

A Year in the Life of Raising Sheep

From lambing to spring turnout, shipping to shearing

By Steve Stuebner

Sheep ranching is an Idaho tradition that dates back to the 1880s. Scottish emigrants like Andy Little, who was known as the "Idaho sheep king," brought sheep ranching know-how to Idaho and established the industry in a state with lots of open range.

Basque sheep herders played a major role as well, finding jobs tending to sheep flocks in Idaho as they had done in the Basque region of Spain. The Basques brought cultural traditions to Idaho that are still celebrated today.

At the peak in the 1930s, there were hundreds of sheep ranching outfits in Idaho, running more than 2.7 million sheep statewide. Nowadays, there are fewer than 40 sheep ranchers and 180,000 sheep overall.

Frank Shirts is one of the last sheep ranchers standing. He runs 12 bands, or about 28,000 ewes and lambs, from the low country in Wilder to the high country in the Boise and Payette National Forests every year.

In the spring, Shirts' sheep flocks navigate through the Boise Foothills -- a popular recreation zone next to Idaho's largest city. And in the high country, Shirts' Peruvian herders cope with predators like coyotes, black bears, mountain lions and wolves.

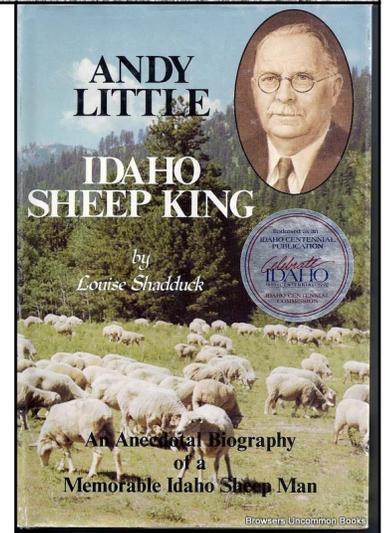
In August, after the lambs have hiked more than 120 miles in the rugged mountains, they're ready to be shipped to the market. That's when Shirts gets a deep sense of satisfaction.

"You've got a pretty band of sheep, and you just love that, you love working with them, you love to make them good," Shirts says. "At shipping time, you see those beautiful fat lambs going on the truck, and it swells you up for another go."

In this story on sheep ranching in Idaho, we're going to follow Shirts' flocks that graze through the Boise Foothills to the Boise National Forest. We'll follow "a year in the life of raising sheep" -- from lambing to spring turnout, from the Robie Creek-Idaho 21 crossing to range readiness, from shipping to shearing.



Sheep grazing is an Idaho tradition that dates back to the late 1880s. Sheep ranching operations brought Basque sheep-herders to Idaho (top). Andy Little was one of the largest sheep ranchers in Idaho. He ran sheep through the Boise Foothills into the high country, just like Frank Shirts does today.



Part One - Lambing

Lambing begins at the Shirts ranch in Wilder in January. This is when the ewes give birth to the lambs in the first three months of the year. It's a busy time.

"This is our night corral. This is where we bring the ewes before they give birth," Shirts explains. "As they lamb, or their water breaks, we take them into the shed and take care of them all night long. With the cold weather, it's vital to get them out of here fast."

During January, the temperatures can drop to near zero or single digits Fahrenheit. The lambing sheds provide crucial cover for the ewes as they give birth, and the lambs are susceptible to freezing when covered with after-birth fluids. The sheds allow the ewes to care for the lambs right after birth in a warmer environment, cutting death loss to a minimum.



Newborn lambs and their moms are paint-branded with numbers to keep them together. Each band of sheep has a unique color, too.

"We bring the lambs into the shed. There's a guy who checks the bags to see what kind of milk they have and that decides how many lambs we put on 'em. A lot of ewes have triplets but we only leave them two lambs," Shirts says. "Every day, we've got a tractor and trailer, and we haul them out in groups. They're all number branded, and each band has a different color of paint."



The lambing crew moves the sheep gradually into larger pens with more animals to get them used to being part of a sheep band.

"Every morning, we roll these lambs out of here and all of the pens are cleaned like they were 100 years ago with a wheel barrow and a pitch fork. When we're really lambing, we're take 250-300 ewes out of here a day." Once outside, the lambs and ewes are put in pens with clean and fresh straw next to the lambing shed. Here, the lambs acclimate to their new life.

"These lambs came out of the shed this morning. They were probably born the day before yesterday. You can see the numbers ... there are all twins here ... No. 263 on the lamb, and No. 263 on the mother, and all down the line, they've been numbered until we get a full band."

Shirts says it's best to let the lambs feed with their mothers in a small-group setting with plenty of space for the best survival.

"The slower you can go with the twins, the better," he says.

After several days, the crew moves the ewes and lambs into a larger pen with twice as many animals. Three days later, they'll move into a pen with triple the number of ewes and their lambs. This procedure gets the animals used to being part of larger groups. Eventually, they form a full band of sheep, or about 2,400 ewes and lambs.



The lambs love to play together, like all young animals ...

"That's why it's so much work," Shirts explains. "We've got pens here for 3,000 ewes. Once you reach the end of that line (close up stutter), you've got the sheep in the front that have to be moved, and then every day, you have to make room for the next group of lambs coming out. You're got to move, move, move, you're moving a lot of sheep."

Shirts employs 25 Peruvian sheep herders year-round to take care of his sheep. The men who work during the lambing process are the same guys who herd the sheep through the mountains in the summer. Most of the herders come from Peru, and a few are from Mexico, including his foreman, Angel. Shirts covers their health insurance, room and board and salary.

Lambing takes about 3-4 months to complete. Once they're done, the crews clean up the corrals and get their gear ready for sprint turnout.

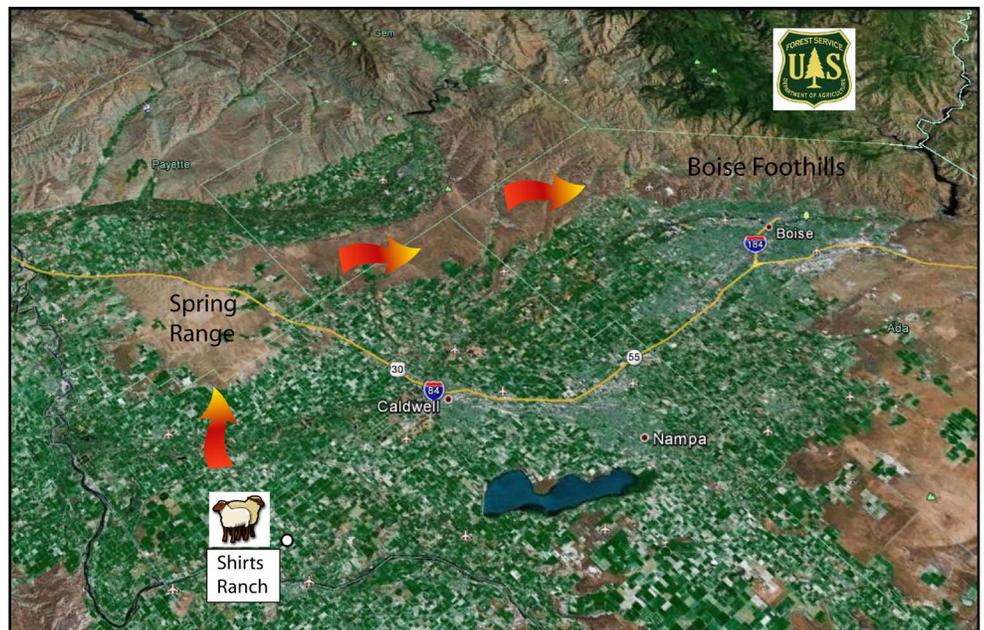
"We clean up all the pens, take the tarps off the sheds, get the pack strings ready, the horses and the mules, by then, it'll be time to go," he says.

Part Two - Spring Turnout

In early April, it's time for spring turnout. The sheep begin grazing on public land pastures as they green-up and produce forage for livestock and other critters.

"We go out here on the desert north of Parma on the Black Canyon allotment and then they'll work across to the Boise Front," he says. "They've all got a designated route, and the herders know where they're going."

Each band of sheep is cared for by two herders. The herders carry a wall tent and camp supplies on pack mules and horses, moving



The sheep start their trek to the mountains in April, trailing across spring pastures in the western Treasure Valley to the Boise Foothills.



the camp every day or so as the sheep move through the country.

"I run pack strings in the mountains," Shirts says. "About 80 or 90 percent of the sheep outfits run one guy per camp, but I run two because I'm in this rough, wolf-inhabited country."

Each band also is accompanied by two Great Pyrenees guard dogs to help keep predators at bay.

This is a best management practice that's used by many sheep ranchers in the West.

Shirts' sheep arrive in the Boise Foothills in mid-April, just as the foothills are greening up. Shirts trucks the sheep to a variety of dropoff points to keep the bands spread out, including popular trailheads such as the Corrals Trailhead and Hulls Gulch.

These trailheads have lots of recreation traffic, so the Idaho Rangeland Resource Commission puts the word out in the local news media, recreation web sites and Facebook to give hikers, bikers, runners and dog-



Top, a herder sets up the wall tent in the Boise Foothills; above, herders pack camp supplies on a pack string on Rocky Canyon Road to the next camp location.

walkers a head's up when the sheep are entering the foothills, and how to co-exist and interact with the sheep and the guard dogs.

Two key things to remember are:

- Keeping dogs on a leash
- Getting off your bike and walking through sheep herds to avoid antagonizing the big guard dogs.

"Unfortunately, when recreationists have their pet with them, the guard dogs consider that a predator. We don't want to see any negative thing happen to somebody's pet," says Gretchen Hyde, executive director of the Idaho Rangeland Resource Commission.

Jim Guiffre, a Boise resident and mountain biker, saw a news report about the importance of getting off the bike when encountering sheep. He was on a bike ride in the Corrals Trail area when he and his son, Jess, ran into a

band of sheep.

"We dropped down the draw and sure enough, there were hundreds of sheep out there," Guiffre says. "And I say, I'm getting off my bike. And then two giant Great Pyrenees guard dogs come running down at us and come within 10 feet of us ... and then they stopped, looked at us, and went away. And Jess and I looked at each other and went, "It worked!"

Frank Shirts says most people in Boise like seeing the sheep. "Ninety-five percent of them love to see the sheep," Shirts says. "They say, "Gall, this is so neat! This is like old times." You've got to run them right, and everyone has to respect each other. There's no doubt about that."



Shirts and his herders move three bands of sheep through the Boise Foothills. Some bands graze over the top of the Boise Ridge to Robie Creek Park, next to Lucky Peak, and others stay low and graze across the Boise River Wildlife Management Area, managed by Idaho Fish and Game.

Fish and Game officials say they like the sheep to graze on white top, a noxious weed. "The sheep have been at least as good as spraying with

Walking your bike through sheep bands helps to diffuse tension with guard dogs.

a lot less impact," says Ed Bottum, manager of the IDFG Boise River Wildlife Management Area.

"They'll eat skeleton weed early in the season - they really like it - and the same with cheatgrass," Shirts says. Sheep grazing helps reduce fire danger in the foothills, too. "I think it's vitally important. It takes a lot of the fuel load off of here, it has to," he says.

Part Three - Robie Creek Park-Idaho 21 Crossing

When the sheep reach Robie Creek Park, the herders funnel the animals to a crossing where Shirts can count them, checking on the numbers three weeks after they've been released in the mountains. He does that to check on predator losses.

"We had a lot of coyote problems on the Boise Front," Shirts says. "I think the wolves are pushing the coyotes in there because we didn't used to have that trouble in there."

After the count, the sheep move down the paved road to a steep, rocky embankment, where the herders work with the lead ewe to climb through a rough spot to Idaho State Highway 21. "When you get into a tight spot and

they don't want to go, we have a ewe that's broke to lead," Shirts explains. "Gotta have one in every band. She's got a bell on her, and then she's got a lamb that'll follow her and then the ewes will follow the lead through those tough spots."

Indeed, Mario, one of the herders, grabs the ewe by the collar and helps her up a steep, rocky slope, and her lambs, and the rest of the herd follows.

Once on top, Frank Shirts and his foreman, Angel, stop traffic on Idaho 21 as the sheep cross the highway. Motorists take photos and wave to the herders as the sheep move through.



Shirts pushes the sheep across Idaho 21 above Robie Creek Park. From this point forward, the sheep will be on state and federal land as they follow the greenup into the high country.

From this point forward, the sheep will be grazing on state and Forest Service land as they follow the green up into the mountains.

Shirts says the range is in pretty good shape this year. "I'm not griping," he says. "You've got to keep them moving. It's getting a little dry down low. It's not as bad as it is in Eastern Idaho. They missed some of the rain that we got."

Shirts admits with a chuckle that it should be a good year. "A sheepman's got to have something to hollar about."

of Land Management and Forest Service land. He pays grazing fees to those agencies for the privilege of using the land.

Shirts has permits to graze his sheep on state, Bureau

Part Four - Range Readiness

Forest Service officials pay attention to range readiness before the sheep move onto national forest land. Prior to when Shirts is allowed to move his animals onto Forest Service land, Forest Service range officials check on range condition and look at specific plants in particular.

Monte Miller, a range technician for the Boise National Forest, explains. "There are certain key species we look at," he says, "Arrowleaf Balsomroot, Philla bilbosa and Agripyron, a wheat grass species. We also look at cheat-grass, and skeleton weed, an invader, a noxious weed. Ten days ago, it wasn't quite ready. But it's more than ready right now."

Indeed, as Shirts unloaded sheep to some Boise National Forest land next to Arrowrock Reservoir, the sheep began feeding on the Rush skeleton weed, bitterbrush and more.

"We have several objectives in mind," Miller says. "We want to graze the rosettes of Rush skeleton weed. They like to eat it this time of year. We also have biological controls -- a rust, a midge and a mite. We want the sheep to weaken that plant so the bio-controls can be more effective."

The Forest Service keeps watch over the sheep grazing to ensure that the utilization does not exceed 50 percent. Most of the time, it's less than 30 percent. "We want to look at proper management," Miller says. "Frank is in the business of putting pounds on the lambs, and to do that, they have to keep them on fresh feed all the time. But very rarely will they graze over 30 percent use."



"Livestock grazing stimulates the growth of grass as long as there's proper management," Miller continues. "Same as the utilization of bitterbrush. We want to graze it enough so that it stimulates leader growth."

The sheep like to feed on bitterbrush in the spring, and that helps stimulate leader growth on the shrubs. In the winter, mule deer feed on leader growth above the snow.

Allowing the sheep to graze on bitterbrush makes the browse species more palatable for mule deer in the winter, he says.

"Frank Shirts is a very good permittee, very proactive," Miller says.

Shirts trains his herders to graze the country once over lightly as they pass through, but still, he wants them to be thorough. "Sheep aren't what you call a grass-eater," Shirts explains. "If they've got the brush and the forbs, that's what they want to eat. And just like a kid in a candy store, they pick off a flower here, and a little brush there, tasting everything."

"They've all got a designated route, and the herder knows where they are going," he says. "Every day, they work those little canyons. They'll go down the draw in the morning, buck up and take their siesta, and graze along eating the brush and the forbs."

"They work all of that underbrush and it helps the forest an awful lot. It takes a lot of that fire out of there. Herders want to give them fresh feed. They go down one time, and come up and that area never gets grazed again until the next year. How can you overgraze it?"

At night, the sheep naturally climb to the top of the hill for the evening. The animals like to climb. It's just part of their nature. "Then they come up and sleep on top of the ridge."

Every two weeks or so, Shirts and his foreman resupply the herders in the forest with fresh groceries and sup-

plies. This is a time to catch up on how the sheep are doing, talk about predators and life in general .

Part Five - Shipping

In early August, it's time to herd the ewes and lambs into a corral and ship the lambs to market. Shirts has a sheep corral in Meadow Creek, east of Idaho City on the Boise National Forest, where they gather the sheep. A lot of friends camp out with Shirts to help.



When the sheep arrive at the corrals, the herders drive the sheep into the large pen while Shirts counts them. Shirts yells out "one-hundred," and his herder, Mario, makes a notch on a stick for every 100 sheep that moves into the corral.

"It's shipping time," Shirts says. "We've been taking care of them since they were lambs. Started in Wilder, and they come up here over the high mountains, and it's time to send them to the market. They look good. They're a beautiful mountain lamb. I'm pleased with them."



The same bands of sheep that graze in the Boise Foothills arrive at the Meadow Creek corrals in early August, east of Idaho City. Here, the ewes are separated from the lambs, and the lambs are shipped to market by truck.

to falling timber in old burn areas. "These mountains, you've got lots of things to deal with. Every year, we'll get a bunch of sheep killed by those trees."

Shirts says he lost about 80 head of sheep to coyotes, wolves and black bears this year. He also lost a few sheep

Shirts sees those losses as a cost of doing business, running sheep on public lands. At shipping time, the mood is upbeat. It's time to celebrate. "We'll have a nice lamb dinner tonight and a few beers."

Stan Boyd, executive director of the Idaho Wool Growers Association, attends the shipping event, as he does for many sheep producers in Idaho. Boyd arranges for several truck drivers and sheep trailers to transport the sheep to market.

"For these folks, they work all year, and now it's pay day," Boyd says. "They hope it's a good one. It is a celebration. It's a perfect excuse to get into the mountains and enjoy the camaraderie and the families. You can see there's a lot of kids out here this morning."

Boyd says Shirts is a large sheep operator for Idaho. "Frank Shirts is one of the largest operators in the western United States," he says. "We have 45 sheep producers in Idaho that use public lands during the year, and 60-70 percent of the lambs come right off the range, living on nothing more than mother's milk and green grass."

There's no antibiotics or food additives. It's a natural lamb."

Early the next morning, the crew gets the loading chutes in place next to the sheep corral for loading the sheep onto special truck-trailers made especially for hauling sheep to market.



"We load them correctly so there's no death loss," Boyd explains. "We're putting 35 in the basket, 52 on the top, and 54 in the middle two decks so they have room to move around. Federal law says they have to be unloaded within 36 hours for food and water, but what time is it now, they'll be in Denver by 1 o'clock tomorrow morning. They don't mess around. Their mission is to get these sheep off the trucks in good shape. They'll sleep on the way home."

Each trucker will haul about 195 lambs to a feedlot in Greeley, Colo., where they are sold by national meat-packing companies to wholesale outlets. The truckers make about \$3,800 per load to Denver.

Lots of Shirts' friends come to the shipping camp and help with loading the sheep into the trucks.

Then they deadhead back to Idaho, and do it again.

"It's their pay day too," Boyd says.

While the lambs are being loaded into trucks, the ewes are placed in a separate corral with rams for breeding. "We put a couple of bucks in there tonight, and put some of those rams in, and some of these mamas will have lambs in their bellies tomorrow night, so we start it all over again," Shirts says.

Part Six - Coming Home

After the lambs are shipped, the herders trail the ewes and rams back through the forest and foothills toward the Shirts home ranch in August, September and October.

In October, the sheep pass through the Boise Foothills and cross Idaho 55 near Beacon Light Road in Eagle, stopping traffic momentarily.



The sheep feed on alfalfa fields on the way home to Wilder.



Shirts makes arrangements with farmers in the Treasure Valley so his sheep can graze their way home, eating stubble in hay fields along the way. "We gotta use that feed," he says. "With the price of hay and corn, you have to utilize every bit you can.

"The sheep come in and eat the hay, and it really helps the ground. We electric fence it, and they move across the field and fertilize the fields. You can't believe how it helps with the rodents and the mice."

The herders time the trip -- and stretch it out accordingly -- so the sheep don't arrive at the home ranch until January, when lambing begins.

Part Seven - Shearing

In November, as the sheep are grazing the fields, Shirts brings the sheep to a ranch along the way to shear the wool from the ewes and rams.

He hires several shearing crews to do the job. Each shearing crew has a customized shearing trailer with all of the tools and equipment needed for shearing sheep. One crew is led by John Balderson of Council. The other is led by Bernie Fairchild of Buhl. His shearers are from Uruguay.

Shirts' herders funnel the sheep into a chute leading to the shearing trailers, and work the animals through one by one. There are 3-4 men that shear

Shearing crews operate out of mobile trailers equipped with power cutting tools and harnesses. Each worker shears over 100 sheep per day.

the sheep in each trailer.

Balderson has been shearing sheep for over 30 years. He explains how it's done.

"You start on the brisket and take the belly wool off," he says. "You throw it aside, the wool on the belly is kind of short, and they like to keep that bagged separate. And then you'll go down and crotch them all out, and start on this leg, and take the leg off, and then come up to the neck, and take this front shoulder off, and then turn that sheep around, and take this whole side off. When you get done, that sheep can just jump out the door behind you, and the fleece you can throw it out as a blanket. And it will all stay together."

It's critical that the shearer cuts the wool off close to the skin, and it needs to be cut off as a full cape, Balderson says. "Part of it is to keep the wool in one piece, and part of it is to keep the sheep tight, so you don't take the hide off," he says. "Your hide-cutter will take the hide right off if it's in the wrong position."

A number of workers watch for the wool capes in front of the shearing trailers, and stuff them into a motorized compactor nearby. The machines compact the wool until they are full. Then, a worker closes the top of the bale and loads it into a truck. Each bale of wool weighs about 400-500 pounds.



Back in the day, the shearing crew compacted the wool by foot. One of the workers would stand and stomp on the load and then climb out when it was full.

Balderson has been shearing sheep year-round in Idaho and elsewhere since he was in high school. "I shear for everybody from two head to 5,000."

Balderson's pay depends on how fast he can shear the sheep. He gets paid about \$4 per sheep. "When I was younger, I'd try to do 20 an hour," he says. "On a good day, 25 an hour, or 150-200 a day. When I was 58, I was still going pretty strong, but I'm 65 now, and I don't care anymore," laughing at the thought. "If I do 90 or

Freshly sheared ewes are sleek and clean.

100 a day, I feel good."

Shirts likes to shear the sheep in the fall before lambing season in the winter. "It makes them milk better. The lambs can find the udder a lot better," he says.

Balderson says it's hard to find anyone in America who knows how to shear sheep anymore. "Extremely hard. That's why we have a trailer-full of guys working here from Uruguay. We used to have guys come here from New Zealand, but the dollar is so weak, that they don't come here anymore. Most of the guys who come here are from countries that are quite poor."



Frank Shirts is a happy guy at shipping time.

That has something to do with the relative low price of wool. Shirts keeps the bales of wool in storage until the wool prices are best. Sometimes, he's held onto the wool for several years, until the price is right. He sells the wool through a global distributor.

"It's medium to fine grade Ramble A wool. They'll make good shirts, blankets, that kind of stuff," Balderson says.

Finale

Frank Shirts has been in the sheep business for most of his life. His dad was a sheep shearer, and they

had some sheep at home, too, about 400 head. About 30 years ago, he bought several bands, and worked to obtain grazing permits from the BLM and Forest Service. Over time, he built up the herds, and the permits. About 10 years ago, he purchased several sheep bands from Idaho Lt. Gov. Brad Little, a grandson of Andy Little, who decided to sell out and concentrate on the cattle business.

Shirts has seen the lamb and wool markets go up and down, and he's dealt with a lot of other issues over the years. But he loves to raise sheep. It runs in his blood. And he makes darn sure the sheep are properly cared for, from the time they are born to the day they're shipped to market.



Sign at the Shirts sheep ranch in Wilder.

"I've fought the markets all of my life," he says. "When you get a pretty band of sheep, you think, gosh damn, you love that, you love working with them, you love making them good. It's something you're proud of, but they've got to be taken care of. Someone is with them 24 hours a day. And they're taken care of."

Steve Stuebner is the writer and producer of Life on the Range, an educational project sponsored by the Idaho Rangeland Resource Commission.