

The Irish Sheepman: A Morrow County Legacy

By J. DOMINIC MONAHAN

This Saturday on a side-street in Heppner, amidst gathered marchers and the impatient shuffling of horses' hooves, a bagpipe will flare a warm up note. Mounted riders and marchers will hesitate momentarily and then the first St. Patrick's Day Parade in living memory will begin to move down the main street of town. As it comes into view that parade will feature much that is customary in past parades in this city: tight-reined horses and riders; colorful floats; a number of smartly formed marching bands; and, of course, side-walks lined with enthused and curious onlookers.

Overall it will have the distinctive Western flavor of most parades in this part of the country. But this one will be very much different from those previously held in Heppner. For not since the great sheep drives which trailed through this town at the turn of the century will the Irish sheepman occupy the eyes and streets of the city. Leading this tribute to local history will be the Grand Marshal, Peter Lennon, a native son of Ireland and veteran of the once great sheep tradition of this area. Sheep, too, will be on hand, trailing behind in a low paneled float, reminding us that they, albeit in small numbers, still do roam this county.

For some of the senior on-lookers, it will stir memories of the times when flocks and fleece reigned supreme in this county. Others will recount those days remembering that the sheep days were an era and industry dominated by the young immigrants from counties Leitrim and Longford.

For over half a century — 1870-1930 — the life and times of Heppner and Morrow County were dominated by the sheep and wool industry; an industry which in turn was the province of the Irish. In the fascinating recollections of one native son, Judge John F. Kilkenny, now senior Judge, United States Court of Appeals, it was an era of "Shamrocks and Shepherds."

Not all accounts though, give the sheepman his proper due. In fact many popular accounts of the American West greatly ignore and sometimes scorn the role of the sheepman. Granted, the lowly sheep was stupid, unpredictable, defenseless and needed constant tending. Yet, at the turn of the century, sheep-raising rivaled, if not surpassed, cattle and mining as the chief economic mainstay of the West. Sheep could adapt to much rougher terrain, live off the scattered foliage among the sands and rimrocks; and get by on a fraction of the water required by cattle. Where it took seven mounted cowboys to handle 1,000 head of cattle, one herder on foot with a good sheepdog could handle a band of 1,500 to 1,800 sheep. Small wonder that sheep were considered the safest and most profitable livestock investment of that time.

The first sheep probably nudged their noses into the bunchgrass of Morrow County in the early 1860s on their way

to feed the gold camps of the John Day country. Permanent sheepmen did not arrive in the area until sometime in the late 60s or early 70s. The first Irishmen followed soon thereafter. Some worked their way west with the track crews of the Union Pacific. Others came by ship around "the Horn" and trekked north from California in quest of gold and other opportunity. Thus, in the 1870s, names like Brusnan, Doherty, Cunningham, Hughes, McCarthy, McShane and Quaid emerged among the first settlers into this county. Almost without exception their first occupation was in "the sheep business."

By 1900, the ranks of the Irish sheepmen had swelled with McCarthys, Bradys, Devlins, Dohertys, Farleys, Gilfillans, Healsys, Kennys, Kilkennys, MacIntyres, Monahans, Murthas, McGuire, Murphys, O'Connors, O'Rourke, Quinns, Sheridans, Slavines, Wards and Whitneys. By 1910, some 28 percent of Morrow County's inhabitants traced their ancestry to Ireland. Forty-four percent of its foreign born residents were Irish, principally from counties Leitrim and Longford.

The only growth rate which surpassed that of the early Irish in Morrow County was that of the sheep industry. Beginning in 1850, there were little more than 15,000 sheep in the entire Oregon territory — most of which were in the Willamette Valley. With gold strikes in California, and later in Eastern Oregon, Idaho and Montana, the sheep rush began in Oregon. By 1865, mutton from Dayville was being sold in the gold fields of Idaho. At the same time the first sheep were scratching in and around lone and a sheep-camp was operated on the present day site of Lexington.

As early as 1867, The Dalles was already recognized as a wool shipping port. By 1870, in the first Agricultural Census, the Oregon sheep population was 467,000 and growing. By 1880, there were over 1.5 million head in the state and almost 25 percent of those "woolies" fed on the tall grass of Umatilla County, which then included Morrow County. Ironically, in an era when cattle were dominant throughout most of the West, sheep had merged as king in Oregon.

In 1889, Heppner became a railroad and overnight became the major wool shipping point in Oregon. (Between Portland and Rock Springs, Wyoming, Heppner was the only southern spur line off the Union Pacific railroad until 1901.) At that time sheep numbered almost two million head in the state, and 35 percent of them grazed within easy trail distance of Heppner. According to one historian, 300,000 to 400,000 sheep were leaving Oregon annually between 1888-1900 for Montana and the Chicago markets in what was billed as "...one of the greatest migratory livestock movements in history." It was not unusual to see bands of 5,000 to 7,500 driven into Heppner for shipment to Montana and the feed lots of the Midwest.

These were the times of large sheep operations of 15,000 - 25,000 head under single ownership spread over

thousands of acres. It was also the time of the itinerate sheepman, the enterprising young Irishmen owning no land, who ran his bands between the rimrocks and on the sands of the vast tracts of public grazing lands.

The life cycle of the sheep was the life cycle of the area. In the spring it was lambing, shearing and mountainous sacks of wool; and in the summer it was great trail drives to the mountains or Idaho or Montana. The reverse cycle began in the late fall when again hundreds of sheep moving with their Irish herders and dogs, moved like a great white blanket on their return to the milder winters of the sand country.

With sheep came wool. And wool production in 1890 reached nearly 10 million pounds in Oregon with newly formed Morrow County leading the state with a record clip of almost 1.3 million pounds. Contributing to Heppner's success was the fact that Grant County and present day Wheeler County had wool clips of almost equal magnitude but were without a real head from which to ship. Heppner became a haven for the shippers, teamsters and sheepmen who took advantage of that opportunity.

The prominence of Heppner as a wool shipping town continued until 1901 when a group of enterprising Wasco County leaders pushed a railroad south to Shaniko — which immediately took away the woolshipping title from Heppner. Nevertheless Heppner continued to boom and by 1910 was still shipping over 2.5 million pounds of wool annually. The sheep count ranged between a quarter million to 300,000 head. By contrast, cattle in the county had declined 30 percent from 1900 to 1910, and numbered a little more than 6,000.

Unlike Shaniko's shortlived success, (which ended when Bend became the major railroad town in Central Oregon a decade later), Heppner thrived as a sheep and wool center and a decidedly Irish community up and into the early 1930s. As late as 1929, there were still some 223 sheep ranches in the county, the majority of which were either owned by the Irish or populated with its herders. This number did not include the large number of itinerate sheepmen who ran their bands independent of land ownership.

The Irish were present in the county long before they were visible in Heppner. A number of them settled in the "sands country," Wells Springs, Juniper Canyon, Alpine and Lena. They chose the country over the city largely because of their rural beginnings in Ireland and the opportunity it offered. Of course, there were marked contrasts between the two rural styles. In Ireland, they had earned marginal livelihoods on small five and 10 acre farms marred by rocky soil and bogs. Often they were from tenant families and had firsthand knowledge about evictions and the

caprice of an absentee landlord. Life in Ireland had meant a few potatoes, a thatched roof and in a rare moment, an occasional cow or pig. Cash crops and livestock were practically unknown to the rural Irish of the late 19th century. So the prospect of land ownership and livestock, measured in hundreds of acres of and thousands of head, was strong incentive for a young Irishman in Morrow County.

The Irish came in droves, usually assisted in their passage by a family member or an elder or patron who had "made his mark" in this new country and was willing to assist his or her less fortunate youngsters. The first Irishmen to reach the area were male, often on foot, and less than 20 years old. Though unskilled they were driven with an intense determination to succeed and their very presence in Morrow County was a testament to their character and ability. For by the age of 20, they had known a life of deprivation and hardship in Ireland; had made a slow and treacherous crossing of the Atlantic under sail or primitive steam; and had crossed another 3,000 miles of frontier by rail, foot and buckboard to arrive in an unknown country.

The usual entry level of the young Irish into livestock was that of the herder; a life of solitude but immense responsibility. The job required resourcefulness, versatility of skill; a good eye for range, feed and coyotes; and an ability to track and predict the weather; all of which he had to do while tending a band of 1,500 sheep covering 70 to 80 acres and constantly on the move.

His day began before the first light of dawn with an early breakfast and the preparation of his noon meal. His menu often centered around his own version of camp biscuits and beans. More often than not, tea, rather than coffee, was his staple drink. He used the early morning hours to feed himself and his faithful sheepdogs and set his camp for a return which would not come until the sun set. It was a tough life that taught consistency, alertness to detail, mental toughness and endurance. All of this, the herder performed for \$30 a month.

The life of a herder attracted a resolute breed of men. And as one commentator noted, there were "many more sheepherders than cowboys who rose to become citizens of substance." Such was the experience of the Morrow County Irish. First as herders; then as tenant owners of small bands; sometimes as an itinerate sheepman grazing among rimrocks of public land; and eventually larger bands running on his own land. Among the visible successes of the Irish experience which remain in Morrow County today are those represented by the Dohertys, Farleys, Healsys, Kennys, Kilkennys, McElligotts and O'Briens. Few have any remaining ties to sheep raising.

Instead, the Irishmen on the land today are wheat ranchers and cattlemen. Their city counterparts are merchants, lawyers, educators and politicians — trades unknown to his sheepraising forebears.

One instance from those early days was to foretell the influence the Irish sheepmen were to have on Heppner and Morrow County. The time was June, 1886, the county newly formed, and the population was somewhere between 2,500 and 3,500 people. Few Irish, if any, lived in Heppner. Many were homesteading in the north end of the county and had no tie to Heppner. But these were summer months and the Irish herders were present in great numbers in the higher hills and mountains to the south and east of town. Their presence was to prove a windfall to Heppner for at that time a hard fought political battle was unfolding between Heppner and Lexington for the right to serve as the county seat. When the decision was set for a county wide vote, Heppner anticipated a down to-the-wire contest.

And a very close race it proved to be: 691 to 658 for Heppner; a 33 vote margin provided primarily by the precincts of Heppner (463-82) and the heavily Irish community of Lena (78 to 5). But the winning margin was not provided by the local vote but by the extraordinary efforts made on election day by the Heppner citizenry to transport the Irish herders into the polls from the mountain summer ranges. The local papers reported that many a small child from Heppner tended sheep that day while its Irish herder was exercising a questionable privilege at the ballot box. If the young herders were ployed with enticements at the time, other than the opportunity to exercise his political franchise, it is not known. What is known is that Heppner was awash with numerous sources of diversions and voting must have been a welcomed respite from the loneliness of the hills.

There is no known breakdown on the size of the actual Irish herder vote. However, the number must have been large because when the 1890 Census was taken, the town had only 675 people, or about 130 more than the total votes in the election four years previous. Discounting children, the enfranchised women vote at time and the fact that Heppner had only 318 people in 1880, it is fair to say the local vote would not have been

more than 300 to 350 persons. It makes for interesting speculation to consider "what might have been" were it not for the "Irish herder" vote.

By 1914, the Irish presence in the community was of sufficient number that the Heppner Division of the Ancient Order of Hibernians (A.O.H.), a male bastion of Irish brotherhood, was the second largest chapter in the state. In February of that year, the Heppner Chapter played host to the state convention where local membership in attendance was well over 100. Among the chief concerns of the A.O.H. followers in that era was an independent and unified Ireland; a goal which the Morrow County Irish supported in concept and cash contribution. Membership in the Hibernians was essentially Roman Catholic, which also made it a responsive group to the emerging political clout of the local Klu Klux Klan; a momentary aberration that flourished briefly in Oregon and the county before and after World War I.

After 1910 the Irish moved into town. They were no longer locked exclusively to bunchgrass and sheep. A home in town had a certain appeal. It was near to schools for young children and allowed a man a permanent base, particularly if he was a family man and ran sheep without benefit of land ownership. It also spurred entry into the trades, merchant, saloonkeeper, etc.

Several of the Irish operated saloons in Heppner at one time or another. Among the notables were the saloons of Dennis McNamee and the Rock Saloon of Frank Monahan and Frank Roberts. When the era of the Irish saloonkeeper ended with prohibition, the Irish were into other commercial ventures. Eddie Breslin ran the local coal yard for many years. Willie Wilson was the proprietor of a hotel in Heppner which catered primarily to an Irish trade.

During the period of 1910-1930 the Irish were probably at the height of their cultural influence in Morrow County. The Heppner High School teams played under the name of "The Irish." Even the new hotel built in Heppner in the late 1920s opened under the name of St. Patrick's. Overlooking Heppner from Cemetery Hill was the tall spired Catholic Church, appropriately named St. Patrick's, a church which then and now draws one of the largest

number of parishioners of any church in the county.

Well into the 1920s sheep and the Irish were riding a cresting wave of good fortune. The value of sheep in the county was three times that of cattle. Wool was bringing as high as 39 cents a pound, down from its wartime high of 55-60 cents, but still a good price. As late as 1929, sheep outnumbered cattle by 279,000 to 9,450, a ratio of almost 30 to one. But clearly, there were signs that the times were changing. Although there were relatively few cattle in the county, mechanization was revolutionizing farming and each year more and more virgin soil fell to the plow. The land east of lone and south to the foothills of Eightmile was a virtual grainbelt. Over 130,000 acres were in wheat by 1930, more than three times the acreage that had been harvested in 1900.

The depression marked the abrupt decline of the Irish sheepmen in the county and the passing of a livestock industry. The price of wool dropped to nine cents a pound in 1932. The average value of a head sheep plummeted from \$11.50 in 1929 to \$2.50 in 1933. Foreclosures on land and sheep missed very few of the Irish operators.

By 1935 the sheep population was down to 139,000 head. Thereafter followed Pearl Harbor and by World War II's end, the sheep count in Morrow County was less than 60,000. While prices had crept back up, consumer tastes had changed and the growth of synthetic fibers sped the overall nationwide decline in sheep and wool production. Oregon was no exception. By 1970, sheep in Morrow County num-

bered little more than 10,000 head. Only 41 farms even noted the presence of a single woolly creature.

Today, the era of sheep and the Irish herder is of a bygone day. The Irish bachelor herders, the likes of which included Hughie O'Rourke, Barney Devlin, Pat Corrigan, Henry Dennis, Pat Connell and many, many others, are all gone. Descendants of the early Irish pioneers are now into fourth and fifth generations. The name St. Patrick's no longer graces the worn marquee of the city's only hotel; the Hibernian chapter has been long disbanded; and Heppner athletes now compete under the team name of Mustangs.

But the Irish experience which began over a hundred years ago and the tradition of Irishness it engendered remains and will be very much in evidence this Saturday. You will see it in the sparkling eyes of their progeny; you will detect it in the lilt of their voices, a subtle reminder of the brogues of their parents and grandparents; and most of all you will feel it in the excitement of the day's celebration.

When Peter Lennon steps out as Grand Marshal of Heppner's St. Patrick's Day Parade, leading that small band of sheep, he will be leading not so much a parade as a nostalgic memory of the shamrocks, shepherds and sheep who contributed so greatly to the early days of this county. A glance around the crowd will find some wistful Irish eyes, as the descendants of those remarkable Irishmen mist in the memory of yesteryear and the grand time it must have been.



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