

Shepherders With Cell Phones

A hundred years of tending camp in the Nevada outback.

Words and photos by Carolyn Dufurrena.

Ten or so dirt-road miles off a two-lane highway just south of the Oregon-Nevada border lies a homestead ranch. It's a couple of rock buildings, a barn. The remains of an orchard are still fragrant with lilac, pear and apple blossoms. No one lives here now, but it was my father-in-law's boyhood home. A jeep track meanders across the foothill country east of this little place, up into ridges dark with volcanic flows, bright with granite that sparkles in the sun, into the summer country where his sheep graze, where he still, a few months shy of 80, tends sheep camp. I ride with him this summer morning, and it's when the truck bumps into the bottom of the canyon that the old stories start to come.

"When I was five or six or seven, I'd

spend a week at a time with Fortunato, the Basque camp tender, at the homestead cabin in Big Wilder Canyon. My brother Manuel and I, we'd tell Mom we were going to ride to sheep camp. Off we'd go, on two old mules, Pat and Charlie."

The summer sheep camp was four dirt-

The herder has hiked every canyon and ridge of this empty corner of the world, through dry seasons and wet, through fires that swept the ridges and floods that rolled truck-sized boulders down the canyons.

track miles above the home ranch, in a steep granite-walled canyon tangled with wild roses, sagebrush and rattlesnakes, and watered by the stream called Wilder Creek. Fortunato spent summers there in the canyon, in a solid log cabin built by Billy Sisson, a homesteader in the early 1930s. The swarthy Basque had bought an interest in some sheep up there, and ran a pack string of half-a-dozen mules to the several bands that grazed the mountain, some partly his, some owned by sheepmen leasing ground from Buster's father. If truth were told, Fortunato did a little babysitting for the young sons of the ranch as they amused themselves away from home, fishing in the stream.

"We'd take a bucket from the cabin down to the creek late in the morning, 11 o'clock,



Except for the camp tender, who shows up once a week with supplies and possibly the newspapers, herders like "Little Juan" Hernandez spend their time alone. For months and years at a time, these men would have just 50 hours of human contact in a season lasting most of a year. Letters from home were infrequent at best. It used to be that sometimes they would go crazy with the silence. But they do have their pack burros and trusty and husky border collies.



ABOVE: Buster's boyhood home was the homestead cabin called Wilder. It's a couple of rock buildings, a barn, and remnants of an orchard fragrant with lilac, pear and apple blossoms. LEFT: Ewes and lambs are watched closely by Juan and his dogs.

fish till our buckets were full, till Fortunato made us quit. We caught so many fish in that creek. The sheepherders had a couple of big troughs there in the meadow by the cabin. We'd bring buckets of fish back live, put them in those troughs. Fortunato would cook the broken-jawed ones, the old ones, and throw the rest of them back in the creek, tell us kids the cats ate 'em." And the boys would go fishing again the next day.

"Manuel and I had to ride along when Fortunato tended camp. He wouldn't let us

stay in camp alone. We took dried fruit, beans, rice, salt to the herders, making one or two camps a day. We visited each camp about every five days. Sometimes there were terrible thunderstorms. It scared us to death but we had to go, making that big circle from early morning until late in the day. Fortunato made camp for bands of sheep all around the country."

He makes that flat circle with his wrist, the old roper drawing an invisible loop around the memories of his childhood. "We

rode to Little Wilder, around these ridges, Mud Creek, four or five bands we'd tend camp for." Then, casually, he adds, "When I got to be nine or ten, I tended camp myself with that pack string." The herders still live in tents and move their remote summer camps with burros, but Buster brings supplies with his pickup now, rather than a string of mules.

The road climbs toward granite crags, the canyon walls rising steeply, without any sign of human form. As we creep up over a saddle, the sheep appear, tiny white dots on the rugged slope above us. I scan the hillside, looking for the herder.

"We'll meet him at the salt ground," Buster says, checking his watch. I scan the mountainside for some glimpse of him, but see only rugged granite poking through sagebrush, dark mountain mahogany twisting toward the sky, aspen groves in their early summer electric-green in the draws across the creek. The still morning is not yet hot; dust hangs in the air.

Suddenly, two of the huskiest border collies I have ever seen appear from nowhere, bounding down the dust of the track toward us, barking exuberantly. Buster hits the

brakes—and reaches for his cell phone. I peer up toward the ridges. Surely there's no service in here. I climb out, and the two dogs are all over me with greeting. Then I see the burros, a big long-haired jack and a gray-and-white pinto, grazing in the brush nearby.

Little Juan has worked for Buster for 25 years, always by himself. He stands barely five feet tall, his curly hair graying at the temples, wrinkles creasing his tanned cheeks. His small feet have hiked every canyon and ridge of this empty corner of the world, through dry seasons and wet, through fires that swept the ridges and floods that rolled truck-sized boulders down the canyons.

After unloading supplies and perhaps sharing a pot of stew and an hour of conver-

sation, the camp tender would gather his mules and ride off. He would go back to camp, make bread for a couple of days, and take salt to the bucks who spent their summers in a nearby canyon separate from the ewes. Except for the camp tender, who showed up once a week with supplies and possibly the newspapers, the herders spent their time alone. For months and years at a time, these men would have just 50 hours of human contact in a season lasting most of a year. Letters from home were infrequent at best. It used to be that sometimes they would go crazy with the silence.



Buster pops his cell phone battery for Juan, so that the shepherd can call his wife and family back in Guadalajara. Cell phone coverage is tough in these mountains, but Juan knows every ridge that can get reception. ABOVE RIGHT: Old aspen tree on Wilder Creek with Buster's name. It was carved in the '40s.

It is the first act of their occasional meeting, almost as soon as they exchange hellos. Buster pops the battery out of his phone. Juan hands his own battery to his boss, snaps in the fresh one as they discuss the news of the day. Juan has only had this little phone for two years. Its precursor, "el negro," was his first

phone, a bulky black thing in a bag, which he carried in his pack saddle for a few years before that. Although there is of course no coverage in these canyons, the ridgetops have a clear shot at the cell towers 50 miles away. "The biggest problem now is where to call from," Buster continues. The top of the ridge is the only place, but depending on where you are, the service is better, or worse, or nonexistent. Looking across miles and miles of empty country, ridges rolling away to the horizon, it looks like there's never been another human anywhere around here. Though the human footprint is light, this knob is called Verizon; that ridge over there is Cellular One. Juan has charted an invisible map of cell-phone coverage—this side of

that rock pile there, above the mahoganies on that ridge across the canyon—that will let him call out any time he really needs to.

For Juan, the phone has changed nothing, and everything. He lives in the solitude he has chosen. The camp on the mountainside is the same as it's been for 100 years: the burros, the dogs, the lions, the sheep. But only a few weeks or months without word from his family, the time it took for a letter to make its way from the ranch outside Guadalajara where Juan's wife and children—two boys and two girls, ranging in age from 13 to 20—live. In case of injury or act of God, the cell phone changes everything.

"Juan calls me every couple of nights," says Buster. "Or if there's a problem he can call me right away. When the lions were there in the head of Shyster Creek—with another band of sheep, cared for by two Peruvian brothers—the dogs barked all night. The herders yelled at those dogs, but they kept it up. Finally they took the rifle and went to look, and there was the lion, right above their camp, above the sheep, and another one with him, treed right there in the rocks. They called me then."

The first order of business complete, Juan tucks the phone deep into his pocket. Binoc-



ulars and his burlap sack he hangs on the packsaddle, machete handle wrapped with duct tape poking out. The knife is old, but—"il serve"—it works. He takes several neatly folded burlap sacks from the other burro's pack. Buster fills them from the boxes and coolers in the back of the pickup as the dogs wait patiently in the shade of the tailgate. He stuffs one sack with vegetables: carrots, lettuce, corn. Another holds a leg of mutton. The largest he fills with dog food. A plastic bag of green grapes Juan nestles gently in a sagebrush, to tuck at the last into the top of the mound.

A 50-pound blue bag of water-softener salt that he will use as mineral supplement balances the load. Juan gathers the lead ropes, ties his pack string together. He slings the rifle and whistles up the dogs.

In a moment they have disappeared down the rocky track that divides our life from his. The trail will lead them across the creek and up a thousand feet twisting through draws on the south side of the deep canyon, to a swale just below the ridgeline of this mountain. There he will do as herders have done for 100 years: put away his groceries, turn his burros loose, and watch the sun redden in the west. Then he will do what herders only a few years ago could not imagine doing. He will call across the thousands of miles and say goodnight to his wife, and she to him, and the sinking sun will have a different quality because of that small thing.

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