

# Herding Cats and Raising Sheep

*Carson Jorgensen finds himself caught between the worlds of sheep ranching and high-stake politics in the country's fastest growing state. By Marjorie Haun*

Naturally cheerful, lanky at six feet six inches, and quietly cunning, Carson Jorgensen charged out of the chute and into politics at the age of 29 when he ran against Congressman Chris Stewart in his district's Republican primary. Although his bid failed against the popular Stewart, the experience produced a thicker hide. Jorgensen compares it to breaking horses: "There's gonna be horses that buck you off once, buck you off twice, and might even buck you off three times. But I'm just dumb enough to keep getting back on."

## Political Tremors

Politics has been likened to herding cats, especially Republican politics where stubborn individualism often overrules cooperation. Nevertheless, in May 2021, Jorgensen ran for chairman of the Utah Republican Party, and won. Currently the youngest GOP state chair in the United States, at 32 he is reshaping Utah's conservative political landscape with his rural practicality. The young sheepman's election came as a surprise to the political establishment, but Jorgensen was fully prepared and expected to win. "The reason I got elected is that I care," Jorgensen says. "I reached out to people individually. The establishment guy spent thousands for that campaign. I spent \$1,200. But I called delegate after delegate after delegate. I reached out, found out what mattered to people, and told them what I thought was important."

Though he easily won the hearts of Utah's Republican delegates, factions of the establishment were rattled by the upset. His key opponent, a close associate of Utah's governor and seasoned Republican chair of Utah's second-most-populated county, ran an aggressive campaign. "I was actually surprised at the



urban support I got," says Jorgensen. "Trump broke the mold, and whether you like him or not, Trump is who Trump is and he did what he did. In the past it was always a matter of getting into the establishment and working your way up into the inner circle where you earn your chance to run for office. Trump

broke that system. Once Trump got in, people saw the fallacy in the old system, and they saw how much he was able to get done when his hands weren't tied by obligations to the system." Modestly, he concludes: "If it wasn't for Trump I wouldn't have been elected. He opened peoples' eyes to the fact that having an outsider shake things up can be good."

## Of Herding Cats

Jorgensen's appeal goes beyond his rural outsider status, however. As Utah is afflicted by

*With their mountain summer grazing lands looming in the background, Jorgensen's sheep wait to be fed on a winter morning.*

*AT TOP: Boyish and good-natured, Carson Jorgensen is both a sheepman and the leader of Utah's most powerful political party.*



wildfires and exceptional drought conditions interrupted by destructive flash floods, Jorgensen wants government to get back to fundamentals.

“Sometimes I think sheep are more intelligent than politicians,” he says. “I see [politicians] making problems out of things that aren’t really problems and not making problems out of things we should be making problems. Sheep just see what’s right in front of them. So much time is spent on a narrow set of social issues, but little time is spent dealing with the things that are impacting everyone’s day-to-day lives.”



He continues: “It’s frustrating that news cycle after news cycle is focused on social issues when there are towns like ours that don’t have enough water to support the population.”

During his speech at the Republican Convention, he assured everyone that there would be “no county left behind.” In Utah, as in other western states, rural counties often lack clout in their legislatures but are acutely impacted by their policies. As a rancher in central Utah, Jorgensen understands the exasperation. “Politicians have their advisers and legislative staffs and bureaucrats, but they don’t bother to listen to people who have real solutions to real problems. We need lawmakers communicating with the people who are closest to these issues, whether urban or rural, and the lawmakers must listen! You wanna know about public lands, come talk to me. Every single day of my life has been involved with public lands.”

Jorgensen knows that most people use public lands three or four times a year when they camp or hunt or fish. He also knows that there are those who understand how to

*ABOVE: Chilean sheep herder, Serjio Rojas, works with the Jorgensen sheep through all seasons of the year. The family runs sheep on allotments in western and northern Utah, in the mountains near the Mt. Pleasant farm, as well as private acreage near Evanston, Wyoming. LEFT: Sheep camp is moved into the high summer grazing pastures in the central Utah mountains.*

manage the environment—the forests, the watersheds, the canyons, and how to best graze the mountains. “We have college-educated Forest Service employees making our grazing plans who have never set foot on the mountain.”

Jorgensen will not run the state party from an office. Technology helps him support county party organizations and keep his followers up-to-date through social media posts—all while staying close to the ranch, doing the work that feeds his family. A friend of Jon Huntsman, former Utah governor and ambassador to China, Jorgensen shares his favorite quote, “Politicians don’t have to be smart enough to have all the answers; they just have to be smart enough to listen to the people who do.”

## Preserving the Family Legacy

A family man, Jorgensen captivated the Republican Convention as he was accompanied onto the stage by his petite wife, Amy, and four daughters: Olivia, 10; Jocelyn, seven; Adeline, four; and newborn Ella. But he didn't pursue the position for notoriety; he did it to save his family legacy. "I'd rather not be in politics, but I had the realization one day that if we don't do anything we'll lose everything," he says. "Everything we do is politically charged and everything we have is dictated by politics, especially the sheep industry in the West where everything runs on public lands. About 75 percent of the sheep industry in the United States depends on public lands. You get initiatives like Biden's 30 by 30. It would put everyone out of business; my family's legacy would end. It would be done." (Note: "30 x 30" is the Biden Administration's plan to put one-third of all American lands under federal control by the year 2030.)

Jorgensen doesn't see the future as irredeemable and he

hopes to inspire other farmers and ranchers to jump into the political fray. "I'll be the first one to admit that we ranchers are not good at telling our stories, and we have to do a better job. We don't have many who are willing to advocate or understand how to do it but it's going to have to start with us. Courage is contagious and most people just need somebody to look to."

## Of Raising Sheep

You will not find a bar or tavern within miles of Mount Pleasant, where the Jorgensen sheep ranch is headquartered, but you will

find a lot of ice cream and burger shops, and locals with pioneer roots quietly going about their lives. Carson is one of three Jorgensen sons and partners with his grandparents, Neil and Diane; parents, Todd and Angie; and his brother Drew and his family, in the ranch's day-to-day operations. Along with the family hands, Jorgensen Farms keep four Chilean sheepherders on year-round to watch over and manage the animals.

The family's 4,500 sheep are generally split into three bands and spend a good part of the year in the Manti La Sal National Forest east of Mount Pleasant. The family holds sheep permits in eastern Nevada and western Utah and keeps them on private land near Evanston, Wyo., in winter. The family business goes back generations. "On my grandma's side, her dad did it, and his dad ran sheep, and he was actu-

*LEFT: Carson's grandfather and family patriarch, Neil, relaxes at sheep camp.*

*BELOW: Three generations of Jorgensens, left to right: Taylor, Shelby, baby Joslynn held by Amy, Olivia, Carson, Angie, Todd, Kelton, Devrie, Drew, Candalyn, Jamison, Jason and Jenny.*





*LEFT: Forest allotments in the mountains east of the Jorgensen farm provide lush summer grazing for their sizable flocks.*

*ABOVE: Bullet, a dapple-gray sheep horse, stands alone on one of Jorgensen's grazing permits in Utah's west desert.*

*BELOW: Amy, Adeline, baby Ella, Carson, Olivia and Jocelyn.*

ally the first one to bring sheep to the valley. My great-great-grandfather came from Norway with little other than the gold watch in his pocket which he traded for 37 sheep. He leased those sheep out to other people so they could start their own herds and they would reimburse him with more sheep. That's how the sheep industry got started in Sanpete County. In the late 1950s there were 2.5 million sheep just in this county."

The farm operation is on 200 acres—180 in irrigated alfalfa—on the rich alluvial valley floor abutting the Wasatch Mountains. Neat and orderly, it is home to four generations of Jorgensen's family. Historic buildings dot the property and massive sheds that once served as turkey houses now hold dog pens for border collies, Pyrenees/Akbash guardian dogs, a handful of dauntless Nigerian goats used to train the dogs, hospital sheep, horse pens, hay and farm implements.

Diversified in his interests and skills, Jorgensen makes custom bits and spurs for a sizable ranching clientele during winter months while the sheep are on their private ranch in Wyoming. "It works out good," he smiles. "That way I'm not completely dependent on the ranch but can be involved when things get busy." Although he claims he can't draw, he manages to turn out decorative shanks inlaid with silver and copper and emblazoned with stars, horse heads and intricate etchings of flowers.

### **Making Sure it Exists for the Kids**

Although he is unusually adept at retail politicking, Jorgensen's real passion is advocating



for a way of life that has sustained countless families through generations of time. "Everyone benefits from sheep ranching. We're supporting the local economy. Everything—gas, implements, groceries—comes from local businesses. We're adding services, we're adding tax revenue, the ranchers are sustaining these small communities and that's not just here, that's everywhere."

Always with a positive spin, he continues: "We're sustaining healthy watersheds. Sheep and grazing help the watersheds immensely by keeping waterways clear so they can flow. There's a lot we can do with grazing that we're not taking advantage of. Wildfire mitigation, watershed mainte-

nance, habitat...you name it.... We need to change the dialogue about livestock grazing on public lands."

More than a political leader, Jorgensen is a man resolved to preserve the things he loves for the people he loves. "I don't foresee the family doing anything other than the sheep," he says. "That's really why I got into politics, to make sure the sheep business exists for my kids and my brothers' kids." ■

*Marjorie Haun is a freelance journalist living in the remote and beautiful backcountry of southeastern Utah. She specializes in natural resources policy, agriculture and land use news and, for better or worse, politics.*