

Charlie Cunningham

From Orphan to Sheep King



RANCH, CHAS. CUNNINGHAM, NEAR PENDLETON.

By Roger Doherty

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In 1864, as one of the decisive battles of the Civil War wound to a close, 170 Union sailors were wounded in the Battle of Mobile Bay. One of those sailors on the Union ship *USS Galena* was an Irishman, fresh from County Galway, named Charles Cunningham.

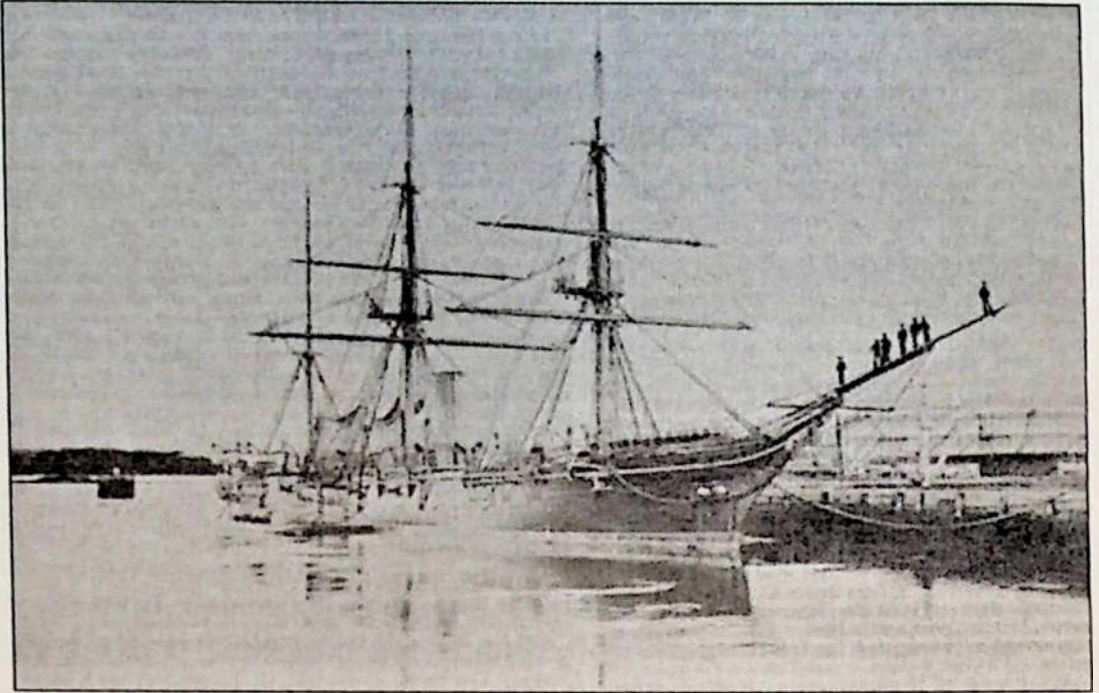
The Battle of Mobile Bay

By 1864, the port of Mobile, Alabama was the last major Confederate port east of the Mississippi River and on the Gulf of Mexico. Its closure would be the final step in completing the Union blockade of the Gulf. Mobile Bay is a natural harbor, 23 miles wide, deep enough in the lower half to accommodate oceangoing vessels, and with a series of barrier islands. Early in the war, the Confederate government had decided to concentrate its coastal defense on a few important ports and harbors. Following the loss of New Orleans in April 1862, Mobile was the only major port on the eastern gulf that was to be defended. Mobile then became the center for blockade running on the Gulf.



A contemporary map of Mobile Bay

The Confederate government had strengthened defenses at Fort Morgan (a masonry fortification built by the US government in 1834) at the mouth of the bay and constructed two additional smaller forts; Fort Gaines on Dauphin Island, across the main channel opposite Fort Morgan and the even smaller Fort Powell, which guarded the Grant's Pass channel to Mississippi Sound. The Confederacy had planted 67 naval mines (called "torpedoes" at the time) across the entrance to the bay, leaving a small gap on the eastern side of the



The *USS Galena* after its' metal armor was removed, served as a wood hulled vessel.

channel for blockade runners and friendly vessels to enter and leave. The mines' purpose was not to sink enemy vessels, but to force them to steer closer to Fort Morgan's guns. The bay was also defended by three small Confederate sidewheel gunboats and the ironclad ramship *CSS Tennessee*.

The Union fleet of 18 vessels at Mobile was led by Rear Admiral David G. Farragut.¹ Charlie Cunningham's ship, the *USS Galena*, began life as an experimental ironclad. Her armor was removed however, and at this time she was essentially like the other wooden-hulled ships of the time. There were also two "double enders" (ships that could move both forward and backward) and four ironclad monitors – representative of the New Navy rejuvenation effort.

¹An interesting sidenote is that when the *USS Brooklyn* slowed as the *USS Tecumseh* crossed her path, Farragut asked why she was not proceeding. In response to the reply that torpedoes were in her path, Farragut is said to have shouted "Damn the torpedoes! Go ahead" giving us a particularly memorable historic quote (or sound bite).

On 3 August, a Union Army landing force preceded the fleet's movement. At the same time, Farragut's last ironclad arrived and final dispositions for the fleet were made. On 5 August, preparations were complete and the fleet set off. The four monitors formed a column and moved close to Fort Morgan, giving cover to the wooden ships which were sheltered on their portside. Each wooden ship was lashed to a partner wooden ship, forming a double column that could hopefully enter the bay, protected by the ironclads.

Farragut made a bold dash through the minefield, which was marked by buoys. It was successful, with the loss of only one ironclad monitor.¹ The fleet was beyond the range of the shore-based guns and began to engage the Confederate fleet, reducing it to the single ironclad, the *Tennessee*. The *Tennessee*, rather than taking shelter under the guns of Fort Morgan, took on the entire Union fleet herself. She was rammed several times by various Union ships without harm, but after an exchange of gunfire she was left motionless, her smokestack shot away, unable to build up steam, her rudder chains parted, and some shutters on her gunports jammed.

In this battle, the *Galena*, now a wooden hulled ship, was lashed to the portside of the *USS Oneida*. The *Galena* suffered seven hits with one man killed during the pass into Mobile Bay. When the *Oneida*'s boiler was put out of commission by a shell hit, *Galena* used her power to move both herself and the *Oneida* beyond the range of Fort Morgan's fire.

The pass through the channel and the three hour action following left 165 Union dead and 170 wounded. Charles Cunningham was

among them.

Charles Cunningham in Ireland

There is general agreement that Charles (Charlie) Cunningham was born in County Galway, Ireland on 20 May 1846.^{2 3 4}

However County Galway is a big area – Ireland's second largest county. We don't know whether he was a country lad or whether he was from a town or city. Gremmert's research suggests that he was born in Galway Town. Galway Town and County's proximity to the sea might explain his quick enlistment in the US Navy when he arrived in New York City. In County Galway, Cunningham may have had some experience with the famous fishing village of Claddagh, which is now demolished.

At the time of Cunningham's birth, Ireland was suffering from the infamous Potato Famine, with millions dying or emigrating between 1845 and 1852. Even if Cunningham was not directly affected or impoverished by the Famine, the general economic effects of these years were bound to have a major impact on his formative years.

One of Cunningham's biographers tells us that in Galway "he spent the first twelve years of his life, his parents [James and Bridget (née Kelly)]

²We know precious little about the childhood of Charles Cunningham. Most information derives from biographical sketches, and a few newspaper and family vignettes. Because of the scant facts we have on Cunningham, his story with information about the times, surrounding history, culture, and other events that throw light on this extraordinary person. The turn of the century biographies from which we derive much information about Cunningham seem to be primarily composed of copy submitted by the biographical subject, or from interviews by the author. Thus, we conclude, the bulk of information contained therein is reliable.

³W. S. Shiach and Parsons 1902. This work contains a biographical sketch and photograph of Charles Cunningham. The book also contains sketches of Patrick Doherty, James G. Doherty, Ebner Nelson, James Nelson, Michael Kenney, and others. Much of the material in this paper is derived from those rich "bios".

⁴Gremmert, Arden and Eva Doherty. *The Family History and Genealogy of Arden Gremmert and Eva Doherty*. Carnation, Washington, 2005.

⁵W. S. Shiach and Parsons 1902.

having died when he was very young.”⁵ His twelfth year would have been 1859 or so, and his whereabouts between then and his arrival in New York City in April 1864 are unknown. We don’t know about Cunningham’s educational experience in Ireland, but Shiach reports that “he gained what education he was able to pick up himself, which by careful reading he [had] augmented until he [stood] among the best informed men of this entire region.”⁶

Cunningham’s First Experiences in America

We don’t know the name of his transatlantic ship or how his fare was paid as in New York City, Cunningham was reported to have “neither relatives, friends, nor acquaintances.”⁷ It is likely, however, that he



Charles Cunningham, about age 30

was immediately befriended by a Union military recruiter. Union recruiters used ports like New York as fertile recruiting grounds for the military, as immigrants from Europe (primarily Irish and Germans) stepped off the immigrant ships and into the muster rolls for Civil War service.

A month or so after his arrival in New York, Cunningham enlisted in the Union Navy and was assigned as a messenger boy on the battleship *USS Galena*.^{8,9} As far as we know, he only saw battle in the Battle of Mobile Bay, where he received a severe wound and after which, spent two months on

a hospital ship. He was then discharged. This would have been early October 1864, about five months before Confederate General Robert E. Lee’s surrender at Appomattox.¹⁰

⁶W. S. Shiach and Parsons 1902.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Jones, Edward Gardner. *The Oregonian's Handbook of the Pacific Northwest*. Portland: The Oregonian Publishing Company, 1894.

¹⁰W. S. Shiach and Parsons 1902.

Cunningham, presumably with sailors' pay in his pocket, traveled to the west coast via Panama. This route would have involved a steamship journey to Panama and then a 48-mile railroad trip across the isthmus via the Panama Railway, which had been completed in 1855. From there, Cunningham sailed to San Francisco, arriving sometime in 1865,¹¹ and wound up on the east side of the bay in Alameda County¹² where he farmed for four years.¹³

In 1869, Cunningham relocated to Umatilla County, Oregon and engaged in the sheep business.¹⁴ His first work here was in the employ of Major W. H. Barnhart. Barnhart is described as one of the leading wool-growers of Eastern Oregon. "No better opportunity for studying the cares and duties of the management of sheep could have afforded itself to the young seeker for fame and fortune than the time Mr. Cunningham spent in the employ of Mr. Barnhart. Even while honestly helping to enrich another he fully made up his mind that in the near future a good part of his honest efforts should be devoted to enriching himself."¹⁵

Having saved his money carefully for several years, in 1873 Cunningham entered into a partnership with Jacob Frazer of Pendleton. They purchased a flock of sheep and soon after the Webb Slough ranch, also known as the Hewlet & McDonald ranch. Frazer was well known in the Pendleton area as "Uncle Jake". Frazer was a very colorful person, worthy of a book himself, who brought large bands of sheep in the Willamette Valley in 1866 and trailed them east to Birch Creek in Umatilla County. He acquired 1,400 acres of deeded land and some 1,600 additional grazing acres in the headwaters of Birch Creek. Later, Frazer sold his flocks in the 1880s and devoted his energies to real estate and commerce in Pendleton.¹⁶

¹¹W. S. Shiach and Parsons 1902.

¹²Jones 1894.

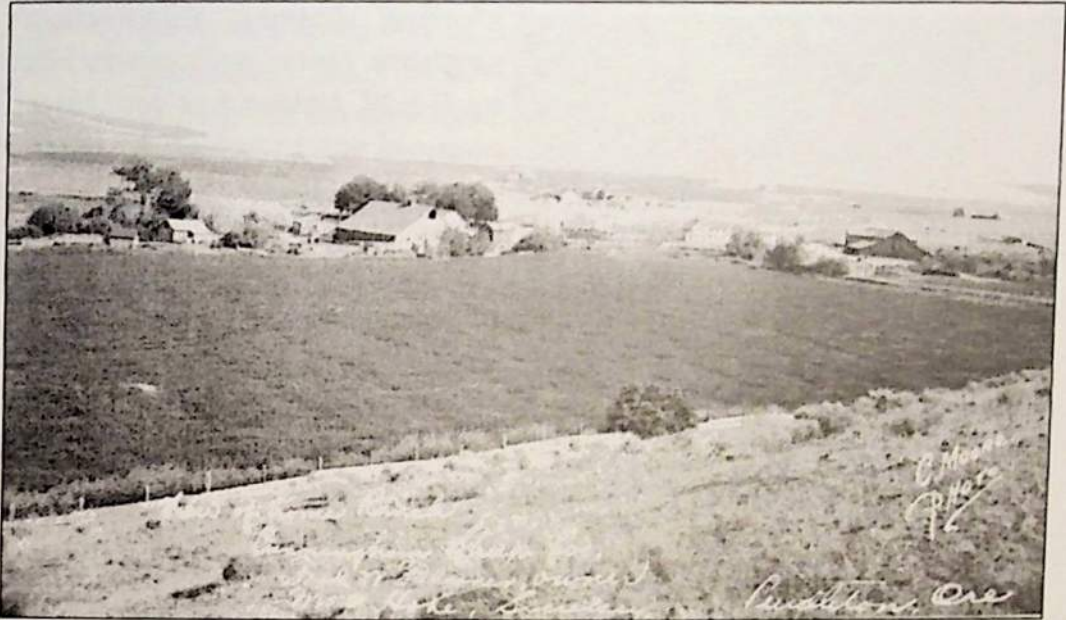
¹³W. S. Shiach and Parsons 1902.

¹⁴Jones 1894.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Evans, Elwood. *History of the Pacific Northwest: Oregon and Washington*. Portland, Oregon: North Pacific History Company, 1889.

The Frazer & Cunningham partnership prospered following the purchase of the Hewlet & McDonald ranch and lasted about three years. By then their flocks had increased to a size which benefited both to dissolve the partnership and for each to go his separate way. In 1876, Cunningham filed a pre-emption (or homestead) claim on Big Butter Creek.^{17 18} His first band of sheep here numbered



Cunningham's former Ranch about 1920 . Mr. Cunningham died in 1912.

approximately nine hundred head.¹⁹

In 1877, Cunningham purchased a ranch on Buffalo Creek, then in Umatilla County. In 1885, parts of Umatilla County were carved out to create Grant, Union, Willowa, and Morrow counties. The Cunningham ranch from that point was in the newly created Morrow County.

The next year brought a seminal event to Umatilla and Morrow counties with the Bannock War of 1878. This conflict pitted the US Army and various local militias against the Native American Bannock and Shoshone tribes in Oregon and Idaho, who were suffering from

¹⁷W. S. Shiach and Parsons 1902

¹⁸Kenny, Edward M. *Leitrim-Donegal Vanguard*. Heppner, Oregon: Hutch's Printing Co., 1981.

¹⁹W. S. Shiach and Parsons 1902

famine after they were confined to reservations and their traditional food sources were exhausted by settlers. According to Schiach the conflict cost Cunningham "over five thousand dollars worth of stock" sheep.²⁰

The uprising however also opened a channel through which Cunningham would meet his future wife. During the fighting in



Sarah Cunningham, daughter of Charles Cunningham, *courtesy Eva Gremmert Collection*

Morrow County, Cunningham's neighbor Ebner Nelson was killed on 6 July. Nelson has sent his 18-year-old son to escort the family's two women to Pendleton for safety. Mr. Nelson and another man were killed near the gate to their ranch and their bodies thrown into a nearby pond for his son James to later find. Mr. Nelson's widowed wife, Catherine (Katie Newman) Doherty Nelson, was an aunt²¹ of Mr. Cunningham's future wife Sarah Doherty and would later help to introduce them when she came to Oregon.²²

Cunningham's Merino Sheep

Despite some bad luck during the Bannock War, Cunningham seemed to have knack for improving his condition and assets overall. To this end, he purchased a flock of sheep from William Ross, a Umatilla wool-grower. These sheep were blooded animals of the Hammond stock of Vermont and

²⁰W. S. Shiach and Parsons 1902.

²¹Kenny 1981. Edward Kenny disagrees and states that Catherine (Katie Newman) Doherty Nelson was a first cousin to Catherine Doherty of Iskaheen.

²²W. S. Shiach and Parsons 1902.

were among the highest valued sheep in the world. As Randall says:

"Spanish [M]erino sheep were the parent stock from which all the known fine-wool varieties have been derived ... The first flock of them introduced into the United States was in 1802 ... Mr. Edwin Hammond, of Middlebury, Vt., seems to have been the most successful breeder of Spanish [M]erinos in America; and they now [after 1840] surpass the parent stock in size, weight, and quality of fleece. His flock yields on an average 10 pounds of unwashed wool per head; they are double the size of Spanish sheep, and are both strong and hardy."²³

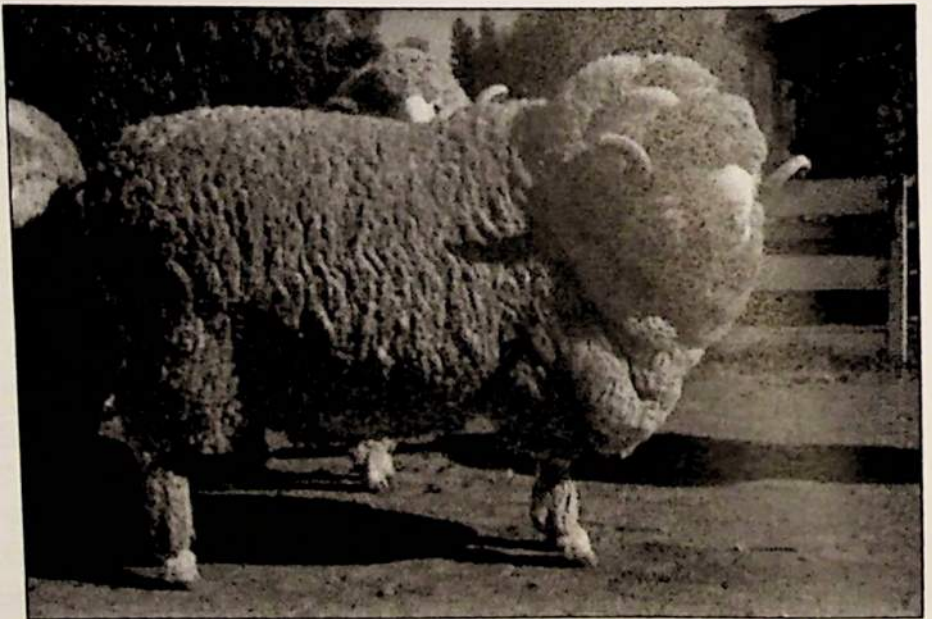
The Merino wool was in such high demand and value that while his purchase was an expensive initial investment, Cunningham's stock helped him to dominate the textile supply trade in Eastern Oregon. In a somewhat obsequious passage, Jones describes Cunningham's Hammond stock:

"They never fail to inspire confidence and admiration in the breasts of practical sheep men who regularly visit the ranch of Mr. Cunningham. The fleece of these animals is long, white and of the staple quality for which there is such an eager and steady demand. The Hammond bucks have established their reputation as "leaders," and they are eagerly sought by sheep men whose knowledge of sheep-breeding is abreast of the times. Those who have bred to the Hammond bucks owned by Mr. Cunningham, have not only increased the weight of the fleece on their own sheep, but they have also added to the size of the sheep themselves. It has been clearly demonstrated that a large fleece of actual wool depends upon the quantity of wool raised to the square inch of surface on the sheep's back. To produce the maximum quantity of wool, it must be long, dense and equally distributed over the body of the sheep. All of these conditions are fulfilled in the Hammond breed,

²³Randall LL.D. Editor, Henry S. *The Practical Shepherd*. Rochester NY: D. D. T. Moore, n.d.

hence their value as wool producers is conceded. It is a well known and undisputed fact that all stockmen who have made or are making their fortunes in sheep raising, are those who have bred to first-class bucks, and thus improved their stock, and who have also improved their wool clip as a result of raising the standard of their bred sheep. That the energy and good judgment which Mr. Cunningham has availed himself of in the sheep industry are fully appreciated, is attested by the fact that this gentleman is now in constant receipt of orders for rams from Oregon, Washington and Idaho, and even from distant California."

"The rearing and caring of sheep is also a very important factor in the sheep industry. A thoroughbred animal is no more exempt from "scab" and other sheep disorders than his plebian brother of meaner extraction. In this direction Mr. Cunningham has also shown himself an expert in his business. By painstaking efforts he has succeeded in keeping his flock free



A modern day Merino stud sheep.

from all the disorders to which the sheep is subject, and his entire ranch is today a model of cleanliness and good order.

²⁴Jones 1894.

This has been brought about by the closest attention to the particular line of business to which Mr. Cunningham has devoted his best energies in life. As before stated, he is looked upon today as an expert and authority in sheep-raising, and as such is frequently consulted, not only by new men embarking in the sheep business, but also by many stockmen of experience who run across knotty points they are incapable of solving."²⁴

Though Merino wool was increasing in value across the country, it was particularly in the west where settlers were increasing their stocks to supply the ravenous demand. Wright tells us that the Vermont breeders' "prosperity was due to the demand from the western sections of the country, where sheep were on the increase."²⁵ Cunningham, like many others, harnessed an entrepreneurial energy to bring these animals to the west where they could undercut the high price of east coast wool that had to be transported cross country.

The Doherty Connection

Sarah Doherty is believed to come to America alone about 1880 according to her nephew Johnny Kenny.²⁶ Sarah was born in County Donegal at Iskaheen, a town near Muff on the Inishowen Peninsula, Nov 27, 1858.

Her mother's first cousin, Catherine (Katie Newman Doherty) Nelson had settled on Big Butter Creek with her husband, Ebner Nelson, in 1869. Catherine emigrated in 1844, joined an uncle in St. Johns, New Brunswick, Canada and the two of them later journeyed to the California gold fields. She met and married Ebner Nelson in California, and after some time in Yreka, they made their way to Umatilla County in 1869, to Big Butter Creek. Catherine's brother

²⁴ Jones 1894.

²⁵ Wright PhD, Chester Whitney. *Wool Growing and The Tariff*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1910.

²⁶ Personal ²⁶ Johnny Kenny by Roger Doherty, 1959

Daniel (later "Tutuilla Dan" Doherty) joined the Nelsons in Yreka, and settled with them on Butter Creek, where they ranched in partnership.

Around the same time Sarah Doherty found herself in Umatilla County, either near or with her cousin Catherine Nelson, for on May 30, 1883, Sarah Doherty married Catherine's neighbor Charles Cunningham in Pendleton.

Although Pendleton was platted in 1863, there was no Catholic Church until 1884 and no resident pastor until 1886. The town was served by the priests from the mission at the Umatilla Indian Reservation. At the time of the marriage the head of the Indian mission was Father Louis Conrardy, a traveling priest who was famous for postings in Hawaii and a leper colony in China. As the only priest in the area, Father Conrardy likely officiated at the Cunningham-Doherty marriage.

A few months after the wedding, Sarah's family emigrated from Iskaheen to America in October 1883 and then found their way to the Nelson ranch. Their party consisted of her mother Catherine (Grant) Doherty, her two brothers James G. and Bernard F. (Lame Barney), and her sister Mary. Sarah's father, Francis, had died in Ireland. Both James G. and Lame Barney were employed by Cunningham after their arrival at Big Butter Creek. In December 1884, Sarah's sister Mary married Mike Kenny. They ranched in Milk Canyon, near Sand Hollow in Morrow County.

After four years with Cunningham, James G. and Lame Barney purchased their own ranch on Big Butter Creek in 1887, where they ran sheep for seven years. They then sold the ranch in 1894 and moved, with their mother Catherine, to Blackhorse Canyon in Morrow County. The brothers bought three hundred and twenty acres from the Buchanan brothers and filed on several adjoining homesteads. In Blackhorse, James G. and Lame Barney ran cattle, and were early wheat growers.

The Cunningham Family

To this point, it would seem that Cunningham led a charmed life. He had risen from an orphan in Ireland to the Sheep King of Eastern

Oregon, a title he was known by from 1894. But no one is immune from disappointment or disaster.

On March 27, 1884, Charles and Sarah's first child, a son, died at



Blackhorse Canyon Homestead, *taken by Don Casteel, 1961*

birth and was buried at Vinson. Barely a year later, tragedy struck again when on February 27, 1885, their daughter Sarah Marie was born and her mother Sarah died in childbirth. She is buried beside her son at the Vinson Cemetery.

Sarah Marie was cared for by her maternal grandmother Catherine (Grant) Doherty until she was four years old. At the Blackhorse homestead, the first house was located a little west of the later "old" house which is still standing. Sarah Marie told her cousin, Margaret Doherty Howard that "the first thing she remembered was waking up in a bed there". She also told of an incident where as a tiny girl, she wandered into the "buck [sheep] pasture" and Uncle

²⁷Howard, Margaret Doherty. In *A Bit of Irish Stew*, by Editor, Martha Doherty, edited by Martha Doherty and Heppner, 1984.

Barney ("Lame Barney") jumped a fence and came to her rescue. In 1889, Cunningham placed Sarah Marie in a nun's school in Pendleton, presumably St. Joseph's Academy.²⁷ Though we are unsure when, Sarah Marie married Matthew Mooney, a native of County Westmeath, Ireland. This couple had four daughters, Katherine, Mary, Cecelia, and Sally.²⁸

In 1893, Cunningham married a second time, to Catherine Flannagan. They lived on Alta Street in Pendleton rather than at the ranch and had two children, Cecilia and Charles Jr. During the Spanish Flu epidemic of 1918 Charles Jr. died at Fort Lewis, Washington. Cecilia would marry Lee Shannon, an engineer with the Oregon Highway Department.²⁹

Arsonists Strike

To this point, Cunningham's tragedies had been filial mostly. A different disaster befell Cunningham as a June 1895 news dispatch from Pendleton reports:

"After the fire of Monday morning at Charles Cunningham's ranch, eighteen miles from here, says a dispatch from Pendleton, Oregon, the proprietor, with seven of his employees, prepared to watch during the night, making bunks on the ground, with loaded pistols by their side. Toward 3 o'clock in the morning, two men stole up and poured kerosene on the wool warehouse, setting it on fire. In the house were about 240,000 pounds of wool. The entire lot began burning and will be a total lose [sic]. The men were tracked a mile down the road and then lost. The fires of the last two nights aggregate to Cunningham over \$50,000 loss, with \$36,000 insurance. Both of the ranches are practically wiped out, only one building out of fifteen or twenty being left. Enemies seem determined to cause the destruction of all

²⁸Kenny 1981.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰*The Deseret Weekly*. "Western News Items." June 22, 1895: 32.



Sarah Cunningham with her father Charles at about age 7.

of Cunningham's property. This makes five fires on his ranch and all of incendiary origin. It was the most complete ranch plant in Inland Empire. The fire leaves only the bare range. The sheep, with all the other real property, are destroyed!"³⁰

The *San Francisco Call* on June 11, 1895 gave more details of the arson. The one remaining building was a wool barn. Cunningham had two ranches several miles apart, and both were set ablaze at the same hour. At the Pilot Rock ranch, employees saw two men ride away in the direction of the second ranch. The ranch house, sheds

³¹San Francisco Call 1895.

and other buildings were in flames in several places, fueled by kerosene. In one shed, 1,600 thoroughbred Merino bucks were cremated. This was the fifth fire on the Cunningham ranches and there were others in the county.³¹

Despite these significant losses for his commercial fortunes, by 1902 Cunningham had rebuilt his herd. His wool sales reached record levels as evidenced by the Oregon Historical Society which noted that:

"Charles Cunningham of Pendleton, who began breeding thoroughbred Merino in 1871, ... has, in addition to several large bands of stock sheep, over 8,000 ewes, and his sales of rams has for years past been upwards of 3,000 annually, a record he will surpass the present season. His stock is mainly of the Rambouillet and Delaine types of Marino [sic]. This makes Mr. Cunningham the largest individual breeder and a pioneer in the business in Eastern Oregon..."³²

Harnessing his ample personal character and strength, Cunningham was determined to recover from his losses in the previous fifteen years.

Around the turn of the century, information about Cunningham becomes even scarcer.

The Sheep King

What we do know is that Cunningham was still very much the Sheep King of Eastern Oregon. His flocks continued to increase in size and remained among the highest quality sheep in the west. When interviewed in February 1903 by a reporter from the *East Oregonian* about a purported outbreak of sheep scab in the area, Cunningham reported that his flock numbered "over 20,000 [and was] entirely free from the disease."³³

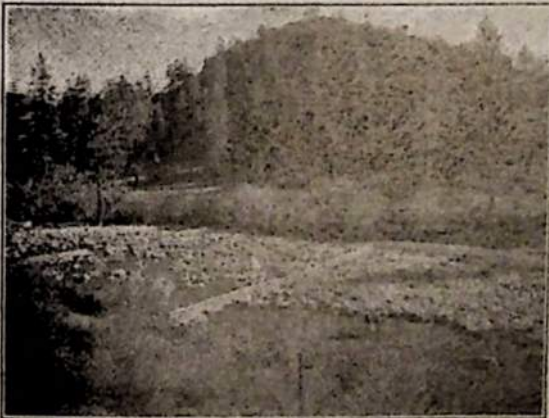
³²Pratt, L. E. "The Pioneer Era of Domestic Sheep Husbandry." *The Quarterly* (Oregon Historical Society) Vol III, no. Number 3 (September 1902).

³³Pratt 1902.

As Parsons and Schiach describe his commercial empire, Cunningham was:

"The proprietor of a princely domain of eighteen thousand acres of land on Butter and Birch creeks, while he owns twenty-one thousand head of sheep, giving him an annual wool clip of two hundred and fifty thousand pounds, while his annual income from this immense establishment is over seventy thousand dollars. His sheep are of the justly famous Rambula and Delane [sic] Merinos. He keeps the strains entirely separate and furnishes rams to all the sheep men on this side of the Rockies, having a world-wide reputation in the leading journals as a sheep breeder. He is also president of the Wool Growers' Stock Journal."³⁴

\$20 AN ACRE for land that produces 20 BUSHELS OF WHEAT to the acre Morrow County, Oregon



Sheep Scene, Morrow County, Oregon

Grazing Land for \$10 an acre

A county twice as large as Rhode Island with a population of 5,000 and capable of supporting 50,000. Land is sold in sections, not in acres. Exceptional opportunities for the stockman, the dairyman, the wheat grower.

1,750,000 pounds of wool, 80,000 hams, 4,000 cattle and large numbers of horses and mules are shipped from Morrow County each year. Irrigation is practiced in the valleys and large crops of alfalfa are grown.

Great fortunes have been made in Morrow County, and are still to be made.

For fully illustrated and reliable literature address Secretary of Morrow County Booster Club.

Heppner, Oregon

An advertisement for Morrow County land in Sunset Magazine, May 1911—just a few years after Cunningham's sale of his ranch.

³⁴W. S. Shiach and Parsons 1902.

Such a massive operation required that Cunningham manage his flock differently than other local farmers, helping him to stand out even more. Even to shear his sheep for their valuable wool, Cunningham had to begin "weeks in advance of the other sheep men ... [as his sheep] have considerably heavier fleeces."³⁵ Further, to hire experienced shearers, Cunningham had to pay a two cent premium per head as they cost more to shear than normal sheep. Each animal yielded approximately 14-15 pounds of wool each, almost double the average.³⁶ To keep his stock high grade and maintain his reputation, Cunningham made yearly trips to San Francisco and other ports to buy new lots of Merino rams to infuse new blood into the herd.³⁷

The early years of the century were particularly good for Cunningham. In May 1903 he reported that his fleece take for the year was on track to be his largest ever and orders for ram sales had topped 2,000 head.³⁸ The next season was wet and mild so "the wool [was] long and strong and much cleaner than ordinarily" with significantly higher yield per head.³⁹ Between May and December 1904, the price of wool increased from 12 cents per pound⁴⁰ to "nearly 17 cents."⁴¹ Despite an overall increase in wool clip that year, Cunningham was able to maintain his premium because of a glut of coarser wools raised by the other Umatilla sheepmen.⁴²

The year 1905 marked a turning point for Cunningham's fortunes. In February he sold his estimated clip to the Union Woolen Mills for 17 cents per pound, "said to be the largest and finest [clip] in the state."⁴³

By March however, his luck failed and disaster loomed.

³⁵East Oregonian 1903.

³⁶American Wool and Cotton Reporter 1903.

³⁷East Oregonian 1903.

³⁸American Wool and Cotton Reporter 1903.

³⁹American Wool and Cotton Reporter 1904.

⁴⁰East Oregonian 1904.

⁴¹American Wool and Cotton Reporter 1904.

⁴²American Wool and Cotton Reporter 1905.

The King Falls

From 1900 to 1905, Oregon experienced a major land fraud scandal primarily related to the state's western timberlands. Eastern Oregon was not immune to the scandal. John Williamson, U.S. Representative from Prineville was indicted in February 1905 "for prevailing upon 45 persons in Prineville to file Timber and Stone Act claims on even-numbered sections in the 'Horse Heaven' country of Crook County." The homestead claims for that rangeland were then to be passed on to Williamson in order to protect his summer sheep range.⁴⁴ Actions like this violated both the letter and intent of the homestead acts that governed settlement in the west by giving individual landholders far more acreage than needed for small operations and enabling large land magnates to develop.

In March 1905, Cunningham found himself embroiled in the scandal. While not in the same league as Representative Williamson, Cunningham had wanted to take title to some land surrounded by his holdings in order to expand his operations. He and six others were arrested on accusations of conspiracy to commit land fraud by having his accomplices claim the subject lands as homesteads. The *Portland Evening Telegram* reported that the seven were indicted on 22 March by a grand jury investigating multiple Oregon land fraud cases.⁴⁵

The mastermind of an enormous land fraud ring in Western Oregon, Steven A. Douglas Puter was convicted on similar charges as Cunningham and later wrote a book on the whole scandal. In his book, Puter referred to Cunningham's case, saying that he:

"... had induced a number of his employees to file homestead entries on a large tract of vacant Government land which was already inclosed [sic] in Cunningham's vast sheep pasture. All involved were charged with conspiracy to defraud the Government of public lands under Section 5440 of the United States Revised Statutes, and upon the day set

⁴⁴O'Callaghan, Jerry. *Disposition of the Public Land Domain in Oregon*. Washington D C: Government Printing Office, 1960.

⁴⁵Spokane Daily Chronicle

for trial, while all the witnesses were on board ready for the case to proceed, much to everybody's surprise, Cunningham personally withdrew his plea of not guilty and substituted therefore a plea of guilty, and a fine of \$5,000 was imposed. He had taken this action without the knowledge of his associates, and with a single exception, the latter lost no time in following his example, a fine of \$200 being imposed on their cases, which Cunningham agreed to pay. Upon his subsequent refusal to do so, the court imposed the cost penalty upon him. No jail sentence was given in any instance, and it was the general impression that Cunningham's political prominence has much to do with the United States Attorney General Hall's recommendation in this case and not by reason of any mitigating circumstances."⁴⁶

The conviction meant the end of the Sheep King in Oregon. Though not barred from continuing his business, Cunningham's reputation must have suffered greatly from the scandal.

In November 1905, the *East Oregonian* reported that John Garrison and Gus La Fontaine agreed to buy out Cunningham's operation for \$175,000 for "19,000 sheep, 20,000 acres of land, 50 head of horses, 15,000 tons of hay, all the vehicles, farming machinery and other stuff belonging to the farm and sheep camps."⁴⁷ There is some inconsistency on the buyer though, as other sources report that he "sold out to three men, Newton Burgess, James Keeney, and Manuel Pedro, who incorporated the Cunningham Sheep and Land Company." They would operate the company until 1920 when it was sold to a Fred Falconer. The company continues to operate into the present day.⁴⁸

What motivated Cunningham to sell in 1905? It may have been due to

⁴⁶Puter, S. A. Douglas. *Looters of the Public Domain*. Portland: Portland Printing House, 1908.

⁴⁷East Oregonian 1905.

⁴⁸Wentworth 1948.

⁴⁹The *Eastern Oregonian* reported on 14 October 1909 that "Charles Cunningham, former sheep king of Oregon" was swindled in early 1906 by a fake wrestling match promoter for \$42,500.

any combination of factors, including his conviction, his advancing age (61 at this time), the peaking of the sheep trade or an immediate need for capital.⁴⁹

The Hotel Cunningham

But, Cunningham was not ready to retire into obscurity just yet. Cunningham saw a new golden opportunity in the Tri-City area of Washington state. Pasco, the oldest city, was incorporated in 1891, Kennewick in 1904, and Richland in 1910. The area was booming due to close proximity to a major transcontinental railroad switching point as well as the Columbia River and the river trade.

In the early 1900s, the area was rapidly developing. There were many early efforts to convey river water to the dry, parched lands by natural channel, ditch or flume, most of them with prohibitive development and/or maintenance costs. An irrigation project in 1906 was approved to use water from the Yakima Valley to support agriculture in the region. The railroad further supported development by linking the fast growing cities of Spokane and Portland through the Northern Pacific Railroad. The railroad promoted land sales as well as furnished cheap living quarters for its employees, encouraging permanent settlement in the area.



The Hotel Cunningham about 1910, Pasco, Washington.

Over the next decades, Pasco showed signs of permanency. The city received funds from the Andrew Carnegie Foundation and erected its first library in 1911. In 1912, city officials built a brand new city hall and a new courthouse for conducting increasing city business. As soon as that project was completed, crews laid new sidewalks and expanded the sewer system. The first hospital was opened in 1916 in a converted hotel. Roman Catholic nuns from Lewiston, Idaho, arrived to operate the hospital, which was called Our Lady of Lourdes.

Cunningham saw opportunity in this thriving area. In 1908-1909, he invested a great part of his dwindling fortune to build a first class hotel in Pasco. By late 1908 he has purchased a plot of land near the railroad tracks. He sold the former drugstore building on the plot to the local Catholic community for \$400, who had it moved to a vacant lot on Lewis Street between Second and Third Avenues, where it was remodeled and furnished as a temporary church.

In early 1909, Cunningham began construction on his hotel. A plain, three story, brick building, it was ornately furnished with steel ceilings and luxury fittings. In all, it is reported to have cost some \$100,000, a princely sum at the time and almost half of what he reputedly got from selling his sheep business. The Hotel Cunningham was richly situated for its time, at the corner of Lewis and Tacoma Streets, facing the railroad, the main source of transportation to the town in the day.

Cunningham had but few years to enjoy his new status as an hotelier. Four years after opening, Cunningham died, on 22 September, 1912 in Pasco. He is buried in Pendleton, where he and Catherine had lived so happily before.

Now, almost a century later, the history of this larger-than-life man is in danger of being lost. Many of us today, however, should reflect on the confluence of history and events that put Cunningham and our ancestors like him in a position to come to this country and to plant their feet firmly on the soil of this area.⁵⁰

⁵⁰During my research, I asked a photographer I met to swing by the Hotel Cunningham and take a current picture of it. Her reply to me was that "the Cunningham Hotel has fallen into disrepair. I'm afraid that seeing it would probably break your heart. It did mine."

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Sheep herding in Heppner Oregon



Charlie Cunningham was a giant among men in settling in Eastern Oregon. As a pioneer in the Oregon sheep raising industry, Cunningham led a life of commercial success, personal tragedy and perseverance in the face of hardship. He met misfortune and decline in his later years, but his impact on the formative years of Umatilla and Morrow Counties cannot be overstated and his contribution to this region has yet to be fully explored.