

Of Spotted Owls & Bighorn Sheep

Watch out cattlemen, you're next.

By Jim Petersen

I was nearly 30 years old before I tasted rack of lamb. Mother refused to cook it. She'd had her fill of mutton during the Depression. She said it smelled bad and tasted worse.

"But at least we ate," she said of the meager childhood existence she endured following Wall Street's collapse in October 1929. "Millions stood in soup lines. We didn't." Then a silence that was only filled once, and only long enough for her to tell me that when she was 12, she got a new pair of socks, a hard-boiled egg and a fresh orange for Christmas.

My grandfather was a cattle rancher who also raised sheep—a rarity in southwest Montana's Ruby Valley in the early 1900s. The sheep wars that raged in Wyoming and Colorado into the 1920s never reached Montana. Still, most Montana cattle ranchers wanted nothing

to do with sheep. If you were a cattleman, you herded cattle, and if you were a sheepman, you herded sheep.

The herd instinct did not reside in my grandfather. He was an inveterate risk taker and a math whiz who kept impeccable ledgers in pencil until the day he was killed in an accident on our Idaho ranch in 1961. Cattle and sheep were simply numbers in columns. Early in his Ruby Valley days he had noticed that the cattle and sheep markets often traded in opposite directions, so why not protect your hard-earned capital by having some of both?

It was a great investment strategy until Wall Street cratered. Then you couldn't sell anything. For reasons unknown, my grandfather decided the Albertson family would eat their sheep and keep their cattle. My grandmother's thriving wool-carding and quilt-making busi-

nesses would have to wait for better days.

My mother ate mutton until there were no sheep left. She rarely spoke of it, and when she did, I could tell that the taste of bitter Depression memories was even worse than the lingering taste of mutton. Nothing bearing a sheep or lamb label ever entered our kitchen. Wool sweaters were as close as we got to sheep.

These long-ago discarded memories flooded into my consciousness on a beautiful September afternoon last year. My wife, Julia, and I were cresting the spectacular divide that separates southwest Montana's legendary Ruby and Madison river drainages. My old friend Rich Stem was at the wheel and Julia and his wife, Karen, held down the backseats on an old Forest Service road that wound for miles through forests and meadows that punctuate the windswept Gravelly Mountains. Here I use the word "road" in only the most general sense. By its appearance, I'd guess it predates the Forest Service's founding in 1905.

We were already planning to visit Rich and Karen as part of a big forestry investigation we've launched in South Dakota and Wyoming, so it was serendipity when I got an email from publisher C.J. Hadley, whom I have admired for more than 20 years.

"Do you know a Richard Stem?" she wrote.

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Tree mortality is quite visible in southwest Montana's Gravelly Range. Some of it is a natural result of a harsh high elevation climate, but at lower elevations mortality is the result of neglect—a failure of the federal resource management agencies to thin diseased trees from forests that are too dense for the carrying capacity of the land. OPPOSITE: A century of sheep grazing has kept vast and beautiful nearby meadows from becoming impassable brush fields.



"Yes," I replied. "I've known Rich for about 30 years. We met in Grants Pass, Oregon, when he was working on the Silver Fire Environmental Impact Statement, I think in 1989. Why do you ask?"

She explained that somewhere in time Rich had expressed an interest in writing a few forestry-related articles for *RANGE*. Since I'd written many essays for CJ that had both live and dead trees in them, she wanted to know if I would be willing to talk with him about what he had in mind.

"Sure," I replied, explaining that he was already on our summer travel schedule.

Rich and I had not seen one another since our wild and woolly Grants Pass days, and about all I knew about him was that he'd officially retired from the Forest Service a few years earlier. As I backed our travel trailer into his yard, he triumphantly reminded me that we had not seen each other for 33 years.

Rich lives his life at warp speed, so he'd already penciled out our agenda. We would: (1) Get caught up on what we'd both been doing for 33 years to encourage the federal government to do a better job of protecting the public's forests; (2) Check out Shedhorn's Gun Shop in nearby Ennis; (3) Eat some red meat at the McAllister Inn Steakhouse Bar and Rooms

in Ennis; (4) Sample some locally distilled whiskey—it was great, and I don't like whiskey; and (5) Explore Virginia City, also nearby, where my late mother wrangled her first teaching job in a one-room school in 1933. She taught weekdays and played honky-tonk piano on weekends at the Bale of Hay Saloon.

"Domestic sheep that stray outside their allotment boundaries will be killed."

I was first in "the Bale" in 1950. I was six. The same guy who owned the place in 1933 still owned it. He greeted Mother like a long-lost cousin and ushered her to the piano. I don't know what Dad thought, but I was amazed, mainly because I had never heard my mother play anything except "White Christmas." She was easily as good as Joann Castle, who played for Lawrence Welk for years. Our table quickly filled with pitchers of beer, which Dad happily passed to other astonished onlookers because he didn't drink the stuff.

Oh yeah, I almost forgot. After I paid the nice lady at Shedhorn's for my beautiful new Weatherby 12-gauge over and under (which I have yet to shoot), the Stems and the Petersens

headed for the Gravellies.

The Gravellies are easily the most dominant feature in the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest. They rise some 10,000 feet behind Rich's house, which overlooks the Ruby River Reservoir, not far from Alder. His nearest neighbors are Ted Turner, CNN's billionaire founder; David Letterman, the legendary comedian and late-night talk show host; and an old logger just up the hill who built Rich and Karen's home.

Rich volunteered that Letterman is "a pretty decent guy." I did not ask about Turner, whose financial support for serial environmental litigators makes me crazy, but that is a story for another time.

It took us two hours to reach the rocky, windswept ridgeline that separates the Madison River Valley to the east from the Ruby Valley to the west. En route, we passed through mixed conifer and aspen stands punctuated by grassy meadows that Rich reminded me were the result of more than a century of sheep grazing.

Above 6,000 feet you begin to see what the Gravellies are all about. Cliffs drop hundreds of feet into steep, heavily shaded canyons, and precipitous rock walls run north and south for miles and miles. Part of this vast expanse is a designated wilderness study area and some



A Peruvian herder for Helle Livestock watches over the sheep during high country summers. When the sheep are bedded down or settled on a big wide meadow, he plays his saxophone. There are still three domestic sheep outfits running on the Gravelles, with six or seven wagons, each tending a band of sheep. As early as 1896, the U.S. government estimated that 2.9 million sheep in Montana produced 24 million pounds of wool. In the early 1970s, Montana still raised 2.5 million sheep, but by 2010 that had dropped to 230,000 head.

300,000 acres are classified roadless areas. The dusty roads we travel—such as they are—are filled with ruts and rocks. We pass through some stands of conifers that are in good shape, but others are not much more than jack-strawed ready-to-burn thickets.

As we traversed the ridgeline that separates the Ruby and Madison valleys, my eyes naturally turned west toward Twin Bridges, where my mother was born; the Tobacco Root Mountains, where my grandfather grazed cattle and sheep on lush, low-elevation grass almost 100 years ago; Dillon, where Mother attended high school and college; and the Ruby River, where I first fished grasshoppers and dodged rattlesnakes 65 summers earlier.

I turned away from everyone, so nobody would see the tears streaming down my face. In my mind's eye, I could even see my great-uncle John, an austere man and a Montana District Court judge who secretly helped me catch grasshoppers and sometimes tagged along with me in his charcoal-gray three-piece suit. I was as close to my Albertson family roots as I have ever been.

I had to forcefully remind myself that the main reason we were here was because CJ had asked me to help Rich figure out what he wanted to write for *RANGE*. But this was sheep country, well above the tree line, and Rich was a forester, not a sheepman, though if you walked past him you would probably think the latter.

Soon enough, we spotted our first band of sheep grazing between scattered boulders on the ridgeline, then a shepherd's camp and a couple of Australian shepherds that took our measure as we drove slowly past. I chose not to

test my diplomatic skills by opening my door. These dogs were all business.

As Rich and I talked, it became clear that the story he will write for *RANGE* (if he writes one) will be about what is happening and not happening in the national forest that spills out into the Madison and Ruby valleys, thousands of feet below where we were standing. But *this story* (which I promised CJ I would write) is about the similarities between the sheep-grazing controversy unfolding in the Gravelles and the forest wars I've been covering since I started *Evergreen* magazine in 1985.

My colleague, Dave Skinner, who writes for both *Evergreen* and *RANGE*, has written about the still-unfolding sheep controversy in the Gravelles, so before I sat down to scratch out this essay, I reread his well-researched Winter

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2016 *RANGE* story, "Sheep vs. Sheep" (available at www.rangemagazine.com).

Sure as hell, this mess is eerily similar to what I had witnessed in western Oregon and Washington in the late 1980s: northern spotted owls versus barred owls, the use of a presumed threatened species to forever alter land management practices in favor of a species said to require no management reserves to ensure its survival. In this case, wild bighorn sheep versus domestic sheep that have been grazing in the Gravelles for more than a century. For all I

know, my grandfather grazed sheep here before he railed his cattle to northern Idaho in 1925.

Dave Skinner has worked hard to hone his storytelling skills. That's admirable, but his true calling is that of an exceptional investigative reporter. Few ever master the skills his craft demands: the patience of Job; an unshakable belief that facts matter, without regard to the time required to sort through the rubble; and a well-calibrated bullshit meter. Guys like Skin-



ner never get paid what they are worth, but they do it anyway because they are, above all else, principled practitioners of a discipline that borders on fine art.

"Sheep vs. Sheep" is the story of the conflict industry's well-funded attempt to drive sheep ranchers out of the Gravelles the same way it drove loggers out of the West's national forests: relentless political pressure relentlessly applied in the name of a phony environmental cause whose main purpose is to kill off the sheep ranching culture in southwest Montana. Cattlemen, pay attention. You're next.

The facts of Skinner's in-depth report fit neatly into two sentences. The 60-some bighorn sheep that were reintroduced to the Gravelles by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks in 2003 and 2004 are susceptible to diseases carried by domestic sheep. Thus, the Bozeman-based Gallatin Wildlife Association has argued in federal court that the 8,000-plus domestic sheep grazed here every summer by Dillon-area sheep ranchers must go.

Most of the rest of Skinner's article is devoted to what he does best: follow often Byzantine money trails created by the nation's largest and best-known environmental organizations—outfits that routinely launder millions of dollars through small like-minded affiliates like Gallatin Wildlife.

If you care to connect the dots that have been strung together in the Gravelles, read Skinner's story. That so much money and political influence could be focused on elimi-



nating a measly seven sheep grazing allotments in one mountain range in southwest Montana is its own frightening story.

What we have here is a merger of monied interests that don't normally coalesce: environmentalists who don't believe private interests have any place in the public domain and affluent big-game hunters who don't mind wiping out the sheep-ranching culture if it means they can hunt trophy bighorns in the Gravellys.

At this writing in November 2018 the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest has sided with the sheep ranchers, renewing their grazing allotments in a negotiated agreement with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks that says that domestic sheep that stray outside their allotment boundaries will be killed.

Gallatin Wildlife isn't happy with the Forest Service's decision, which it says impedes restoration of bighorn sheep range. Restoration to what? The millions of sheep grazed

here since 1896 are *the reason* there are so many meadows filled with tall grass and wildflowers. Absent these sheep, the Gravellys' meadows would be impassable brush fields.

Trust me, Gallatin Wildlife's well-funded serial litigators will be back. This is how they make their living, too often at the expense of taxpayers who pick up the tabs for litigators, even when they lose in court.

Around Twin Bridges, Sheridan, Dillon and Whitehall there is a deep-seated concern for the disruptive influences of Eastern money and political power. The fear is that the same ugly forces that have reshaped Bozeman and the Madison Valley over the last 30 years will eventually spill over the Montana Highway 287 divide that separates Ennis from Virginia City. No doubt they eventually will—there are already visible pockets of great wealth west of the divide—but I pray that the same merciless ethnic cleansings that have crushed the thriving

economies of hundreds of small western timber communities will not occur here in southwest Montana's splendid ranching country.

The politically driven collapse of the West's logging and sawmilling industries has left us with precious few of the resources needed to corral the wildfire crisis that has befallen our national forests, including the Beaverhead-Deerlodge, which is rife with insects and diseases that can only be arrested by judicious removal of dead and dying trees or by wildfires that don't care which trees they kill.

Tree mortality now exceeds new growth in most western national forests. Some blame "greedy" loggers and lumbermen. Others blame "human-caused" climate change. I blame the "progressive" hollowing out of respect for history, culture and tradition, and the precipitous and closely linked downfall of public and private institutions built up by earlier generations of men and women who answered the federal government's luring call



Small, crystal-clear streams carry Gravelly rain and snowmelt to the Madison and Ruby rivers. Minus a good map, these streams are easily identified by the dense vegetation that grows along their meandering courses. Colorful wildflowers, including Indian paintbrush, bloom wherever sunlight reaches the rocky soil.

to settle the West.

It breaks my heart to think that the same litigious fate that befell hundreds of western logging towns awaits my family's ranching roots in southwest Montana. What our society is callously squandering is a core respect for the cultural and spiritual value of work itself, be it amid the cacophony of a sandwich shop in Manhattan's Grand Central Station or the solitude of a sheep camp high in western Montana's Gravelly Mountains. ■

Jim Petersen is the founder and president of the nonprofit Evergreen Foundation (www.evergreenmagazine.com). He is an award-winning writer, photographer and public speaker. Among his many honors is SAF's 2003 National Journalism Award. He is currently working on his sixth book, "First, Put Out the Fire!" Jim and his wife and business partner, Julia, live in Dalton Gardens, Idaho.