

## Land, Water and People

### 150 Years of Grazing in the SLV

By Lisa Van Amburg

There is a long history of livestock grazing in the San Luis Valley. What are now public lands played an integral part in this history. Since the history is much too long for one article, there will be additional articles on livestock grazing throughout the winter. Stay tuned to learn more on how livestock grazing has changed the land, water, and the people.

The earliest known grazing of domestic livestock in the San Luis Valley was recorded by the Taos trader, Antoine Leroux. Antoine Leroux wrote, "Over 5,000 head of cattle were taken into the Valle de San Luis to winter in 1820." Since technically the San Luis Valley extends into northern New Mexico, it is not known if the cattle grazed in Colorado.

Early settlers during the 1850's to the 1870's generally were engaged in subsistence farming which included small numbers of sheep and goats. It was not until 1867, when John Lawrence settled near Saguache and started a sheep business, that livestock as an industry began to thrive in the Valley. He was soon followed by others including Sam Hoagland. During the late 1860's or early 1870's, Sam brought in 500 horses from California and, in 1869, the Baca Grant was leased for grazing a large number of cattle.

This time was marked by a "remarkable increase" in numbers of sheep and cattle. By 1873, it was reported by Officer E. F. Ruffner with the Army Corps of Engineers, that on the foothills from Del Norte to present day South Fork, "cattle run and thrive, unsheltered and unfed, summer and winter."

The La Garita stock drive (beginning at the bottom of La Garita canyon and following the La Garita divide to Snow Mesa then following the Continental Divide to West Uet Creek), most of which is on what is now public land, was at its peak use by the late 1880's and early 1890's. Over 100,000 sheep used the drive each spring and fall.

During this same time period, the Warshauer Land and Cattle Company grazed 56,000 sheep during the summer, on what is now known as the Conejos Peak Ranger District, as far west as Elwood Pass. They also grazed 4,000 head of cattle in the La Jara Creek, Jim Creek and Conejos Canyon areas, as well as the lower portion of the Cumbres range. Several other outfits were running between 15,000 and 20,000 cattle in the lower part of the valley on the west side.

In Saguache County, it was estimated that there were 36,532 head of sheep and 21,488 head of cattle grazing on surrounding lands during this same period of intense grazing.

The high numbers of unregulated cattle and sheep grazing throughout the upper Rio Grande certainly had an impact on the land. The intensity of the grazing began to alter the foothills and high country, and conflicts began to arise between the sheepmen and cattlemen as demand for forage became greater than the land could provide.

Eventually, many of the areas that were heavily grazed came under federal land management and began to recover. However, even today, over 100 years later, the

trained eye can see that areas remain where recovery is still occurring and areas that will remain changed for possibly another 100 years. More on that next time.

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