Unsung Heroes of the American Range:

The Role of Sheep and Sheepherders in Colorado's History



Courtesy Villard Ranch



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High School Youth Forum - Monterey, CA

February 10, 2026

INTRODUCTION

"Keeping western traditions and an American way of life alive, one family at a time." We should all be so humbled to have this as our mission in life, but unfortunately this motto is already taken by Villard Ranch of Craig, Colorado. Since 1928, this family ranch has been passionate about the land, the livestock, their family, the western heritage, and the legacy of livestock production. You can probably picture this beautiful area of Moffat County, Colorado. Steep hills, native pastures, hay meadows, colorful sunsets, family gatherings as they process livestock, and mile after mile of fenceline. The only thing left to wonder is the breed of cattle that run those pastures; maybe those compact Black Angus, those rugged Herefords, or the long Limousines, but perhaps you would be surprised to hear that it's actually **sheep** that dot these pastures in Northwest Colorado! My name is Renzo Bustamante, and I am representing the Colorado Society of Range Management. Together, we will discover more about the Colorado sheep industry through the lens of the Villard Ranch in Northwest Colorado.

For some 98 years, the Villard Family has been ranching in Northwest Colorado. Back in 1928, Marie Villard took over the ranch after her husband passed away from a heart attack. There was a great deal of anti-sheep sentiment in Moffat County at the time. However, the family prevailed and in 2026 still manage their 14,000 acres of private land and 20,000 acres of public lands operated by the US Bureau of Land Management, or BLM. In dealing with the BLM, Kevin Villard pays an annual fee, which is calculated by the Animal Unit/Month (AUM) carrying capacity on his grazing lease. All this acreage is used for the grazing of his sheep, which he says are typically Rambouillet crossbreds, a breed originating from France. He owns a brood flock of about twenty five hundred replacement ewes and rams which he runs under a strategic rotational grazing system, moving them between summer and winter ranges.

HISTORY OF SHEEPHERDING

Sheep have always been well-adapted to withstand Colorado's mountainous steep slopes and high elevations, but ranchers have had to fight for their rights to raise this lesser-known alternative to cattle. During the 1800s, the pastoralists, most of whom were Greek, Hispanic, or French, searched for economic opportunities and offered available labor, and these hard-working immigrants gave the sheep industry a strong footing in the western US. The industry, however, really took off during the 19th century due to the Stock-raising Homestead Act in 1916, which allowed settlers to claim 640 acres of non-irrigated land for livestock grazing at the cost of reserving mineral rights to the federal government. With such an advantageous act, however, tensions within the livestock community rose. The vast, unfenced pastures were seen as communal resources, making it ripe for exploitation and land mismanagement. Ranchers would allow their herds to graze freely, often leading to overgrazing and conflict over land use. With a lack of regulation, the most aggressive and well-armed ranchers would dominate the range. Competition was so intense that as sheep were transported to Colorado from New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming, oftentimes sheep were killed, and pastoralists threatened or murdered, marking the start of “Sheep Wars”. This heated rivalry between cattlemen and sheep herders stemmed from the competition for scarce labor and the diminishing rangeland for their herds. Cattlemen considered sheep to be invasive and viewed them as a threat to cattle grazing, evening coining the term “hoofed locust”. Sheep shooters violently drove out many sheepherders and destroyed flocks through tactics like shooting, poisoning, and clubbing. After a gruesome case of three sheep herders being burned alive, things were finally addressed under the Taylor Grazing Act of 1934. This act regulated livestock use by establishing grazing districts and requiring permits, which effectively stabilized the livestock industry in Western public lands. With the new

requirement of established grazing districts, the sheep industry grew, and the need for sheepherders became evident. Early shepherds flocked from the Basque regions of Northern Spain and Southwest France to join those from Mexico. These gentlemen lived in small tents or wagon-trailers, commonly referred to as “campitos:” the conditions of which varied. Work periods were long, lasting up to months at a time with nothing but the herder's horse and occasionally some mules as companions.

With such an isolating environment, many pastoralists left messages on aspen trees, also known as “arborglyphs.” In the book *The Woolly West* written by Andrew Gulliford, we learn about their journey as he tries to capture the legacy of the pastoralists. Andrew explains that the standard template for these carvings included the herder's name, the date, and their hometown or village. Occasionally some might have included drawings, symbols, or stories recounting their experiences as a sheepherder. This is just one example of how shepherds left their legacy on the American west.

EVOLUTION OF THE PASTORALIST

Today, the Villard’s still heavily rely on herders to manage and care for their 2,500 ewes and rams. They use fewer herders and the standard of living has greatly increased for ranches that still practice herding on foot. They are now provided with transportable tents that are movable with vehicles. These tents are insulated and come with propane heaters, wood stoves, and solar panels. In addition to that, herders now have phones allowing them to communicate with each other and keep in touch with family and relatives. Most of the Villard employees are hired through a company called “Western Range,” an H-2A company that secures foreign workers. Villard notes that these herders, who are typically from South America, are very

important as his sheep are on a pasture year-round and most of his pastures have no fencing. They are especially important during the winter months when his sheep are moving sixteen miles west of Craig between Elk Springs and Macedonia for BLM grazing.

THE DECISION TO GRAZE SHEEP

While anti-sheep sentiments have died down in the last 75 years, statewide, cattle still hold the crown as Colorado's most important livestock commodity. However, sheep were built for these Western Slope pastures. In terms of rangeland, sheep provide a unique and versatile experience. Due to body size and forage preference, ranchers can graze about five sheep in exchange for one cow weighing 1,000 pounds (the equivalent of one Animal Unit). When it comes to forage selection, sheep tend to gravitate towards shrubs and forbs rather than grasses. A few shrubs they particularly enjoy in Western Colorado include Mountain Mahogany, Serviceberry, and Big Sage Brush, while highly palatable forbs include Wild Geranium, Arrowleaf Balsamroot, and Mules Ear Wyethia. With such different forage diets compared to cattle, Villard explains that these two livestock animals are perfectly compatible for dual-grazing livestock grazing, which he practices. As the cattle graze the grasses, the sheep eat the forbs and shrubs that the cattle leave behind. Sheep are also able to consume some plants considered poisonous to cattle such as Leafy Spurge and Larkspur.

CHALLENGES FACING THE U.S. SHEEP INDUSTRY

Grazing sheep is not all sunshine and Mountain Mahogany! When asked about some challenges and obstacles, Villard split the answer into two parts. Observably, predation is a struggle. Predators like coyotes, mountain lions, and black bears are year-round concerns and

now with the reintroduction of wolves, the list of predators continues to grow. During the spring, Villard reports that foxes and eagles become a problem as they tend to pick lambs as easy meals. In order to combat this issue, however, Kevin uses both animals and human intervention to protect his sheep. Some common guard animals include Great Pyrenees dogs, donkeys, and surprisingly, llamas, which serve as alarm systems. In terms of human intervention, Villard says government trappers professionally manage wildlife through capturing, relocating, or removing animals that pose threats to both humans and livestock.

Villard has also noticed that in the last twenty years, his pastures have become more dry with little to no moisture and an increase of invasive weeds. As a result, Villard has experienced some winters where he was simply unable to graze his sheep. Financially, when asked about the current status of the sheep industry, Kevin described it as poor. He explains that as the U.S. imports sheep and lamb products primarily from Australia and New Zealand, the US industry just can't compete and is slowly being destroyed. According to the American Sheep Industry Association, Australia accounts for 74% of lamb imports followed by New Zealand at 25%, which means American lamb has been displaced within its own markets. This not only raises concerns for Kevin, but the sheep industry as a whole.

CONCLUSION

Sheep ranching in northwest Colorado has a long history involving pastoralists, arborglyphs, conflicts with cattlemen, and today is fighting for survival as an industry. Herding sheep is necessary; these pastures and mountainsides were made for these nimble, small-footed grazers. Sheep grazing affects the range differently than other livestock due to differences in sheep diet and their increased mobility especially in mountainous terrain. In the

past, conflicts between sheep and cattle ranchers were inevitable and are well documented in the literature, but today, dual-use livestock grazing strategies are used to enhance rangeland diversity and manage potential poisonous range plants. Despite decades of unrecognition, brutality, and injustice, the nineteenth century history of the American West is a history of sheep and settlement. “Trapper, soldier, miner and cowboy may claim title to the romance of the West, but its economic success was made certain by the great sheep trails.” – Charles Towne and Edward Wentworth.

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