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PIONEER DAYS  
"SHEEPING WAS ONCE BIG BUSINESS"  
Pic + Text Apr 18-1980 A. REED

corrected — Apr 17 1980

2010.25.20





Captions, "When sheeping was big business"

1. When flocks of sheep had to travel Bridgeport's Main street they were of great interest to tourists. Early spring, 1938.

Collection of M. A. "Slick" Bryant

Adele Reed collection

2. Sheep shearing by hand in early days at "Lower Town". Richie Conway recognized his marks but not the shearer.

Frasher photo  
Adele Reed collection

3. Pete Minaberry, Jr., stuffing wool into burlap bags for transport.

Frasher Photo  
Adele Reed collection

4. Hauling wool from Benton Hot Springs to Laws Depot, jerk line team. Remains of building was the old Brewery.

George Brown, Olancha, Photo, C. 1900.

Genny Smith Collection

5. Canadian born <sup>J.</sup>Richie Conway, sheepman, and his trusty shears.

Adele Reed photo

6. Noonin' time or rest stop at Deadman Creek.

Howard Jones Photo

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20. Sheeping washing business

3 small } pictures  
3 large }

Apr. 13, '80  
17

Use the antique picture hanging wool



1. 1. 1. Copy  
PIONEER DAYS

Sheeping was once big business

By Adele Reed

Inyo and Mono counties have long been famous for the picturesque flocks of sheep that were trailed north from Bakersfield and other areas. It was a thrill to watch a herdsman and his dogs handle several thousand animals as they grazed and moved slowly to summer meadows. Looming up in their midst there was always a burro or two packed high with equipment and supplies and always a water bucket strapped on top. Sheeping was a great business, then along came progress, narrowing the number of flocks and most are now trucked in.

We became acquainted with the late M. A. "Slick" Bryant of Bridgeport several years ago, a native son. His grandfather, A. F. Bryant had settled near Bridgeport in 1863 on rich farmland that is now covered by the Bridgeport Reservoir.

It was most interesting to visit with "Slick", as we did several times, sitting in the beautiful 'front yard' of his Auto Court on Main street. We talked of cattlemen and sheepmen, of the immense meadows and hills where animals grazed in summer, beautiful country once named Big Meadows.

"In the early years the bands of sheep had to be trailed through the main street of town", as "Slick" liked to tell, "on their way to summer range. My wife and I had the Tourist Cabins we have today. Our guests would gather along the sidewalk to look and listen to the bleating and the clacking of many hooves. They liked to picture the thrilling sheep drive, it became an annual event! Later I donated a strip of land to the north of Main street, now known as "Stock Drive". I remember when at least thirteen sheepmen with bands of two to three thousand head came through, now there are about three outfits."



2

Some of the early owners were; John and Joe Giraud, C. E. Wedertz, Fred Fulstone, Frank and Jim Compton and G. B. Day. The Domingo Saldubehere family trailed vast herds the Long Trail from Bakersfield for many years. A son now trucks a flock in.

The Bridgeport Valley was great sheep and cattle country only in summer. Due to the extreme winters the stock were trailed and later trucked to lower and warmer climes as Carson, Smith and Mason valleys in Nevada and also south to Bakersfield.

During the early years the Basque herders and owners joined in the fourth of July celebration at Bridgeport. A tug of war was always a big event between herders and local cowboys. Another event was the yearly barbeque near LeeVining enjoyed by people from many areas. It was followed by an evening of Basque dancing at Bodie Mike's place. The music was quite unique. A woman played an accordin accompanied by a man with his wash tub and broom. He played chords by bow on an upright wire or cord stretched tight to the top of the broom. Their old country dancing brought a packed room until late hours.

One Basque ranch is seen today when traveling north of Bridgeport on #395. It is the Sairo Sheep Ranch where one can see several big bands of sheep that summer there and are trucked to the Fort Churchill area in Nevada for winter. The shearing is now done there in spring.

The Sairo Ranch is very historical as noted by Bryant; "It once was known as the Huntoon Way Station for stages and wagons to and from Reno, Carson and Sonora Pass. There was a two story house with rooms for travelers and a dining room. Across the road toward the meadow was a store, saloon, barns and corrals. The property was sold to Lattapi in 1910, then in 1915 to the Joe Sairo family. They built a large brick home fashioned after the home they left in the Pyrenees."



Along the trail south to winter feed the bands of sheep could be seen in early fall. Conway Summit meadows on the north side was one place of great beauty, another was a ranch on the south side of Conway Mountain. It dates back to 1903 when John Andrew Conway bought the one thousand acres from a man named Jim Sturgeon. Several buildings remain midst trees and spacious green meadows.

Conway was an early freighter using the long teams in and out of Bodie where he settled in 1879. He hauled heavy machinery and supplies to Aurora, Candelaria and other camps, using a mixed team of sixteen to twenty mules and horses, jerk line style. John Andrew's family of three girls and one boy inherited the ranch at the foot of Conway Mountain in 1918 with son, Richie, becoming manager.

In 1923, Richie and wife Tweed (Shipley) went into the sheep business. "We sheeped the Bodie Hills," Richie tells, "and, in fact as I think about it, we sheeped all the hills--even above June and Silver Lakes through the years. In winter we lived in the Benton area, wintering our flock there for thirty years, then moving back to the Conway ranch each spring after shearing."

The ranch they lived on in Benton Valley was named McBride in early times and was a busy stage center with three stage lines in and out. Richie recalls the log cabin, barn and corral that were seen there for long years.

The shearing shed and sheep corral were located near the little school house in what was named "Lower Town" beyond Benton Hot Springs or "Hot Springs" as hawker known. Many other bands of sheep were brought to the corral and the shearers, local men, contracted the tedious, heavy work. They were the workers who used the big shears that had a leather thong over the hand to insure the handhold. It was sometimes difficult to handle sheep that might weigh up to 175 pounds. Good shearing meant



getting the fleece off in good shape, no cuts in the hide.

The wool had to be tied in a bundle and stuffed tight in the huge burlap bags. They were then loaded and hauled by team and wagon south to Laws Depot to be shipped out via the Carson and Colorado train. In later years mechanical shearing entered the picture, especially on large ranches. A group of workers would travel up through Inyo and Mono from Lancaster and Bakersfield. They sheared each flock at gathering places, then moved on north to Oregon.

Richie tells how his sheep were marked; "we put an "under bit" and an "over bit" on the left ear of a ewe lamb. The same on the right ear indicated a wether lamb. Their tails were docked accordingly, short or longer tails indicated whether a ewe or a wether lamb. Also we all had brands (marks) on our sheep to show ownership or other details."

It was good to hear firsthand from Richie the particulars of the huge sheep business that was carried on in both counties.

Richie and Tweed, now retired, live near Bishop. He keeps busy with a few head of cattle and travels to the Mono Ranch, above Mono Lake, to give attention where needed. His sisters, Katie Bell, Gladys Milner and Pearl Silva rely on their brother. Tweed gives a sigh of relief that her helping days of truck driving, running errands on endless roads, as well as housewife and mother of two sons, is back of her now. Their son, Adrien and family live in Bishop, their older son, John, was lost in World War Two.

Richie's sheepling days are not forgotten, he gets a gleam in his eyes, telling of many incidents. They used to trail sheep and sometimes cattle by way of Adobe and around the eastern edge of Mono Lake on the way to or from the Conway Ranch. In his younger days he had a notion, perhaps made a bet, that he could ride horseback around Mono Lake in one day, and that he did! Quite a ride.



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# SHEEPING WAS ONCE BIG BUSINESS

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Another event was the yearly barbeque near Lee Vining enjoyed by people from many areas. It was followed by an evening of Basque dancing at Bodie Mike's place. The music was quite unique. A woman played an accordion accompanied by a man with his wash tub and broom. He played chords by bow on an upright wire or cord stretched tight to the top of the broom. Their old country dancing brought a packed room until late hours.

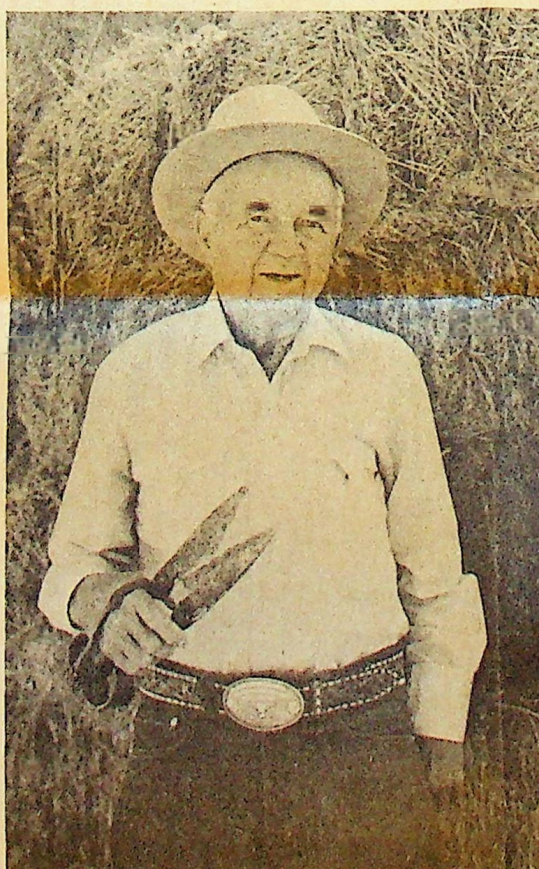
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REST STOP—"Noonin' time" at Deadman Creek.  
Howard Jones Photo, Reed Collection





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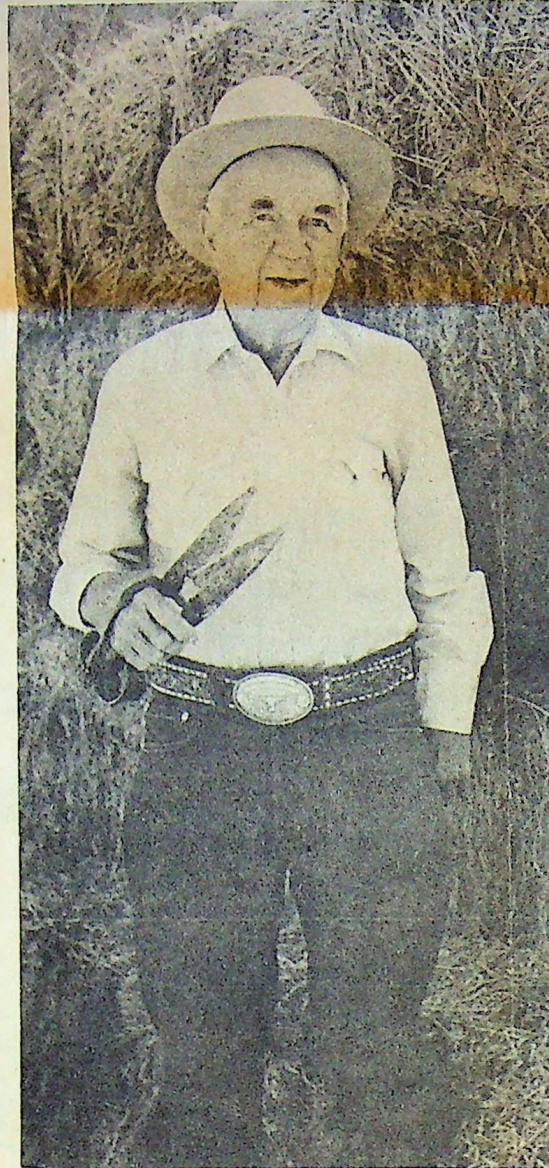
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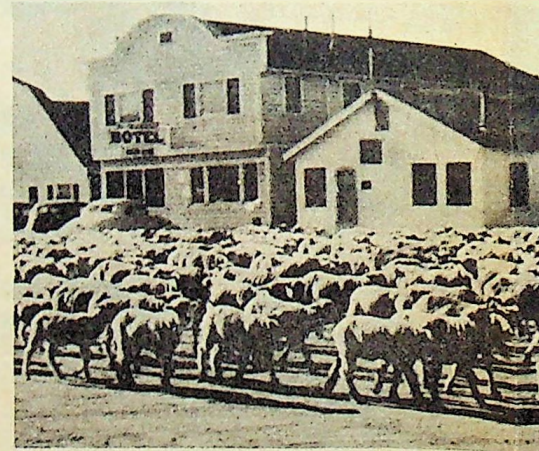
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CANADIAN BORN Richie Conway, with his trusty sheep shears.

Adele Reed photo



HEAVY TRAFFIC—When flocks of sheep had to travel Bridgeport's Main Street, they were of great interest to tourists, not to mention temporarily stopping most traffic. This photo was taken in the spring of 1938.

M.A. "Slick" Bryant Collection

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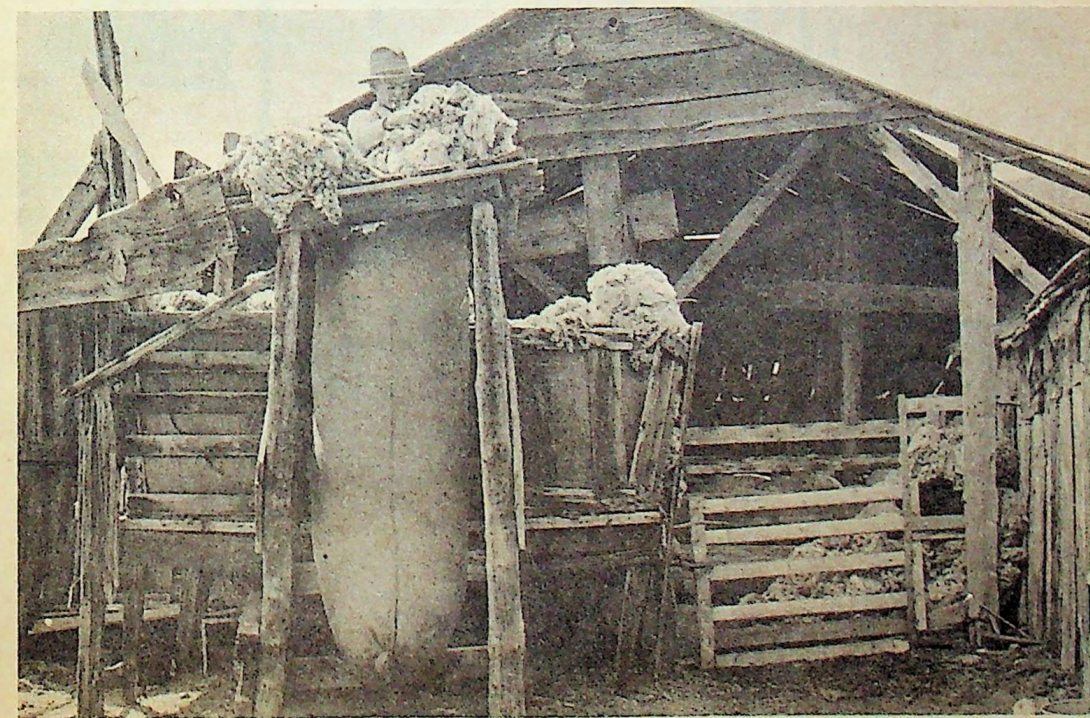
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JUST A TRIM, PLEASE—Sheep shearing by hand in the early days at "Lower Town." Richie Conway recognized the brand

on the lamb but not the shearer.

Frascher Photo, Reed Collection



GOLDEN FLEECE—Pete Minaberry, Jr., stuffing wool into huge burlap bags for transport.

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