between bighorns and domestic sheep. Beyond the serious problems with the analysis, it also encouraged many third parties to believe that grazing should be terminated immediately on the Shirts Brothers Sheep allotment before the Forest Service completed its analysis. Regretfully, after several rounds, the Forest Service let these third parties have their way, at least for the 2007 grazing season.

My brother looks at the dry hills in the distance. He must find a suitable place to graze his ewes until October and then maybe he will be able to get back on his forest allotment next year. He knows that will depend on many variables, including the outcome of the analysis. He remains hopeful that at least the Forest Service and others will follow the commitments made in 1997 so as to maintain the viability of both his domestic sheep operations and the bighorn sheep in the Hells Canyon area and the Payette National Forest.

He had found out just five days before turnout on May 11th that he could not turn out his early band for three weeks. Worse yet, he could not graze his remaining two bands on the forest allotment in 2007 at all. Only five days before turnout...five days in an industry that needs notice of at least a year and should have three to five years to phase out its operations in order to limit the liquidation losses that occur.

It made Ron question the judicial system when he had to get off his allotment for a bighorn sheep that might wander onto his range during the 2007 grazing season. This was something that hadn't happened in the last three grazing seasons, according to the Forest Service's own information. He had been told as late as February 1st by the Forest Service to plan on turning out and grazing his three bands of sheep as he had normally and

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historically done.

He thinks about things the Forest Service has told him: "We keep our promises." And the Foundation of North American Wild Sheep has said: "We will never hurt you." He now understands that some will say anything and spin half-truths to keep their careers or their causes alive.

His anger turns to heartbreak as he thinks back to age 13 when he herded a band by himself in Hells Canyon. He remembers how

This Is America

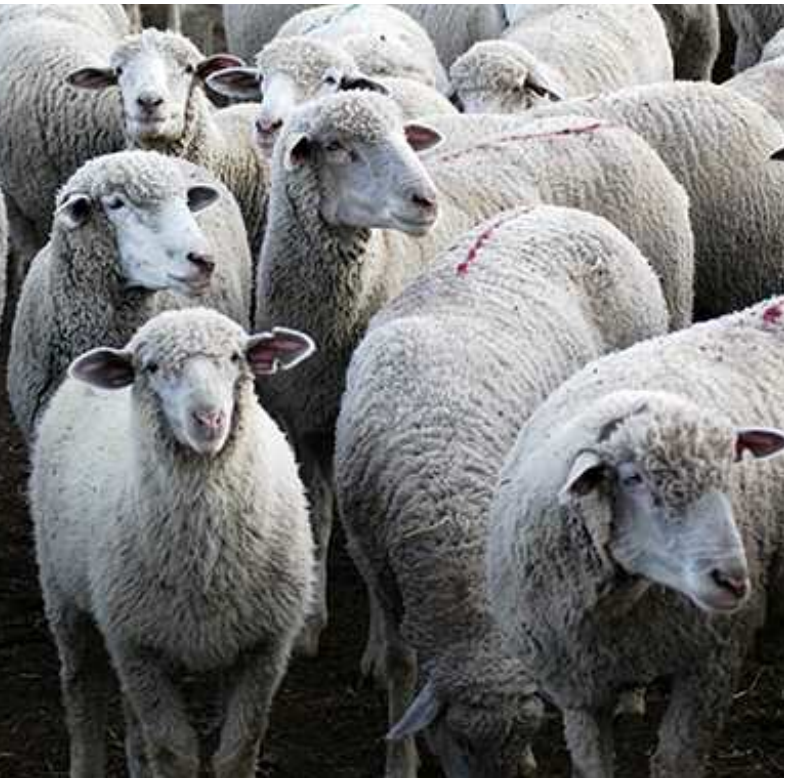
Where a deal is still supposed to be a deal. By Judy Boyle

In the West, the total acres of private property are quite limited with the majority of land in federal management. This makes grazing permits an essential piece of a ranching operation. The federal government recognized this fact through the 1934 Taylor Grazing Act. Priority adjudication of federal allotments was granted to ranches which had grazed the federal lands for at least five years and which held sufficient private land and water as "base property." Many Idaho ranches have used the same range since the 1860s.

Grazing allotments are purchased in connection with the ranch; family heirs must pay inheritance tax on the value of the allotment; and permits are collateral for bank loans. Although ranchers have a recognized vested property interest and value in their federal grazing allotments, grazing permits are under constant seige. Decisions by federal agencies, lawsuits by environmental groups, and/or endangered species' listings reduce or eliminate ranchers' ability to use their allotments.

In 1993, neighbors to the Shirts brothers were facing loss of accessing their federal grazing allotments due to the listing of salmon. The federal agencies required temporary "bridges" built over every stream, no matter how small, on the grazing allotment to prevent the sheep from stepping into the water. Even though the grazing areas were many miles from where the salmon swam, biologists didn't want a grain of dirt to cloud the water. At great expense, and with much hard work, ranchers complied. The bridges were proven ridiculous shortly thereafter.

The allotment arrangement is somewhat comparable to owning a business with a 100-year lease on the building and lot from which you are operating. You have improved the building and are well established at the location. In year 30, someone walks by your business and decides it offends them. They sue to shut you down, and a judge agrees. You must remove everything by tomorrow morning and have nowhere to move. That is the situation the Shirts found themselves facing just before turning their sheep onto their allotments this summer. The difference is sheep are not simply objects to store somewhere but



At shipping time, getting loaded in the trucks takes very little time but a lot of help. After sorting and shipping, a few of the ewes are culled, but most join the bucks on the range for breeding. The bucks are removed from the band in early October and lambing begins again in January.

he worked his way through college, then elected after graduation to follow his love of the outdoors in Hells Canyon and the sheep industry.

The profession has not been easy: all night in the lambing shed to save the one lamb that may mean profit or loss in lean times. He thinks about the characteristics that were bred into the sheep in the last 25 years and the improvements he has made in this year's ewe lambs—ewe lambs that will not pass on improved traits to the future but will instead be slaughtered. He remembers the words of a national lamb buyer saying: "These are some of the best lambs in America."

He notices his three-year-old son poking a ewe with a stick to move her up the chute. Will his children remember the days of shearing the sheep and feeding the orphaned lambs? What will he do with his White Freightliner that he bought a year ago as a necessity when the closest sheep trucking company sold all but one truck? What will happen to the new bunkhouse he built for his crew? What about the lambing shed with its canvas draped over the top? And what about his herders and their heartache?

His men have been anxious to see how this year's lambs would finish out, how much bigger they would be than last year, who would win the $10 pool for guessing the closest average weight of the lambs, how much money would they have earned to send home to their families. He thinks about how good his herders have become over the years, Peruvians who are passionate about their jobs and the sheep. They had come to this country legally to enjoy their part of the American dream.

A lamb jumps in the chute, and he watches his wife put it back in the narrow alley. What a wonderful mate, so pretty and so pleasant to be with, so good to his family yet out here handling the sheep although she is eight months pregnant with their third child.

He sees his 80-year-old father pushing up the sheep from the back of the corral. He had seen his dad choke up when he told him he was selling the lambs. He remembers all of the things his father has taught him, the stories he has told about shearing sheep in Hells Canyon, his laughter at pulling an innocent prank. He thinks about his sheepdogs, especially his favorite old dog Joe. Will he ever have a border collie again? Maybe, but it may never herd a sheep.

The third truck pulls up to take the last load of lambs. The loading goes quickly; he hears the mothers crying for their babies. He has heard it before, but this time he is crying with them. ■

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are living creatures requiring food, shelter, and space 24 hours a day.

The latest excuse to close the sheep allotments are reintroduced bighorn sheep. Theory alleges that contact between bighorn and domestic sheep causes bighorns to die of pneumonia. Leading veterinary research centers dispute that theory through numerous studies. However, domestic sheep in other states have been removed from their allotments soon after bighorns were reintroduced. In 1997, the U.S. Forest Service, state fish and game agencies from Idaho, Oregon, and Washington, and the Federation for North American Wild Sheep proposed to reintroduce bighorns to the Hells Canyon area. All groups signed an agreement stating that if problems developed for the bighorns, the grazing of domestic sheep was not to be affected.

The 1997 agreement clearly stated that all parties understood the bighorns would come into contact with domestics and that the state fish and game departments would assume responsibility and take action without impacting the domestic sheep operations. To be certain there would be no misunderstanding, the agreement added: "This means that the committee recognizes the existing domestic sheep operations in or adjacent to the Hells Canyon Complex, on both national forest and private land, and accepts the potential risk of disease transmission and loss of bighorn sheep when bighorns invade domestic sheep operations."

When recent questions were raised that the agreement did not cover the Payette National Forest where the Shirts' allotments are located, a court declaration was given. Former USFS Wallowa-Whitman Forest supervisor, Robert Richmond, stated he had signed the 1997 agreement on behalf of the three national forests which share the Hells Canyon area—Wallowa-Whitman, Payette, and Nez Perce. In 1980, the Forest Service gave management of the three forests within Hells Canyon Complex to the Wallowa-Whitman to avoid such confusion. The Forest Service 36-year-veteran employee declared he had signed the agreement with the knowledge the language applied to all three national forests.

Additionally, the Idaho legislature codified the agreement language into state law. With this agreement in place, the sheep producers felt reassured that they would not suffer the same misguided fate as producers in other states. After all, in the West a deal is a deal. Or is it? ■