

Chandler

Valley family continues sheep herding tradition

by **William Hermann** - Apr. 29, 2010 12:00 AM
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A blue heron rose in flighty alarm from the rushing surface of the Salt River, flapped about 100 feet into the cool early-morning air and looked down at Blue Point Bridge to see what all the bleating was about.

Ranchers drive sheep out of Valley

The noise came from 1,600 sheep that were crossing the bridge about 30 miles east of Phoenix on Tuesday.

The next day, another 1,600 would cross, marking the beginning of a six-week, 220-mile trek that's been an annual rite of spring in Arizona for more than a century.

"We may not see this much longer; that's why so many of our family come out here at 5 or 6 a.m., just to witness an important part of what made this state," said Carol Dobson, 72, who with husband Dwayne Dobson, 72, owns Sheep Springs Sheep Co., based in Chandler.

The Dobson family has been in Arizona since the 1880s, and Dwayne's grandfather started the sheep company in 1929.

Dwayne could not be at the trailhead because of a business meeting, but in a telephone interview he said that the days of trail drives "are largely behind us."

"So much Valley land that was agricultural has gone out of production and has houses on it that many sheep companies are gone," he said. "We use the Heber-Reno Sheep Trail Driveway that was established in 1916. Years ago, eight outfits drove 12 bands of 2,000 sheep each on it. Now we're the only ones using the driveway."

Dobson said that most sheep companies that take herds to the cool country in the spring use trucks.

"Of course it's more efficient," he said. "We just like sticking with the drive."

On the trail this week, the Dobsons' son-in-law, Mark Pedersen, worked with hired shepherds to get the flocks moving toward Greer, in the White Mountains, of eastern Arizona, to spend the summer in cooler climes.

Last week, the flocks were driven from company pens near Florence, and they spent Monday night in the desert around the bridge.

"When they cross the river here, they follow a trail at the base of the cliffs above the river, cut through a canyon and make their way over to Highway 87," Pedersen said. "From there, they follow the trail to the northeast and they cover about 6 miles a day."

Diercio Contreras, 30, is one of several men the company hires from a Peruvian business that specializes in experienced shepherds.

These are men who can control a large flock, doctor them on the trail and, along with the sheep dogs that are a constant presence, protect them from predators.

"It is a long drive, but it's what I do, and I enjoy it very much," Contreras said as he put a pack frame on the back of a burro and then hung battered five-gallon wooden water barrels on it. "I've done this since I was very young, and it is a good living. And I like this country in Arizona."

Shepherding has been an Arizona industry since the 1870s, and early on, it was found that the animals were happier and healthier in warm areas like the Valley in winter months and in cooler climes in the summer.

So a tradition began of moving herds from the Valley in the spring up onto Mogollon Rim or White Mountains pastures.

"We used to shear the sheep twice a year," Pedersen said. "But now that longer wool is selling better, we do it once a year. When they get up north, we'll shear them. We also breed them up there."

Aside from a small crowd of Dobsons watching the sheep crossing, there were others who had heard that on Tuesday and Wednesday the sheep would start on the old trail.

Cindy Shanks, 60, a retired Mesa schoolteacher, in recent years became so interested in the drives that she recently published a children's book:

Emily Walks the Sheep Trail.

"Most people in Arizona have no idea of the history of more than 100 years of sheep drives from the Valley to the mountains in the spring, then back again in the fall," Shanks said.

Babs Buck, 73, of Apache Junction, clad in canvas pants and shirt, a big, floppy hat and boots, couldn't seem to stop smiling as she watched the sheep move in a long fluid white line from the bridge area and along the trail above the river.

"I saw the sheep once in Greer and learned about the drive," Buck said. "Now I'm just loving witnessing this. It's so important and so beautiful. It's an important part of history."

Carol Dobson watched the sheep move along the trail and smiled, too. But she also shook her head a little sadly.

"I hope this goes on for some years, but I don't know," she said.

"We lose money on the sheep now, but Dwayne doesn't want it to end, and none of us do. That's why we're here to watch. Our son Chris is here with his wife, Jenny, and their two little ones, my daughter Dawn is here, my son-in-law Mark, just a bunch of us."

Then Carol laughed.

"I was whining about getting up so early," she said, "but when you get here it's so beautiful. This is just a treasure."