

# Family: Farm began raising cattle in 1960s

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In 1933, Mac Hoke and his business partner, Don Cameron, acquired it. Cameron later sold to Hoke's family, in whose hands the farm has remained ever since.

Hoke and his wife, Carrie, the first generation, had two daughters: Joan and Helen, the second generation.

Joan married a Corey and Helen married a Levy.

Joan Hoke Corey had three children and Helen Hoke Levy had six — the third generation.

In the fourth generation, there are six Coreys and 17 Levys.

The fifth generation is comprised of around 30 children.

About 75% of the family has stayed in Eastern Oregon, and most family members — including the children — spend some time on the farm.

## Everyone has a voice

Industry leaders and community members say the farm's success is partly attributable to its structure, which strategically incorporates generations of family members.

Direct lineal descendants inherit interest in the company, but non-owners also play a role.

The family has two entities that contribute to the business: a family board and a family council.

The board includes eight family members and one independent director. Board members vote on business decisions. The current board has seven fourth-generation family members and one third-generation member. Older generations are transitioning out.

The family council is separate, existing to give everyone a voice. Spouses of lineal descendants are allowed to participate. Although council members don't get to vote on business decisions, the council keeps the family connected and is a "breeding ground for ideas," Steve Corey said.

On some family farms, only those who actually work the ground get an ownership stake and a say in how the farm is run, but that's not the case with Cunningham Sheep Co. This family encourages each generation to pursue their own career interests, on or off the farm, but to be part of the farm either way.

Some family members have chosen farm life, including Dick Levy, who manages cattle, and Bob Levy, who oversees sheep. Others have chosen off-farm occupations, including Steve Corey, who worked in the farm's wheat fields when he was young, studied history at Yale University and law at Stanford University, then returned to practice as an attorney in Eastern Oregon.

Both categories — those in full-time farming and those with off-farm careers — participate in the family board and council, contributing their skills and knowl-



A group of ewes in a holding pen outside the lambing barn.

Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press



Leah Swannack

Glen Krebs

edge to the farm.

Sharing responsibility between family members has kept the business in its best shape, said Corey, though it has demanded "a great deal of coordination and communication."

## 'Wool was king'

Early in the farm's history, Cunningham Sheep Co. had about 25,000 sheep, and the farm has a long history of selling its wool exclusively to Pendleton Woolen Mills.

"Back then, wool was king," said Glen Krebs, the farm's lead sheep herder.

As markets changed through the decades, Cunningham Sheep Co. whittled down its flock — the farm now keeps about 4,000 ewes, plus rams and lambs — and expanded into other commodities.

In the 1960s, the family added cattle and now raises 1,200 cow-calf pairs annually. The family also diversified by adding wheat, timberland and a hunting operation called Hunt Oregon LLC.

Since the 1950s, the farm has increased its acreage by 60% to 80%.

Steve Corey showed the Capital Press a map of the family's holdings: private land, timberlands and federal grazing lands extending across Umatilla County and parts of Morrow and La Grande counties. Corey estimated the farm is larger than 75,000 acres.

Although the farm now produces a diverse mix of livestock, wheat and timber, many locals still know Cunningham Sheep Co. best for what gave the farm its name: sheep.

## Fine-wooled Rambouillets

Wool remains a major part of the farm 149 years after Cunningham started the business.

The Coreys and Levys raise Rambouillet sheep, a large, white-faced breed that produces fine wool soft enough to be worn next to the skin.

"Shearing is a busy time," said Glen Krebs, lead sheep herder.

Krebs ascended a ramp to the upper story of a barn



Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press

Glen Krebs, Cunningham Sheep Co.'s lead sheep herder, enters a holding area where pregnant ewes stand immediately before they are brought into the barn to give birth.

lined with shearing stations.

Annually, he said, the farm pays a shearing contractor to bring in several shearers.

Shearing is fast-paced. Shorn sheep are guided down chutes resembling slides at a park, while handlers classify the wool's quality before it's mechanically stuffed into bags.

When Krebs was growing up, his family stuffed round burlap bags, often 7 1/2 feet tall, with wool manually rather than mechanically.

"When I was little, they'd throw me in a bag and I'd have to work my way out," said Krebs.

He chuckled. Krebs is not part of either the Levy or Corey side. The family hired him because he has a lifetime of industry knowledge; Krebs' family also runs an Eastern Oregon sheep business.

The farm hired Krebs in 2013 after their former Basque lead sheep herder, Juan Erice, retired.

## To the mill

Once wool is bagged, it's shipped to Pendleton Woolen Mills.

The mill and farm have a long-standing relationship built on trust. For decades, the mill has committed to buy the farm's wool at the best price it can afford to offer. Pendleton's wool buyer does a visual inspection, talks with the farm about the year's clip and negotiates a price.

"If you want to call it a handshake relationship, you can call it that," said Dan Gutzman, who manages Pendleton's wool buying department. "But it's one that's withstood (decades)."

Corey, of Cunningham Sheep Co., said Pendleton Woolen Mills has been loyal, buying the farm's wool even during difficult years.

Many factors drive the

international wool market. Tariffs, disease outbreaks, drought and shipping congestion all impact pricing.

Pendleton Woolen Mills consumes about 2.4 million scoured pounds of wool annually — 40% from domestic growers, 60% from overseas — and Cunningham is one of the longest-standing suppliers.

Wool, however, isn't the farm's main money-maker. More profit comes from selling meat and breeding stock.

## Registered, commercial flocks

Twilight lapped across the hills like a quiet tide near Pilot Rock, south of Pendleton.

Krebs, the foreman, with help from a Border Collie, led a pair of 300-pound rams through a gate.

These rams belonged to the farm's registered flock, comprised of sheep with fine wool and white faces that meet Pendleton's wool standards.

Each year, Krebs said, he sells about 100 top-quality rams as breeding stock.

Animals that don't meet the standards are in a commercial flock, many of which end up as meat.

Krebs keeps track of each animal's pedigree with electronic ear tags, which the farm started using four years ago. He said the tags provide him with data for targeted breeding.

Plus, Krebs said, he anticipates the meat market is moving toward consumers demanding more traceability — tracking with ear tags which animals have received antibiotics, for example.

"Traceability is coming," said Krebs. "We're trying to get ahead."

The sheep business' main profit comes from selling lamb through Stan Boyd, based in Eagle, Idaho, the farm's broker for the Rocky

Mountain Sheep Marketing Association.

Krebs said he's pleased that demand for lamb is on the rise.

"I'm really optimistic," said Krebs.

He was interrupted by an uproar of dogs barking.

Cunningham Sheep Co. has about 40 farm dogs, each with different roles — working, herding, guarding — across a range of breeds including Border Collies, Turkish Kangal Shepherds and Great Pyrenees.

Some of the dogs protect sheep from predators.

## Main challenges

Predator pressure is one of the main challenges the farm faces.

Last year alone, the farm had 17 confirmed sheep kills and two dog injuries from wolves. Those were just the confirmed cases. According to Corey, "It's tough to get a wolf predation confirmed."

The family says the farm is affected by the state's decisions on wolf management.

"It's not us making those rules. We just live and deal with them as best as we can," said Corey.

To repel wolves, the farm has increased its number of guard dogs.

Krebs, the foreman, said the dogs take different roles. Some chase. Others bark. Yet others remain close to the sheep. Krebs said he doesn't assign the dogs their roles; they decide.

"It's like they have a coffee every morning and say, 'You go here, I'll go there,'" said Krebs.

He laughed. The farm faces other challenges, too: the economy's unpredictability, environmental regulations, the ongoing agricultural labor shortage and concern over the new farmworker overtime pay law.

Despite the challenges,

Krebs said he's fortunate to have a team of about six H-2A migrant guestworkers who follow the sheep on the range.

"We've got a terrific team, couldn't have better," said Krebs. "They're just go-getters."

## Lambing barn

The next morning, Corey, Krebs, the herders and a veterinary student met at the lambing barn in Nolin, between Pendleton and Echo.

Beside the farm's Nolin headquarters, the Umatilla River, brown from rainstorms, meandered past cottonwoods and hills that buckled into each other.

In the river valley stood a grain elevator and nearby, the lambing barn.

According to the Oklahoma State University Extension Service, when Rambouillets lamb, only 20% to 35% have twins. This spring, Cunningham Sheep Co. birthed between 4,500 to 4,800 lambs out of 3,800 ewes — a good rate considering the breed and last year's drought.

Inside the barn, Leah Swannack, a Washington State University veterinary student doing a mixed-animal rotation at the farm, was moving between jugs — stalls holding a single ewe and her young — checking their health.

The Coreys and Levys say they're intentional about surrounding themselves with good veterinarians.

While Swannack did health checks, migrant workers labeled ewes and lambs with colored chalk-paint: blue for singles, red for twins. The farm also uses letters with different meanings: for example, "A" for "ayuda," Spanish for "help," painted on a lamb needing attention.

Even bumper lambs have their own warm, clean space with individual pens. Krebs jokingly calls this "The Hilton."

With such a large operation, it's crucial to be organized, he said.

## The future

With younger faces on the family board and council, Corey said he looks forward to seeing how the farm innovates in the future.

Younger family members have bounced around ideas that may take shape, including harvesting more of the farm's timber, acquiring a small lumber mill and buying more land to expand pheasant hunting. Young family members have also talked about marketing lamb differently, with more direct sales under a brand name such as "Cunningham Lamb."

At this point, those ideas are still just that: ideas. But as new generations of the family take leadership, Corey anticipates the farm will adapt with the times.

In the meantime, consumers continue to see the farm's ripple effects far and wide: at the grocery store, on the landscape and woven into cloth in Pendleton Woolen Mills' 35 retail stores.

# Water: About 40% of the water will be sent down Klamath River for ESA-listed salmon

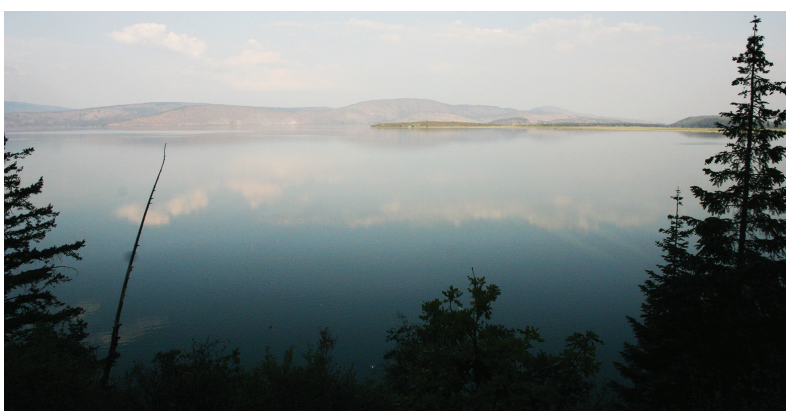
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in Upper Klamath Lake during April and May for suckers to access shoreline spawning habitat.

However, Reclamation acknowledged there is not enough water in the system to meet that target regardless of project supply. The agency laid out its 2022 operations plan on April 11, calling for a minimum surface elevation of 4,138.5 feet in Upper Klamath Lake and minimal Project allocation.

Gentry states the 2022 plan "directly contravenes Reclamation's own water allocation formula, the honest application of which would straightforwardly set project supply ... at zero."

"It gives me no pleasure to send this letter, or for the Tribes to be forced to sue the United States for the third time in five years," he wrote.



George Plaven/Capital Press

## Upper Klamath Lake

C'waam and Koptu fisheries have sustained the Klamath people for millennia. The species are also central to the tribes' cultural and spiritual practices, yet they now face extinction due to habitat loss and water quality issues, Gentry added.

Basin farmers, meanwhile,

argue they are being deprived of water for crops and livestock without benefitting fish.

A year ago, the Klamath Project received no water from Upper Klamath Lake. As canals went dry, fields turned to dust and more than 300 domestic wells failed in Klamath County.

According to the Klamath Water Users Association, a group that represents 1,200 farms and ranches in the Klamath Project, this year's expected allocation of 50,000 acre-feet equals no more than 5% of all the water that will be used this season from Upper Klamath Lake.

About 40% of the water will be sent down the Klamath River for ESA-listed salmon; 28% will be held in Upper Klamath Lake for C'waam and Koptu and 27% will be lost to evaporation.

KWUA President Ben DuVal called the regulators' performance "unacceptable" and "embarrassing" in a recent statement.

"On a single acre, we can produce over 50,000 pounds of potatoes or 6,000 pounds of wheat," said DuVal, who farms near Tulelake, Calif. "This year, most of that land will not produce any food because the government is denying water for irrigation. We'll just be

trying to keep the weeds and dust under control."

Reclamation will provide \$20 million in immediate drought assistance to farmers, and \$5 million in technical assistance for tribal-led water conservation projects. The Biden administration's infrastructure bill also set aside \$162 million for the basin through 2026.

Gentry said C'waam and Koptu have seen no major recruitment into the breeding population since the early 1990s, and the remaining adult fish are nearing the end of their natural lifespan. The tribes are urging Reclamation to rescind its 2022 plan to comply with the ESA and prioritize the needs of fish.

"The Tribes will do everything in our power to ensure that the precious remnants of these once bountiful populations are not forever erased from the face of the Earth," he wrote.