

# Endeavor to Persevere

*Eight generations ranching in the High Sierra's shadow.*

*By Carolyn Dufurrena*

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**I**t's 6:30 a.m. at the Fulstone Ranch in Smith Valley, Nev. A white-painted screen door creaks open on the long red-brick cookhouse. Half a dozen men, small, dark, burnished by the sun, eat breakfast at a long linoleum table: crispy bacon, eggs over easy, hotcakes, French fries, coffee. Old black and white pictures of sheep camps, mule teams, and many sheep are tacked to a cardboard mural, along with a newer picture of Fred Fulstone's grandson Kristofor Leinasar, his wife, Andrea, and a brand-new baby boy. A Spanish-language soap plays quietly in the background.

Kristofor meets with his herders, his camp tenders, and water-truck drivers here at the

crack of dawn. The men get their marching orders, talk about things that have come up. There are three bands of sheep on the trail toward summer pasture. One of the water trucks can't get to the sheep; the road has washed out. It's a U.S. Forest Service road. Although Kristofor could fix it, federal restrictions on what kind of gravel, weed-free mix, whatever, have brought repairs to a standstill. Gonzalo, the camp tender, and Kristofor lean on the hood of Kristofor's pickup with BLM allotment maps, iPads and smartphones spread out. There are many things to take into consideration. Gonzalo will move the herder's camp toward Sonora Pass in the Sierra Nevada. This creek, that creek, to this meadow,

where they will stay perhaps 15 days, depending on the moisture. Then, "steep climb, very steep," past the USMC Mountain Warfare Training Center in Pickel Meadow.

The ranch feeds as many as 15 workers three times a day in their traditional cookhouse. Kristofor's sister Danielle, an elementary schoolteacher in Reno until 2017, makes the run to town to keep the kitchen supplied, working with the ranch cook. She waits for sales to buy case goods and uses local grocers when she can, loading her kids—Colton, age three, and Kelsey, two months—into the car, making the long circle from Reno and Sparks to the ranch and her home in Gardnerville, 30 miles away. "Tuesday is my town day," she says,



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*Pregnant sheep are shorn and moved into lambing shed areas. As ewes give birth, they are moved to smaller corrals with similar age-group lambs. They go through a series of corrals before being sent out to pasture around the ranch and valley. Bands are made up, marked and docked, then sent out to spring grazing in sagebrush foothill country. They are moved to higher country in summer. AT TOP: Pickel Meadow below Sonora Pass, part of the Fulstones' summer grazing.*



“although I did pick up 100 pounds of hamburger last Saturday.”

Marianne Fulstone Leinassar, Kris and Danielle’s mother, finds herself in the role of matriarch of FIM Corp, since her father died in April 2020, just before his 100th birthday. An only child, Marianne, age six, learned to love the land early. She would hop into the pickup with her father. “We would drive up the mountain to the sheep camps on these steep, narrow roads; of course, there was no four-wheel drive. We would park the truck and hike up the mountain to the shepherd’s tent. He would make us coffee with cream.” There was always good, crusty bread to dip into the coffee, and Marianne would listen to the flow of Spanish as her father and the herder talked. “Dad and the herder would go out and walk around; I’d stay in camp and play with the dogs. It was so beautiful then.”

Now Marianne manages the office; she keeps books for both the ranching operation and her husband Scott’s dental office, and manages H2A contracts and visas for Peruvian shepherders and Mexican farmworkers. She and range consultant Floyd Rathbun, along with the research help from Max Symonds, keep abreast of constant assault on their public and private lands interest. Floyd



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Fred and Irene on their wedding day. “This is for always, like the grass and the trees.” ► The family gathers for Fred’s 90th birthday. Back row L-R: Daniel Rausch; Fred’s granddaughter Danielle Rausch, holding Colton; grandson Kristofor; wife, Andrea; and Scott Leinassar. Front row: Daughter Marianne Leinassar; and Kris and Andrea’s son, Jeremy, and daughter, Aubrey, flank Fred. ► Marianne and Fred have always had little dogs, which are smaller than local raptors. ► Fred ate breakfast with his crew every morning at the ranch cookhouse. Maybe that’s why they’ve stayed with him for decades. ► Kris and his main camp tender, Gonzalo, plan movements of sheep herds for the next days.



and Max go to the meetings, read and write reports, and update maps.

Max answered an online ad for a ranch cook about 10 years ago. Although by the time she relocated from out of state, the ranch cook had been hired, Fred brought her on to cook for him and keep house. “As soon as he found out I was interested, he started taking me around to places, marking springs on maps, researching for him,” she says. That in

itself is a full-time job.

Marianne and her family are busy all the time, from the roll out of the day at dawn until after the dinner bell rings. “Dad did all this by himself,” says Marianne. “It takes all of us now to do what he did. He often said, ‘It took all my life to build this operation, and it will take all my kids’ lives to hold on to it.’”

Fred took the reins of what was even then a multigenerational outfit at age 19, near the

end of the Depression. The bank had repossessed the sheep, and he had to sell equipment to make ends meet, but Fred's employees stayed on, working for room and board and "running a tab" for as long as it took to get the ranch back on its feet. Every time he had a little money, he'd buy another sheep, and eventually the ranch did recover. In 1946, he

married Irene Roberts, a teacher from nearby Coleville. At the end of her school year, she came to the ranch for the next two decades. She went back to teaching in 1960 for another 27 years.

When Marianne went to college, Fred and Irene made a rare trip away from the ranch to a parents' weekend. Their daughter intro-

duced them to her friend, Scott Leinassar. They would marry five years later.

Scott was in dental school, and Fred was swamped at the ranch. "I had a job in Reno," says Marianne, "but I told Dad if he'd pay me \$800 a month I'd come to work for him." Scott would later open a dental practice in Smith Valley, and their children would grow

## A Life of Fighting for What's Yours

Sheep have run in the high country of the Sierra Nevada since the 1800s, and on what are now the Fulstone allotments since before John Muir hired on as a shepherd in 1911, hiking the high country and writing what would become the missives that caused powerful men to draw boundaries on the map. The Forest Service brought rangers. Then the rangers began to drive the sheep away, wanting to preserve the beauty that they did not realize they would destroy in trying to save it.

"Dad bought these sheep in the 1940s, and the permits that came with them," says Marianne. "The whole idea of multiple use on the public lands didn't arise till the 1970s, and for a long time sharing the lands was good for everyone. As recreation grew, there were more campgrounds, more people." It became an issue of territory, as young urbanites began to resent the presence of sheep in what they saw as "their public lands," not "our public lands." The Fulstones' century of stewardship of the mountain came under attack.

Beginning in the 1980s the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS) in cooperation with California's Department of Fish & Wildlife (CDFW) began transplanting bighorn sheep

into various new habitats, habitats too high and harsh for them. But it was territory, an expansion of the fiefdom. At first, there were denials of the attack:

**1984**—"We do not believe that habitats south of Lee Vining Canyon, particularly the Bloody Canyon allotment, are suitable for bighorn sheep. Should any number of bighorn move to an active domestic sheep allotment, they will be considered a 'failure segment' of the overall reintroduction element. The department will not request any additional reduction or cancellation of allotments based on the presence of these animals."—*CDFW regional manager to Inyo NFS supervisor Eugene Murphy*

**1986**—Federal authorities release 27 bighorn sheep into Lee Vining Canyon from a population in the south acclimated to friendlier habitat, despite evidence that such a population will not flourish. They are renamed Sierra Nevada bighorn and, without evidence, declared unique. Sixteen die in the first winter from starvation and predation. Some bighorns move into the Bloody Canyon allotment, living in close proximity with FIM sheep for the next 15 years, with no ill effects.

**1989**—"To restate, the bighorn sheep established in the Bloody Canyon area will not be used by the Forest Service or California Fish & Game to eliminate any domestic sheep grazing in your Bloody Canyon allotment."—*Mono Lake District Ranger Bill Bramlette to Fred Fulstone*

**2000**—FWS lists Sierra Nevada bighorn (SNBS) as endangered. Bloody Canyon allotment canceled due to possible interaction of domestic sheep with bighorns.

**2004**—Deaths of several bighorns near Winnemucca, 300 miles away, prompt accusation that bighorns are being infected with pasteurella, commonly known as shipping fever, from contact with domestic sheep. Those bighorns are later proven to have died from malnutrition and lungworm infections. Without evidence of either contact or transmission, feds unilaterally begin restricting domestic sheep grazing permits, even as state wildlife agencies plant bighorns on every available mountain in Nevada. Since the introduction of the Sierra Nevada bighorn, domestic sheep reductions of 20,000 head have occurred in the Mono Basin alone.

**2005**—The Fulstones win their initial appeal against the Forest Service. The Center for Biological Diversity sues the agency, which capitulates.

**2006**—Fred and his entire family travel to Washington, D.C., to testify before the House Committee on Natural Resources.

**2005-2009**—On BLM-administered lands: "We had two bands in the Dog Creek area until 2005," says Marianne. "In 2008 there was one band; by 2009, there were no sheep." All because the SNBS were dying in the high country in snows too deep to survive. Agency interests annually plant bighorns, which continue to starve and die of predation.

Although bighorn sheep have been the primary weapon, other species have been used to expand the power of the fiefdom. Lahontan cutthroat trout were planted in the 1990s, which restricted the Fulstone sheep from watering at all but designated "watering stations."

COURTESY FULSTONE & LEINASSAR FAMILIES



Summer grazing in Dunderberg Meadow. Herders live 24/7 with dogs and the sheep and move the bands as the grass and waters dictate.

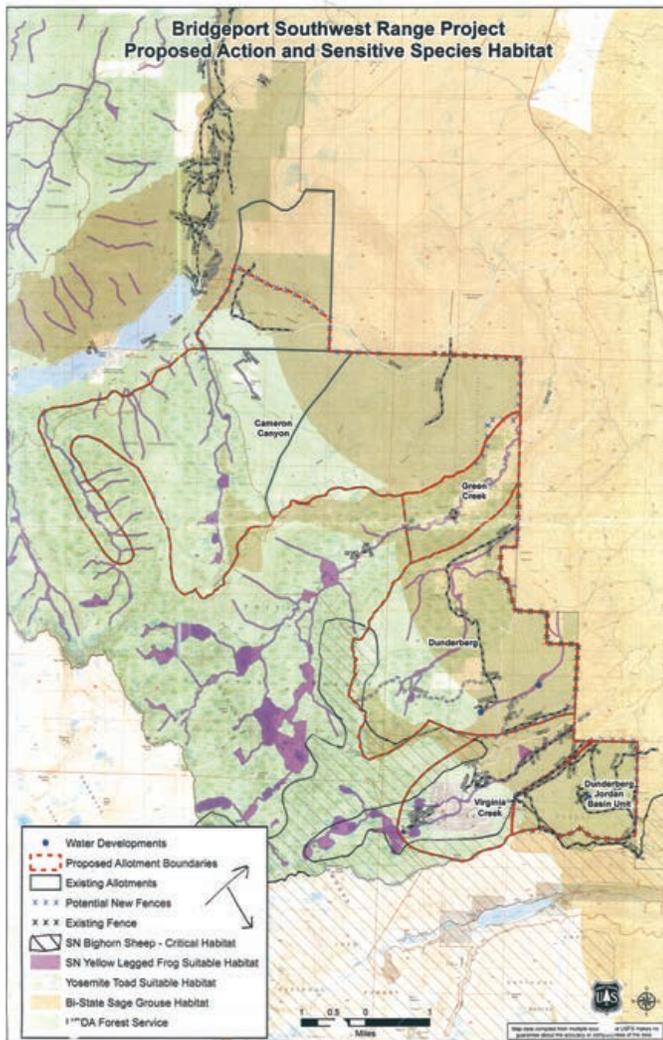
up on the ranch, immersed in the day-to-day workings of the place.

“Grandpa gave Kristofor a little four-wheeler when he was pretty young,” says Scott. “Kristofor was in and out of every nook and cranny of this ranch, and later Danielle inherited that machine.”

Kristofor came home after college and

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started managing the 1,300-acre haying operation. He put up alfalfa and small grains: oats, winter wheat, barley, depending on the Sierra’s winter snowfall, which fills Topaz Lake on the California border, and groundwater from several wells, which also respond to winter moisture. The reservoirs at Topaz and Bridgeport keep the Walker River running all summer



U.S. Forest Service map shows the carving up of two FIM allotments. Domestic sheep grazing is cut out or reduced, not by the documented presence of the animal, but by the presence of habitat for SNBS, the yellow-legged frog, the Yosemite toad, and the bi-state sage grouse.

2010—The greater sage grouse and its purported cousin, the bi-state sage grouse, were the focus of much angst on the part of the environmental community, until it was discovered that there was no valid way to prove them an endangered species.

The yellow-legged frog, a creature the size of your fingernail, lives in the banks of Sierra streams. It only comes out in wet years. It doesn’t exist above a certain elevation, and is

difficult to actually find in those streams, particularly since the Lahontan cutthroats eat yellow-legged frog eggs. But where the frog *might* be identified as “suitable habitat”—another weapon employed by those who seek to conquer. “Livestock grazing is likely to affect” the frog. “Well, we’ve always known the frogs were there,” says Marianne. “We just stayed away from them” at the sensitive times of year.

2015—Fred Fulstone appeals Humboldt-Toiyabe NF cancellation of sheep permits south of Bridgeport. After exhausting the appeals process, the ranch sues. It becomes apparent that the Forest Service will lose the lawsuit, so the agency and the Fulstones come to a settlement, 30 years into the struggle. It covers three Fulstone allotments and specifies that the family converts its historic grazing lands from sheep to cattle. A National Environmental Policy Act analysis is ongoing. HTNF then cancels *all* grazing permits in these three allotments.

2016—There is the Yosemite toad and 18 allotments with different owners are affected. More lines are drawn on the map: critical habitat, occupied habitat, suitable habitat, depending on elevation, on times of the year. Designate everything, then back off as challenges arise.

There’s a weasel; there’s a fox that some feel the sheep might “frighten.” Species have been weaponized by the Center for Biological Diversity and its allies, and the list is long.

“[The feds] take a little bit all the time,” says Marianne. All in all, the Fulstones have lost 45 percent of their outside permits, forcing them to sell over 3,200 ewes and take the concomitant reduction in income. “We had nine bands of sheep,” says Kristofor. “Now we have five.” (RANGE has covered these stories many times and for decades. You can find more at [www.rangedex.com](http://www.rangedex.com).)

Ranchers are hard-pressed to find advocates for grazing, even as the High Sierra burns. “How many fires did our sheepherders put out?” asks Marianne. “They each had a shovel; when lightning struck, they were right there and put those fires out before they got big.” Sheep grazed the understory of the forest, trimming the ladder fuels that now carry flames up the great old trees. Now a lightning strike has plenty of tinder, miles of kindling that, instead of being grazed off, fuels the flames. The result is a summer of blackened skies and charred forest all up and down the Sierra. “The Boot Fire in 2018 started in a campground. We had 2,000 sheep fleeing in front of that fire. People don’t realize that fire is good for the land, in moderation,” but with all the dry grasses left from years of nongrazing, fire becomes a whirlwind of destruction.

Stewardship versus bureaucracy. Management by response to the environment, or management by rule. Which is better for the land? Does it matter, if the goal is to conquer the fiefdom? Environmental groups continue to take aim at ranching operations, filing lawsuits against federal land-management agencies. Ranchers are driven incrementally from their lands, as they have been for the last 40 years of Fred’s life. “He had such an uncanny way of being a fighter for what he wanted,” says Marianne, “while still being able to keep working with the agency people.” He was Marianne’s example, and she and her children are still there, fighting for their lives, and the life of the land. ■

long. The reservoirs benefit wildlife as well as domestic agriculture, and both have become magnets for fishermen and water-sport enthusiasts along the Sierra Front.

“We had three incredible winters in a row,” Kristofor says. “Two years ago, the water level in some of our irrigation wells came up 16 feet because of the heavy snowpack in the Sierra.” Many farmers in the Walker and Mason valleys irrigate with these waters, but “some of the oldest water rights in the valley have been sold to nonagricultural interests, who can offer four times what a farmer or rancher can afford.”

Now it is the first of June. First crop has been cut and stacked. It’s all about getting the sheep to summer country. The sheep year begins with lambing in March, when six bands of ewes birth their young in sheds at the home ranch. New mothers and their



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babies move into a series of corrals, and then onto pasture.

Marking, when lambs are docked, vaccinated and branded with paint, happens in

early April. “We have small portable corrals that we move from band to band,” says Kristofor. “It’s all hands on deck for that project.”

By early May the last band has moved

## Fulstone Ranch: The First 165 Years

**1855**—Fifty-year-old shoemaker Henry Fulstone, his wife, Elizabeth, and five sons, age 15 to infancy, travel to New Orleans from England, eventually reaching Carson City, Nev., by wagon train in 1858. By 1916 two of the sons are ranch owners in Smith Valley.

**1911-19**—Mary Hill of Carson City goes to U.C. Berkeley to study mathematics and completes a degree in medicine. She finishes her residency at San Francisco County Hospital in the midst of the Spanish flu epidemic. She marries Fred Fulstone Sr. and begins a practice in Smith Valley that will last until 1983. She provides medical assistance to Native American communities as far away as Bridgeport, some 65 miles distant.

**1911**—Fred Senior donates land to build Topaz and Bridgeport reservoirs.

**1920**—Fred Junior, the first of five, is born when his mother the doctor is on her way to make a house call in Smith Valley. She has a car wreck and crawls out of the ditch in labor. Neighbors take her to their house, where Fred is born.

**1922-23**—Topaz Reservoir and Bridgeport Reservoir, owned and operated by the Walker River Irrigation District, are completed, holding a combined total of nearly 169,000 acre-feet of water for irrigation and flood control in Topaz, Smith Valley, Mason Valley and Schurz.

**1920s**—The federal government begins providing predator control to ranchers. Fifty thousand sheep roam the Bodie Hills and the Sierra foothill country under various owners. The Fulstone herd grows to some 10,000 head, plus 500 head of cows, under Fred Senior’s care.

**1925**—Fred, age five, and an Indian ranch employee find a car wreck. A man from Washington, D.C., scouting locations across the West for an Army munitions depot, has two broken legs. The Indian and the boy extricate him and take him to Dr. Mary, who performs several surgeries. Fred is the anesthesiologist, dripping ether onto the mask over the man’s face. The man lives in their house for two months learning to walk again. After Dr. Mary nurses him back to health, he tells her the munitions depot is coming to Nevada. Five years later Hawthorne Army Munitions Depot is completed.



The family of George and Annie Fulstone established themselves in Wellington in 1903. This portrait was taken on the family farm. Pictured (from left to right, back row) are: Frank, Arthur, Clara, Ed, Joe, Juanita, Fred, Marguerite and Harry. Front row: Annie, Marceline (not a member of the family, she lived with the Fulstones for a while), Elaine and George. AT TOP: Fred with sheared sheep in 2000.

onto spring grazing in sagebrush foothill country. Spring permits are mostly in Smith Valley and low country around Hawthorne, 30 miles to the east. Two camp tenders bring groceries, new boots, batteries, and whatever the herders need. They move the herders' camps every two or three days, depending on the feed. Julio Gorritz, a Spanish Basque, has been with the family since the mid-1980s. Now 78 years old, he tends two bands, with his younger partner, Gonzalo, taking the other four. Gonzalo has worked with Julio since he was 21 and newly arrived from Peru. Now 40-ish, he has his green card and is working on his citizenship papers.

As the sheep move into higher country, Gonzalo takes the duties for those that have moved out of range of the pickup. He makes camp horseback; a pack burro leads the sheep. Gonzalo has learned from Julio, who

has been tending camp for decades. Marianne says, "Julio knows the country, knows the history of the sheep and where they go."

Peruvian herders live with their bands. The sheep are divided into two bands of "singles," those ewes with one lamb, and three "twin" bands. Another band is comprised of dry ewes, and yet another of rams. Rams in the past summered near Bridgeport, Calif., but predation losses by large coyotes caused Kristofor to bring the boys back to pasture closer to home. Do they have wolf problems? "Not yet," he says.

Every family ranch out there sooner or later has to confront the idea of succession. The old guys get older. If they're lucky enough to have kids and grandkids and greats who want to live the ranch life, there has to be a way to integrate them into the operation, a way for them to learn the nuts and bolts,

accept the present, and bring in new ideas. Because a ranch needs new ideas as much as it needs respect for tradition.

These days, on any given workday, Marianne is at her desk, surrounded by computers and swamped with paper; Danielle works at the desk next to her; and Kristofor is either in his pickup or on the phone across the way. The grandkids, Aubrey, Jeremy and Colton, run rings around the house and build forts under the desks. Baby Kelsey naps in the next room. The ranch work goes on.

"Fred would have loved this," says Scott. "Like he said, 'Who would want to do anything else?'" ■

*Carolyn Dufurrena is socially distant in the beautiful isolation of northern Nevada's high desert, where she chronicles ranch life, raising cattle, horses and dogs with her husband, Tim.*

**1930s**—Bank repossesses all livestock.

**1938**—Fred Senior becomes gravely ill. Young Fred quits premed program at U.C. Berkeley to come home and take over.

**1940s**—The war years. Four P-51s land in the field across from the house. One of them needs repairs. Fred helps them make parts in the shop. Fred Junior rebuilds the sheep herd little by little.

**1946**—Fred marries Irene Roberts. "This is forever, like the grass and the trees," he tells her on their wedding day.

**1947**—Fred's sisters are chosen to be "The Toni Twins" and become famous in a perma-



nent-wave advertising campaign. Their lives diverge forever from the ranch.

**1950s-1960s**—Fred helps local BLM office as it crafts allotment management plans. Agricultural development projects on public lands include spraying mountain big sagebrush to encourage development of native grasses. This area would later host the densest population of sage grouse in the



*Fred and grandson Kristofor pause during spring shearing about a decade ago. Marianne says, "Fred wished he had brought Kris into the sheep outfit sooner." LEFT: Fred holds brand new great-grandson Colton Rausch, part of the eighth generation to carry the Fulstone legacy. Fred would meet Colton's little sister, Kelsey, two days before he passed in the spring of 2020. Granddaughter Danielle and her husband, Daniel, look on.*

Bodie Hills.

**1973**—Desert bighorn becomes Nevada's state animal. Endangered Species Act is passed.

**Late 1980s**—FWS begins planting bighorn sheep in the High Sierra in the Dunderberg, Cameron and Tamarack allotments. Access to streams is restricted.

**1980s-present**—Pressure mounts to cancel Fulstone's Dunderberg, Cameron and Tamarack permits. The objective appears to be to take, without cause, water rights owned by the family for decades. This series of

assaults on the ranch's water rights and grazing permits does not result in the family giving up.

**2007**—Kristofor comes back to the ranch. His wife, Andrea, a dentist, goes to work with Kris' father, Scott.

**2017**—Danielle and her husband, Daniel, move closer to Smith Valley so she can help her mother on the business end of things.

**2020**—Danielle and Daniel welcome baby Kelsey in March. Fred gets to meet her two days before passing away in April. The wheel turns. ■

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