

Operation Hay Lift: The Winter of 1949

James A. Young

Much has been written about the winter of 1887 on the Northern Great Plains and the winter of 1889 west of the Rocky Mountains. These severe climatic events greatly influenced the livestock industry on the western range. The passage of time since these severe winters has dimmed the harsh realities of such climatic extremes. In the minds of many range managers such winters could not possibly happen again.



Isolated eastern Nevada ranch headquarters.

The winters of 1949 and 1952 did much to revive the memories of the late 19th century winter disasters among sheep and cattlemen on the western range. Although the winters of 1949 and 1952 were not of the caliber of the winter extremes of 1887 or 1889, they too had severe impacts on the range livestock industry.

One of the worst aspects of the hard winters of the 19th century on the western range was the helplessness of stockmen to do anything to alleviate the sufferings of their animals. Many cowboys told stories of being snowbound in a cabin while starving cows lined the corral fences. However, in 1949 in the post World War II era, availability of bulldozers, all-wheel drive trucks, and especially cargo airplanes provided a new technology to ranchers and range managers and allowed them to strike back against the forces of nature and to try and save their livestock.

Winter of 1949

The great passenger train streamliners were still compet-

ing for transcontinental passengers during the winter of 1949. A measure of the severity of the weather was provided by the impact of storms on the progress of the streamliners. In mid-January, 1949, the major United States newspapers headlined that the streamliner, City of San Francisco, was stuck in Kimball, Nebr., as the result of blizzards. The same papers carried smaller type stories on how bulldozers were being used to reach isolated ranches in Nebraska and Wyoming. *Life Magazine* featured a brief article on the plight of



Traffic jam on U.S. Highway 50 near White Horse Pass. Army trucks loaded with hay. Lead truck became stuck and it took 8 hours to clear convoy. Out of Ely headed toward Sunnyside.

range sheep operations in the Great Basin of Utah and Nevada.

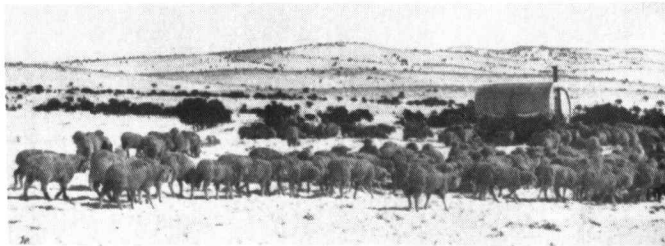
The Nevada Scene—Winter 1949

December 1948 had been generally cold with average temperatures 10 to 20°F colder than normal. Then a major snowstorm hit northern Nevada in early December and a second major snowstorm developed in early January 1949 with maximum precipitation from southeastern Nevada northward through Utah, Wyoming, and extending into Nebraska.

This heavy snowfall in southeastern Nevada and southwestern Utah was very unusual. Desert range areas where large bands of sheep were historically wintered on predominantly salt desert shrub ranges were suddenly heavily snow-covered. Other parts of the Intermountain area such as eastern Oregon and northern Elko County, Nev., were cold and snowy that winter as well, but did not have the extreme snowfall that occurred in White Pine County in eastern Nevada. Even normally balmy Las Vegas, Nev., experienced snowfall of up to 6 inches. A hotel publicist suggested replacing the city's "Fun in the Sun" slogan with "Blush in the Slush."

The author is range scientist, USDA, Agricultural Research Service, 920 Valley Road, Reno, Nev., 89512 in cooperation with the Univ. of Nevada, Reno.

The extreme snowfall on the desert ranges was especially significant because the ranchers were dependent on winter grazing and did not have resources of hay. Most of the snowfall was dry and powdery with a relatively low moisture content. Despite the low moisture content, however, by the end of the season, weather reporting stations in the area reported precipitation of 200 to 600% above the average precipitation. The unusual dryness of the snow lent itself to drifting, and



Desert sheep camp.

ground blizzards that were created by north winds produced 4- to 8-foot drifts that blocked roads. Not only was there heavy snow, but temperatures were below zero in Ely, Nev. A temperature of -31°F was recorded on January 8th. This -31°F temperature was repeated again on the 14th. Such bitter cold meant that range livestock were expending a lot of energy just staying alive.

Beltran Paris

Some of the best first person accounts of the 1949 storms are provided by the distinguished Basque sheepman Beltran Paris.¹ When the storm started, the Paris Family had several bands of sheep on Nevada desert ranges. A range sheep band usually consisted of 1,000 ewes. Beltran's son, Bert, was snowbound at the Uhalde Ranch at Little Cherry Creek,



Snowed-in sheep camp.

Nev. Gracian and Alfred Uhalde and Bert tried to ride horseback for help. They did have a long-legged mare that could break trail through the drifts so they followed her lead.

Because of the drifted snow, the boys could not see washes and gullies, but the mare would plunge in and then, instead of panicking and fighting, she would just feel her way through. The blowing wind and the ground blizzard made it impossible to see the hills. The boys were worried and scared. The first day they made 26 miles before they reached a sheep camp. The next day they started out hoping to make the town of Hiko. The great desert valleys of eastern Nevada might as well have been on the moon. The cutting north wind and drifting snow obscured all landmarks. As the boys rode with the wind, they noticed a single black speck struggling toward them through the snow across the desert flats. When they got closer, they realized it was a man on horseback. It was 70-year-old John Uhalde riding by himself, trying to save the sheep. He had his face buried in the turned up collar of his sheepskin coat, and Gracian had to intercept the old man, or they would have passed by each other. Old John explained that the horse knew where camp was, so there was no need for both of them to face the wind!

The four sheepmen eventually made it to Hiko and organized truck convoys with supplies of hay. The state supplied snowplows and ranchers organized bulldozers to try and force their way through the worst passes.

Local government officials were well aware of the sheepman's plight. County and state highway crews plowed roads only to have them drifted full in a couple of hours leaving the plow crews stranded. Plow operators worked until they passed out from fatigue. One night Beltran Paris cooked mutton stew for snowplow and truck drivers who had not eaten for two days. After stew and shepherd bread, the weary crews unrolled their bedrolls under a herder's wagon and woke up in the morning to 18 inches of new snow. They were losing the battle.

Out on the range, conditions were really desperate. One of Beltran Paris' bands of sheep was being cared for by a herder named Big John who had a boy for a helper. The herder had a truck, but it bogged down in a drift the first day of the storm. Forty days passed before the truck was recovered. The boy was afraid he and the herder would starve despite an almost unlimited supply of fresh frozen mutton. By the 10th day of the storm, Big John could see the sheep were ready to die, because they were starting to eat each others wool. The ewes were standing on little islands of trampled snow with their eyes frozen shut. Big John started to cry because he knew the sheep would be dead the next day.

Beltran Paris helped to organize the ranchers, and they went to Ely, Nev. to, as Beltran put it, get a lawyer fellow to write the government.

The first relief committee formed was headed by George Swallow, Executive Secretary of the United Stockmen's Association and the committee included White Pine County ranchers Bert Robison, Lloyd Sorenson, and Chet Oxborow. These individuals probably purchased and sold at cost to their neighbors as much hay as was later purchased by the state of Nevada.

Government to the Rescue

The Nevada State government was slow to appreciate the seriousness of the situation. The state legislature was in

¹William A. Douglas. 1979. *Beltran, Basque Sheepman of the American West*. All range managers interested in the desert range sheep industry should read this book.

session, but at first it refused to appropriate funds to save the livestock. A special committee flew to Ely and reported back that 25% of all the range livestock were probably already lost, and that the demand for hay exceeded supply by at least four times.

On a national level, President Truman made \$300,000 available for relief to stockmen. Most importantly, this aid was partially in the form of cargo airplanes to haul hay.

Flying Boxcars

At 10-minute intervals on January 24, 1949, C-82 "flying boxcars" of the U.S. Army Air Corps, Transportation Command lifted off McClellan Field near Sacramento, Calif. The



Loading C-82 "flying box cars" at Fallon, Nev.

planes had to fight clouds and winds to clear the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Their first stop was at the irrigated farming center of Fallon, Nev., where service club members and other volunteers wrestled bales of hay into the cargo planes.

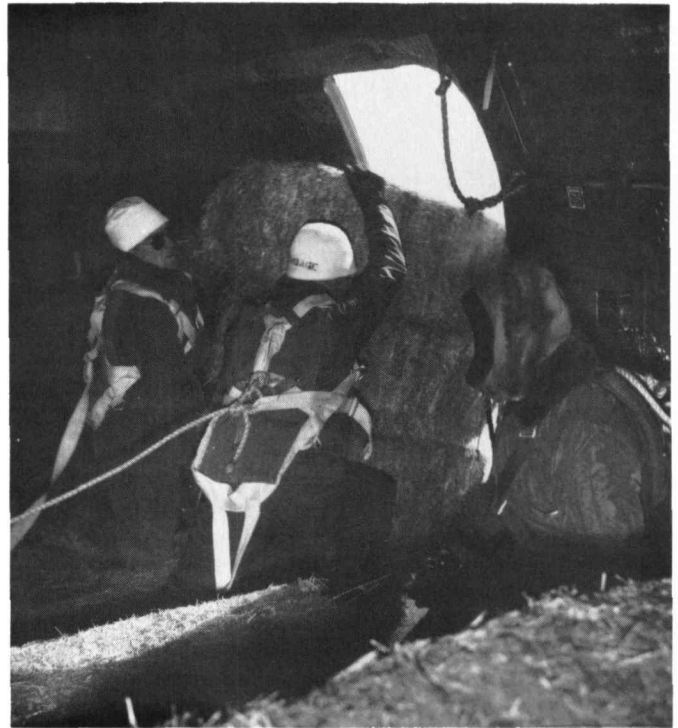
At Ely, Nev., ground crews worked desperately to clear runways and taxiways. The original idea was to fly hay into the area and to use army trucks to distribute it. The Air Force pilots suggested dropping the hay directly to the snow-stranded animals.

Operation Hay Lift

Beltran Paris was at the Ely airport when the C-82's arrived. An Air Corps man helped him into the plane and strapped the sheepman into the co-pilot's seat. It was the first time Beltran had ever flown. At first, he was lost, but his sense of direction, honed by years of riding the desert, soon returned, and he directed the pilot to his winter range.

As the pilot dropped the nose of the big plane for the first hay bombing run, Beltran was sure the wing would hit the mountain and the bales would hit and kill the sheep, but he was too scared to say anything. Each plane in the four-plane flight dropped 4 bales per pass. With perfect timing, the bales hit and broke at the edge of the huddled sheep. As the airplane circled for another run, Beltran could see a herder struggling through the snow. It was Big John! Finally, on the 11th day of the hay lift Big John could stop crying.

Obtaining and delivering hay to Ely soon became a problem. The major highway across central Nevada, the Lincoln Highway (U.S. 50) was often closed by drifting snow. A special train loaded with hay was made up in Fallon and sent all the way around the Southern Pacific tracks to make connections with the Nevada Northern Railroad which serviced



Kicking baled hay out the door.

the copper mines and smelters in eastern Nevada. Hay was purchased in the irrigated valleys of southern California and hauled across the deserts of southeastern California and southern Nevada to Ely.

Operation hay lift was repeated many times across Nevada, Utah, and Wyoming. Congress boosted funding to \$750,000 and some 2 million cattle and sheep received hay from the air.

By early February 1949, a total of 27 C-82's from as far away as South Carolina were dropping hay in the Ely, Nev., area. The cargo planes eventually flew 325 sorties to deliver 1,400 tons of hay. The planes were in the air for a total of 54, 24-hour days. That was sufficient time for the planes to fly around the world eight times.

The severe weather continued into February. John Spencer of Reno was stranded in Chicago because the transcontinental streamliners were shut down by snow in Nebraska and Wyoming. He took a chance on the airlines only to make a very rough landing in Salt Lake City on February 10th. On the ground in Salt Lake City the pilot told the passengers the plane had been buffeted by 80 knot winds during the landing and they were snowbound. The next day, however, John continued to Reno and the low level flight in a DC-3 provided a spectacular view of snowbound desert landscapes.

The hay bombers became extremely accurate with the bales. The idea was to miss the stranded sheep or cattle, but

to drop the hay relatively close so the animals could struggle through the snow to the feed.

At an isolated range in Spring Valley, Nev., the hay lift was trying to drop bales into a corral, but unfortunately one bale went through the washhouse roof and demolished the rancher's wife new washing machine. On Pancake Flats, Nev., a bale meant for the 2,100 sheep of Tony Perez hit one of his pack burros, killing it instantly, before bouncing off to fatally injure a second burro. Wags among the air crews suggested that this was the only jackass bombing run in history.

The Long Struggle

Harry Galloway of the Nevada Department of Agriculture left Reno in late January to assist in the relief operations in eastern Nevada. He did not make it home until mid-March. It was a long struggle involving coordination of hay supplies, aircraft, trucks, and snowplows. The State of Nevada sold 3,600 tons of hay at cost to the ranchers during the emergency.

The Air Force considered the hay lift to be a great training mission under arctic conditions. Some of the pilots undoubtedly later flew down icy corridors and across the snow-bound ridges of Korea. Governor Vail Pittman later made the air crews honorary citizens of Nevada. George Swallow summed the result of the hay lift as follows: "Without the haylift, there would not be a livestock industry in this part of the country."

Truck Convoys

The hay lift was spectacular and made for interesting newspaper articles. Many of the stranded animals were kept alive with hay delivered by 6 by 6 National Guard trucks and from a nearby U.S. Army transportation unit.

Not every rancher in Nevada was happy with the hay lift. Some Elko County ranchers complained it was a waste of federal and state government money, because the desert livestock men were gambling without sufficient hay resources. To this criticism the desert ranchers replied that they had been winning the gamble since 1890. The Elko County ranchers again felt the wrath of winter 3 years later during the severe winter of 1952. Most Elko County ranchers, however, gladly accepted hay from similar hay lifts during that year.



Soil Conservation Service conservationist counting dead cattle after winter storms of January and February 1949.

Aftermath

The winter of 1949 was one of the contributing factors toward the eventual decline of the range-sheep industry. The actual death losses were hard to approximate but estimates ranged from 10 to 25% of all animals. Cattle drifted with the storm and many isolated carcasses were never found.

Legend suggests that the variable estimates of death losses were partially due to the large numbers of trespassing animals on the public ranges. After the death loss numbers exceeded those on grazing permits, it was difficult for some ranchers to claim a large percentage loss for the animals still remaining on the range.

A dinner was held in Ely to celebrate the end of the emergency. At the dinner one rancher reported that as he rode into town he did not have to go around livestock he met on the road, he simply drove under them they were so thin and long-legged. Many cows died from poisoning after being forced to consume greasewood or excessive amounts of sagebrush.

In historical perspective, we should view the winter of 1949 as a grim reminder of what can be expected under extreme conditions. The developers of winter grazing systems for sagebrush rangelands need to have this perspective. ●

