

UNITED STATES

There was a time in American history when cattle ranchers and sheep ranchers engaged in turf wars with the regularity of a Saturday afternoon matinee. In the early 1800s, seven million head of sheep called America home. By the end of WWII, the number had swelled to 51 million, providing enough wool to clothe millions of US soldiers. According to the 2020 USDA census, there are now just 5.2 million sheep left in the country. They are raised in every state, including Hawaii and Alaska. Formerly regarded as walking wool machines, they are now raised primarily for meat. Wool is a byproduct, and during downswings in the market, the cost of shearing and shipping can outweigh the value of the fiber.

Fortunately, passion is not a numbers game. American shepherds no longer fight to the death, but they are still infused with enough passion to pack a punch against modern-day predators. Take John Peavey, and his wife Diane, for example. In response to the residents of Ketchum, Idaho (primarily the secondary homeowners), who were enraged by sheep walking and pooping on newly-built bike trails, they established the Trailing of the Sheep Festival. The festival heralds the land's woolly history and demonstrates to all that sheep were there first. American shepherds have proven to be anything but sheepish.

Whether it's the loss of pastureland due to oil drilling and fracking or the reintroduction of the wolf to Yellowstone Park in an effort to maintain ecological balance, the decline in the US sheep population has been precipitous. Yet the resurgence in small-scale fiber farming and craft has been an emotional gold rush. Fiber festivals featuring rare and not-so-rare breeds of sheep, sheepdog trials, fleece sales, hand-spun yarns, and sheep-to-shawl contests reflect an ever-growing vibrant market of fiber enthusiasts. They also represent a new chapter in America's wool legacy. One new tradition that seems uniquely American is the use of Indian Runner ducks as substitute "sheep" during herding exhibitions. As anyone even remotely familiar with the behavior of a Border Collie knows, they will attempt to herd virtually anything in sight—toddlers are a particular favorite. But whoever thought of setting an OCD herding dog loose on a flock of ducks deserves a spot on the Comedy Channel.

And then there are the other "fiber" ungulates: goats, musk ox, bison and alpacas. A wonderful coming together of fiber animals from afar, underscoring the fact that man—like animal—has roots the world over.



The vast expanse of the American West can still accommodate large herds, unlike most other parts of the country where large flocks aren't economically viable due to the price of real estate. Rambouillet herd. Camino "Kid" Ranch, Buffalo, Wyoming.



Sheep wagons are still used extensively throughout the American West. Similar to the covered wagon that transported pioneers across the country, sheep wagons are now designed with propane for cooking, and charging power for cell phones. Noh Sheep Company. Kimberly, Idaho.



All terrain vehicles are an easier form of horsepower. They also make it easier for a sheep with sore feet. Flat Top Sheep Ranch. Carey, Idaho

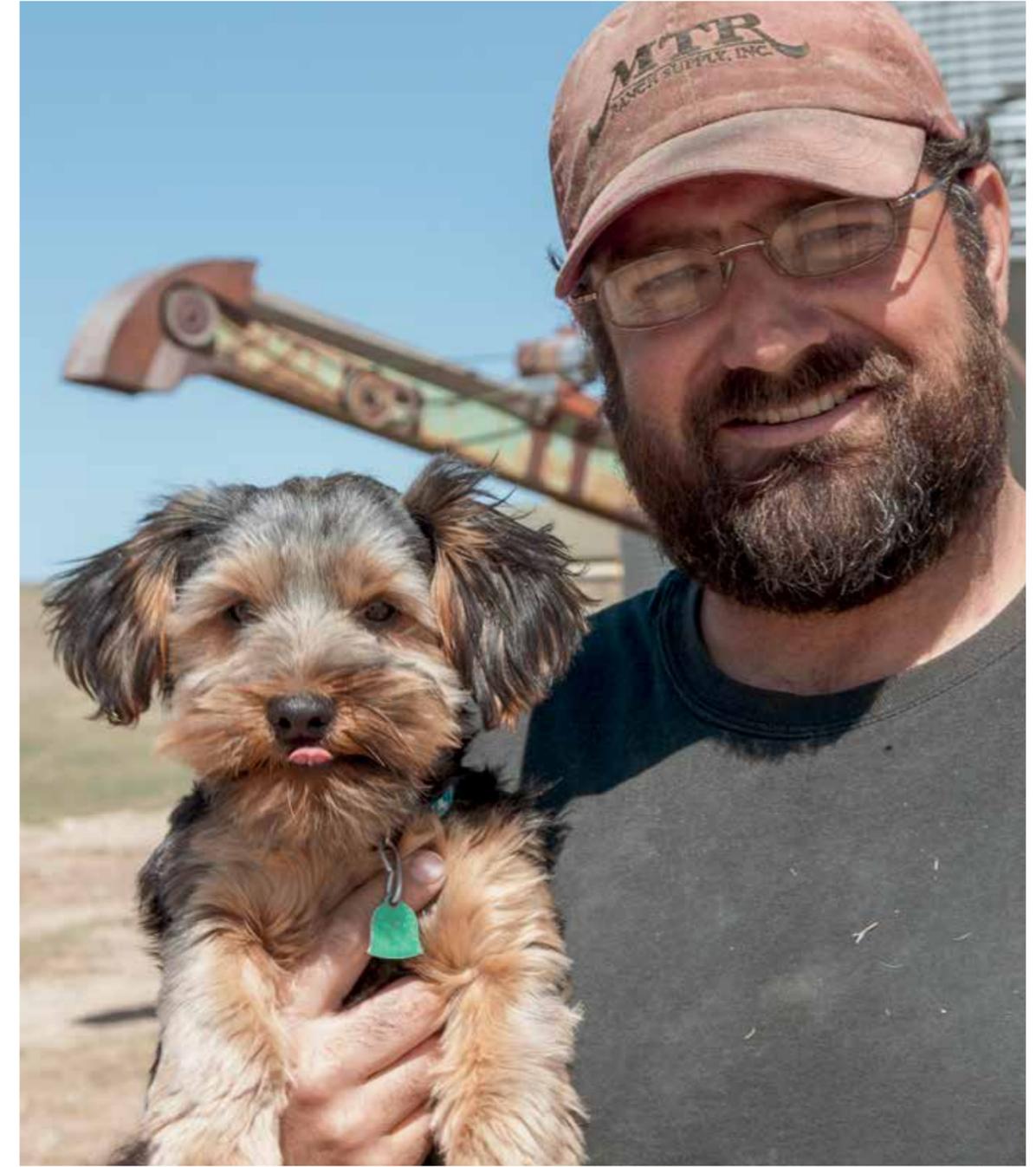


Moving sheep between pastures can often be an all-day event, sometimes more. It requires a skilled shepherd and an equally skilled dog—several of them. Flat Top Sheep Ranch. Carey, Idaho

THE OTHER FARM DOG

Farm dogs are considered working dogs. Some are charged with herding sheep, while others are charged with protecting them. Both jobs are vital. In recent years, there has been a growing trend toward another type of farm dog, the “cab companion.”

Typically seen in the west, where open space is more plentiful and crops grow far beyond where the eye can see, farmers (ranchers....) spend long hours in the cab of their combine, listening to the same playlists over and over. It’s a lonely business, and what better way to stave off the monotony than with the company of a small dog? The very dog that was once relegated to a lady’s purse is riding shotgun on a half-million dollar tractor. Perhaps there will come a time when someone will use a cat instead. But for now, a dog is still man’s best friend.



Kirby, a fourth generation Basque shepherd, holding Rex who does an excellent job as a cab companion, but he also likes to “moonlight” as a herding dog. As the saying goes, don’t quit your day job! Camino “Kid” Ranch. Buffalo, Wyoming



Farming: some call it the “Dirty Life.” Marie and Steve Minnich “catch” Sitting Bull, a CVM Romeldale ram. The sheep are coated to keep them clean. Perhaps Mike should consider wearing a coat as well. Marushka Farm. Danville, Pennsylvania.



A skilled shearer must avoid cutting the animal or creating second cuts, which reduces the value of the fleece. Cutting oneself, however, goes with the job. Cestari Sheep and Wool Company. Churchville, Virginia.