

# John and Diane Peavey - an Idaho power couple who have enhanced education, natural resources policy

By Steve Stuebner

Many miles north of Carey, Idaho, there's a perfect little knoll that provides an expansive view of the Flat Top Ranch.

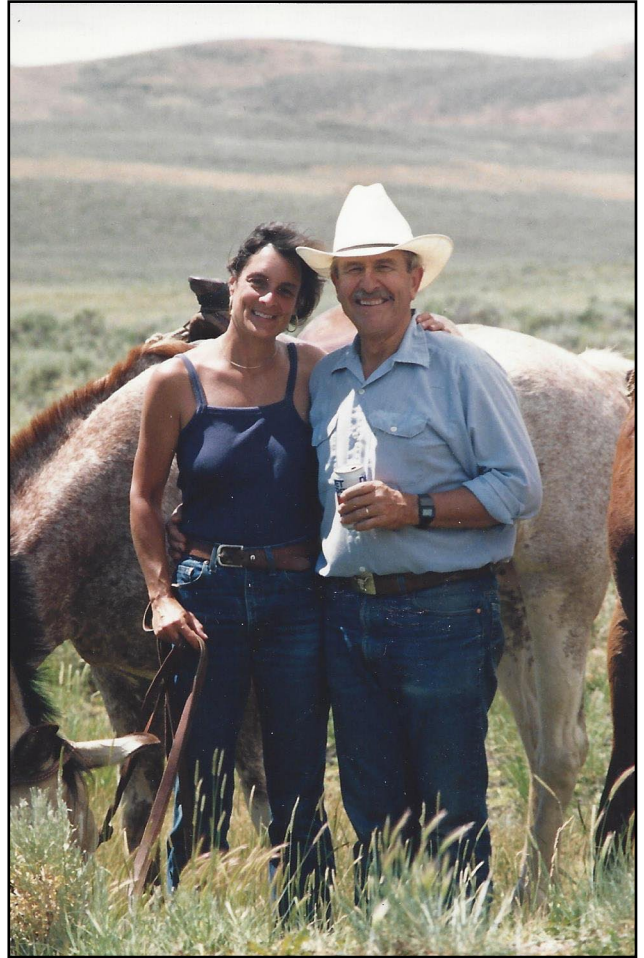
Nestled in the foothills of the Pioneer Mountains, the Flat Top Ranch is home to John and Diane Josephy Peavey, a dynamic power couple who have made a big impact on the state's political and educational landscape. They founded and participate in the popular Trailing of the Festival in Ketchum, held every year in October, as one example of their contribution to Idaho.

During the Trailing of the Sheep Festival in October, a record crowd showed up to see more than 1,000 sheep move through Main Street in Ketchum following a colorful parade of Scottish, Basque and Peruvian dancers and musicians.

"We came over to pick up wool, and pick up art," says Pat Itzen of Kent, Washington, who visited Ketchum with her sisters from Boise and the Pacific Northwest. "This is just a wonderful thing. I've never seen the sheep run; so I want to see the sheep."

A third-generation Idaho rancher, John Peavey raises 1,000 cow-calf pairs and four bands of sheep with his son, Tom. He's also been a lifelong political activist. He served multiple terms in the Idaho Legislature, launched an initiative to create Idaho's Sunshine Laws, and stood up for water rights on the Snake River.

But mostly, he likes to ranch. "Ranching is a wonderful way to spend your life," says John Peavey, who turned 80 this year. "You're out here, it's spectacular. People travel from all over the world to come



*Diane and John at the Flat Top Ranch*



*The Oinkari Basque Dancers always give a wonderful performance at the Festival.*



up here and spend a week at Sun Valley, and I've spent my lifetime up here. And it's the animals, the interaction of the animals, the dogs, the cows, and the sheep. Even the horses have personalities, and it's a lot of fun and very, very rewarding."

Peavey had three children in his first marriage. But for the last 30-plus years, the real love of his life has been Diane Josephy Peavey. An East Coast transplant, Diane not only fell in love with the ranching lifestyle, she became a staunch defender of it as a poetic writer and story teller. Diane contributed weekly radio essays about the ranching lifestyle to Boise State radio for 18 years.



"One of the things that really encouraged me or inspired me was that, at that time, there

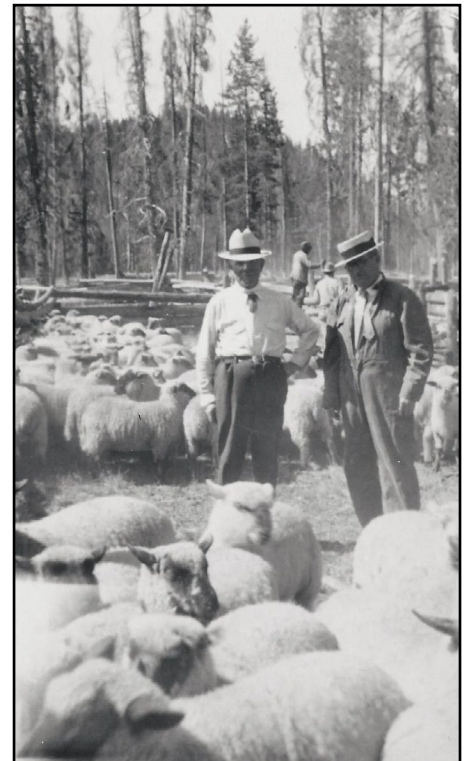
was a lot of acrimony about grazing on public lands, and it was 'cattle free by '93,' " says Diane Peavey. "And I thought, it's definitely time to get this story out. It's time to talk about this in real and earnest ways."

*The Peaveys drive their cattle across the high desert in the spring, west of Craters of the Moon National Monument. Diane wrote about cattle drives and many other topics related to cattle and sheep ranching in her radio essays for Boise State Public Radio.*

Diane Peavey penned her radio essays with wonderful detail about ranching and the rural lifestyle. She wrote hundreds of essays about many topics. One of her stories was about the experience of participating in a cattle drive across Idaho's high desert between Kimama, north of Rupert, where the Peaveys winter their cattle, and their spring range near Craters of the Moon National Monument.

*"Each spring, we move our cattle 50 miles across open desert -- ranch hands on horseback with dogs at their heels," Diane Peavey says in her clear, calming voice. "We pull a cow camp for our headquarters. The trip can take three days with the steers, five days with the cows and calves. We are a strange sight -- a pilgrimage of sorts, of animals and men moving north for the summer to high country, with green pastures and mild days ...."*

How did the Peaveys get started at the Flat Top Ranch? It all goes back to John Peavey's grandfather, John Thomas, who launched the Flat Top Ranch in the 1920s. Thomas also was a banker and U.S. Senator. He ran sheep. "He could see that the people that ran sheep paid their loans off easier and



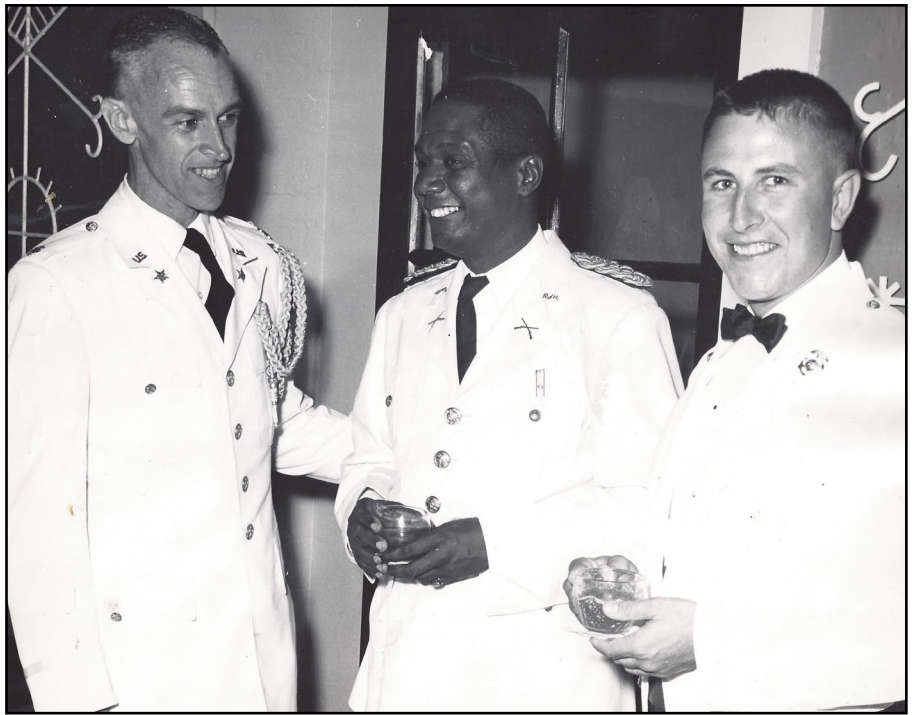
*Sam Burks, left, and John Thomas check on the sheep in the early days of the Flat Top Ranch.*



quicker than the ones that ran cattle," John Peavey says. "And so he started buying up little parcels that were old homesteads."

The Peaveys added cattle and 10,000 acres of land to the ranch when they purchased both from the Laidlaw family in 1960, after John finished a tour with the U.S. Marine Corps. The Laidlaws were one of the pioneering ranch families in Idaho. There is a nice rock-hewn monument on the knoll overlooking the Flat Top Ranch to James and Genevieve Laidlaw, who settled the ranch prior to selling to the Peaveys.

John Peavey's take on being a Marine: "Eisenhower was president and nobody was shooting at us. It was a good time to be in the Marine Corps."



*John Peavey served in the Marine Corps in the early 1960s. Prior to that, he earned a bachelor's degree in civil engineering from Northwestern.*

Prior to serving in the Marines, Peavey got a civil engineering degree from Northwestern University. "I can make water run downhill and I can build a straight fence," he says with a smile.

Peavey's father, Art, died in a hunting accident on the Snake River when John was young, so he always knew he'd return home to work on the ranch.

"I always intended to come back," Peavey says. "We had a wonderful family that ran the ranch with us. Well, there were three generations of Burks, actually, that managed the sheep. There was Sam and then Dennis and then Denny, all Samuel Dennis Burks. It was kind of a unique deal, and I think it speaks well of the operation and how we treat people. "



*Peavey likes running sheep and cattle on the Flat Top Ranch. "You cover your country a lot better," he says.*

Peavey likes running both sheep and cattle. "Oh it works fine. The cattle love the grasses; the sheep like the flowers and weeds. The grasses grow on the meadows, riparian areas, and so the cattle kind of stay down lower, and the sheep climb and end up on top. You cover your country a lot better."

The Peavey's cattle spend the winter and spring grazing in the high desert between Kimama and Carey, and his sheep spend the winter grazing in Nevada and California.

"Well, the big expense in running livestock is the wintering expense," Peavey says. "And the customary way to do that is to feed hay. With the dairying that's come into Magic Valley, the hay prices are really super-elevated. So, we've got a sheep operation where we feed no baled hay, none."

Some of the sheep feed on BLM range near Wendover, Nevada, and the rest feed on alfalfa fields near Fresno, California.



*Above, Diane's father, Alvin M. Josephy Jr., was a Hollywood screenwriter, a World War II combat correspondent, a writer for Time magazine, an accomplished author, and an authority on Native American tribes. Right, a photo of Diane in the days when she and John were dating.*



Peavey likes the Kimama winter range for cattle. "We've found that if we do not graze in the spring or summer and leave it for winter, that those cows will get along really, really well off it," he says. "There's a lot of lava flows. It's spectacular country, especially in the spring when the grasses are starting to grow."

The lava flows provide windbreaks for the cattle and shelter from big storms, Peavey says. "If you get a big storm, you get maybe a foot of snow, and you'd think the cows are gonna need to be fed hay. But the wind blows and it rearranges the snow, and the cows quickly learn that the succulent feed is in the protected coves. They'll push that snow with their noses and dig down to the feed."

Peavey learned to fly a Cessna many years ago to keep tabs on his livestock. But he's used the plane for other pursuits as well, like courting Diane Peavey in the early 1980s.

The daughter of Alvin M. Josephy Jr., a noted historian, author and authority on the Nez Perce Tribe, Diane was working in the public policy arena at the time. She understood politics and the West, having worked in Montana, Alaska and Washington D.C. Her family also had a second home near Joseph, Oregon. Diane had met John through a mutual friend, and he invited her over for a lamb supper on New Year's Eve. They stayed in touch while Diane worked on a National Science Foundation project in Montana.

After that gig was completed, Peavey invited Diane back to the ranch. "Why don't you come and spend the summer at our ranch? You want to write? This is a great place to write," Diane recounts the tale. "And I went, I really have never heard that one before. That really is a new line. So I said, let me think about it."

Single at the time, Diane decided to go. Her parents would drop her off in Idaho on their way from Connecticut to Oregon, their annual trip to the small ranch near Joseph, Oregon.



But Peavey had a secret plan. "So he called the first night and he said, "Where are you?" And I said we are in South Bend, Indiana," Diane says. "We are always in South Bend, Indiana on the first night. The second night we'll be in Grand Island, Nebraska. He said, "Are you sure?" And I said, absolutely sure, their itinerary never changes."

Diane continues, "So we got to Grand Island, Nebraska, and we're sitting there about to order dinner, and I see my parent's head whip around to the end of the table, and I look, and a man has walked in wearing a cowboy hat and a big grin. John has flown out to Grand Island to pick me up."

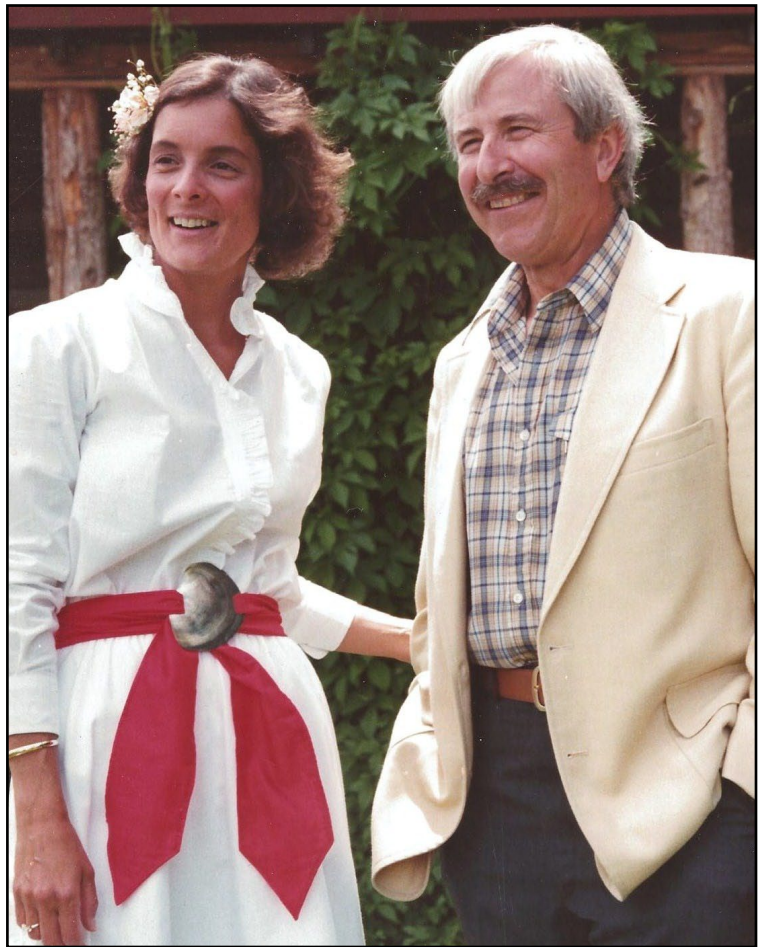
"So John scored major points with my family, and that was the way I began my summer with him."

John and Diane got married in the summer of 1982. It took Diane a few years to find her niche. "I kind of wandered around for about 5 years or so, thinking, what is my place? And it was about then that I finally stepped back and gave myself permission not to be cowgirl of the year."

Diane Peavey began writing about ranch life in earnest, and soon afterwards, she approached KBSU radio in Boise about contributing weekly essays. They said yes.

Another excerpt from Diane's KBSU Radio piece on the cattle drive: *"It is not a frightening landscape. Look down at the smallest details slow to reveal themselves. Wildflowers. Pink. Yellow. Blue. Some no bigger than a fingertip. Hidden behind stalks of purple larkspur and lupine. And the grass is green now before it turns brown too soon. Smell the sage as it fills the air with its haunting fragrance. Listen to the silence. Watch the light spread across the landscape -- its pattern spreading, shifting with the hours of day. This is the Idaho desert, still primitive and unspoiled."*

John Peavey, meanwhile, was engaged in multiple political battles as a state legislator. He was initially appointed to the Idaho Legislature in 1969 to serve in the place of his mother, Mary Brooks, whom President Nixon named to run the U.S. Mint at the time. "I was appointed," Peavey says, chuckling. "You know, it's a long tradition in our family, we get appointed."



*John and Diane got married at the ranch in 1982.*



*John's political career began in 1969 when he was appointed to the Idaho State Senate to replace his mother, Mary Brooks, left, who was tapped by President Nixon to run the U.S. Mint. Nixon's wife, Pat, is on the right.*



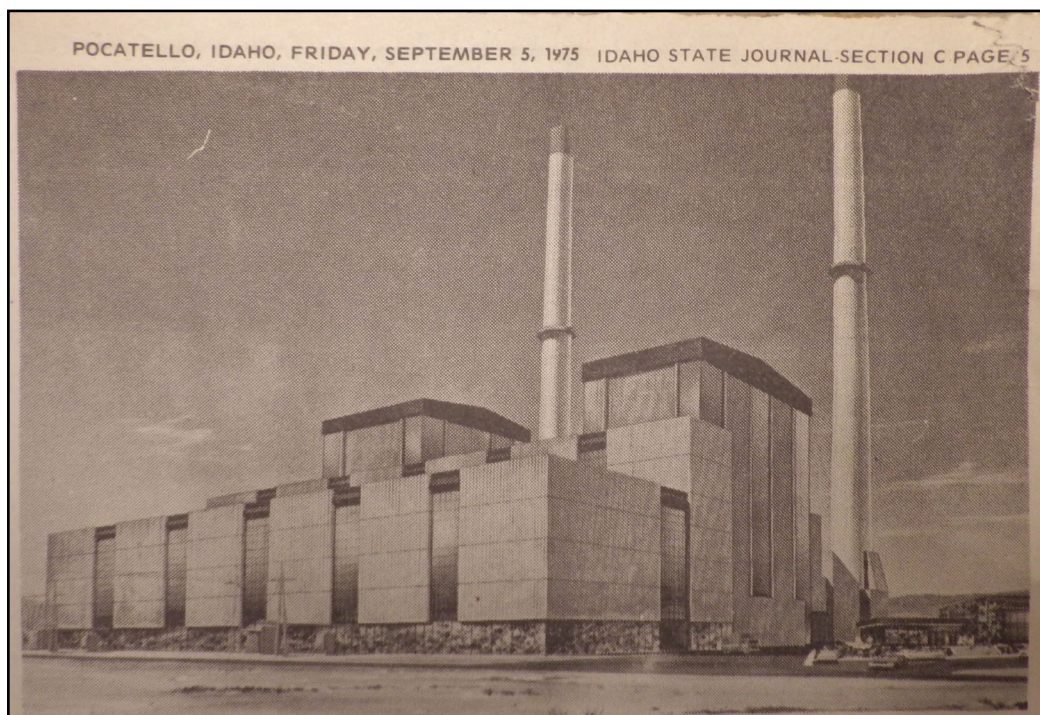
He noted that his grandfather, John Thomas, has been appointed twice to the U.S. Senate -- once when Senator Frank Gooding died in 1929, and again, when Senator William Borah died in 1940. "That's the easy way to get in," Peavey says.

Peavey started out as a Republican, but he got cross-wise with his party when he challenged a proposal by Idaho Power Co. to build a coal-fired plant on the Snake River in the mid-1970s. "It was a big squabble over what to do with the Snake River and whether we needed a thousand-megawatt power plant to pump, literally, all the water out of the Snake, which was going to triple our power rates," he says.

In 1977, Peavey and attorney Matthew Mullaney filed a complaint with the PUC on behalf of 32 ratepayers, asserting that Idaho Power should defend a substantial surface water right at Swan Falls Dam. The dam was built in 1901, the first on the Snake River.

"We were arguing that they didn't need to build a thousand-megawatt power plant, all they had to do was change water policy so we could keep this water in the river producing the power that we're using now," he says.

It's interesting to note that fellow ranchers John Faulkner and Bud Purdy also signed the complaint, as well as citi-

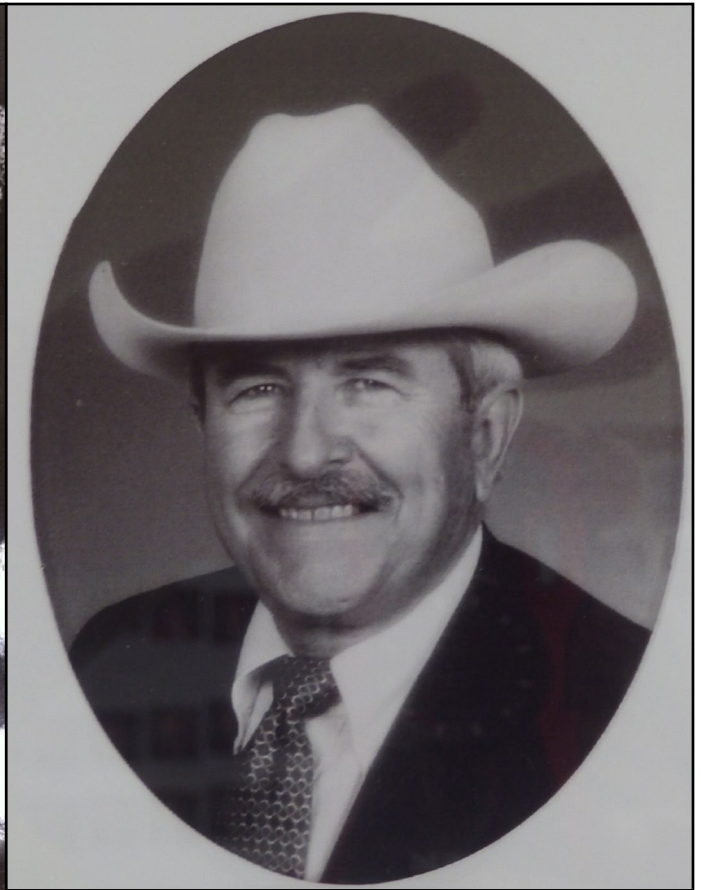
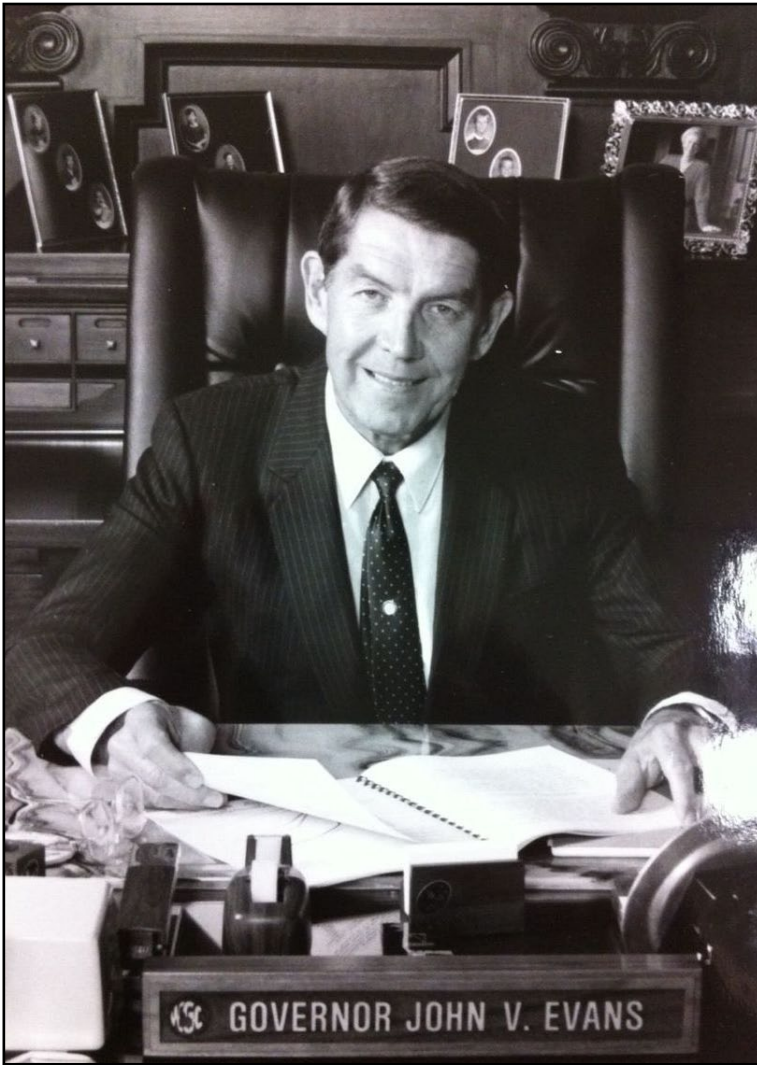


*Idaho Power's proposal to build a 1,000-megawatt coal-fired power plant near Boise inspired a fierce debate about Snake River water rights. Peavey was at the forefront of the debate. The plant eventually was nixed by the Idaho Public Utilities Commission by a 3-0 vote.*



*The Idaho Supreme Court ruled in favor of Peavey et al. that the Idaho Power Company should defend its surface water rights at Swan Falls Dam, shown above, south of Kuna. The decision had big implications for Snake River water users of all kinds.*





*The Swan Falls water rights debate involved Democratic Gov. John Evans, Republican Attorney General Jim Jones, Democratic State Sen. John Peavey, many other farmers and ranchers in the Idaho Legislature, plus attorneys and city water interests.*

zen activists in Boise, who opposed the power plant. The ranchers and citizens formed a strong coalition.

As the case shook out, the Idaho Supreme Court agreed with Peavey and Mullaney that Idaho Power had a valid water right at Swan Falls Dam and should defend it.

Idaho Supreme Court Justice Jim Jones, who was state attorney general at the time, reflects on the issue. "Just before I took office, the Supreme Court rocked the state with a decision that maybe the power company is entitled to their full right at Swan Falls. We had a tremendous fight for two years in the Legislature, and I got into a slugging match with the power company, and John Evans, too, and we finally got to a point where we agreed," Jones says.

"Quite frankly, we were pretty much at odds with John Peavey's position, but the interesting thing is, when everything settled down, and got things resolved, I think it was a good thing for the state because it required us to start thinking about water allocation, how we do it, what interests we need to protect."

"Anyway, I lost the election but we won the war," Peavey says.

Peavey ran as a Democrat for state senate in 1980 and won, just in time to defend the Swan Falls water rights agreement in the Idaho Legislature. In the meantime, the Pioneer power plant was nixed by the PUC on a 3-0 vote. The Swan Falls agreement set minimum flows at Swan Falls Dam, and called for a basin-wide examination of Snake River water rights. Jones gives credit to Peavey for thinking ahead.

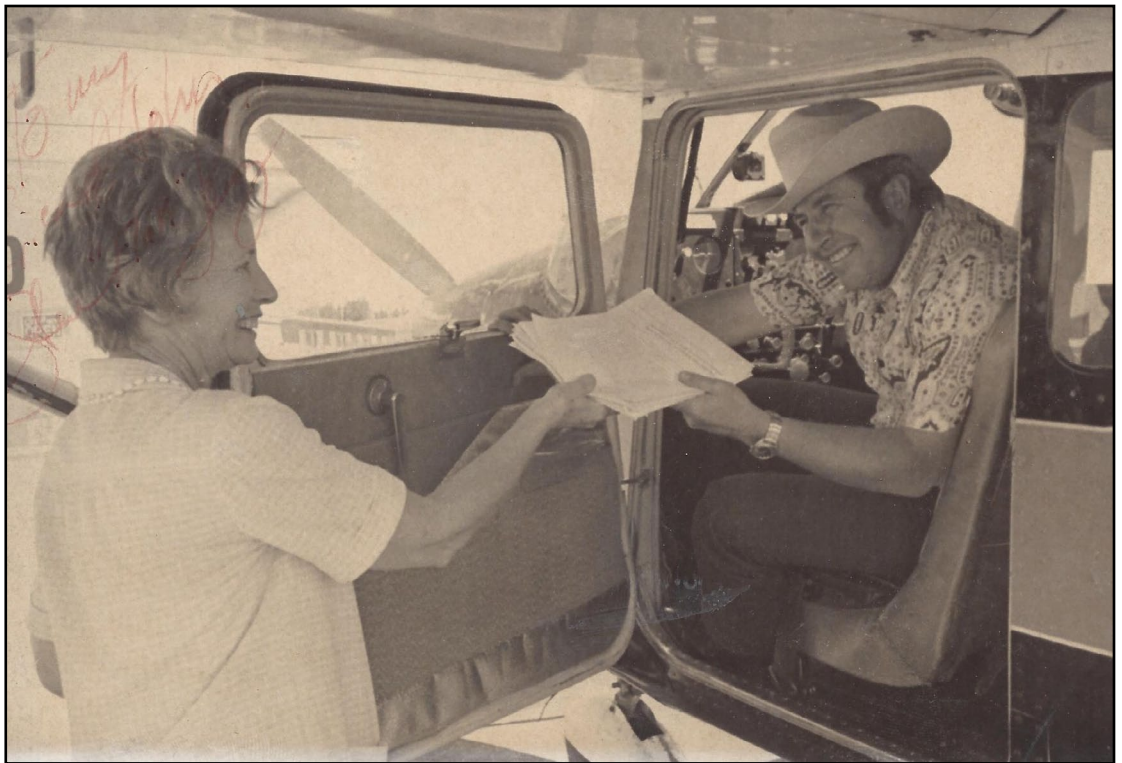


"Without water in a semi-arid state you have nothing," Jones says. "If we hadn't gotten on course to fix what was looking like an over-appropriation situation, I think it would have been really disastrous down the road, so even though I kind of cussed him a little bit, at that time, it was a good thing that he got us thinking about it, and got us on a path to where we did something about it."

The Peaveys had ground water and surface water rights at their ranch, and anyone with water rights upstream of Swan Falls Dam worried about people developing new farm ground and how that might affect their senior water rights.

"It turned out to be really fortunate because Idaho is, I think the only Western state, that is not allowing the mining of our aquifers," Peavey says, noting the widespread positive reviews of the Snake River Adjudication process, which was completed in 2014. The extensive water rights legal review and resulting decrees took 27 years and \$93 million to complete. It's the largest water rights adjudication to be completed in U.S. history.

Peavey also championed the state's first Sunshine Laws, which require lobbyists to register with the state and disclose financial contributions. He did so via a grass-roots ballot initiative that passed by more than 70 percent majority, after proposed legislation failed multiple times in the Idaho Legislature. He also authored a "bottle bill," a recycling measure that never passed.

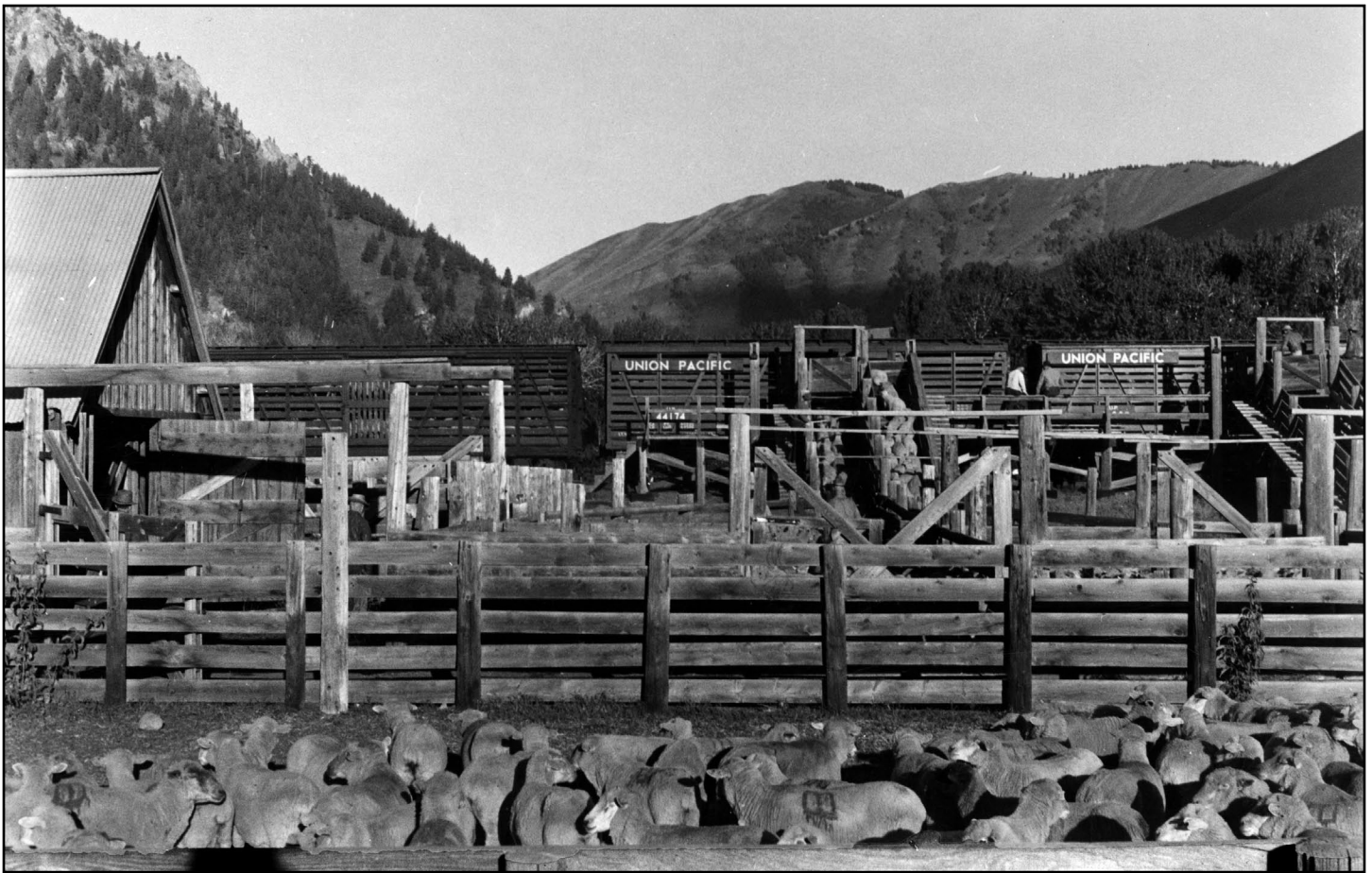


*Peavey flew all over the state in his Cessna to push an initiative petition to create Idaho's Sunshine Laws. The measure passed on the first try with more than 70% in favor.*



*To appease critics, Peavey invited the community to help herd sheep along the new Wood River bike path. He and Diane turned a negative into a positive by creating the Trailing of the Sheep Festival.*





*The Trailing of the Sheep Festival pays tribute to the history of sheep ranching in the Wood River Valley. In the early 1900s, there were more sheep shipped out of Ketchum than anywhere else in the United States.*

Peavey's political career ended in 1994, when he lost a race for lieutenant governor against Butch Otter. Peavey received 47% of the vote, while Otter got 53 percent in a race between two men with strong agricultural roots. Otter is now serving his third term as governor.

Meanwhile, back at the Flat Top Ranch, Peavey had a new challenge. Blaine County wanted to build a paved bike path along the old Union Pacific railroad right of way. The RR corridor had been used for decades as a sheep driveway. The ranchers said, sure, go ahead and build the path. We can share it.

But after the bike path was completed and paved, when local ranchers trailed the sheep through, the Peavey's phone rang off the hook. "We were just besieged by phone calls," Diane recalls. "And it was all, Get your sheep off our bike path. Their dropping are getting caught in my bike wheels and in my roller blades. It's a mess, and get them out of here."

John Peavey suggested that they invite the public to help herd the sheep along the trail.

"So, John, who is so good about reaching out to other people and sharing what he loves, said I'll buy coffee, I'll tell them the history of sheep ranching. They can walk with the sheep, walk along the bike path, keep the sheep off the bike path. Then they'll find out what it's like to be a sheepherder," Diane says.



*While John Peavey talks to elementary school kids about sheep ranching prior to the Festival each year, Diane helps line up speakers and storytellers to talk about ranching.*





*Great music, delicious food and many fun events fill out the four-day Festival agenda. It culminates with 1,500 sheep trailing through Main Street Ketchum on Sunday, with the sheep ranchers out front.*



Twenty people showed up the first year, and more came the next year, so the Peaveys and the Ketchum/Sun Valley Chamber of Commerce decided to create a sheep festival in 1997.

The festival pays tribute to the fact that Central Idaho area used to be the epicenter of sheep ranching in Idaho and in the United States. Thousands of sheep were shipped to market out of Ketchum by rail-car each year. In 1918, Idaho's sheep population reached 6.5 million, six times the human population. It was the 2nd largest population of sheep world-wide. Sydney, Australia had the most.

Now in its 18th year, the festival runs over a four-day period, with sheep-shearing demonstrations, sheep dog trials, lamb barbecues, music, story-telling and of course, the sheep parade. Before the Festival begins, each year John Peavey tours the Blaine County elementary schools, talking about sheep ranching.

"This is a wonderful area to raise sheep," Peavey tells the kids at Hailey Elementary School. "We have the big deserts down south to winter on, and we have the high country to spend the summers on. It's all naturally raised things that the sheep eat."

He talks about the importance of perennial plants, native grasses and deep history. "It was the first form of agriculture -- it goes back maybe 10,000 years."

The kids ask, where do the sheep herders sleep? "They stay in a sheep wagon. It's got a bed, a wood stove, you can cook and stay warm out of the storm ...."

The kids love the presentation and pet John's border collie before going back to class.

The Trailing of the Sheep Festival helps spread the word about sustainable grazing and raising natural lambs in





*John and Diane were pleased to sign conservation easements that will preserve the Flat Top Ranch for many years into the future for agricultural production and conserving sage grouse and other wildlife habitat.*

an area that's popular for tourism and recreation. Learning the history helps people understand, Diane Peavey says. "That's part of the motivation for starting it. They didn't know the history of this place. And we wanted them to have a good sense of the history -- that it mattered, and that was what attracted them to this place, whether they knew it or not."

Henry Etcheverry, an Idaho sheep rancher from the Rupert and Lava Hot Springs area, appreciates all of the work that the Peaveys do -- as well as volunteer board members and paid staff -- to put on the festival each year. It's a great way to educate people about the industry.



*Tom Peavey is excited about running the Flat Top Ranch into the future. His two boys are involved as well.*

"The sheep were here before the skiing," Etcheverry says. "A lot of these people will see sheep in the hills and they feel like, they shouldn't be there, but after they understand what they do, their contribution they make to the environment -- they cut down on the fuel for fire, they leave their droppings for fertilizer, they invigorate the plants with the pruning effect, and they contribute to the economy. People like them after they really understand what it's all about."

Back at the Flat Top Ranch, John Peavey has been transitioning the ranch operations to his son, Tom, the youngest of his three children. The family recently signed conservation easements representing 23,000 acres with The Nature Conservancy, Natural Resources Conservation Service and Blaine County to preserve the working ranch in perpetuity and enhance sage grouse habitat.

All of the Peaveys are proud of the conservation easement. Tom Peavey talks about how much he loves the ranch from the top of the knoll. "Not a bad place to spend eternity is it?" he says with a big grin that's as shiny as the blue sky all around us. "Days like this are just incredible. In the fall, I have a lot of hunting friends that come up, and they have to remind me every year how lucky I am to live and work out here. I tend to forget about that a lot during the summer and the stress of the business.

"When they come up, they're all, "Tom, you're the luckiest guy." And I just have to get out on these warm fall days. I love the cold mornings and the warm afternoons, and it's just beautiful. Without question, this is, right here, this is what I really appreciate."

Says Diane, "I think the thing that I'm most proud of is the fact that we were able to put this whole place in conservation easements. That's huge. It means, everything that I love about this place should be here forever. Except John, and me. But other than that, this is an amazing piece of land, it's got an amazing history. Just to think that





*Wildflowers bloom on the spring range under the shadow of the Pioneer Mountains. Left, John and Diane at the ranch.*

it will be here really is something to be very proud of, I think."

Peavey's radio essays were published in written form in a book titled, *Bitterbrush Country: Living on the Edge of the Land* (Fulcrum Publishing, 2001). The book is available on [amazon.com](http://amazon.com).

Diane was recently appointed to the 14-member American Lamb Board by the Secretary of Agriculture. "I really wanted to be a part of the Board because it is the education arm of the sheep industry," Diane says. "What the Board has done to promote American lamb in the last 12 years working with chefs, grocers, restaurants and consumers around the U.S. is inspiring. For example, their "Lamb Jams" held in major cities are celebrations of lamb that allow the public to sample lamb dishes from local chefs and take classes in cutting and preparing lamb at home. I think the Board has awakened a new interest in the delicious meat we producers raise with such care. For me, the Board is an extension of the Trailing of the Sheep Festival - telling our stories."

John Peavey isn't ready to retire yet. He continues to run the sheep side of the business, and Tom's sons may be ready to take over when the opportunity arises. But in the meantime, Peavey continues to speak about the benefits of managed grazing. "How grazing can complement the environment is one of the most important messages we have to share with our friends in the urban areas," Peavey says. "You know, truth is hard to deny; truth is truth. Grazing is a wise use of the resource. And with global warming coming on, I think the big challenge is going to be feeding people. So we are out here with these sheep, and there's no way in hell you could raise corn out or soybeans out here. The rangelands are a resource that add something to the economy with no negative input whatsoever -- all positive."

And John is proud of preserving the ranch as well. "I'm pleased that the valley will look about like it does now 100 years from now, 500 years from now. That makes you feel good," he says.

*Steve Stuebner is the writer and producer of Life on the Range, [www.lifeontherange.org](http://www.lifeontherange.org).*