

Offbeat Oregon: Range-wars veteran put Oregon on map as sheep country

By Finn J.D. John
For The sentinel

The notorious cattle-man-sheepman wars of the 1880s had not been good to John G. Edwards — known to friend and enemy alike as Jack. But then, they hadn't been good to anybody.

Edwards had been on the sheep side. On his Wyoming ranch and covering the nearby hills of public range-land, Jack had owned the largest flock of sheep in the country: over 100,000 of the wooly critters. Journalists called him the “Sheep King of America.”

Then had come the wars. The range wars were squabbles over public lands. Those lands were theoretically open to everyone, but the people using it had a tendency to assume they had a right to keep others out.

Most of the time this took the form of cattlemen and sheepmen fighting like Bloods and Crips, and the squabbling continued in deadly earnest until the federal government changed its grazing-permit practices in

the early 1900s. In those battles, Edwards and his employees gave as good as they got, and a number of cowboys as well as more than a few sheep-herders found their way into lonely graves on the wind-swept prairie as a result. But, winning or losing, it was not a life one could settle into.

Then one day in July of 1896, a gang of heavily armed cattlemen bent on convincing Edwards to yield the range to them got the drop on him, tied him up, and put a noose around his neck.

When he refused to promise to move his sheep, they lifted him off the ground with the noose and let him dangle until he blacked out. He surely must have thought he was being lynched.

Although he refused to give the cattlemen the assurance they demanded from him, this episode seems to have convinced Edwards that something had to change. So he started looking around for a place he could move to where he could raise his

sheep and mind his own without having to deal with range-war drama — a nice big spread with lots of land that was good for little else but running sheep, with good access to public range-land and international ports. He found it in a spread 25 miles north of Prineville, in a place called the Hay Creek Ranch.

The Hay Creek had started out as a 160-acre homestead, which a Boston physician named David Baldwin bought in 1873 to try his hand as a sheep rancher. Although I haven't been able to confirm why Dr. Baldwin decided to leave the medical profession, usually when an urban professional did this sort of thing it was because he had contracted tuberculosis and had been advised to move to a cleaner, drier climate to recover.

If so, Dr. Baldwin didn't exactly rest in bed. On his new ranch he founded the Baldwin Sheep and Land Co. and stocked it with registered, purebred Spanish Merino sheep hauled in from the East Coast; then

he bought as many adjacent homesteads and acreages as he could and started irrigating and planting alfalfa on them.

The alfalfa would be the key to his success. But before that could happen, his health failed.

By the time Jack Edwards started looking into it, Dr. Baldwin had been out of the picture for some time, and the Baldwin Sheep & Land Co. was owned by a group of businessmen out of Portland. He bought in in 1898, and by 1901 he'd arranged to buy his partners out and take over.

Edwards had learned a thing or two from the range wars in Wyoming.

The number-one thing he'd learned was that the key to not getting involved with range wars was not his fellow sheepmen, nor the cattlemen who opposed them — it was the sodbusters, the homesteaders, who lived in the neighborhood.

Back in the Wyoming wars, the sodbusters had been cordially hated by both sides, and vice-versa. But what Edwards had come to understand was that the homesteaders were there to make a home and a community, not a buck.

They would rally and defend that community against anyone who was just there to make a buck; and if Edwards settled down and made his outfit part of that community, they'd rally and defend him too.

So the Hay Creek Ranch became the center of a sprawling rural frontier community of homesteaders working 160- and 320-acre claims; and at the ranch, Edwards provided a general store and post office for their convenience, and a school for their children.

He also provided jobs for homesteaders who found themselves pinched for cash.

And, of course, every time a sodbuster gave up and started looking to sell out, Edwards would be right there, in a perfect position to make an offer.

Without range wars to worry about, Edwards could concentrate on what he really wanted to do, which was develop the Hay Creek Ranch into the world's pre-eminent sheep facility. Over the next ten years — a surprisingly short period of time, really — Jack Edwards did just that. In the process, he put northern Central Oregon on the map.

These were the boom years for places like Shaniko — which, although it's an almost-ghost town today, was the largest wool shipping town in the Pacific Northwest during this time.

Edwards experimented with breeding, developing a colossal breed of sheep, weighing 200 pounds and covered with wool, that he named the Baldwin. He put in a mechanical shearing facility to speed the process of harvesting wool. And he bought or leased all the adjacent land he possibly could, at every opportunity.

His ranch got bigger and bigger, eventually covering 30,000 acres.

Meanwhile, a little farther south in the state, the range wars were breaking out again. This time it was the Crook County Sheepshooters — masked cattlemen trying to force the sheep herds off “their” public rangelands.

Their technique was to creep up on sheepherders, tie them up or hold them at gunpoint, and just massacre their flocks.

They never moved against Jack Edwards, though. They never dared. All the northern central Oregon sodbusters would have risen up to defend him.

But the Sheepshooters were part of the reason Jack lost his empire. The federal government, tired of the anarchy and waste of the incessant range wars, tasked the U.S. Forest Service with setting grazing allotments on a per-rancher basis.

This took the wind out of the sails of the Sheepshooters. There was no point in massacring herds of sheep if everyone's grazing allotment was set in advance.

But it also gave the Forest Service a suite of management tools that it really didn't yet understand how to effectively use. And in 1906, the forest service used one of those tools when it announced it was cutting Edwards' grazing allotment by 40 percent.

Edwards negotiated the cut to 25 percent — a total of 30,000 sheep. He reduced his flock accordingly, and made his plans on that basis. But then, in 1909, they hit him with another 30 percent cut.

At that point, no doubt concluding that he was too old to have to deal with getting his business thrown into chaos after every election year by a fresh crop of well-meaning Forest Service bureaucrats, Jack rode into Portland and made arrange-

ments to sell everything off. “I mean no criticism of the government,” he told an Oregon Journal reporter, after explaining the situation. “But the facts are as I have stated. Twelve months from the present date we expect to have our entire sheep holdings sold out.” And so he did.

That wasn't the end of Hay Creek Ranch, though. Not by a long stretch. Its new owners were able to continue operating profitably in spite of the grazing-allocation cuts — in no small part because of the new Baldwin breed of sheep Jack had developed.

In fact, in 1927 the ranch sold 10,000 purebred Baldwins to the Soviet Union as breeding stock — the largest single sale of large livestock to an overseas buyer in history at the time.

Unfortunately for the Russians, most of these expensive “designer sheep” were eaten within a year of their arrival — and that surely was the most expensive mutton to ever pass human lips.

Although the boom years of sending 500,000 tons of wool a year down the Columbia are long past, the Hay Creek Ranch remains a going concern to this day.

As for Jack Edwards, after he sold out he settled into a long and happy retirement in Portland, and took up painting. He died in 1945.

(Sources: “The Sheep King of America,” an article by David Braly in Little Known Tales from Oregon History, a book edited by Geoff Hill and published in 1988 by Sun Publishing of Bend; “Hay Creek Ranch,” an article by Jarold Ramsey published March 17, 2018, on The Oregon Encyclopedia at oregonencyclopedia.org; “Conflict on the Range,” an article by Candy Moulton published Aug. 29, 2011, in True West magazine; and The Woolly West: Colorado's Hidden History of Sheepscapes, a book by Andrew Gulliford published in 2013 by Texas A&M University Press)

Finn J.D. John teaches at Oregon State University and writes about odd tidbits of Oregon history. For details, see <http://finnjohn.com>. To contact him or suggest a topic: finn2@offbeatoregon.com or 541-357-2222.

Worship Directory

DRAIN:
HOPE U.M.C.
131 W “A” St. Drain, OR
541-315-1617
Pastor: Lura Kidner-Miesen
Fellowship & Song: 11:30am
Potluck Lunch: 12:00pm
Worship: 12:30pm

COTTAGE GROVE:
6th & Gibbs Church of Christ
195 N. 6th St. • 541-942-3822
10:00am
Christian Education:
Pre-K through 5th
www.6thandgibbs.com

Calvary Baptist Church
77873 S 6th St • 541-942-4290
Pastor: Riley Hendricks
Sunday School: 9:45am
Worship: 11:00am
The Journey: Sunday 5:00pm
Praying Thru Life: Wednesday 6:00pm

Calvary Chapel Cottage Grove
1447 Hwy 99 (Village Plaza)
541-942-6842
Pastor: Jeff Smith
Two Services on Sun:
9am & 10:45am
Youth Group Bible Study
Child Care 10:45am Service Only
www.cgcalvary.org

Church of Christ
420 Monroe St • 541-942-8565
Sunday Service: 10:30am

Cottage Grove Bible Church
1200 East Quincy Avenue
541-942-4771
Pastor: Bob Singer
Worship 11am
Sunday School: 9:45am
AWANA age 3-8th Grade,
Wednesdays Sept-May, 6:30pm
www.cgbible.org

Cottage Grove Faith Center
33761 Row River Rd.
541-942-4851
Lead Pastor: Kevin Pruett
www.cg4.tv
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33087 Saginaw Rd. East
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9am - Classic in the Chapel
10:30am - Contemporary in the Auditorium

First Baptist Church
301 S. 6th st • 541-942-8242
Interim Pastor: Reed Webster
Sunday School 9:30am
Worship Service 11:00am
Youth Wednesday 6:30pm
cgfirstbaptist.com

First Presbyterian Church
3rd and Adams St
541-942-4479
Rev.: Karen Hill
Worship: 10:00am
Sunday School: 10:00am
fpcgrove.com

Hope Fellowship
United Pentecostal Church
100 S. Gateway Blvd.
541-942-2061
Pastor: Dave Bragg
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Bible Study: 7:00pm Wednesday
www.hopefellowshipupc.com
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Non-Denominational Church of Christ
1041 Pennoyer Ave
541-942-8928
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Sunday Bible Study: 10:00am
Sunday Worship: 10:50am & 5:30pm
www.pennoyeravecoc.com

Old Time Gospel Fellowship
103 S. 5th St. • 541-942-4999
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Sat. 4-5pm or by appointment
St. Philip Benizi, Creswell
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541-895-8686, Sunday: 8:30am

St. Andrews Episcopal Church
1301 W. Main • 541-767-9050
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Seventh-day Adventist Church
820 South 10th Street
541-942-5213
Pastor: Kevin Miller
Bible Study: Saturday, 9:15 am
Worship Service: Saturday, 10:40
Mid-week Service: Wednesday, 1:00

Trinity Lutheran Church
6th & Quincy • 541-942-2373
Pastor: James L. Markus
Sunday School & Adult Education
9:15am
Sunday Worship 10:30 am
Comm. Kitchen Free Meal Tue & Thur
5:00pm TLC Groups
tlccg.com

United Methodist Church
334 Washington • 541-942-3033
Pastor: Lura Kidner-Miesen
Worship: 10:30am
umcgrove.org

“VICTORY” Country Church
913 S. 6th Street • 541-942-5913
Pastor: Barbara Dockery
Worship Service: 10:00am
Message: “WE BELIEVE IN MIRACLES”

CRESWELL:
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