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## Aldo Leopold, Estella Bergere, Mia Casita and Sheepherding in New Mexico and Colorado

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Andrew Gulliford\*

**ALDO LEOPOLD, ESTELLA BERGERE, MIA  
CASITA AND SHEEPHERDING IN NEW MEXICO  
AND COLORADO†**

*In our family there is always one thing, and that is the sheep. The summer passes and the winter comes and soon it is Easter and the time for spring; but all the time, no matter when, there is the sheep . . . . Everything comes and goes. Except one thing. The sheep. For that is the work of our family, to raise sheep.*<sup>1</sup>

“There are two things that interest me: the relation of people to each other, and the relation of people to land,” wrote Aldo Leopold in *A Sand County Almanac*.<sup>2</sup> As one of the 20th century’s pioneering conservationists and ecologists, Leopold’s life and legacy continues to influence the environmental movement. I wanted to learn more about his New Mexico roots. What I found was a love story that almost ended in tragedy.

Educated at Yale, Aldo Leopold became one of the first generation of young foresters. Leopold proved himself on the Apache National Forest in Arizona; and in 1911, he caught the eye of District Forester Arthur “Ring” Ringland who invited him to Albuquerque. The two handsome bachelors walked into a local drugstore only to be swept away by a pair of Hispanic sisters who were leaving the store. What they said to each other is lost to history, but Aldo was invited to a fancy dance or cotillion by Estella Luna Otero Bergere. He went.

They danced and she stole his heart. “Ring” Ringland saw sparks between the couple and rather than assign Leopold to another Arizona forest, he assigned him as assistant supervisor of the 9,000 square mile Carson National Forest, which stretches from north of Santa Fe to the Colorado state line. Headquarters for the Carson were in Antonito, Colorado, and Leopold regularly rode the Denver & Rio

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1. JOSEPH KRUMGOLD, . . . AND NOW MIGUEL 4–5 (1953).

2. To understand Aldo Leopold’s classic thoughts, see ALDO LEOPOLD, *A SAND COUNTY ALMANAC* (1977).

Grande Railroad between Santa Fe and Antonito. He called it “slower’n a burro and just as sorry.”

His job was to bring rules and regulations to abused and overgrazed forest lands where gullies “scissored across the landscape,” but always in his thoughts was the young Estella.<sup>3</sup> She had a second suitor. He was also Yale-educated. Leopold said of attorney H.B. “Jamie” Jamison that “Jamie’s soul is like a silk-covered brick.” Their rivalry intensified and so did the need to stop overgrazing. On the Carson, established in 1908, stockmen requested 220,000 sheep be permitted. The new plan allowed for only 198,000.

By 1900, the Upper Rio Grande may have been the most heavily grazed watershed in the country with 220,000 cattle and 1.7 million sheep, making it the heart of public land sheep grazing. “The families that for three and four generations had run the sheep outfits there were among the wealthiest in the West,” wrote Leopold’s biographer, Curt Meine.<sup>4</sup> How ironic that Leopold, a young forester and conservationist, sought to marry into one of those families.

Estella Luna Otero Bergere was heiress to one of the great sheep empires in the West. Her grandfather Don Jose Luna and Don Jose Otero trailed 50,000 sheep to the Sierras after the California Gold Rush. Worth 50 cents apiece in New Mexico, they sold their flocks for \$15 per head.

Estella wouldn’t answer his letters. Aldo took the train to Santa Fe and formally proposed. She attended Albuquerque’s largest social event with her other suitor, but then at 4:30 the next morning, she wrote Aldo and accepted. Marriage to Estella would be the most important event in Leopold’s life. They would have five children. Three would be voted into the prestigious National Academy of Sciences.

In summer 1912, Leopold designed and built a bungalow for his new bride-to-be in Tres Piedras, New Mexico. Appointed the 2nd supervisor on the Carson, he moved forest headquarters there as well. Paid for with “six-hundred-and-fifty large silver dollars, coin of the realm,” the house boasts a front porch with a commanding view.<sup>5</sup> He affectionately called the bungalow “Mia Casita,” and down through the decades the nickname remains.

“He planned the house to face east over the thirty-mile-wide valley to the snow-capped Sangre de Christos. It had to be done right—simple, elegant, by necessity small, and set amidst the granite boulders and pinon pines of Tres Piedras.”<sup>6</sup> And, of highest priority, it had to have a great fireplace. “He had only to stand on his porch to partake of a landscape as beautiful as any on the continent,” wrote his biographer.<sup>7</sup>

They married in October and came to live in the new house. Estella, raised with servants, had never cooked. She learned. They read books to each other. By April 1913 she was pregnant and took the train south to Santa Fe while he took it north to Durango to hire a horse and ride southeast into the remote Jicarilla Ranger

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3. MARYBETH LORBIECKI, *ALDO LEOPOLD: A FIERCE GREEN FIRE* 47 (Oxford University Press 1999). This well illustrated book is a useful introduction to Leopold’s life and career.

4. CURT MEINE, *ALDO LEOPOLD: HIS LIFE AND WORK* 107 (1988). This book is the definitive biography of Leopold.

5. *Id.* at 120.

6. *Id.*

7. *Id.* at 122.

District to settle disputes with sheepmen. He succeeded. But Leopold also got caught in a cold, wet spring blizzard and slept out for two nights. An Apache man gave him shelter. The next day Leopold rode on in the spring storm. His limbs began to swell and he had to cut off his knee high leather riding boots.

Finally, he made it to Chama, New Mexico where a physician misdiagnosed him and gave him the wrong medicine. When Leopold returned to headquarters at Tres Piedras, his assistant demanded he seek a doctor in Santa Fe. Within four days Leopold would have been dead. Rest and recovery from Bright's disease, a serious kidney ailment, took 18 months.

Aldo Leopold achieved a stunning career in forestry, wildlife management, wilderness preservation, landscape restoration, and what we now call conservation biology and ecosystem management. But never again did he live in the bungalow he built against the pines. Instead, I have.

In July 2016, I spent a glorious month in Leopold's Tres Piedras house as one of two senior scholars who received an Aldo and Estella Leopold Writer-in-Residency. Restored by the U.S. Forest Service in 2006, Leopold's house has wood floors, period leather furniture, a massive fireplace, a downstairs bedroom with plenty of light, extra beds upstairs, and a broad front porch where I ate every meal. The residency program is a collaboration with the Carson National Forest, the Aldo Leopold Foundation, the Taos Land Trust, and the Public Land Library. I was honored to be chosen for the 5th annual residency to work on my book manuscript on sheep and public lands grazing.

With no telephone, cell service, internet, radio, or television, I felt like I had entered a monastery. I would write, walk my two dogs in a pine forest west of the house, write, eat lunch, write, and walk the dogs again. In the morning, sunlight bathed the house. By 3 p.m., when summer monsoons arrived, huge banks of dark blue-gray clouds washed over the horizon with curtains of rain or *virga* not quite touching the ground.

Leopold would recognize Tres Piedras. It hasn't changed much. The D&RG's wooden water tower is still there, and you can get a good breakfast burrito at the Chile Line Depot. The road in front of the house is now U.S. highway 285, but aside from that ribbon of asphalt, most everything is as it was a century ago. The San Antonio Mountain to the north rises above a sea of sagebrush that is now the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument and stretches across the Taos Plateau.

I soaked up Leopold's essence in the historic house he built for his bride. A friend did a bird count, finding twenty-nine species of birds near the bungalow including a Pygmy Nuthatch, Plumbeous Vireo, Hammond's Flycatcher, Townsend's Solitaire, and a Western Wood-Pewee. At night, I wrote in my journal and read *Stories from the Leopold Shack: Sand County Revisited*<sup>8</sup> by Estella B. Leopold, the youngest of the five siblings.

One evening with the windows open both dogs barked and growled quietly. Probably a bobcat passing through. The next morning we hiked into the forest. Flickers flew between tall trees and I heard the raucous quork of ravens and the soft call of mourning doves. We hiked by cans scattered from decades ago and

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8. ESTELLA B. LEOPOLD, *STORIES FROM THE LEOPOLD SHACK: SAND COUNTY REVISITED* (2016).

pine cones stacked in a dry stock tank. And we located an old wagon trace running west.

When I applied for the residency, I was the same age Aldo Leopold was when he died. I wanted to continue Leopold's work—I wanted to understand the world of sheepherding, sheepmen, and their impacts on public landscapes. His time on the Carson National Forest deeply affected the future trajectory of Leopold's life and work. As a young, brash forester, he came west to change the land. Instead, the land changed him. He wrote that the oldest task in human civilization is to live on a piece of land without spoiling it. Now we have climate change. Migratory birds arrive and plants flower two weeks earlier.

Leopold's thoughts still guide us. His emphasis on a land ethic resonates across America with a new focus on eating local and organic farm-to-table products. For my final dinner in his house, my wife cooked elk shoulder roast. In the twilight we sat on the porch until stars came out above the Sangres. I wish Aldo Leopold could have been there. In a very real sense, he was.

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In 1540, as Don Juan Francisco de Coronado came north from Mexico into what would become New Mexico, amidst the dust of horses' hooves and foot soldiers, he brought 5,000 sheep. Always there were sheep. Blatting and baaing and needing to be herded lest they become lost. Sheep provided fresh meat on the hoof for soldiers, a staple part of their daily diet. For the Spanish and Native Americans, and Navajo weavers in particular, sheep were integral and would become one of the great legacies of the Southwest.

In Mexico, Cortez, Coronado, and later Don Juan de Onate, all kept sheep. As the Spanish conquistadors traversed the landscape resplendent in their glittering armor, herders watched the flocks, which provided movable mutton meals. The foundation stock was a Spanish-Mexican Merino-Churro sheep. After a few concussions from falling off his horse, and having not found gold or the Seven Cities of Cibola, Coronado returned to Mexico in disgrace.

Rich silver-mine owner Onate next came north from Mexico to what would become New Mexico in 1598 with 2,600 sheep for wool and 400 sheep for mutton.<sup>9</sup> As Spanish settlements began along the Rio Grande River, Native Americans quickly saw the value in sheep. The Pueblo Revolt of 1680 pushed the Spanish out of New Mexico for 12 years. Navajos swooped in to steal sheep and horses. When the Spanish returned, Hispanic culture stayed and so did sheepherding for native peoples as well as Spanish settlers.

The readily adaptable Navajo, who had moved into the same area around 1400, quickly saw the wisdom of sheep for their way of life, which was so different from the village-bound Pueblo Indian farmers. Navajos lived dispersed across Northern New Mexico, especially near Gobernador, Blanco, and Largo Canyons. By developing sheep herds, the *Dine*, or the People, as they called themselves, could flourish with sheep for sustenance and wool to weave into blankets and rugs. Pueblo weavers utilizing cotton had been male, but as Pueblos fled their villages

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9. CHARLES W. TOWNE & EDWARD N. WENTWORTH, *SHEPHERD'S EMPIRE* 22 (1945).

when the Spanish returned and intermarried into Navajo clans, Navajo women became both sheep owners and skilled weavers. A woman's wealth was in her flocks, and the Spanish readily agreed that Navajo blankets, woven water tight, were superior to the textiles created by Hispanic guilds.<sup>10</sup>

By 1783, there were an estimated 15,376 sheep at Zuni Pueblo and 300 at Hopi Pueblo.<sup>11</sup> Navajos had the most sheep. A military inspector in 1850 reported that in the prior 18 months, Navajos had stolen 47,300 sheep from Pueblo Indians alone, many less than were stolen from struggling Hispanic families daring to live on land grants north of Santa Fe.<sup>12</sup>

In New Mexico, families planted corn and melons, beans and wheat. Chiles harvested in the fall became colorful red *ristras* as they dried strung from the *vigas* or wooden beams of flat-roofed adobe houses. But farming was subsistence only. Sheep represented *pesos* on the hoof.

"From the earliest days, New Mexico—which until 1863 included all of Arizona—has been a land of sheep and wool," write Charles Towne and Edward Wentworth.<sup>13</sup> For the first half of the 19th century, the largest export from New Mexico was sheep and woolen textiles.

Thus began a 300-year-old sheepherding tradition that would stratify Hispanic culture between shepherds and sheep owners, between the poor and the rich, with only the slightest chance of advancement if a person herded sheep on shares and could build up their own flocks. In the *partido* system, *ricos* or rich men, paid shepherds a percentage of the increase in flocks. Much grazing land was already claimed, so in search of fresh grass enterprising *pastores* or herders moved farther out away from the safety of plazas and villages and into areas vulnerable to predators both four-legged and human. If the herder lost lambs to coyotes, wolves, bears, late spring snows, or raiding Indians, then instead of independence, the herder became trapped in a cycle of debt and could never rise above *peon* labor. He and his dogs walked miles for the rich *dons* who possessed hundreds of thousands of sheep.

"It was easy to get a few hundred poor shepherds into one's debt; and once in, the *amo*, with the aid of complaisant laws, took good care that they should never get out," writes Charles Lummis who adds, "[h]e was thenceforth entitled to the labor of their bodies—even to the labor of their children. They were his peons—slaves without the expense of purchase."<sup>14</sup>

Governor Baca of Spanish New Mexico had 2,700 herders who tended his two million sheep. When Mexico revolted from Spain in 1821, *El Guero* (the Blonde) Chavez ran a million woolies in New Mexico. Hundreds of thousands of sheep owned by Armijos, Lunas, Luceros, Mirabals and Oteros covered the high

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10. The best book on Navajo herding and the matriarchal nature of Navajo flock ownership is MARSHA WEISIGER, *DREAMING OF SHEEP IN NAVAJO COUNTRY* (2009). To learn from a Navajo herder's perspective, see WALTER DYK, *SON OF OLD MAN HAT: A NAVAJO AUTOBIOGRAPHY* (1967) (originally published in 1938).

11. WILLIAM W. DUNMIRE, *NEW MEXICO'S SPANISH LIVESTOCK HERITAGE: FOUR CENTURIES OF ANIMALS, LAND, AND PEOPLE* 18 (2013); TOWNE & WENTWORTH, *supra* note 9, at 39.

12. *Id.* at 152.

13. *Id.* at 54.

14. CHARLES F. LUMMIS, *THE LAND OF POCO TIEMPO* 20 (1893).

desert landscape closely cropping the nutritious grama grass, the highest protein of any grass in the West, and eating it down to the roots.<sup>15</sup>

Sheep possess a prognathous mouth and their teeth come out an angle, unlike cattle, so sheep can pull out grass and bite it below where the grass buds. Conquistador accounts describe grass belly high to a horse in northern New Mexico. On Taos Mesa, overgrazing by sheep eliminated grasses. *Artemisin tridentata*, or Greater Sagebrush, came from seeds introduced by thousands of horses brought east from California on what became The Old Spanish Trail between Santa Fe and Los Angeles.<sup>16</sup>

The original Spanish sheep were a rough, half-wild Churro with a long scraggly fleece but well-adapted to the deserts and mountains of the Southwest. Later, sheepmen would import blooded rams to increase both meat and wool production—"Pioneer purebred improvers, whose higher quality, larger-framed, better fleeced animals of impeccable ancestry superseded the ill-bred, shaggy, undersized Churros, which for centuries had dominated the Southwestern pastoral scene," write Towne and Wentworth.<sup>17</sup>

Sheep went with soldiers, missionaries, and settlers. Sheep trails crisscrossed the Southwest. Estimates are that there were 321,500 sheep at the California missions by 1834. During the Mexican-American War, 1846–1848, which brought Colorado, California, Utah, and Arizona into the United States, General Stephen Watts Kearney's Army of the West rode over the Santa Fe Trail and lived on mutton boiled and baked. "Sheep have been the life of New Mexico's mountains and plateaus, the doughty survivor of Indian raids . . . the outstanding source of subsistence for explorer, Indian, colonist, and citizen," write Towne and Wentworth. "New Mexico cradled the foundation blood for Colorado [sheep]."<sup>18</sup>

Gold fever struck the Sierras after a carpenter found nuggets in the trace of John Sutter's sawmill. As the California Gold Rush boomed in 1849, the demand for mutton increased and long distance sheep drives headed west and northwest between New Mexico and California. Because the Gold Rush swelled California's population, Antonio Jose Luna and Antonio Jose Otero shrewdly calculated to make a fortune. The two Hispanic entrepreneurs drove 50,000 head of woolies from New Mexico, where sheep were worth 50 cents apiece, to the Sierras where they could be sold for \$15 each, thus establishing family fortunes and political power that would last into the 20th century.<sup>19</sup>

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15. *Id.* at 19; see also TOWNE & WENTWORTH, *supra* note 9, at 63.

16. The first caravans of Hispanic traders moved west as soon as Mexico, including New Mexico, became independent of Spain in 1821. They took New Mexican hand crafted woolen goods and were astounded to trade two blankets for one horse. In just one season alone the traders returned to New Mexico on the Old Spanish Trail with 4,000 horses. The legs of those animals contained sagebrush seeds which flourished on soils eroded and depleted by sheep. Today, Greater Sagebrush dominates for miles between Taos and Tres Piedras.

17. TOWNE & WENTWORTH, *supra* note 9, at 314.

18. *Id.* at 64.

19. Antonio Jose Luna established an empire of wool, business, and politics. His sons Solomon and Tranquilino would come to run 150,000 head of sheep south of the Zuni reservation and across the Rio Puerco Watershed doing immense ecological damage. "[B]y 1900 it was said to be the largest sheep outfit in the United States." Solomon would play a crucial role in writing the bilingual New Mexico State Constitution prior to statehood in 1912. Though married to Adelaida Otero, "thus uniting two of

Heir to the San Clemente Land Grant, which encompassed 100,000 acres in the Rio Abajo or lower Rio Grande River Valley, Don Jose Luna was approached in the 1880s by the Santa Fe Railroad, which needed to purchase a right-of-way through his vast land holdings. He grew concerned that the route of the train would damage his house so the railroad paid him \$13,000 for the right-of-way and enough money to build a new house, which became an impressive two-story Italianate mansion in the village of Los Lunas, though he did not live to see it completed.

In the 1850s, other New Mexican Hispanic families sought new water and grass along the edge of the Sangre de Christos Mountains in the San Luis Valley of Colorado, but their financial gains would be far more modest than those of the Lunas and Oteros.

Jose Ilario Valdez came to San Luis in 1851 followed by Dario Gallegos, the adopted son of J.C.L. Valdez, who inherited 26,000 sheep. Up the Rio Grande River valley came Luis Montoya whose large flocks grazed the Culebra Range to the east of the valley and to the west towards Del Norte. Then came Rafael and Tomas Atencio, Francisco Lujan, Pedro Lobato, Jose Damian, Juan Jose Lopez, Luis and David Romero, and Domencio Salazar.<sup>20</sup> Other settlers in Costilla County included Armundo Trujillo, Julian and Francisco Sanches, Juan Pacheco, and four Vallejos—Francisco, Mariano, Miguel, and Antonio.<sup>21</sup>

Sheep brought Hispanics north and united the cultures of Southern Colorado and Northern New Mexico into a single Hispanic community.<sup>22</sup> Most Hispanic families eked out a subsistence living, but Anglo entrepreneurs sought California gold. Fortunes could be made by trailing sheep.

Mountain man and guide, “Uncle Dick” Wootton, tried his hand with 9,000 head delivered at Taos that he would take to California. He left on June 24, 1852 with supplies and herders up the Rio Grande, across what is now the Weminuche Wilderness, then north to the Gunnison River Valley and west to the Colorado River. Wootton wintered his flock near Sacramento and sold it for the tidy sum of \$50,000.

Seeing the profits to be made, other mountain men moved into the sheep business because the value of beaver pews had plummeted. A year after Wootton trailed woolies west, Kit Carson drove 6,500 churro sheep to Sacramento and earned \$30,000 in the most profitable venture of his long and storied career. Soon a quarter million sheep took the southern route from Santa Fe to Los Angeles in about three months’ trail time. Unlike cattle, because of the flocking instinct, sheep movements could be sustained and they ate as they walked. Sheep could move

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the most influential families in New Mexico,” Solomon unfortunately had no children. While inspecting his holdings one night he fell into a sheep vat probably filled with water, lye and tobacco to rid sheep of parasites, hit his head, and died. See *Tercentennial Exhibit Commemorating the San Clemente Land Grant*, LOS LUNAS MUSEUM OF HERITAGE & ARTS (Los Lunas, N.M. July 9–Sept. 17, 2016) [hereinafter *Tercentennial Exhibit*]; MEINE, *supra* note 4, at 111.

20. EDWARD N. WENTWORTH, AMERICA’S SHEEP TRAILS 332 (1948).

21. C.E. GIBSON JR., CIVIL WORKS ADMIN., *Stories from Costilla County*, in 349 PIONEER INTERVIEWS: ALAMOSA, CONEJOS, & COSTILLA 81, 83 (1934), [http://www.historycolorado.org/sites/default/files/files/Researchers/CWAPioneerInterviews\\_349.16-30.pdf](http://www.historycolorado.org/sites/default/files/files/Researchers/CWAPioneerInterviews_349.16-30.pdf) [https://perma.cc/2V6C-CBCS].

22. SARAH DEUTSCH, NO SEPARATE REFUGE: CULTURE, CLASS AND GENDER ON AN ANGLO-HISPANIC FRONTIER IN THE AMERICAN SOUTHWEST, 1880-1940 10 (1987).

further than cattle because they had better endurance. For water, they could lap dew from leaves and survive.

Entire sheep caravans crossed deserts and faced dry drives and the dangers of alkali at water holes and problems with water crossings. Cracks in sheep's feet had to be covered with resin or pine tree sap to heal footsore stock. Poisonous vegetation needed to be avoided, and most Indians demanded a toll or a percentage of the stock if herders traversed tribal territory.

Five years after Kit Carson made a small fortune trailing sheep to Northern California miners, a new market opened up even closer to New Mexico. The 1858 Colorado Gold Rush near Denver, a decade after the California mining boom, encouraged thousands of prospectors to head towards Pike's Peak. As emigrants rushed to the diggings along Cherry Creek and then spread into the mountains near Black Hawk and what would become Central City, hungry miners "looked to New Mexico for their meat supply. To the mining camps trudged tens of thousands of sheep from the south, a traffic that continued for a full decade."<sup>23</sup>

Other bands spread across Southeast Colorado and the Arkansas River having come north near Raton, New Mexico, and crossing La Veta and Mosca Passes. Teofilo Trujillo moved north from Taos to the San Luis Valley with his family and flocks in 1864. Despite losing sheep to Indian raids, he would prosper. "The demand for wool uniforms for soldiers in the Civil War attracted Hispanic shepherds to southern Colorado in the 1860s," historians explain.<sup>24</sup> "Many of the hamlets they and others established were created by informal groups, often extended families."<sup>25</sup> Men of Spanish and Mexican descent ruled the sheep industry until after the Civil War in 1865, but then as other settlers and homesteaders stamped into Colorado, competition increased for water and grass.

By 1880, three-fourths of New Mexico's sheep belonged to only twenty families and four-fifths of them were New Mexico natives.<sup>26</sup> In that same year in Colorado, a few bands of sheep followed the South Platte River east but raised the ire of cattleman John W. Iliff, who argued that the public land was his range. Herders sought alternate routes but waves of homesteaders came in after Congress passed the 1862 Homestead Act.<sup>27</sup> As the nesters claimed their 160 acres, trailing large bands became more difficult.

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23. TOWNE & WENTWORTH, *supra* note 9, at 65.

24. CARL ABBOTT, STEPHEN J. LEONARD & THOMAS J. NOEL, *COLORADO: A HISTORY OF THE CENTENNIAL STATE* 35 (5th ed., 2013); *see also* Jon M. Wallace, *Livestock, Land, and Dollars: The Sheep Industry of Territorial New Mexico* (Feb. 14, 2014) (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of New Mexico, Department of History), [http://digitalrepository.unm.edu/hist\\_etds/80/](http://digitalrepository.unm.edu/hist_etds/80/).

25. *Id.*

26. DEUTSCH, *supra* note 22, at 29. A comprehensive look at sheep in New Mexico can be found in DUNMIRE, *supra* note 11.

27. An Act to secure Homesteads to actual Settlers on the Public Domain (Homestead Act of 1862) ch.75, 12 Stat. 392 (1862) (codified at 43 U.S.C. §§ 161–164) (repealed 1976) (encouraging Western migration by providing settlers with 160 acres of public land).

Flockmasters moved sheep eight to ten miles per day by feeding before dawn and early in the morning, bedding down at noon and moving again while it was cooler in late afternoon until almost nightfall. If water was scarce, herders pushed their sheep all through the night on long drives that covered vast ground.

New Mexican herders brought sheep north through the Rio Grande and San Luis Valleys to the upper Arkansas Valley and the hungry silver boomtown of Leadville boasting 5,000 residents. Sheep also trailed north by following creeks and riverbeds to Pueblo, Colorado and along the Front Range. Increasing sheep numbers exacerbated tensions with cattlemen who also grazed free public lands.

There were no rules about who could use public land and under what conditions, so by the 1880s and 1890s, ranges all across the West became overstocked with both sheep and cattle. Bitter rivalries resulted and the land suffered from overgrazing with denuded landscapes, deepening soil erosion, extensive gullies and arroyos, and mountain meadows pulverized to dirt and dust.

When herders moved bands of 3,000 to 7,500 sheep, they needed ground sometimes ten to forty miles wide, which riled homesteaders and inflamed cattlemen. Basque, French, and Portuguese herders hired their own kinsmen as they brought sheep east from California. Simultaneously, Hispanic herders moved bands north from New Mexico. Perhaps as many as 15 million sheep were driven east on the sheep trails, which fell into disuse by 1900.

As railroads came to crisscross the West, mercantile stores sold plug tobacco, steel plows, knives, buckets, granite ware coffee pots, coffee beans to be ground in Arbuckle hand-crank grinders, calico, gingham, horse shoes, Winchester rifles, Colt single action revolvers, and striped peppermint candy. Hispanic herders racked up debts at Anglo-owned mercantile general stores, and enterprising French and Irish Catholic males married into sheep-owning Hispanic families and began to dominate New Mexican land grants.<sup>28</sup>

Lucien Maxwell married Senorita Luz, daughter of Don Carlos Beaubien, who owned 1.7 million acres near Cimarron, New Mexico. It would come to be called the Maxwell Land Grant and be home to 50,000 sheep.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps the most successful sheep and mercantile enterprise was that of George and Frank Bond of Espanola, New Mexico who leased and sold ewe bands in New Mexico, Wyoming, and Colorado, carried back the debt, had thriving mercantile stores, owned 25,000 head, and handled 100,000 to 200,000 sheep as traders and middlemen.<sup>30</sup>

“One of his tactics was to obtain permanent grazing rights on forested public lands, then to rent out parcels to individual sheepherders who were unable to find pastures for their own small flocks. Their only recourse was to sign on with Bond under the *partido* system of old,” explains William W. Dunmire.<sup>31</sup>

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28. Andrew Gulliford, *Eye of the Miracle: Los Ojos, New Mexico*, DURANGO HERALD, Apr. 10, 2011, <https://durangoherald.com/articles/22120-eye-of-the-miracle> [<https://perma.cc/P7MM-ABLE>].

29. TOWNE & WENTWORTH, *supra* note 9, at 330. The bulk of the huge Maxwell land grant is now Vermejo Park Ranch, the largest in the United States, owned by Ted Turner who raises bison where once sheep grazed.

30. TOWNE & WENTWORTH, *supra* note 9, at 331. For another perspective on the Bond brothers' sheep empire and New Mexicans kept in *partido* relationships, see SUZANNE FORREST, *THE PRESERVATION OF THE VILLAGE: NEW MEXICO'S HISPANICS AND THE NEW DEAL* 24 (1998).

31. See DUNMIRE, *supra* note 11, at 71.

“Contracting to rent a specified number of ewes for a three-to-five-year period, forced to outfit himself at the company store with its inflated prices and usurious rates, and then having to pay for the privilege of using Bond’s grazing rights typically left the *partidario* in deep debt after the contract period.”<sup>32</sup>

Many poor Hispanic herders never rose out of debt. If the antiquated *partidario* system continued in New Mexico into the 20th century, so did overgrazing due to excessive sheep numbers. Grasses and shrubs diminished. Alien weeds and non-native plants began to thrive. Arroyos and gullies deepened especially in the Rio Puerco watershed. Even the white-tailed ptarmigan became regionally extinct because domestic sheep ate the bird’s most important food—alpine willow. Wild bighorn sheep disappeared by 1903.<sup>33</sup> While New Mexico’s sheep barons kept Hispanic herders in debt and did extensive damage to land and watersheds, back east a conservation movement had begun.

Historian Frederick Jackson Turner wrote of the closing of the frontier in 1890, the date the Superintendent of the U.S. Census declared a frontier line had ceased to exist across the American West. It meant that “thus had ended the first great phase in American history.”<sup>34</sup> Out of that understanding would come the beginnings of the conservation movement and a new era of protecting American soil, water, and forests, but it also intensified competition for grazing land. Aggressive Basque, Greek, and Scotch shepherds took their wages in lambs or ewes, and over time, sought new pastures when they emerged as sheepmen.

In 1895, New Mexico produced 14 million pounds of wool from three million sheep. Two years later sheep barons or *ricos* made fortunes when wool hit eleven-and-a-half cents per pound.<sup>35</sup> By 1900, one quarter to one half of New Mexican sheep were herded under *partido* contracts. The *ricos* had forced small flock owners into becoming wage earners. They had lost control of their flocks and were now *partidarios* or sheep sharecroppers. Earning \$16 a month and food, Hispanic men remained as sheepherders, but less and less as flock owners. As seasonal wage laborers, they maintained credit for their families at mercantile stores and desperately tried to pay down their bills at season’s end.<sup>36</sup> Even into the first decades of the 20th century, there would be almost no change in the grazing system or in sheepherders’ lives.

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In a little remembered chapter in Southwestern history, in April 1936, Colorado Governor Edwin Johnson declared martial law and used the National Guard to illegally close Colorado’s southern border. Of course, Anglos and those of Euro-American descent could pass through, but not “Mexicans,” which was a catch-all classification for all Hispanics whether from Mexico or native New Mexicans whose families had lived in America for over 300 years. Many of those

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32. *Id.* at 71.

33. *Id.* at 82.

34. Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, in *FRONTIER AND SECTION: SELECTED ESSAYS OF FREDERICK JACKSON TURNER* 62 (1961).

35. *Tercentennial Exhibit*, *supra* note 19.

36. DEUTSCH, *supra* note 22, at 22–23.

who were stopped at the border were young men seeking jobs as shepherds for Anglo sheepmen in a seasonal work pattern that had begun in the 1880s and by the 1930s had become vital to New Mexican village economies. There was simply no work at home.

In the 1920s, during the final competition for grass on the range “cattle was king, sheep were ‘woolie bitches’ and lower than a sheepman was only a snake.”<sup>37</sup> During the Roaring Twenties, agricultural prices began to slide. In 1929, with the Great Depression, they plummeted. Sheep purchased for \$18 or \$16 dollar a head dropped in value to \$2 a head. Lambs sold for three-and-a-half cents per pound in 1930. Sheep and cattlemen barely survived. Racism escalated.

Because of the lack of employment statewide, the Colorado governor illegally declared martial law. In March 1935, he threatened to round up all Mexicans in Colorado. Two months later Governor Johnson placed local sheriffs on Southern Colorado highways to prevent “Mexicans” or anyone who looked Hispano, from entering the state. Yet Hispano herders, most from New Mexico, were desperately needed to herd flocks in Colorado’s high country. Because of changing environmental conditions in the New Mexican highlands, and age-old dominance by rich sheep families or *ricos*, they had no opportunities on their homelands. Those young Hispanic men absolutely needed the work. Their wives and families depended upon them to bring home cash after a summer and fall season. Few jobs existed in Abiquiu, Coyote, Tres Piedras, Las Truchas, Espanola, Lumberton, or Chama, New Mexico.

Arrested in Colorado, a dozen Spanish-Americans, as the phrase was then used, from the villages of Abiquiu and Penasco were removed from a train, forcibly placed in trucks, and dumped on the prairie on the Colorado-New Mexico state line. They traveled with passes from their sheep company employers. An Albuquerque newspaper reported that reactions to the deportation “ranged from tears to indignation.” A successful regional community of Hispanic wage laborers sending funds home to northern New Mexican villages “had been cut in half.” Anglo employers begged the governor to end the blockade because they needed the “Mexicans from New Mexico” during lambing season and for herding in mountain meadows and above timberline.<sup>38</sup>

The New Mexico governor threatened to boycott goods from Colorado. His State Comptroller, Juan Vigil, wrote Colorado Governor Johnson arguing that “to prevent these citizens from coming into your state means they will be deprived of their only means of livelihood.” Vigil’s letter was prompted by urgent requests from Taos families who had always herded sheep.<sup>39</sup>

Not because he was concerned about racism or the legality of his actions, but finally faced with economic realities from ranchers, Governor Johnson relented. Hispanic herders returned to the high country.

Across Colorado, in aspen glades and national forests, Hispanic names and dates from the 1930s can be found. As the Depression deepened, the men came north “following the sheeps.” On thousands of aspen trees they left their signatures

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37. MARGUERITE LATHROP, *DON’T FENCE ME IN* 138 (1972).

38. DEUTSCH, *supra* note 22, at 166.

39. FORREST, *supra* note 30, at 100.

and the names of their villages so that other herders would know they had been there. Greek and Basque herders, equally lonely, silently carved on the soft bark, too.

Greeks, Basques, and Hispanics herding for Anglo sheepmen had a common thread. They came from remote villages, left women at home, and “worked out” to provide desperately needed cash for small rural communities caught between an agricultural past and an industrializing future.

A prime difference, however, was the distance of those villages. Greeks and Basques herded thousands of miles from home. As World War I shattered national boundaries and left destruction with millions dead, there seemed less reason to return. Many herders did take ships back to the Old Country and used their American-earned savings to secure a better life. But others stayed.

They overcame the loneliness, the desert landscapes, and began to see opportunities. Once established, Basque and Greek men sent for wives, often young women they had known as girls growing up in their village or in an adjacent village on the other side of a mountain.

Thus, they reconstituted their home communities. And when they began to succeed, they sent for more of their own, young men they could trust whose uncles they knew or whose brothers they had already hired. Slowly, tentatively, Basques and Greeks overcame prejudice and racism, and integrated themselves into Colorado’s rural communities, by seeking bank loans, citizenship, and even becoming bankers themselves.

For most Hispanics with unwavering ties to Northern New Mexican villages, their goals never changed. They did not become Colorado sheepmen. They stayed as herders and migratory labor for decades, bringing much needed cash back to small villages and presenting their wives and mothers with dollars to purchase iron beds, sewing machines, glazed windows, oilcloth tablecloths, and most importantly combination kitchen range cook and heating stoves. “The Anglo item most often listed in early accounts both by Anglos and Hispanics was the kitchen range,” states Sarah Deutsch. She describes a merchant in 1907 selling an average of one stove per month in a Hispanic community of only 500 people. Male shepherds earned the money, but women “appear to be the spenders, or the ones for whom money is first chiefly spent.”<sup>40</sup>

Why did some Basques and Greeks become landowners and sheepmen while the large number of Hispanic herders did not? Because native New Mexicans retained their village ties. They may have spent years herding sheep in Colorado’s high country, but home remained the New Mexican highlands with one important exception—Southern Colorado where the landscape resembled New Mexico and young men could get a better start. The food, the terrain, and the weather all flowed seamlessly across arbitrary state lines.

“The houses of northern New Mexico blend into the land. Often they lie hidden behind or atop mesas, but even in plain sight, by their color and shape, they merge with their surroundings,” writes Deutsch. “Their plaster facades bear the same pastel earth and vegetable tones as the hills, and the dramatic rises and falls, light and shadows of New Mexico’s arid north dwarf the one-story adobe

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40. DEUTSCH, *supra* note 22, at 38.



**Figure 1.** Aldo Leopold married Estella Luna Otero Bergere, whose family's extensive land holdings included the Luna Mansion in Las Lunas, New Mexico built with money from the Santa Fe Railroad after the railroad purchased a right-of-way across her grandfather's vast estate.



**Figure 2.** When he was the 2nd supervisor on the Carson National Forest Aldo Leopold built this bungalow in 1912 for himself and his young bride though he only lived in it for less than a year. Restored in 2006, the bungalow is now home to the Aldo & Estella Leopold Writers-in-Residency Program.



**Figure 3.** A sign outside of Tierra Wools in Los Ojos, New Mexico advises visitors to “Get your lamb here,” which would be fresh organic lamb raised by Antonio Manzanares and his herders on private pastures and the Carson National Forest.



**Figure 4.** A photo of the Tierra Wools building interior shows the beautiful craftsmanship of woven woolen rugs and the assortment of colored dyes used by local artisans at Los Ojos, New Mexico.



**Figure 5.** The Tierra Wools building, a modern co-op, is in an early 20th century adobe structure in Los Ojos, New Mexico.



**Figure 6.** Visible for miles just on the Colorado side of the Northern New Mexico border north of Chama, V-Rock was a landmark for New Mexican shepherds who brought their flocks north from Rio Arriba County to spend the summer in the San Juan National Forest.



**Figure 7.** Generations of sheepherders carved in the aspen trees near Buckles Lake on the San Juan National Forest. Solomon Trujillo always carved male faces with exotic long eyelashes.



**Figure 8.** Each carver had his own style and though many just carved their names, dates, and the villages where they were from. Solomon Trujillo etched distinctive eyelashes & mustaches on male profiles.



**Figure 9.** An ancient Maltese cross, the kind of Christian symbol that the original Spanish conquistadors would have brought into the Southwest, is found on a tree by Buckles Lake. It was probably carved by Merejil Valdez.



**Figure 10.** Sheepherders carved their names, the date they were in the forest, and their home village. Often they used a flowing Spencerian cursive penmanship like a herder used from Chama, New Mexico on July 24, 1934.



**Figure 11.** Aldo, Estella, and pup—Married in 1912, Aldo Leopold and Estella Bergere had a long, happy marriage that produced five children three of whom were elected to the prestigious National Academy of Science.



**Figure 12.** Aldo holding a horse—Aldo Leopold spent a dozen years in Arizona and New Mexico. A Yale University graduate, he came west to change the land and the land changed him.



**Figure 13.** Aldo & Tres Piedras—Outfitted with pistol and pipe, Aldo Leopold poses near one of the granite outcroppings on the Carson National Forest near Tres Piedras, New Mexico.



**Figure 14.** Estella family portrait—Born into one of the wealthiest and most politically connected of all Hispanic New Mexican families, Estella Leopold here poses with her large family. She is standing top left. Her uncle Solomon Luna helped write the New Mexican state constitution which is in Spanish and English.



**Figure 15.** Wedding photo—Aldo and Estella Leopold married in October of 1912 at the cathedral in Santa Fe. He became a world famous conservationist and ecologist and she became one of the top female archers in the Midwest.

structures.”<sup>41</sup> Adobe architecture moved north into Colorado with Hispanic families.

From the broken canyon country along the Purgatoire River in Southeastern Colorado to the arresting mountains of the San Juans, Hispanic families, including the Archuleta, Montoya, Gomez, and Gallegos families, came north and brought sheep. For those families willing to uproot, Colorado offered lush grass and mountain meadows for expanding flocks. Some of those families would come to own thousands of sheep and alternatively graze cattle depending upon market and range conditions.

They lived in tight-knit communities and plazas along rivers, creeks and streams, spoke Spanish, attended Catholic mass, and piled wagons high with wool then drove to distant railheads until trains came closer. With luck, they worked for themselves and not for others. “From at least the 1850s the villages of northern New Mexico continually if gradually expanded, sending out runners to Colorado. . . . They created a regional community bound by ties of kinship as well as economy,” but by the turn of the 20th century, boys growing up in New Mexican villages had few options.<sup>42</sup> Mercantile stores monopolized prices. Sheep farmers

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41. *Id.* at 3.

42. *Id.* at 9.

who had borrowed against their accounts at these stores found their land possessed and they became *partidarios* or sheep sharecroppers owing money against their lamb and wool crops.

Hispanic sons could rarely become sheepmen, only herders because of a decreasing land base, resulting from aggressive Anglo expansion and *ejidos* or common grazing areas being legally redefined as national forests with new rules and regulations. Having been overgrazed for decades, Northern New Mexico had great scars upon the land, deep and dusty arroyos, and pastures pulverized to dirt by the hooves of too many sheep owned not by local families but by *ricos*, rich families from Santa Fe that employed hundreds of herders.

If herders stayed home, "high interest rates and low wool prices kept the sheepherder's debts in excess of his profits and the sheepherder himself, in a form of debt slavery," wrote Suzanne Forrest.<sup>43</sup> To stay out of debt, and to come home with cash, Hispanic men moved north. Forrest writes, "Villagers who did not want to become entrapped in the *partido* system of New Mexico migrated to work as sheepherders in Colorado, Utah, Wyoming, and Montana."<sup>44</sup>

As the 1920s segued into the 1930s and the Great Depression, Colorado's high country offered the only hope for hundreds of young men who had limited education and only spoke *Espanol*. They would follow the *borregas* and bring home the cash that their wives and mothers so desperately needed. On their home turf in Mora, Colfax, or Rio Arriba Counties, "by the 1930s, forage in the mountains was so scarce that cattle were beginning to starve to death. The per capita income in Vallecitos [New Mexico] was just over \$200. Unable to support their families, village men left to take jobs as cowboys, sheepherders, and miners in Colorado."<sup>45</sup> Deutsch concludes, "[t]he Depression disrupted migration patterns and strategies Hispanics had followed for ten, fifteen, and even twenty-five years. Only the skeleton of the regional migratory pattern survived," and for families whose men found herding jobs in Colorado or Wyoming, their wives were considered "fairly well off."<sup>46</sup>

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The herders who traveled brought with them centuries of working with sheep and a custom and culture familiar with high country wilderness and weeks of being alone. They knew the exact day to turn rams in with ewes so lambs would be born under a full moon. Lambs arrived in March or April and herders knew all the behaviors a ewe exhibits before giving birth. She paws at bedding to make a nest. After the lamb drops she steps forward, turns, lowers her head, sniffs it, licks the lamb's nose so it can breathe, and nudges it towards her teats. The ewe moves around and adjusts herself so the lamb can suck milk. A tail starts to wag and the lamb has found its mother. Often, a second lamb drops, and the process starts over

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43. FORREST, *supra* note 30, at 25.

44. *Id.* at 29. To further understand the *partido* system and sheep on shares, see the chapter "Manitos" in WILLIAM DEBUYS, ENCHANTMENT AND EXPLOITATION: THE LIFE AND HARD TIMES OF A NEW MEXICO MOUNTAIN RANGE 169-86 (1985).

45. FRANK CLIFFORD, THE BACKBONE OF THE WORLD 214 (2003).

46. DEUTSCH, *supra* note 22, at 164.

again deep in the night with herders moving through the flock helping the lambs, ears tuned to coyotes, eyes watching their border collies for any sign of danger in this, one of the most vulnerable times on the range.

At lambing season, Hispanic herders prayed to Santa Ines or Saint Agnes, patron saints for those who lived outdoors, and they prayed especially hard over lost lambs or other strayed animals that they might be restored. Hispanic herders knew the morning star as *La Estrella del Pastor*, the star of the shepherders, because as the star rose in the glittering cold of a mountain morning, so did the sheep.

Hospitable, willing to entertain guests or strangers at sheep camp, for herders “a blackened coffee pot is always present on the edge of the campfire. Ground coffee and water are added as needed.”<sup>47</sup> In a cast iron Dutch oven atop *rescoldo*, or a big bed of coals, they baked *pan de pastor*, or shepherd’s bread, to serve with stout black Arbuckle coffee and canned milk. Everything had a function in sheep camp and even the condensed milk cans were saved to be strung on hard wire like a wreath to make a rattle or tambourine to shake behind the sheep so they would move faster. Known as “tin dogs,” these milk can rattles can be found in museums across Northwest Colorado.<sup>48</sup>

Some stockmen kept their herders in canned food. Basques took the time to wash vegetables for stew, “but the universal and standard food was pinto beans and mutton, sour dough bread and cheese. The beans were simmered long and slowly with mutton and some onion . . . the beans were cooked until the skins burst making the juice thick and brown; the mutton, to savory bits.”<sup>49</sup>

Hispano herders added roasted chilies or chili powder to taste. “With a kettle of beans simmering on the camp stove, the coffee kept warm by the stove pipe, bread baking in a pit of ashes, the men out all day with the sheep, in the evening [they] were assured of a meal such as the most efficient wife could not match,” recalled one sheepman’s spouse. Later when he had leased his sheep and rented his range, the stockman complained of not being well fed at home. He teased his wife, “I’m going to sheep camp and get a good meal.” To which she responded, “I’m going with you.”<sup>50</sup>

On Christmas Eve in the low country watching sheep in winter pastures, Hispanic herders lit small fires in bags filled with sand, *luminarias*, to commemorate the shepherd campfires near Bethlehem and the birth of Christ on *Noche Buena*. Not familiar with English or knowing how to count to keep track of their sheep bands, herders would fill a tobacco sack full of pebbles with a black stone to represent the black sheep, one per hundred, and white stones for how many tens of sheep they herded. If bears or coyotes came after their flock, the herders would retrieve the pelts and ears to show their *patron* or boss. To keep the sheep moving forward with billy goats as leaders, herders used *hondas* or slings to send egg-shaped rocks after stragglers. If fresh lamb basted on the stove in sheep camp

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47. LORIN W. BROWN, *HISPANO FOLKLORE OF NEW MEXICO* 159 (1978).

48. “Tin dogs” are in collections at the White River Museum of the Rio Blanco Historical Society in Meeker and the Wyman Living History Museum in Craig. Lou Wyman said his sheepherding family preferred Columbine condensed milk cans because they had coupons, which could be redeemed.

49. LATHROP, *supra* note 37, at 157.

50. *Id.*

instead of rangy mutton, a herder almost always would claim it broke its leg. Who could argue?

Sometimes the herders stayed on their proper ranges or allotments; sometimes they did not.

Herders occasionally trespassed on to cattle and sheep allotments as well as on to game preserves. When confronted by forest rangers wearing a side arm, they panicked. "A herder was grazing his sheep on a game refuge and he may or may not have known that the sheep were in trespass, but he was of the older type, understood no English, and apparently felt that he was going to be killed on the spot," a forest ranger related. "He got on his knees, prayed, crossed himself, and there is no doubt in my mind but what he thought the end had come. I helped him get his sheep onto a proper range and no further difficulty was experienced with him," recounted Ranger C.B. Mack.<sup>51</sup>

There are stories of shepherds dying and faithful dogs continuing to move and work the sheep. And there are stories of the effect of loneliness, of "crazy" herders who could not adjust to even the bustle of a small village. "It is probably true, as has often been stated, that the *pastores*—shepherds—sometimes lost their reason after weeks and months with their flocks, accompanied only by the faithful dog who was trained to guard the sheep from wolves and bring them into the corral at night," wrote Colorado pioneer Honora DeBusk Smith. She added, "[t]he writer has never forgotten the keen sympathy evoked by the shepherd lad who burst into tears and could not reply when accosted by a passing group of horseback riders as he stood on the solitary prairie after weeks away from any human contact."<sup>52</sup>

Herders cheated on each other's allotments, and occasionally quarrels became deadly. "Had to jack up Daniel Martinez for not staying on the trail. He had cut a wide circle through Tino Garcia's range," wrote one U.S. Forest Service ranger.<sup>53</sup> On winter range in the Book Cliff area of Utah, a Hispanic herder slayed his "countryman," another Hispano herder, with an ax after supposedly being beaten with a rifle.<sup>54</sup> In remote sheep camps, anger could be difficult to defuse.

Young shepherds may not have known how to combat isolation, but they knew how to assist *el Ganado prenatalado*, or pregnant ewes, and how to help *pencos*, or orphan lambs, by tying the skin of a dead lamb atop the orphan lamb to fool another mother ewe into accepting the orphan because it smelled like her own. The herders also harvested and dried medicinal plants, *yerbas del campo*, and returned to their villages with a variety of herbs including osha root which grows best above 9,000 feet and *hediondilla*, a part of the creosote bush which serves as a remedy for

51. Letter from C.B. Mack, San Juan Forest Ranger, to Gifford Pinchot (July 15, 1940) (on file with the San Juan National Forest, Durango, Colorado).

52. HONORE DEBUSK SMITH, *MEXICAN PLAZAS ALONG THE RIVER OF SOULS* 69 (J. Frank Dobie, ed. 1965).

53. RANGER'S DAYBOOKS/LOGBOOKS, PAGOSA SPRINGS RANGER DISTRICT, SAN JUAN NATIONAL FOREST (June 26, 1924), [https://swcenter.fortlewis.edu/finding\\_aids/inventory/PagLogs.htm#1924June](https://swcenter.fortlewis.edu/finding_aids/inventory/PagLogs.htm#1924June) [<https://perma.cc/B78U-H29J>].

54. *Mexican Herder Slays Countryman in Book Mountains*, TIMES INDEP., Oct. 5, 1922, [https://newspapers.lib.utah.edu/details?id=20253379&q=title\\_t%3A%22Mexican+Herder+Slays+Countryman+in+Book+Mountains%22&page=1&rows=50&fd=title\\_t%2Cpaper\\_t%2Cdate\\_tdt%2Ctype\\_t&sort=date\\_tdt+asc&gallery=0&facet\\_paper=%22Times+Independent%22#t\\_20253379](https://newspapers.lib.utah.edu/details?id=20253379&q=title_t%3A%22Mexican+Herder+Slays+Countryman+in+Book+Mountains%22&page=1&rows=50&fd=title_t%2Cpaper_t%2Cdate_tdt%2Ctype_t&sort=date_tdt+asc&gallery=0&facet_paper=%22Times+Independent%22#t_20253379).

kidney ailments. “Every pastor knows about *yervas del campo*. It is well that he does, he is alone so much. Knowing them, he can treat any disease that might strike him while out alone with his sheep. Only a broken leg holds any terror for a shepherd.”<sup>55</sup>

Herders knew herbs. They also knew poisonous plants and had to save their sheep from larkspur, poisonous in the spring but not in the fall. Blue lupine was harmless in the spring but needed to be avoided in the fall when pods formed. In the summer, sheep nip short tender grass, but in fall prime sheep feed are gramma and curly grasses and blue stems with heavy seed heads. Sheep could also benefit cattle by eating poisonous larkspur twice a year—in spring before it reached sixteen inches high and in fall before the plant’s seeds ripened.

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Stories came from the sheep camps. Stories of lost lambs, greedy coyotes, wrecks with horses, and bears—always bears, some of which became taller and taller with each telling. Leo Coca remembered:

One time I was herding sheep and there was this mother bear. She weighed about two thousand pounds and she had three little cubs. I had a little pistol and I had a little pup and the pup seen it first. By gosh, when I seen it I didn’t know what to do. I just ran right up to where she was, almost about thirty feet. Then she just stood up on her hind feet and her cubs just start eating and then she started to come up to me and showing me her teeth. Her teeth looked like they were one and a half feet long. I started to back up and she started to stop and go down on her feet, and pretty soon after I got down the hill a little ways, why I ran just as fast as I could and I started shooting backwards, but I don’t know what I was shooting at. I went back to camp and saddled my horse, and I went back but she wasn’t there no more. It was a grizzly. She was white and had three little ones.<sup>56</sup>

When not confronting predators, in their spare time, herders carved on aspen trees, stacked stones as cairns known as *harri mutalik*, or “Stone Boys” in Basque, made *teguas* or homemade moccasins and *reatas*, or hand-braided ropes. To heal sick sheep, animals would be placed in stone enclosures or small brush pens, *chiceros*.

Herders knew a hundred ways to care for sheep, and every one of their strategies would be tested the winter of 1931–1932 when a severe spring blizzard decimated flocks only to be followed by a long lasting drought which forced reductions in numbers on the public domain. The drought was also felt across the Navajo Reservation under the stock reduction policies of Indian Commissioner John Collier, nicknamed “Sheep Killer Collier” by Navajo women who never

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55. BROWN, *supra* note 47, at 170.

56. Mike McCole & Scott Davidson, “Oh hell, I rode that bear,” *Oral history with Leo Coca*, 3 PTARMIGAN Q. 51, (1979).

forgot.<sup>57</sup> For herders across Colorado and New Mexico, the spring blizzard of 1932, just after flocks had been sheared and had no warm wool for protection, left dead sheep by the hundreds.

The Gomez family of Pagosa Springs and Archuleta County survived, but to this day grandchildren repeat stories of white, frozen sheep stuck to their bedground, dead in the snow, and relatives gathering wet wood to light fires, trying to warm lambs still living, while tears froze on the herders' faces amidst the low plaintive sounds of dying sheep.<sup>58</sup>

Snow melted but no rains came—for years. The drought deepened. Sharp sheep hooves cut fragile soils and hungry ewes ate plants down to the roots. Village men who had started to herd at age 10 or 12 now headed north desperately seeking work. "Though most Hispanic migrants came from landowning families in the village, they performed only wage labor outside it," writes Deutsch.<sup>59</sup>

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Beginning in the 1890s, for Bluff and La Sal, Utah ranchers, New Mexican herders might tend 2,500 to 3,000 head apiece for as long as eight to ten months before returning home. For shearings, as many as fifty men would come north. Often they remained anonymous and were only spoken of as "Mexicans." "Lemuel Redd developed close relationships with some of his herders. But more often these workers were noted only for their tragedies, such as the poor man who fell off a heavy wagon and was crushed to death by its wheels," wrote Bluff historian David S. Carpenter.<sup>60</sup> Buried in Bluff, no one knew the Hispanic herder's name or how to contact his family.

Lem's son, Charlie Redd, grew up working with herders and learning Spanish, Hopi, Paiute, and Navajo "words, phrases, customs, and ways of looking at life," according to his biographer Leonard J. Arrington.<sup>61</sup> That cultural education stood Charlie Redd in good stead as he expanded his father's partnership in the La Sal Livestock Company into Redd Ranches and one of the largest sheep and cattle concerns in the Rocky Mountain West with over 25,000 sheep and thousands of deeded acres in two states including a quarter million acres of permits and leases straddling the Utah-Colorado border.

Charlie Redd knew how to talk to people he hired. He asked about them, asked after them, and remembered their names and families. After a drop in livestock values in 1921, he inherited his father's debts of \$575,000, yet he persevered. His personality helped account for his success and Hispanic herders could expect him to share their dinner of mutton and *frijoles*, coffee "that would take the head off a ten-penny nail" and Dutch oven bread. Winter or summer, he would ride into camp with only one wool blanket. Charlie easily found and retained

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57. See MARSHA WEISIGER, *DREAMING OF SHEEP IN NAVAJO COUNTRY* (2009).

58. See San Juan Historical Society, *Voices from the Past*, 9 REMEMBRANCES 5 (2004).

59. DEUTSCH, *supra* note 22, at 204.

60. DAVID S. CARPENTER, JENS NIELSON: BISHOP OF BLUFF 276 (2011).

61. LEONARD J. ARRINGTON, UTAH'S AUDACIOUS STOCKMAN: CHARLIE REDD 45 (1995).

employees because “the sheep camps were comfortable, they had plenty of quilts and blankets, and the herders were better paid than cowboys.”<sup>62</sup>

He understood his Hispanic herders and they understood him. Because of that trust, he had foremen like Ignacio Martinez, Roque Garcia, and Fernando “F.R.” Lopez. His employees would run up debts at the La Sal store which Redd owned, but were not required to pay their bills until they headed home. With a staff he could depend upon, Redd expanded even in the depths of the Great Depression. “With banks that were able to survive the depression, he was able to obtain credit to buy up outfits that went broke and land that was foreclosed by failure to pay taxes or mortgages. His holdings continued to increase during the thirties,” wrote Redd’s biographer.<sup>63</sup> Loyal Hispanic herders from Rio Arriba County worked for the Redd family for almost half-a-century. They needed the income and Charlie needed the help.

“Hispanics were much admired by Charlie,” Redd’s biographer Arrington explains. Charlie stated, “You could send them out with a herd of sheep and tell them what you wanted done and you knew that they would be there when you went after them. If they ran out of groceries, they wouldn’t walk off; they would kill a sheep and roast it over a fire. When they lost sheep, they felt worse than I did. They worked for me; they were good fellows, and we depended heavily on them.”<sup>64</sup>

Northern New Mexican men that Redd remembered included Roque Garcia, Mateo Garcia, Anton Chacon, Cosme Chacon, Leon Sanchez, Fernando Lopez, Benito Martinez, Tony Serrano, Melicandro “Big Mike” Lovato, and Merejildo Valdez from Espanola. Charlie Redd even traveled to Espanola for the wedding of Valdez’ daughter. “These men knew sheep, were loyal, and were resourceful in getting out of any difficulty,” notes Arrington.<sup>65</sup>

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Hispanic herders continued to return home to New Mexico. Aldo Leopold did not. He left the Southwest for Wisconsin, but in many ways he took the Southwest with him. Aldo Leopold loved to fish and hunt. He had spent his early years as a sportsman in the Midwest and he had seen some of the best natural areas for water fowl hunting diked and drained for corn fields. He wanted unspoiled landscapes with maximum numbers of wild game and he thought a career in the new U.S. Forest Service would give him the outdoor opportunities he sought. His timing could not have been better.

Leopold arrived in the West just as the frontier was ending and the federal government, through the U.S. Forest Service, was extending its reach and regulations. He enjoyed time on horseback, carrying a rifle in a scabbard, smoking aromatic pipe tobacco, and “cruising” timber. He looked like a “dude,” and perhaps he was, but almost no one in the first decades of the 20th century asked harder questions about the land or had a better understanding of what we now call

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62. *Id.* at 119.

63. *Id.* at 154.

64. *Id.* at 172.

65. *Id.*

ecological processes. “Ecology” and “environment” were not yet words in anyone’s vocabulary. The U.S. Forest Service mantra was efficiency on the ground, grazing rules, and “getting out the cut” of timber for local sawmills.

Leopold questioned what he was seeing and he challenged priorities for federal spending. As momentum built across the West to do something with the wide open public domain where cattlemen and sheepmen fought for grazing supremacy, Leopold worried about the land itself. He would join a rising chorus of fledgling federal employees concerned about the West’s timber, grass, and watersheds. He focused on grass, soil, and erosion and few stockmen wanted to hear his conclusions.

In 1922, speaking at the New Mexico Association for Science, Leopold read a professional paper that contained all the sincerity, wit, and wisdom that would mark his later writings. The breadth of his subject, his sharp analysis, and his sweep of time and place would herald a major new voice in the American conservation movement.

In his lifetime, Leopold would come to straddle that divide between conservation—the greatest good for the greatest number for the longest time—and the idea of the environment and ecology having values separate from human needs. An American spokesman for land and landscape was finding his own voice, and just like President Theodore Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot and their establishment of millions of acres of national forests, Leopold would leave his own mark on public land. But he also left his beloved New Mexico, ancestral home to his wife Estella Luna Otero Bergere. Perhaps as recompense, they would give some of their children Hispanic family first names.

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Thousands of domestic sheep once grazed in the mountains of the San Juan National Forest near Pagosa Springs, Colorado. Now there are none. High country sheep grazing allotments are vacant and the only signs of a historic industry are stands of aspen trees carved by Hispanic herders over generations. Peggy Bergon began recording and photographing those carvings, or *arborglyphs*, almost four decades ago. She knows how to “read the trees” and to find patterns in the aspen art.

“Peggy’s done a great job documenting arborglyphs on the Pagosa Ranger District. The value of our history should not get lost,” states District Ranger Kevin Khung. I have attended one of Bergon’s popular aspen art walking tours “Look Who’s Talking: Arborglyphs” at Buckles Lake Trail #688 several miles east of Highway 84, which runs from Pagosa Springs to Chama, New Mexico.

We saw a 500-year-old Spanish style of Christian crosses carved by Merejil Valdez, and Celtic knots, boxes, and stars etched by Leandro Cruz. Eturo Sanchez drew grouse and Solomon Trujillo perfected handlebar mustaches.

When Bergon began in 1977, locals thought she was a bit daft. Who cared what messages sheepherders left on trees? She was told, “That’s not important. That’s just sheepherder graffiti,” but now her critics realize she’s sharing a historic and cultural treasure.

Her two-and-a-half hour interpretive walks, once in the summer and once in the fall on a three-mile loop, are in their thirteenth year. The tours fill up with locals and visitors to Pagosa Springs who delight in following Bergon as she shows off the names, designs, and portraits of her favorite carvers like Pantelon & Pablo Casados, Solomon Trujillo, and Benigro Gallegos. “Arborglyphs captivated me from the beginning. I’ve always looked at these as folk art. They have become an important historical aspect of the forest and have a specific story to tell,” she relates.

After decades of following sheep trails and stock driveways, Bergon can recognize herders’ carvings from yards away because of their distinctive writing style, caricatures, or artistic flourishes like Solomon Trujillo’s smiling facial profiles always with large, glittering eyelashes, especially on men. How ironic! Macho Hispanic men with truly magnificent waxed and upturned mustachios, and yet with elaborate, elongated, feminine eyelashes. “This is a hobby with a purpose,” she laughs and then says, “The greater picture here is documenting Western history, the untold story of sheepherders compared to the more famous and popular cowboys.”

As early as 1893, Archuleta County, Colorado annually shipped 300,000 pounds of wool on the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad in addition to thousands of *borregas* or sheep. Families that ran woolies had names like Candelaria, Gallegos, Rodriguez, Martinez, Quintana, Lopez, Trujillo, Archuleta, Pacheco, Garcia, Munoz, Lobato, Jacquez, Vigil and Ortiz. They hired herders from Lumberton, Los Ojos, Chama, Blanco, Coyote and Caniljon in northern New Mexico to live with the flocks from June to September.

Herders trailed sheep north into Colorado and left their names and dates carved on aspen trees in a beautiful curving penmanship that proved they had attended school through the 8th grade. The penmanship taught across America was Spencerian and the herders proudly demonstrated their literacy by carving the date they passed by, their names, and where they were from.

Bergon has found thousands of separate glyphs. “I saw that this was a resource that was disappearing,” she notes. She spent even more time searching for aspen groves that represent only 12% of the 590,000 acres of the Pagosa Ranger District.

Bergon has spoken to herders and their descendants who were “delighted that someone was showing an interest” in the carvings of their fathers and grandfathers. She began as a camp cook in the Weminuche Wilderness wondering about all the inscriptions and designs she found on aspen trees. Over the years she has learned the trails, patterns, and movements of sheep and she finds familiar names carved in the forest with dates from each decade beginning in the 1910s up to the 1960s. Those years were the “golden age” of aspen arborglyphs and sheepherding in general, which prospered during both world wars but then declined as Americans ate less lamb and synthetic fibers replaced wool.

Peggy Bergon searches for carved aspens on the San Juan National Forest in Archuleta County. Ruth Lambert, archaeologist for the San Juan Mountains Association, looks for glyphs on the Columbine Ranger District of the San Juan National Forest in La Plata County. “Aspen art is not just art images on a living canvas. The carvings are a reflection of a cultural way of life. They are artifacts of

a larger story that is grounded in those traditions. They provide a window into Hispano life,” Lambert explains. She leads glyph tours into Moonlick Park and Beaver Meadows along the Pine-Piedra Stock Driveway.

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As Peggy Bergon returned to Pagosa Springs after her arborglyph tour, my dog and I stayed on and spent our second night in a tent close to the old herder’s trail and dozens of arborglyphs. Just before afternoon thunderstorms hit on the day after the tour, we set out on our own to find more trees based on Bergon’s suggestions.

Wary of lightning storms but compelled to find additional glyphs, we hiked north beyond Buckles Lake and toward natural drainage off the steep South San Juan Wilderness, which rose above us to the east. Trails went in several directions, but I thought we should look near a shallow natural lake surrounded by aspens. As we hiked a steep ridge, I found what I was looking for.

Numerous trees had carvings and dates from the 1930s through the 1950s etched delicately with a pen knife or even a horseshoe nail. I had entered a private gallery with names, dates, and the hometowns of dozens of herders, as well as post-World War II “Kilroy was here” symbols (a man with a large nose and two hands peering over a fence). There were a variety of carved human faces and horses, and always the name and dates of the carvers in beautiful handwriting signifying: “I am with the sheep and I am here.”

One thin scratch on the smooth white bark had expanded such that when the tree grew, so did the inscription. These were master carvers and I marveled at the penmanship of a herder from Chama and his July 1941 date carving. Where was he when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor five months later? Did he keep herding? Did he return to the trees or did he join the Armed Services, change his life, and never herd again? For many shepherds in the mountains of Colorado and New Mexico, the summer of 1941 was their last peaceful time in high country meadows, knowing in the winter they would return to the villages where they had been born.

Carved aspen trees are living monuments. There are many stories to tell from Hispanic, Greek, and Basque herders. There is much to learn because, as Bergon laments, “[i]t’s devastating to come back and see a tree that’s fallen. The forest is different now because the sheep driveways are overgrown.”<sup>66</sup> On the Pagosa Ranger District, the sheep are gone. The herders are gone. Only their carvings remain.

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The Buckles Lake area is rich in arborglyphs because the U.S. Forest Service built sheep corrals there to count ewes before herders trailed the *borregas*

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66. Andrew Gulliford, *Art in The Aspens: 40 Years of Searching for Sheepherder Carvings*, DURANGO HERALD, Aug. 12, 2015, <https://durangoherald.com/articles/94049-art-in-the-aspens> [<https://perma.cc/H2QG-ML44>].

higher into the San Juans. Thousands of sheep came through the area from Rio Arriba County in New Mexico and the villages of Tres Piedras, Canijlon, Los Ojos, and Tierra Amarilla. Herders “followed the sheeps,” trailing them north across private ground, “but cattlemen liked for them to cross and eat the poisonous Larkspur that did not harm the sheep,” explains Antonio Manzanares, owner of Shepherd’s Lamb from Los Ojos, New Mexico.<sup>67</sup>

His grandfather owned one of the bands of 900–1,000 sheep that were trailed in the early summer on their way to the high country symbolized by the dramatic V-rock, a mountain with the natural shape of a V on a large granite face. Hispanic families had sheep “on top of V-rock.” Above it was excellent browse, grass, summer pastures with water, and bears eager for a lamb lunch.

Manzanares’ grandfather trapped a bear and decided to tease it for a while. Then he shot it to find the bear had pulled and chewed and strained until only one tendon remained holding it in the trap. Had his grandfather teased the bruin just a little more, “I probably wouldn’t be here,” says Antonio with a laugh as we sit in the office of the New Mexico co-operative Tierra Wools, an organization established by *Pastores de Valle*. “There was more sheep shipped here in the fall from Chama, New Mexico on the railroad than from almost anywhere else. In the fall herders raced their flocks out of the forest and down to the railyards because there just weren’t enough holding pens and they wanted to get their lambs on boxcars and off to market.”

The sheep wintered in the desert and sagebrush country of Chaco Canyon, lambled in the spring near Los Ojos, and summered in the high San Juans. Manzanares’ stories include a tale of his grandfather breaking a leg after being kicked by a mule, and once coming home covered with so many lice that he was “lousy,” and not permitted into the family house.

Etched in the memory of many families, though the date is obscure, is the year of the big snow—*el Año de la Nevada*—in which thousands of sheep died smothered under four or more feet of wet snow, probably in the winter of 1932. Dozens of sheep sharecroppers or *partidarios* lost everything and went deeper into debt with the mercantile stores that had advanced them groceries and supplies. It was those boys, men, uncles, brothers, and cousins who had carved their names and their village names on so many aspen trees near Buckles Lake.<sup>68</sup>

Though Manzanares’ grandfather owned a flock, his father did not. So when Antonio went into the sheep business, “I learned from the sheep. They taught me what I needed to know about running sheep in the mountains, and the old experienced herders I hired like Martin Romero from Los Brazos and Elandro Chavez from Los Ojos taught me how to pack mules, how and when to move camp, where to set up camp, and what plants sheep prefer. I know now that when a herder says it is time to move camp it is time right now. The sheep have eaten the

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67. Interview with Antonio Manzanares, Owner, Shepherd’s Lamb, LLC (Aug. 2, 2016).

68. *Id.* In his interview, Antonio Manzanares stated that the Bond Mercantile in Espanola, New Mexico had numerous *partidarios* and that he had once seen the list which was two pages long, single-spaced.

browse. Sheep are always looking for fresh food. They want to move, and the herder knows.”<sup>69</sup>

After centuries of sheep grazing on public land in New Mexico, there are now only two families that graze on national forests north of Interstate 40. Manzanares is one of them, he told me. The Hispanic herding tradition of moving sheep and men from Northern New Mexico into Southern Colorado is gone, and few flocks graze on public lands in New Mexico itself. An ancient tradition has ended. Sheepmen in Colorado, Wyoming, and Utah, who once hired young men from northern New Mexico, now seek herders on H2A visas from Peru, Chile, and even Nepal. Most of the family herding stories are forgotten. Only the carved aspen trees remain.

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Just before his death in 1948, Oxford University Press agreed to publish Aldo Leopold's edited essays as *A Sand County Almanac*. He was to be one of America's representatives at a United Nations sponsored conference on conservation in 1949. Instead, he died fighting a wildfire on a neighbor's property near his beloved retreat called “the Shack” in Wisconsin.<sup>70</sup> The world had lost a great naturalist and conservation leader, but his thoughts have lived on in *A Sand County Almanac*.

“The idea that all species properly make up a community, and that human beings have a moral obligation to expand their idea of community to include other species . . . and even natural processes, was first clearly articulated during the 1930s and 1940s by pioneer conservationist Aldo Leopold,” explains William R. Jordan III.<sup>71</sup> He adds that Leopold “has become one of the defining legends of environmentalism” based not only on Leopold's land ethic, which argued for the greatest distribution of natural species on a piece of land, but also because “he avoided the extremes of utilitarian conservationism and hands-off preservationism. . . . His writings are marked by a sense of moderation and an undogmatic respect for diverse cultural traditions combined with a passionate commitment to the well-being of the land community.”<sup>72</sup> Leopold's writing on diverse cultural traditions includes respect for sheepherding and sheepmen and trying to understand the need for ecological balance. He wrote about riding the White Mountains of Arizona and of mountain meadows that “were scrolled, curled, and crenulated with an infinity of bays and coves, points and stringers, peninsulas and parks, each one of which differed from all the rest. No man knew them all and a day's ride offered a gambler's chance of finding a new one.”<sup>73</sup>

He describes “the profusion of initials, dates, and cattle brands inscribed on the patient bark of aspens at every mountain camp site” and how the trees traced

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69. *Id.* Manzanares stated that after centuries of sheepherding in northern New Mexico, there are now only two Hispanic families, his included, that graze sheep on public lands north of Albuquerque.

70. LORBIECKI, *supra* note 3, at 178.

71. WILLIAM R. JORDAN, III, THE SUNFLOWER FOREST: ECOLOGICAL RESTORATION AND THE NEW COMMUNION WITH NATURE 30 (2003).

72. *Id.* at 30, 31.

73. LEOPOLD, *supra* note 2, at 134.

the rancher's evolution, his acquisition of stock, and even the birth and coming of age of his children. Leopold concludes, "[t]he old man was dead now; in his later years his heart had thrilled only to his bank account and to the tally of his flocks and herds, but the aspen revealed that in his youth he too had felt the glory of the mountain spring."<sup>74</sup>

In his lifetime, Aldo Leopold gave momentum to ideas and ideals that would transform the West and impact the West's sheep-owning families exactly like the Hispanic New Mexican family into which he had married. From his beginnings in New Mexico, from the bungalow he built for his bride at Tres Piedras lovingly named *Mia Casita*, Leopold branched out from the Carson National Forest to a global vision of the need for intact habitats and ecological balance. His career almost ended before it began.

He was admonishing sheep ranchers in the remote Jicarilla Ranger District when he got caught in a spring blizzard, developed dangerous symptoms, and nearly died. His wife's prominent New Mexican family once owned thousands of sheep. Yet trying to control sheep and overgrazing almost cost Leopold his life. The lessons he learned in New Mexico, some of them carved on aspen trees, stayed with him.

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Rain was coming. My old Labrador sensed it, and at twelve years old, he is terrified of thunder. I wanted to keep looking for glyphs south of Pagosa Springs at Buckles Lake, but I knew it was time to turn back. I had found a small carving of a Catholic priest on an aspen tree but not much else. As the mist around me became slow, quiet drops of rain, I realized I was deeper into the forest than I expected. I thought I knew the way back to camp and my tent, but I could not be sure because in the sunshine of the early afternoon, I had zigzagged from aspen tree to aspen tree and not paid much attention to where I was going or where I had been.

Feeling a little nervous, I set down my pack, carefully wrapped up my camera, and retrieved my rain gear. Walking forward, I was not quite sure of what direction to take as thunder moved closer, booming towards me from the northwest.

Hiking in groves of ponderosa pine and scattered clumps of aspen I was not yet wet, but not sure either of the route to take. In the overcast and rain, it was definitely time to turn around and so I made a slow arc, taking one last look at the aspens, their bright white bark now muted and light gray from rain. I saw a solitary carving. Nothing around it. Just a very simple horse, but exquisitely done as if carved in one or two master strokes.

What did I have to fear? I was alone on a ridge, but a solo herder had preceded me decades before. The aspen carving calmed me down, eased my anxiety, let me know subtly, succinctly, that someone else had been there. He had left his sign, a masterpiece. Elated, I hauled out my camera for a few shots. Then my dog and I turned toward our tent, sure of our direction, moving quickly through the wet grass, thunder receding behind us.

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74. *Id.* at 135.

