

*Spring has sprung
The grass has riz
Lambs are out
All earth's a-fizz.*

My apologies to Burma Shave, but this time of year, when the hills are green and little lambs run behind their mothers in the field, brings energy to my life. Several days ago, I was privileged to see a set of triplet lambs at Carole and Mike Murray's house. Ewes often have twin lambs, but rarely triplets. They were so tiny and dear—they had been born just that morning.

Sheep first came into the Livermore Valley with the Spanish missions in the late 1700s. Two types of sheep were raised, one for mutton and the other for wool. Coarse cloth for blankets and serapes, similar to linsey-woolsey, was woven on hand looms. The knee-length serape was an important article of clothing for the Californios. Elam Brown visited the Amador compound in the Dublin area in 1847 and described a long row of small adobe buildings used for spinning, weaving, harness making, and other crafts. By 1841 Robert Livermore had roughly 6,000 sheep, which, like his cattle, were allowed to graze on open range. In the 1850s large numbers of sheep were brought from New Mexico to supply mutton for the gold miners, and during the Civil War heavy demands for wool created an even stronger market. Gradually, the quality of wool production improved.

Experienced sheepmen emigrated from Ireland to work in the hills east of Livermore—the Callaghan brothers, Patrick Connolly, the Moys, Michael and John Mulqueeney, John McGlinchey, James G. Kelly, John Elliot. In 1868 Anna Young lived in Coral Hollow near the entrance to the San Joaquin Valley. In her autobiography, she said. "It was sheep range, and the way most of the herders lived was terrible. [My neighbor]

Do You Remember?



By Anne Homan
Livermore City Historian

Sheep Raising

and I used to go out to help one poor woman with a houseful of children. We finally taught her to make bread, which she hoarded as if it were very precious. They lived on mutton and beans and potatoes. The house was surrounded with sheep, and the lambs shared the one-room house with the babies. Do you wonder that I hate sheep?"

By 1869 California had more than 2.9 million sheep, the earlier Spanish ones replaced by American breeds driven overland to California as were the American varieties of cattle. The major sheep raisers listed in the 1870 U.S. agricultural census in Murray Township were Peter Murray, William Knox, and Greene Patterson. In the 1880 census George C. Stanley out on North Livermore Avenue raised 3,000 sheep and had a spring clip of 2,300 fleeces weighing 18,400 pounds. Up in the Altamont hills Simon Zimmerman had a flock of 1,000 with a 5,600-pound wool clip. The Callaghans were the other major sheep raisers in the valley, with 4,700 sheep on land out in Corral Hollow bringing in a 27,800 pound spring wool clip.

Supporting so many flocks on the free range hills year-round became impossible. Gradually, the sheepmen learned to combine the hills and the lowland stubble fields for their sheep range. The hills surrounding Corral Hollow, Midway, and Patterson Pass were used as a lambing range, and the ewes were moved up there from the stubble fields in the San Joaquin Valley in December. In the late summer after harvest season,

they were herded back down. In August 1913, Peter Moy and Peter Connolly purchased 2,000 merino ewes and drove them to the beet fields near Woodland, where the men had pasture under lease. Stubble fields in the Dublin/Pleasanton area were also used. Livermore's First Street must have been a sea of sheep in August 1909 when Patrick Connolly and his men herded a flock of 1,200 two-year-old merino ewes through town on the way from Dublin to Tesla. In the same week James G. Kelly bought a "bunch" of lambs at Clifton Court, which he planned to fatten on Pleasanton beet field stubble.

Gangs of shearers went from ranch to ranch in the hills in the late spring and again in the fall. The fleeces, each rolled in a ball and tied with twine, were stuffed in burlap wool sacks measuring three by eight feet. When filled and tamped down, the sacks were so heavy that they required two men to lift one. At first, the sheep

owners had to transport the wool to market, but later, buyers came to the ranches to bid for the wool clip. Sheep raising in California peaked in the 1930s. Today, no one raises large herds of sheep for wool in Alameda County. As long ago as 1927, an article appeared in the *Herald* headlined, "Lamb Displaces Wool As Profit Maker for Sheepmen." A few sheep are still raised locally in small flocks for their lambs. At the present time, the favorite breed is the Suffolk.

Occasionally, a large flock can be seen on the hills of Los Vaqueros Reservoir mowing down the tall grass to decrease fire danger. In 2004 the Contra Costa Water District hired shepherds and two flocks of 1,000 sheep. Several years later, a neighbor phoned and asked us to look out our eastern door. The sheep had gotten through the district fence and many of them were settling in our yard for the night. Bob Doyle of the East Bay Regional Park District said that the district had learned to encourage the shepherds to take the sheep through the hills fairly quickly. The sheep first graze on the slightly sweeter wild oats rather than the native bunch grasses. Thus, the sheep grazing is helping to restore the native grasses.

(Readers can reach me at am50homan@yahoo.com.)

Livermore Dance

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