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BOB E. G...

EARLY DAY RANGE, LIVESTOCK AND WILDLIFE OBSERVATIONS

AS RECALLED BY

MR. SID TREMEWAN, FIRST FOREST SUPERVISOR OF THE HUMBOLDT NATIONAL FOREST

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Diamond "A" Desert

The Murphy-Hill or Diamond "A" outfit was one of the largest cattle operations in Elko County prior to 1900. For the most part, they ran between Charleston and the Diamond "A" Desert. The operation was sold in the 1890's. Barney Horn, a big butcher in San Francisco, bought the cattle. By 1899 he had them all rounded up. The total count came to 18,000.

In 1900 we moved from the Evans place at the foot of the Independence Mountains to what is now the Mink Ranch on the Bruneau River. We built a home and put in a few acres of alfalfa. Only enough grass hay was cut to feed the saddle horses or an occasional sick cow. We were running 400 cattle and never thought of feeding them during the winter. The grass was one and one-half feet high and waved in the wind all over the hills. That was real winter country. Oftentimes the green grass would be four to five inches high in October. We could pick an animal from the herd in the winter that would be in beef condition. The first two or three years after we went down on the Bruneau, our two year old steers weighed 1100 to 1130 pounds right off the range. They had never been fed a bit of hay. Cows ran 1230-1250 a carload lot. They, too, had never been fed in their lives.



They originated from animals turned out during the early days by the Murphy-Hill and Columbit outfits. None of them were branded. All the ranchers in the area agreed that there must have been 5,000 of them on the Diamond "A" between the Bruneau and Jarbidge Rivers. Since much of the area was surrounded by rim rock canyons, they were pretty well confined. They ranged lower on the desert in the canyons and box canyons in the winter. During the summer they always used the higher country between Dear Creek and Deep Creek. At night they fed high on the mountain. During the day they stayed on the desert. There were streams of dust night and morning as they went from the desert to the mountains, and from the mountains back to the desert.

About this time, horses were way down in market value. People started shooting them for practice. They didn't even bother to skin them. A fellow by the name of Tom Bradstreet from Grand Island, Nebraska came out and offered to pay so much per head for all the animals that could be gathered. To gather them, we built corrals where the trails crossed the rim rocks and also down in the bottoms of the canyons. These corrals were camouflaged in one way or another. By making a big drive, the horses were pushed down the trails into the corrals. During the first day we gathered 160 head in the Deep Creek pocket. Our work was just starting though, because we still had to get them to the railroad. Bradstreet brought in hundreds of halters, with the idea of chaining two horses together. We knew, however, that two horses chained together would run as fast as they wanted; so we added another, making it three.



Well, it was a good idea, but it didn't work. The horses started fighting one another when we let them go. One of them would grab the other by the nose, and you could just hear his teeth pop as he pulled away. We had to do away with this method.

Other people also started gathering horses besides ourselves. They would corral 40 or 50 at a time. It was found that the best way to get them to the railroad was to use a barley sack. A hole was cut in the bottom of the sack and the top was pulled up over the head and tied around the neck. This allowed the horse to walk, feed, and drink as long as its head was down. When they took the notion to run, the sack would come down over their eyes. Not being to see, they stopped. After fitting them with barley sacks, we would put a bell mare in the corral. In a day or two after they got used to the bell, we would be ready to start for the railroad. They would just put their heads down so they could see the ground and would then follow the bell. This was the best way anyone ever found to get them off the desert to the railroad. Quite a few were brought out this way.

As the shooting and corralling continued, horse numbers on the Diamond "A" declined steadily. By 1916, there were only a few scattered bunches running in the mountains.

#### Range and Livestock

~~Up there~~ At Gold Creek, Walt Martin used to cut his winter hay by mowing the ridges. The native grass was thick enough that all he had to do was find a smooth place.



There was a lot of bunch grass on Sunflower Flat, but most of it was on the lower part of the area. Also there was a lot of sunflower. When it bloomed, the flowers were so thick the country was yellow.

Prior to the turn of the century, I lived on the Evans Ranch with my uncle. This was a wonderful feed country. It was primarily a grass range. Of course, there was a little more brush than in the Gold Creek country, so it was not quite as smooth appearing. All the smoother ridges were covered with bunch grass. There wasn't any sagebrush to speak of, just grass. The creek bottoms from the present highway to the mountain were continuous narrow meadows. There was no sagebrush in them then. The vegetation was mostly redtop and small white clover. It was wonderful feed.

The Pole Creek area was another fine grazing country. The grass over there was "out of this world". You could go out anywhere and mow hay, good hay.

Just before I left the Evans place, the sheep started to come into the country in large numbers. There were so many that the herders would run back and forth trying to beat one another to the better camp sites. This tromping and running around did more damage to the range than the feeding. The whole mountain range was tromped up. It was just a dust pit from Foreman Creek clear south to Taylor Canyon. By the first of September the country looked like a desert. There was nothing left. The cattle ranchers were having a hard time running what they could feed in winter. The feed was so short by fall that as soon as the ranchers got their meadows cut, they would turn the cattle on them. One fall, about 1905, Joe Pattani, Sr., sold his cattle to Barney Horn.



They were gathered out of Snow and Jerrett Canyons in early October.

Those animals were so thin and weak that they had to be fed hay for several weeks at the ranch before they could be driven down to the railroad at Elko.

Both the Ruby and the Independence Forest Reserves were established in 1906 and 1908. I can remember the leg work we did to get the Independence Mountains included. In 1907, to get the ball rolling, Frank Winters and I went up north and told the people about putting the Independence into the Forest Reserve. When they learned that this would give them first chance at the range adjacent to their homesteads, they were quick to sign the petition calling for creation of the Forest.

During that same summer, I got a technical assistant, George Thompson. He came out and we started surveying the boundary line for the proposed Bruneau addition. We started surveying at Jack Creek and went all the way across the Bruneau River to the East Fork of the Jarbidge River. All of it was done by pack horse and we had some pretty hard going. The area we covered was included in the National Forest in 1909.

In 1908, there were 560,000 sheep running on what is now the Independence, Gold Creek, and Jarbidge Ranger Districts. Some of the larger operations were: Old W. W. Williams, who had 40 thousand; his brother, George, had 22 thousand; J. G. Taylor had 60 thousand; Tom Nelson had 12,000; and Jenkins Co. had 30 thousand. The Bradley outfit was running in Mary's River. They had 25-30 thousand. These fellows, as well as others, were operators who had been in the country several years.



The rest were tramp outfits who had swarmed into the country in 1908 in order to establish preference. They had learned that a National Forest was to be created and that each outfit must have used the summer range at least one year prior to establishment of the Forest. We soon found that this was inadequate, so I recommended that it be extended to two years and it was approved.

In the beginning, some of the sheep operators were opposed to the idea of a Forest Reserve. Pence in Idaho, Williams, Jenkins, and Taylor were some of them. However, there were enough homesteaders in favor of it that we got it passed over their objections.

On March 9, 1909, we held a two day session to decide who had preference and to draw up allotments. All the sheepmen and cattlemen in the country came to the meeting. They talked things over among themselves with a great deal of arguing. One would say, "I ran sheep in that country in a certain year." The other would counter with, "I used to run in there and you never came in when I was there." "I had my camp there first", and so on. After it was all over, old man Williams, who had a strong dislike for me to start with, said, "I can't help but say, you were fair with everybody. We got all we were entitled to, I guess, considering the condition the range is in."

As a result of the meeting, 210,000 sheep, several thousand cattle, and 2,000 horses were cut from the Forest. Each cattle rancher was given an allotment for his cattle which would be closed to sheep and every sheep



owner who had prior rights, an allotment for his sheep that would be protected for him until he was ready to use it. By doing this, we did away with the annual race which occurred every spring to "beat the other fellow to it".

When we made the final adjustment in 1909, those outfits that were turned away made a rush for the Santa Rosa Mountains. The area had not yet been set aside as a National Forest. There was at least 5 or 6 of those 20 to 30 thousand sheep outfits down there, besides small operations. With the increased use, this country, too, became badly depleted.

The Ruby Mountains were never stocked as heavily with sheep as the north country. The main reason was because a great deal of it was railroad land that was under lease to sheep operations or had been sold to them. These people did not allow the tramp outfits in the area under their jurisdiction. Another reason it had not been stocked like the north country was because the high country had a great deal of rock. This reduced considerably the total area where sheep could be run. As near as I can remember, the initial permit on the Rubies was around 30,000 sheep.

#### Sage Grouse

Sage chickens were so plentiful in the 1890's when I was on the Evans place that they clouded the sky. I can remember killing them with a stick on many occasions. When returning home from school, all I had to do was gallop my white horse through a stretch of natural meadow. The birds were always thick on those meadows. They would be eating the white clover and



'other vegetation. As I passed by, they would raise up like a bunch of blackbirds. When I was pretty near home I would get a stick about four feet long and three quarters of an inch thick. As I galloped along, I would start slapping the stick from one side to the other. In a short time, I would have five or six sage chickens to take home for supper.

Another way I got sage chickens without a gun was by using a stick while raking hay. We used a one-horse rake, and I generally had a long stick with a little brush on it to keep the flies off the horse. In the late afternoon, when it began to get dinner time, the chickens would walk away from in front of the horse and just outside of the wheel. I would just reach out and rap them over the head with the stick. Oh, they were thick!

Sheep bands destroyed a lot of nests in the early days. I watched as many as seven bands in a day go by the Tremewan Ranch. They would be so thick that they had to have an extra man out riding between the bands to keep them from mixing together. Years of this type destruction to the nests are what started to thin out the sage chickens.

Also hunting cut the numbers down in some areas. During the 1890's, parties used to come out in wagons from Elko. They would camp for weeks at a time just hunting and fishing. When they were ready to go home, they usually had one last shoot. A dead-axe wagon wouldn't hold the birds they killed. They would just leave them on the ground in big piles to rot. It was a contest to see who could kill the most.



Prairie Chickens or Willow Grouse  
(Sharp-tailed Grouse)

There were a large number of these birds along the creek beds when I was a kid. They liked the willows and trees. They weren't all over the country, just on the drainages. You could get a mess of them anytime. They were a small, quick-running, little bird with a tuft of white feathers on their head. Their tail section was spread out. They didn't like to fly. When they did, it was just for a short way. People coming out from the east called them "prairie chickens" and the name stuck. The last one I saw was the year the Scout Camp was built in Lamoille Canyon. I saw one of the little rascals running up the creek bottom near the camp.

Big Horn Sheep

I think there were about 100 in the Rubies around 1909 and 1910. Most everyone would report seeing them here or there. On one occasion about 1909, we were returning from a horseback trip back over toward Conrad Creek when we sighted a group of animals. There were eleven in all.

There were some in the Jarbidge Mountains too. Every once in a while some shepherd would report seeing a bunch. They were doing all right until the domestic sheep got so numerous and began coming down with scabs. Big horns began to decrease both in the Rubies and Jarbidge country when this happened. They would find them dead with their hair gone. I figure the scab killed them.



## WOLVERINE

Old Dick Weatherford told me about one time he was going up North Fork Canyon. This was in the 1880's or 1890's. He spotted something in the brush, but couldn't make it out. Then he got on a little high place where he could see and finally made it out. It was one of those wolverines. It had killed a young lamb and was trying to get it up the hill. He said he watched it quite a while from a distance and then walked up as far as he dared. The wolverine was grabbing the lamb by the neck. It would then roll over and pull the lamb up on its back. By doing this, it was able to pack the lamb a short way. Dick watched it do this several times. Wolverines were scattered through the country. During one winter in the 1890's, wood choppers were working in the Foreman Creek country. They had a camp in a high basin at the head of Pratt Creek and were making charcoal for the mines at Tuscarora. During the middle of the winter, two fellows decided to ski over the mountains to Tuscarora. When they were coming back, they must have gone too far out on a snow bank that had combed over. A shepherd found them the next summer right under the hang-over snow bank at the head of Foreman Creek. They had been entirely eaten by wolverines except for the inside of their boots.

## Fox

That mountain next to the Belcher place was just loaded with red foxes. This was around the 1880's. They have all disappeared. They are gone now.



White Tail Jack Rabbit  
~~(Varying Hare)~~

I can remember when I was driving stage in the winter that the country was covered with snow, so we would be using the sleigh. In the late afternoon or evening, the rabbits would be out in bunches of 25-30. While we were on the Evans Ranch I shot white tails by moonlight. I would put on my warm clothes and go out on the feed ground. The cattle had it packed to ice. By laying on the ground, I was on a dead level with the rabbits. I shot five or six with my 22 rifle everytime I went out.

At times when the white tail population was high, we had trouble with them eating our hay stacks. They would eat around the bottom of the stack until the weight caused it to topple over.

Black-tailed Jack Rabbits

For years there was hardly a black tail between the railroad tracks at Elko and the Idaho line. People returning to Elko had something to tell about if they happened to run across a black tail on the Park Station Flat (Dinner Station). When I was on the Evans place, I never saw a black-tailed jack. I don't know whether the white tails kept them out or not, but they weren't there.

Fish

The salmon used to run the South Fork of the Owyhee every spring. The ranchers in the Independence Valley and the people in Tuscarora would



take them with pitch forks and spears. It was quite a sport for a while. I remember the run of 1887. Those fish even went up that little stream that runs down through Tuscarora. It dried up completely in the latter part of July, but when it was high in the spring, the salmon could go up. Old Jess Snyder went out with a pitch fork one day and right down under the bridge, he saw one spawning. He just put the pitch fork under it and heaved it on the bank. The fish weighed about 30 pounds.

The Indians used to get them too. They would work the country near the reservation and bring them to Tuscarora in wagon loads.

When we were on the Evans, the cutthroat trout would come up out of the Humboldt River to spawn every spring. They would run almost all the streams from Pie Creek to North Fork. When they started back after spawning, lots of them would end up in the irrigation ditches. I have gone out behind the Evans in the ditch next to the meadow and picked up three and four of those cutthroat every morning. They would weigh three and four pounds. They were wonderful fish.