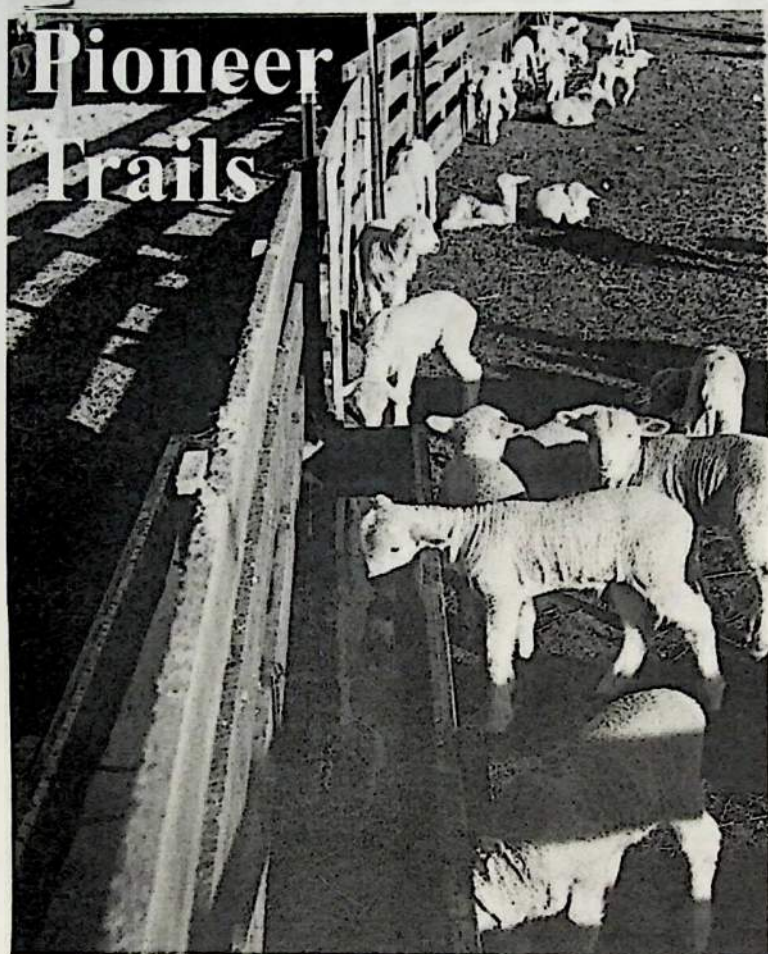




Vol. 31 No. 3

\$3.00

Winter 2007-08

Table of Contents

Adam Wirt Nye	3
UCHS Board of Directors	6
The Cunningham Sheep Legacy	7
Letter describes Meacham, Spring, 1899	16
Trail's End	18

Editors

Jayne Frink
Julie Reese

Contributor

Dorys Crow Grover

Cover Photo

Newly shorn lambs in Cunningham Sheep Co. corral.
Umatilla County Historical Society Archives



Pioneer Trails is a publication of the Umatilla County Historical Society, a non-profit organization. Printed January, 2008. All rights reserved. All information submitted for publication is greatly appreciated. Articles may sometimes be reduced in length in order to insure breadth of coverage in an issue. A copy of the full article will be placed in the Heritage Station Museum archives for future reference. Upon request, submitted materials may be returned after publication. Please send historical information and photographs for future issues to:

The Umatilla County Historical Society

P.O. Box 253

Pendleton, OR 97801

The Cunningham Sheep Legacy

By Dorys Crow Grover

Sheep and wool constituted the major industry in Eastern Oregon in the 1870s, and Charles Cunningham was one of the leading sheepmen. He was the foremost breeder of Rambouillets in the United States, as well as Delaines. [Both Rambouillets and Delaines are types of Merino sheep.] The quality of his "clip" was recognized by the expression "Cunningham wool".

The foundation breed of the American sheep industry originated in France. In 1785, Louis XVI, impressed by the importance of wool and wool manufacturers to the industrial growth of France, asked the King of Spain as a personal favor, for "... permission to import from the celebrated Spanish flocks a flock of sheep with the highest quality of fine wool."

His request was granted. In October 1786, 318 ewes and 41 rams, representing the best of the breed, found a new home on a government farm at Rambouillet, near Paris.

The French flock was preserved without change, and the purebred Merinos, now named Rambouillets, were brought to the United States in 1840.

The American Merino was the favored breed in the East, however at the time of the gold rush of 1849, the French sheep were sent to the Pacific and served as the foundation flock of California. Cunningham introduced Rambouillet sheep to Eastern Oregon in 1870.

Charles Cunningham was born in Tuam, Galway County, Ireland, May 20, 1846, the youngest son of



Charles Cunningham
U.C.H.S. Archives

Bridget and James Cunningham, both of whom died when Charles was a boy. Most of his youth was spent in England, but helped by his brothers to the age of 18, he decided to come to the United States.

He landed in New York City in 1864, and as a teenager was a messenger boy for the American Navy. The last year of the Civil War, 1865, he served on board the sloop of war, Galena.

Upon his discharge, he went to San Francisco and farmed several years. He came to Umatilla County where his first employment was with Major W.H. Barnhart, a prominent sheepman

and Umatilla Reservation Indian Agent.

Realizing there was a profit in raising sheep, he purchased a band of 900 head and formed a partnership with Jacob Frazer in 1873. They bought the Webb Slough ranch, later known as the Hewitt & McDonald Ranch. Jacob Frazer is credited with bringing the first band of sheep into Umatilla County in 1866. It was not known where Frazer obtained his band, but they may have been from the California Merinos (Rambouillets).

As their sheep bands increased, they found it more profitable to divide their holdings, and Cunningham took out a pre-emption claim on Butter Creek. In 1876, he purchased all of Frazer's thoroughbred Merino stock, and in 1877, purchased what was known as the Cunningham Ranch on Buffalo Creek in Morrow County.

The winter of 1889-1890, Cunningham pastured some 1,600 head of sheep in the Glade District southwest of Prosser, Washington. Weather that winter was severe with deep snow and cold. Hay supplies were soon exhausted, and Cunningham

shipped a carload of corn and a carload of prairie hay nearly 2,000 miles from Kansas for his flocks.

Many of the animals were too weak to trail out. Cunningham paid F.A. Phillips 40 dollars a ton to haul the feed and furnished two men with shovels to help Phillips get through the snow drifts to the sheep. It took two days to make the first trip. He managed to save about 400 animals.

Cunningham was one of the first men to improve the breed. His first rams were imported directly from the French government's stock at Rambouillet, and his breeding program was successful.

Some of his purebred stock came from the flocks owned by William Ross. Upon Ross's death, Cunningham bought his entire spread—sheep, ranches, and ranges. Cunningham held title to some 50,000 acres of patented land on which he pastured about 20,000 head of sheep. All except winter grazing occurred on public lands. In 1902, Cunningham was the largest individual breeder of purebred sheep.

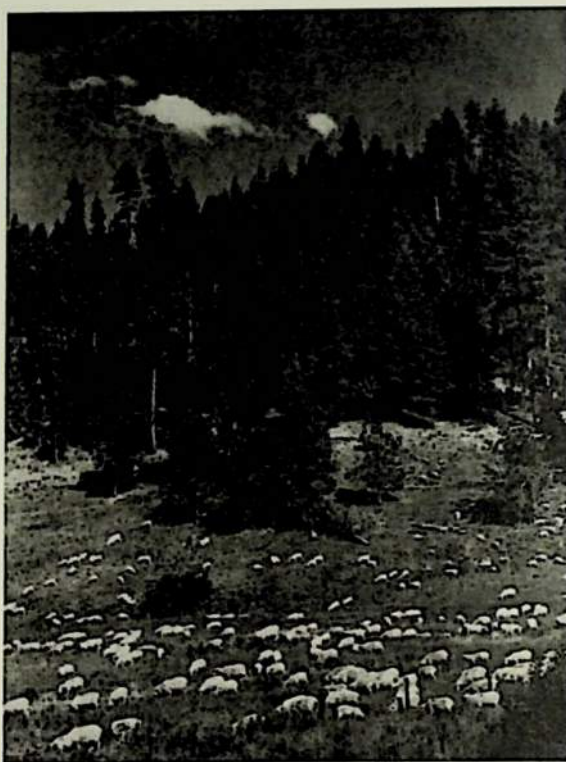
Cunningham married Sarah Doherty, a native of

Donegal, Ireland, in 1883. She died in 1885. They were the parents of Sarah.

He married Katherine Flanagan of Pendleton, January 16, 1893. The marriage license was issued by County Clerk Walter M. Pierce, who later became Governor of Oregon. Charles and Katherine were the parents of Cecilia and Charles.

At the turn of the century (1900), Cunningham was the sheepman raising the greatest number of thoroughbred sheep in the United States and was regarded as an authority on sheep breeding. His foreman, Samuel H. Forshaw, stated that "...sheep conditions are very favorable for a good increase in lambing." He urged passage of the coyote bounty bill to protect lambs.

In February 1903, Cunningham explained why he sheared several weeks in advance of other sheepmen. His sheep had considerably heavier fleece, and experienced shearers would not agree to shear his sheep for the same price per head they sheared other sheep. On this account, he paid two cents more per head than was usually paid.



Cunningham Sheep Company holdings and public land provided grazing for the flock.

Umatilla County Historical Society Archives

Sheep shearing usually begins in late March, soon after lambing is over, and can continue into May. J.N. Burgess, manager of Cunningham Sheep and Land Company in 1906, reported to the *East Oregonian*, "...not a single loss was sustained by the company during the recent cold weather although shearing had been in progress for some time."

In 1904, Cunningham sold his entire clip of wool to the Union Woolen Mills for 12 cents a pound. He had 450 sacks of the clip, or about 180,000 pounds which brought a payment of \$22,500.

The Eastern Oregon Wool Growers Association was formed in 1877 in Pendleton with Jacob Frazer as president and C.H. Seeley, secretary. By 1880, Umatilla County, including what later became

Morrow County, showed an assessment of 339,371 sheep. Ten years later there were more than one million.

Besides Cunningham, leading sheepmen were George Barnhart, Henry and John Bowman, the Rugg Brothers, Frazer, Jerry Despain, John Adams, Samuel L. George, John Emerson Smith, Gus LaFontaine, James Hackett, and the Rieth

brothers: Jacob, Eugene, Louis and Joseph. LaFontaine was lambing 7,000 head of ewes on his range north of Echo.

By 1900, Oregon was the primary wool market of the United States, but the sheep industry had reached its peak by 1920. The primary causes for the decline were loss of labor during World War I and loss of rangeland due to the establishment of the national forest system that limited allocation of grazing land which once had been unrestricted.

Years later this land became the center of several land fraud cases. In one instance, Cunningham had arranged for four other men, Asa Reyburn, Glen Saling, Dallas O'Hara, and Shelly Jones, to file claims on parcels near Pilot Rock. Cunningham paid the filing fees and would take title to the land once the patents were approved. They sued the receiver in the government land office in LaGrande, saying the titles to their claims were being held up because they refused to pay a bribe. The receiver, Asa Thompson, was acquitted. Cunningham and his friends were indicted

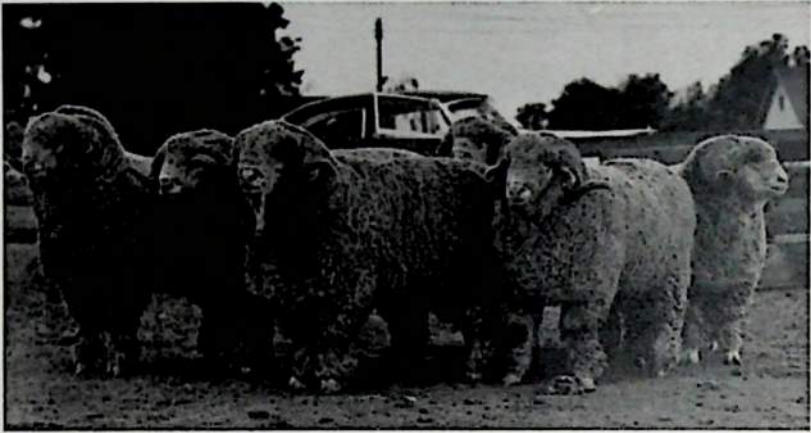
on charges of trying to defraud the government. They bargained for leniency, entered guilty pleas, and were fined.

In 1904, Charles Cunningham sold his company consisting of 21,000 head of purebred sheep, 21,000 acres of land, and the right to use Cunningham's name for \$355,000 to Burgess, Keeney, Kelsay and Malarkey. They operated the company for 18 years.

Long associated with the sheep industry, Donald Cameron started working for Cunningham Sheep and Land Company in 1910. Two years later he obtained an interest in the firm, as did Mac Hoke.

In 1920, Fred Falconer of Enterprise, Oregon, bought the major interest in Cunningham Sheep and Land Company. When Falconer took over some of the firm's interest in Wallowa County and in Washington in 1933, he sold the Umatilla County interests to Cameron and Hoke.

In February 1955, Cameron said about 8,000 ewes of Lincoln-Rambouillet and pure Rambouillet breeding would lamb and estimated 10,000 lambs would be pro-



Cunningham Sheep Company's Rambouillet Bucks
Umatilla County Historical Society Archives

duced by the peak of the lambing operation. The company had two lambing camps, one at Nolin and one six miles south of what is known as White House Camp. Thirty-five extra men were employed for lambing season.

Mac Hoke was a county agent in Wallowa County in the early 1900s and is credited with master-minding the present organization and aiding the progress of the business's four companies.

Herman Oliver recalled an incident when he and Hoke were members of the Regional Agricultural Credit Corporation during World War II. When the sheepmen were in trouble, Hoke went

to Washington, D.C. to testify for aid to sheepmen. Oliver wrote: "At the end (of the discussion) the committee looked around at each other and one of the spokesmen said, 'Well, Mr. Hoke, if as you say, your herders do not have enough food to sustain dem and, if as you say, dey do not have access to fresh vegetables, for vy den do dey not grow victory gardens?'"

"This left Mac speechless, but it indicated as well as anything the hopelessness of trying to run a ranch from Washington or make decisions far from the scene," noted Oliver.

Hoke attracted national attention to the firm and to

himself for his outstanding public service. He was president of the Oregon Wool Growers, Oregon Farm Bureau, the Northwest Livestock Production Credit Association, and was a member of the Oregon State Board of Higher Education. Hoke Hall on Eastern Oregon University campus, LaGrande, was named in his honor.

Donald Cameron (1888-1955) was born in Pilot Rock, the son of pioneers Mary and Angus Cameron. He had a sister, Sarah Fahrenwald of Pilot Rock. He married Sarah Amberg of Pilot Rock May 12, 1912.

They were the parents of Mrs. George Shirilla, Pendleton, and Mary Lois (Mrs. Carlton) Luck and James Cameron, both of Pilot Rock.

He had full partnership in Cunningham Sheep Company, Pendleton Ranches, Inc., Mud Springs, Inc., and Cunningham Sheep & Land Company. He was vice-president of all four companies.

Cameron was a member of the Oregon Wheat Growers League, Oregon Wool Growers Association, Umatilla Farm Bureau, Kiwanis, Eagles, Masonic lodge, Chamber of Commerce, Pen-



Donald Cameron surveys some of the Cunningham sheep in the company's corrals.

Umatilla County Historical Society Archives



dleton Country Club, and the Presbyterian Church.

Cameron and Hoke were partners until the latter's death, June 19, 1945, at Portland, after which Carrie Hoke became president, succeeding her late husband who had been president for many

years. Cameron remained vice president and before his death, April 18, 1955, he and Mrs. Hoke remained the principal shareholders in the extensive Cunningham interests. Following his death, his widow Sarah became vice president.

The two families continued to operate the various companies until 1957 when Mrs. Cameron (1893-1968) sold to Mrs. Hoke (1894-1992) and her heirs all of the Cameron family's capital stock.

New officers of the company were elected April 2, 1957. Mrs. Mac Hoke was president; Lou Levy, vice president and general manager; and George H. Corey, secretary-treasurer.

In 1960 Mrs. Robert Lister (formerly Carrie Hoke) became president of Cunningham Sheep and Land Company; Lou Levy, vice president and manager of the companies; George Corey, secretary-treasurer; Helen Hoke Levy, Joan Hoke

Corey, and Ervic Williams, Portland, directors.

In August 1979, Cunningham Sheep Company had the top-selling Rambouillet ram at \$7,200, the highest amount ever paid in the nation. The firm set a national record for the sale of a Rambouillet ewe for \$1,500. They also set national records in 1959 and 1981 for selective breeding and uniform wool clip.

Cunningham Sheep and Land Company and its satellites have been recognized as one of the most modern and progressive ranch operations in the state. Through intensive culling and selective breeding the company has one of the most uniform wool clips in the nation.



Invitation to Membership

The Umatilla County Historical Society collects and preserves historical objects and stories unique to the Umatilla County region and uses them to strengthen present and future generations' understanding of that history through exhibits and diverse programming.

Membership is open to all who support that mission. Annual dues are: Individual, \$40; Family, \$50; Business, \$75. Benefits include free museum admission, *Pioneer Trails* subscription, advance notice of events, Museum Store discount, facility rental. Send to: P.O. Box 253, Pendleton, OR 97801.

Umatilla County Historical Society Board of Directors

Term Ending 2008

**Bob Bloch, Weston
Marty Lieuallen, Adams
Tim Mabry, Hermiston**

**Jack Remillard, Pendleton
Jo Simpson, Pendleton
Tom Winn, Helix**

Term Ending 2009

**Bob Green, Pendleton
Greg Holden, Pendleton
Richard Hemphill, Pilot Rock**

**Virginia Roberts, Pendleton
Matt Wood, Helix**

Term Ending 2010

**Jennifer Carnes, Milton-Freewater
Russ Dorran, Hermiston
Lois Horton, Pendleton**

**Ryan Levy, Pendleton
Pat McClintock, Pendleton
Phyllis Shovelski, Echo**

**Umatilla County Historical Society
P.O. Box 253
Pendleton, OR 97801**

**Non-Profit Organization
U.S. Postage
PENDLETON, OR 97801
Permit No. 19**