

Iberlin Brothers Fight Low Profits and Predators as Sheep Market Rises

Kenneth G. Slocum

Editor's Note: This is about Basques who work and play. It is a condensed version of an article that appeared in the April 14, 1978, issue of the *Wall Street Journal*. The original was written by Kenneth G. Slocum, staff reporter of the *Wall Street Journal*, and was condensed by John A. Hafterson, chairman of the SRM I&E Committee.

SHEEP RANCHER SIMON IBERLIN STANDS near a curiously shaped rock formation where the rugged Big Horn Mountains drop off into rolling brown hills and sagebrushed canyons. Sweeping a tanned hand across the treeless horizon, he says, "We Basques own everything for 50 miles. The sheep has been good to us and is getting better."

Mr. Iberlin's optimistic observation points up both a current economic trend and a colorful chapter of Western history. The economic lot of sheepmen is considerably improved, although sheep raisers still are plagued with predators, labor scarcity, and low profit margins. But sheep ranching in Johnson County in northern Wyoming is more than just an ailing industry on the mend. It represents survival of a centuries-old way of life for one of America's least-known groups of immigrants, the Basques. And it presents an unusual melding of untouched European tradition with Western savvy and Yankee entrepreneurship.

Sheepmen generally have ample cause for optimism. Freshly shorn wool is bringing 72 cents a pound up from 19 cents a pound, 7 years ago, and, according to government sources, could reach a record 80 cents to 85 cents in the next few years. Because of the diminished supplies, choice slaughter lambs on the San Angelo, Texas, market sell for about \$72 a hundred weight today, up from \$56 three months ago and \$24 in 1971.

"Pricewise, we're in the best shape in 20 years," says William Bonde, president of the National Woolgrowers Association. "And there's a real scramble for breeding stock as people move back into the sheep business." Six-year-old breeder ewes, which 2 years ago would have brought \$18 each, went recently for more than \$50 each.

In no place is there more happiness over the sharp economic upturn than in Johnson County. And none are happier than Simon Iberlin, 55, and his brother John, 48, whose ranch typifies the improvement of the industry as well as the painful problems still facing all U.S. sheepmen.

Simon and John Iberlin grew up on a sheep ranch. Their father emigrated in 1905 from the Basque Country in the Pyrenees, the mountainous area straddling the border of Spain and France. At the age of 27, he walked off the boat in New York with only his clothes and railroad fare to Wyoming. After 10 years, he had enough money to buy a few sheep and some equipment. When he died 25 years ago, he left his wife and children 10,000 acres of land and 4,000 sheep.

Simon and John Iberlin picked up the mantle and, through dawn-to-dark work and frugal habits, they expanded the ranching operation to include 7,000 sheep, 500 head of cattle and

30,000 acres of deeded land. They lease another 20,000 areas. Their property all told is worth about \$2.5 million.

AND YET THE IBERLINS AREN'T WEALTHY MEN. Even in their best year, 1972, they netted only \$46,600, or less than a 2% return on their investment. In 1976, the sheep operation showed a net profit of \$39,000. Even these small profits would have been lower without a federal program of incentives for sheep ranchers. Under the complex program each rancher is paid a certain percentage of what he receives for his wool. Last year Washington paid ranchers only 9%, but recently the payments were increased.

The brothers are regarded locally as topnotch sheep ranchers and shrewd businessmen. Indeed, while most U.S. sheep ranchers have had year after years of losses, the Iberlins can count on one hand the years that they have lost money since they went into partnership some 25 years ago.

Simon Iberlin explains their success simply, "We do everything ourselves and do without." In 1963, for instance, when all the ranchers here used sheepherders to handle and guard their sheep herds, the Iberlin brothers were the first in the county to switch to the concept of fenced pastures. Most county sheep ranchers have since switched to fencing because of the scarcity and rising wage costs of herders. The Iberlin's foresight resulted in considerable financial savings.

Also, unlike most U.S. sheep ranchers, the Iberlins use no permanent outside labor. The peak work periods come in the spring and the fall. At these times, the two brothers and John Iberlin's three grown sons are joined by Simon Iberlin's wife, Dollie, and John Iberlin's wife, Maggie.

The two brothers want to make sure that their ranch remains an Iberlin family business. Because Simon Iberlin's children aren't interested in ranching, he is in the process of selling his share of the sheep and equipment, but not the land, to John Iberlin's three sons.

BUT WHOEVER SUCCEEDS THE TWO BROTHERS will have to deal with a perennial threat to Western sheep ranchers: coyotes. The fences haven't helped the problem. One family of coyotes that moved in last spring killed 200 lambs before the Iberlins detected it. "Our two biggest enemies are the coyote and the federal government, and there isn't much we can do about the government," says one sheep rancher.

Indeed, a large part of successful sheep ranching in Wyoming is dependent on doing something about the coyote. Thus Simon Iberlin became chairman of the Johnson County Predator Control Board, which runs one of the toughest, if not the toughest, predator control programs in Wyoming.

Using a \$50,000 annual budget, provided mostly by local sheep ranchers, the board has two full-time trappers, a part-time

pilot, and a \$20,000 Piper Super Cub bought specifically for coyote hunting.

The aircraft has more than justified itself already. In the past year, it has accounted for 285 coyote kills, while trappers, using steel traps, game calls, and rifles, have accounted for another 100.

But predators aren't sheep ranchers' only problem with nature. Like farmers and livestock men everywhere, the Iberlins are vulnerable to the weather. They're still recovering from the Easter weekend of 1973 when a heavy blizzard pushed by 100-mile-an-hour winds howled down across northern Wyoming.

When the storm abated, the scene was grim. Flocks of sheep had suffocated under several feet of snow. Many of these that were dug out alive were badly chilled and later died of pneumonia. When the snows melted and the carcasses were counted, the Iberlins had lost 2,500 ewes, 90 head of cattle and 140 calves.

With the severe loss in breeding stock, the sheep and cattle operation lost money in 1973, 1974, and 1975, recording a

battering \$33,000 deficit in the latest year. Even with the improved market outlook in 1977, which served the Iberlins well, they were hurt again by last spring's snows which killed 600 ewes and 30 rams.

But the hardships fail to dampen the Basques' irrefragable devotion to dancing, wine and song.

Once the work is done, the life style here becomes anything but Spartan and is marked by a penchant for marathon parties.

And there has been plenty of that around Johnson County since the Basques arrived at the turn of the century. The local Basques used to throw mountainside parties on a large openair concrete dance floor built into the side of the mountain. But people in Buffalo, Wyoming, county seat of Johnson County, today prefer smaller gatherings, such as neighborhood and block parties.

But it still takes little to motivate Basques to gather. The arrival of a newsman here on a recent Sunday triggered a Basque party the following night. ●

Grazing Outlook on Public Lands Managed by the Bureau of Land Management

Maxwell T. Lieurance

The following was presented by Maxwell T. Lieurance, Associate State Director, Bureau of Land Management, New Mexico at the annual meeting of the New Mexico Section of the Society for Range Management at Albuquerque, New Mexico on December 3, 1976.

In a word, the grazing outlook on public lands, managed by the Bureau of Land Management is good!

There are many in the livestock industry today who will disagree with me, but from where I sit, the picture for long-term stability of livestock grazing on public lands has never been better. With the intensity of interest in these lands being displayed today, it sometimes seems that there is a concentrated effort by environmental and conservation groups to eliminate domestic grazing, and there certainly are some who do feel this way. By and large, however, responsible representatives from these and other public land user groups recognize the multiple use considerations that have to be made, and we know that livestock grazing can be a very important tool in improving the quality of vegetative cover.

Let me explain why I say the outlook is good. In order to do this you have to take a historical look at what has happened to these lands, and what we started with. In the 50-year period following the turn of the century in 1800, the United States acquired 1.4

billion acres in the West by purchase or treaty. This land acquisition period ended with the purchase of Alaska in 1867, making a total of 1.8 billion acres. This was the original "public domain" and it covered three-fourths of the continental United States and all of Alaska. These lands were then used to "subsidize" the settlement of the West. Literally thousands of laws were passed to provide the transfer to private ownership. Land was cheap. In addition to the laws permitting individual ownership, of which the most memorable was the "Homestead Act," there were:

- grants to the railroads;
- grants to the builders of wagon roads and military roads;
- grants to the States as they were added to the Union;
- beginning with Yellowstone Park in 1872, the National Parks and Monuments were set aside;
- following the turn of the century in 1900, the National Forests began to be carved out of the public domain;
- then came the Wildlife Refuges;
- and on and on the "public domain dwindled."

Along with this movement came the tremendous build-up of domestic livestock on the open ranges of the West, which peaked out late in the century. Grazing was uncontrolled and much of the real damage to the range resource occurred then. The contemporary ranching industry as well as the Bureau of Land Management fell heir to what was left after everyone else got their "cut" of the public domain. Today, there remain about

Editor's Note: On June 4, 1978, Mr. Lieurance assumed responsibility for range management in the Washington, D.C. office of the Bureau of Land Management. Prior to his coming to New Mexico he engineered the Vale Rangeland Rehabilitation Program in Oregon—known as fine example of intensive management system.