

# Bunchgrass Historian

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- **McGregor Ranch**
- **WPA Grazing History Story**

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## THE AUTHORS

Craig Holstine is employed by Archeological and Historical Services, Eastern Washington University, Cheney, Wa.

## COVER

Hay shed, McGregor ranch.

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Whitman County Historical Society  
P.O. Box 67  
Colfax, WA. 99111

#### Memberships and subscriptions

Gwenlee Riedel  
Membership Committee  
Whitman County Historical Society  
SW 220 Blaine  
Pullman, WA 99163

#### Articles for Publication:

Lawrence R. Stark, Editor

#### The Bunchgrass Historian

P.O. Box 2371 C.S.  
Pullman, WA. 99163

#### Current and Back Issues:

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#### The Bunchgrass Historian

SW 405 State Street  
Pullman, WA 99163

# McGregor Ranch

by Craig Holstine

for the National Register of Historic Places

*The following article is the last in a series taken from nominations to the National Register of Historic Places, all dealing with agriculture-related properties in Whitman County. Readers are advised that many of the structures discussed in these articles are located on private property. Those wishing to view these structures should treat them accordingly.*

— editor

Situated amidst grain fields about 5 miles southeast of the small town of Hooper, the McGregor Ranch consists of three clusters of farm buildings standing along two rural gravel roads. Two building groups at either end of the complex are focused around the residences of two of the four McGregor brothers who founded the ranch in the late nineteenth century. The other building assemblage is centered around the barn and is composed of grain and livestock feed storage facilities. Of the total 17 buildings, 12 appear to be at least 50 years old. The other 5 are of more recent construction.

The McGregor Ranch meets the registration requirements of the property type "Farmsteads" established in the Multiple Property Listing for Grain Growing in Eastern Washington. Both the structural and associative integrity of the majority of the buildings conveys a strong sense of the property's historic character. Despite the presence of modern structures, the farmstead retains its essential character-defining elements, most particularly in the two residences, the barn, and bunkhouses. In addition, the McGregor Ranch possess documented historical significance within the context of grain growing in eastern Washington.

Among the best preserved structures at the ranch is the Peter McGregor house along the Thomas Flat Road at the western edge of the complex. Spindework on the recessed half-facade front porch and decorative bargeboards under double-hung wood sash windows distinguish this cross-gable vernacular frame structure. Original shiplap siding and wood shingles under the gables further strengthen its historic appearance. Subtle decorative elements such as corner boards and molding under the gables and roof eaves help articulate the simple lines of the otherwise unadorned, 1 ½-story residence. The foundation is stone and mortar, composition shingles cover the roof, and an original brick chimney protrudes from the center of the roof. There is a shed-roofed extension on the rear which appears original. Overall the house measures ca. 40 X 23 feet.

A gabled, covered walkway connects the rear of the house with the adjacent automobile garage, which is also of shiplap construction. Behind the house is a two-story structure comprised of a concrete root cellar on its lower level and a frame bunkhouse above of shiplap and shingle construction matching that of the house. Entry to the root cellar is via a ground-level door facing the house. A wooden stairway leads to the only door at the rear of the single-room bunkhouse, which has original double-hung sash windows. The structure measures ca. 13 feet square, stands ca. 15 feet high to the top of the bunkhouse gable, and appears to be unaltered. About 80 feet to the east outside the fence that encloses the yard, garden, and main buildings is a gabled chicken house also of shiplap construction. All structures appear to date from the turn of the century.

Approximately 500 meters (1650 feet) to the southwest at the opposite edge of the ranch is the Archie McGregor house. Built about the same time (1901), the structure retains some of its historic appearance despite numerous alterations. Perhaps most importantly, the house retains its original shiplap siding and decorative shingles under the gables, as well as its original mass and configuration. The most significant alterations include: new windows; conversion of gable dormers to shed-roof dormers; removal of spindlework on the roofline and front porch; replacement of the bannister on the front porch; and clipped gables replacing the original pointed gables and sunburst decorations. The house has been remodeled on its interior.

At the rear of the house off the shed-roofed back porch, an enclosed causeway, with shiplap siding matching the house and bunkhouse, has been installed connecting the house with the bunkhouse. Similar to the root cellar/bunkhouse behind the Peter McGregor house, this structure is also frame and gabled on its upper level above a high (ca. 6 feet) foundation. Like the other structure, the lower level housed a root cellar. Unlike the Peter McGregor structure, however, the building behind Archie's house has a stone foundation and is built into the hillside, with the door at the rear of the bunkhouse opening to ground level on the raised hillside. The uncoursed native basalt stone foundation continues into a retaining wall extending several feet to the west, creating an upper terraced lawn.

East of the Archie McGregor house is a metal-sided automobile garage of recent construction. To the east of the garage is a bunkhouse where some of the harvest crews were lodged. Measuring about 15 X 65 feet, the building has shiplap siding like the nearby house and smaller bunkhouse. Its gable roof is covered with composition shingles, as are the two awnings over the front entrances near opposite ends of the facade. The structure's fenestration pattern is unchanged, with double-hung wood sash windows throughout. There is a small gabled extension with an entryway on the rear of the bunkhouse. Although not architecturally significant, the building is one of the largest and best preserved bunkhouses in the Palouse, and



*Peter McGregor house*

as such bears significance as a contributing structure on the McGregor Ranch.

Standing barely 6 feet east of the bunkhouse is a large shiplap building with a high, steeply-pitched gable roof. Known as the “Tack Building”, it is a harness shop complete with old saddles, bridles, and the sewing machine used for repairing equipment associated with the many draft animals once required on the ranch. The structure has double-hung wood sash windows and decorative crowns. It stands on a crude stone foundation and measures about 15 X 27 feet. Like the nearby bunkhouse, the harness shop is a contributing structure at the ranch.

Immediately to the east is another non-contributing structure: it is a pole barn (#1 on the sketch map) of modern construction consisting of corrugated metal siding supported by a wood pole and lumber frame. Open on its eastern side, the building serves as a parking shelter for farm machinery. It is a large structure, measuring 35 X 150 feet. A few feet to the east is another pole barn (#2) measuring 35 X 100 feet. It is of similar age and construction, but is a higher building with a regular (centered) gable roof. Entry to the structure is via large, full-height sliding doors at either end. The barn houses combines and other farm vehicles and implements.

To the north is a modern machine shop of concrete block construction. Measuring 35 X 70 feet, the shop is also a non-contributing structure on the ranch. Northwest of the shop is a small frame shed used for storage, measuring 20 X 20 feet. Immediately northeast of the shop is a small frame garage which, like the shed, has a gabled corrugated metal roof.



*Archie McGregor house*

Standing about 300 feet north of the garage is a stock barn that appears to be of considerable antiquity. It is open on two sides, with feed bins and stalls in the sheltered, open-sided areas. Large sliding wooden doors are on the north end of the barn, which stands on a concrete pier foundation and has a gable roof covered with composition shingles. Livestock are fed and sheltered in part of the structure, with the remainder used for storage of apparently unused farm equipment. The barn measures 40 X 60 feet.

North of the barn across Thomas Flat Road stand a granary and two hay sheds. The hay sheds are of identical construction and dimension, built of sawn lumber atop concrete pier foundations. They measure 15 X 100 feet, are completely open on the ground story, and are enclosed with board siding on the upper level. There are no floors in the structures either at ground or upper levels. Composition shingles cover the shed roofs.

The granary appears to be one of the oldest structures on the ranch. It was, and still is, used for storing sacked seed grains. Measuring 18 X 40 feet, the building is of tongue-in-groove frame construction atop a stone and mortar/post and pier foundation. Its gable-on-hip roof is covered in corrugated metal. There is a small wooden door on the north gable above the hip. The structure has a sturdy wooden floor. Sliding wooden doors enter on three sides.

Although there are more non-contributing (9) than contributing (8) buildings on the property, most of those non-contributing elements are insignificant structures, with the possible exception of the hay sheds. Those structures are functionally important, though not architecturally noteworthy. Of the non-contributing buildings, only the two pole barns and cement-block machine shop are large enough to be intrusive. Yet the extensive scale of the McGregor Ranch tends to overwhelm even the larger



*Bunkhouse and  
Root Cellar*

modern structures, as if reflecting the overall immensity of the McGregor land holdings. The contributing buildings convey a sense of the historic development of the grain industry in this dry, predominantly rangeland country of the western Palouse.



## **Statement of Significance - McGregor Ranch**

Few ranches in eastern Washington can claim association with a family more significant in the agricultural history of the region than the McGregor family. From their headquarters in and near the tiny company town of Hooper they founded and built in western Whitman County, the McGregors profoundly influenced, and sometimes led, the transformation of agricultural practices on the Columbia Plateau from open range to agribusiness. Besides raising sheep, which was originally their primary preoccupation, the McGregors raised cattle, hogs, wheat and other grains, alfalfa, and apples. As family descendant and historian Alexander Campbell

McGregor wrote in *Counting Sheep: From Open Range to Agribusiness on the Columbia Plateau*, the McGregors also

operated feedlots and a packing plant; . . . organized an irrigation company; made loans; sold general merchandise, insurance, farm machinery, and agricultural chemicals; hired their own agronomists; became land merchants; and even organized a gold mining company — all as an independently financed family corporation headquartered in a small company town. The history of this enterprise illustrates the impact of the application of agricultural science and technology on a specific ranching and farming business during a century of “agricultural revolution.”

Peter, John, Archibald, and Alexander McGregor, founders of the ranch, were born in Ontario, Canada, to a farming family. In 1882, Peter and Archie emigrated to southeastern Washington. John followed his brothers in 1886, and Alex joined his siblings in Whitman County in 1900. The first two brothers to arrive homesteaded on dry rangeland in the western reaches of the county. Before entering business for themselves, Peter and Archie worked for other farmers, usually herding sheep, which was their ancestral occupation in both Scotland and later Canada. Before long the McGregors had their own flocks and entered the sheep business.

The McGregor brothers formed a partnership that was eventually to become an agricultural empire in southeastern Washington. The empire was formed as a result of shrewd, well-timed land acquisitions at a critical moment in the history of the Columbia Plateau. In 1895 John, the only one of the brothers to avoid bankruptcy and remain in the sheep business during the depression of the mid 1890s, bought the first grazing land that would later be included in the partnership’s extensive holdings. At that time, the Northern Pacific Railroad (NP) owned every other section of land; the need to gain access to private holdings within that “checkerboard” pattern of ownership led the McGregors to lease railroad land for grazing rights. A year later, financial troubles forced the NP into receivership, and railroad directors eagerly offered to sell Columbia Plateau rangelands they considered “utterly unprofitable.” In the fall of 1896, John McGregor acted quickly, buying 2,755 acres adjacent to leased grazing land for seventy-five cents an acre. The next year he acquired 5,440 acres adjoining the land he purchased in 1895. He soon signed additional railroad grazing leases, bringing an area of rangeland 21 miles long and 17 miles wide under the McGregor’s control. The brothers wisely acquired additional lands by arranging postponed payment schedules that came due after the profitable years for sheepmen in the late 1890s.

Those lucrative years prompted John, Peter and Archie to encourage their younger sibling, Alex, to sell his drugstore in Chicago and move to Washington. By the time Alex arrived in 1900, the brothers had purchased



all but the southeast quarter of Section 8, T 14 N, R 38 E. That property, an alternate section situated amongst leased railroad rangeland, was to become the headquarters for the McGregor brother's operations. Once Alex moved onto the southeast quarter, all four then lived within the same section, each having 160 acres. Peter's residence was built on his land in the northeast quarter, Archie constructed his house in 1901 a short distance to the west on his E ½ W ½, and John established his place along the road in the W ½ W ½.

This location near the junction of two dirt roads was the logical place to establish the ranch's base of operations. Barns, harness shops, a bunkhouse, and other ancillary buildings were soon erected at there. Probably most of the older structures remaining at the ranch were erected in the years between 1901 and 1909. Reportedly two horse barns were razed in the 1970s. During the heyday of ranching with draft animals, reportedly 100 men and over 300 horses were required to harvest the wheat crop. Not all of those men and animals were housed at the complex, but the McGregors undoubtedly maintained facilities that would have accommodated considerable numbers of employees and draft animals.

Archie's house served as the ranch headquarters until he built a second house in Hooper in 1910. The ranch house later served as a dining hall for harvest crews and a residence for the ranch foreman. The other brothers also built homes in Hooper and moved off the ranch. (Peter maintained residences in Spokane, and, after his election to the State Legislature, in Olympia as well). Management of the family enterprise then moved to the company's town, which soon contained over a dozen residences, a company store, a hotel, fruit and grain warehouses, and other buildings reflecting the diverse nature of the McGregor enterprise.

In the early days of the McGregor ranch, feeding their growing flocks of sheep in winter presented problems for the brothers. Their attempts to



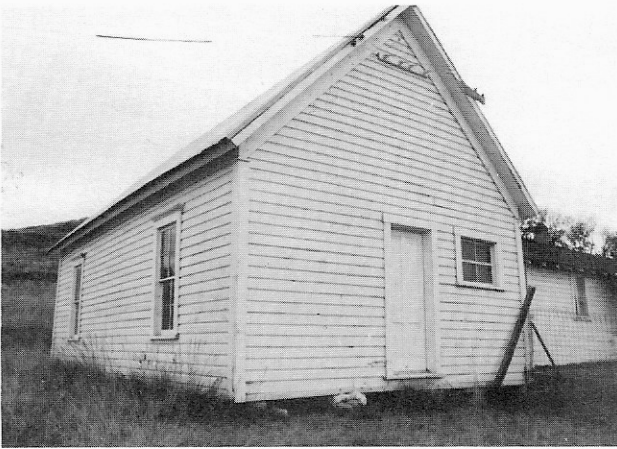
*Bunkhouse*

raise corn, rye, and barley were not as successful as their experiments growing wheat for hay, which they began after the turn of the century. Agreements with the railroad prevented their growing grain on leased grazing lands, until 1901 when they gained options to buy the properties. The McGregors then began “breaking” sod on extensive acres of Palouse hills and planting wheat. They were pioneers in converting sheep rangeland to wheatfields, although they were not alone. The dry, light-colored soil of the western Palouse had at first appeared less attractive to grain farmers than the dark soils to the east. Once most of the fertile lands in the eastern Palouse had been taken and the economic outlook improved after the depression of the mid 1890s, farmers began breaking the sod of the western Palouse.

The process was laborious. Native grasses had to be burned, and sagebrush uprooted by teams of horses and mules and either burned or plowed under. Horsedrawn wood or iron-framed harrows with steel teeth were used to break up the soil. The McGregors used both horses and mules for a great variety of tasks on their ranch. Teams of eight animals pulled mechanical seeders. Before 1907, the brothers hand-seeded by “broadcasting” from the back of a wagon. Planting of winter wheat usually began with fall rains in late September. If it died from lack of moisture or frozen from lack of snow cover, spring planting would be done with the hope that wheat would mature before being killed by summer heat and drought. Like sheep ranching, wheat farming was a risky business in the dry lands of the western Palouse.

By 1905 the McGregors had 1,096 acres in wheat, 435 in summerfallow, and 369 in newly-broken sod, or a total of more than 1,900 acres of cultivated land. At that time, the brothers also had over 15,000 sheep and nearly 50 head of cattle. They held onto their grazing leases until the properties were offered for sale, expanding their holdings at a time when available lands were becoming scarce and expensive. Railroad policies were such that ranchers holding grazing leases could expand their ranches easily through legal purchase without violating federal land laws on the public domain, as was the case so frequently elsewhere throughout the West. In addition to railroad land, the brothers also bought lands from banks, real estate firms, insurance companies, and the federal government. So extensive were their holdings that the McGregors were able to supplement their income from sales of lands on the fringes of their ranch for considerable profits. In 1901 John McGregor was paid just over \$31,000 for land that had cost him slightly over \$6,000 only a few years earlier.

Between 1896 and 1905, the McGregor brothers transformed their business from a small-time sheep operation to an enormous ranching, farming, and real estate enterprise. In July 1905 they incorporated the McGregor Land and Livestock Company at \$200,000 capital stock. By that time,



*Bunkhouse*

livestock had been supplanted by wheat at the Columbia Plateau's most important agricultural product, a fact not overlooked by the McGregors. That year the brothers decided to become serious commercial wheat farmers and expand their acreage devoted to the crop of gold. Of the 10,000 acres of McGregor land suited for cultivation, only one-fifth had been planted in wheat. Over the next ten years, the McGregor corporation converted about 8,000 acres of rangeland to wheat fields. Already by 1911, the McGregor brothers were being heralded as the "wheat kings" by virtue of their harvest of over 100,000 bushels in a single year. By the time wheat prices peaked at the end of the First World War, between 10,000 and 11,000 acres had been converted, and wheat had become the corporation's single most profitable endeavor. The massive transformation of rangeland to cultivation still left 25,000 acres in rocky pasture, however. The McGregors continued in the sheep business, which was reliable and more stable than wheat, whose price tended to fluctuate wildly.

Commercial farming was something in which the McGregor brothers could claim little experience. Their acreage was so extensive and the management so complex they decided to divide their land into parcels and lease out farms to individual tenants. For twenty years, the McGregors rented portions of their property to tenants under agreements that called for payment of a third of all hay, livestock, and wheat to the landlords, who provided grain sacks, fence posts and wire, and other necessities. Using materials provided by the McGregors, tenants constructed numerous buildings, including houses, at various locations around the ranch. Tenantry continued until the agricultural depression following World War I and the near failure of crops in 1924 eliminated profit margins necessary to maintain the system. During those two decades, the brothers continued to farm portions of the ranch themselves, however.

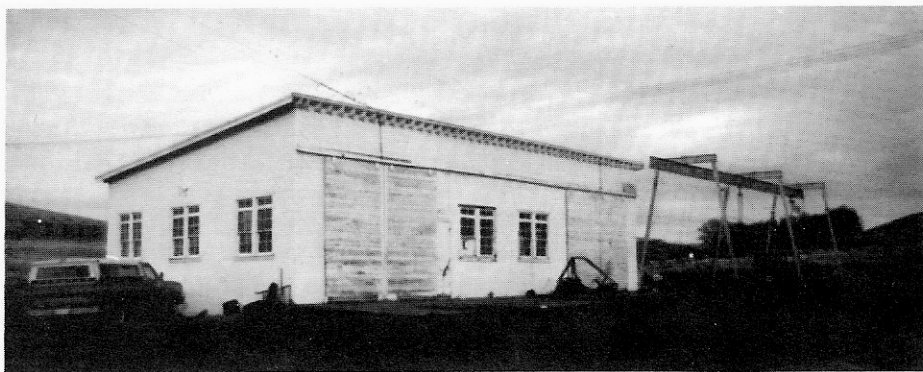


*Barn/Shed*

Expansion of their investments in wheat brought the McGregors considerable financial reward. As their profits grew, they bought new farm machinery and a grain elevator, and converted to handling grain in bulk prior to 1920, long before most farmers did so in the Pacific Northwest. By 1920 the corporation was handling 150,000 bushels a year in its storage facilities, which also included a flathouse in Hooper where sacks of wheat were stored. In addition to wheat grown by the McGregors and their renters, the two facilities stored wheat raised by seventeen other farmers in the immediate area. The McGregors had become grain merchants on a large scale, and committed to a continued boom in the industry that was not to be sustained.

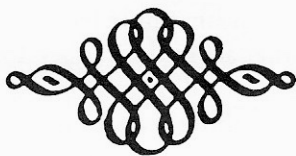
The sudden drop in wheat prices in 1920 left the McGregors unable to collect on many debts owed them by local farmers. Their cattle business had also fallen on hard times, losing money in six of twelve years between 1909 and 1920. Unwise and/or unlucky investments in mining ventures, irrigation projects, and other unprofitable schemes left the corporation's future uncertain as the nation suffered through the agricultural depression of the 1920s and the Great Depression of the 1930s. But the corporation's diversity, the brothers' willingness to apply scientific methods to farming (especially in the use of fertilizers and erosion control), and the recovery of the international wheat market helped pull the McGregors through hard times.

The McGregor Land and Livestock Company weathered numerous serious reversals and survives to this day. Its land holdings have remained



*Machine shed*

fairly constant since 1920: the corporation farms about 8,000 acres of wheat and owns or leases roughly 24,000 acres of rangeland. Technological developments have altered the structural and human components of the ranch: only seven employees now farm roughly the same acreage that once required 100 men and over 300 draft horses. The focus of the family business has also changed: the McGregors passed a milestone in their history in 1974 when they finally abandoned the sheep business, which had become too labor-intensive for the times. The company now concentrates on agricultural chemicals, cattle, various farm service industries, and of course, wheat. Despite some poor years and serious market declines, wheat over the years was consistently the single most profitable commodity produced by the McGregors until eclipsed in the 1950s by more capital-intensive farm service industries (primarily fertilizers and agricultural chemicals). Just as they were pioneers in sheep and wheat, the McGregors continue their prominence on the frontiers of modern agriculture.



## From: History of Grazing\*

*Interview with Arthur Cox, North 309 West Street, Colfax, Washington, on February 3rd, 1941, as given to Harry M. Crumbaker, Research Assistant, Washington Historical Records Survey, at the residence of Mr. Cox.*

Mr. Cox arrived in the Palouse country when five years of age in 1870, along with his father's family, and settled in the vicinity of what is now Endicott, Washington, his father taking up land under the Homestead Act of 1862 and establishing a pre-emption claim on 320 acres. Here they lived until 1877, when they moved to the Snake River fruit district near Penewa-wa. In 1882 the family moved to Alkali Flat, location of the present Cox farm, in Whitman County. At this location the family gradually bought up 12,000 acres of railroad land for grazing purposes, and started a long career of stock raising. The land was bought from the Northern Pacific railroad at a price varying from one dollar to three dollars per acre. The farm became strictly a stock ranch and remained so until 1916.

At first the Cox family went into the sheep business, building up a flock which reached its first peak period in 1885 of approximately 20,000 to 25,000 head of sheep, interbreeding a pure strain of heavy wool Rambouillet. In 1885 the family started a side-line of cattle, using Hereford and Durham stock, and in a few years had a herd of over 500 head. Again in 1892 the Cox's started another side-line, this time raising a superior breed of draft horses, mostly pure-bred Percheron. According to Mr. Cox this line of stock became known as "the best breed in Eastern Washington", the ranch having at times as high as 150 to 200 head.

Sheep raising business is year-around work, states Mr. Cox, and has its seasons of varied work. Lambing season usually started around March 15th of each year in the pioneer days, and was followed by the shearing season, which usually started about May 20th. On or about June 15th the flock was divided into bands of approximately 3,000 sheep, each band placed in charge of one or two herders, and then started towards the open grazing country to the north. With ample feed and range, the flock slowly fed northward until frost time, around October 15th, and then returned to the home ranch for the winter feeding season. In the spring the round of work again started with the lambing season. An interesting point stated by Mr. Cox was that the open range of the Palouse country provided such an abundance of feed that the flock seldom reached mountainous country by frost time and seldom got further north than the area now included in the town of Rockford, Washington. In early June the sheep fed on small green weeds, and later on the native bunch grass, which grew thick and wild over the rolling Palouse hills. The open range, usually railroad or government

\*Copy courtesy Washington State University Libraries

land, had no restrictions on grazing until the introduction of fencing, states Mr. Cox, and there were few such fences as late as 1895. Around 1900 and following years, fencing began to have a retarding effect on grazing, with cattlemen building so many fences and cutting up the open range that sheepmen were finally forced to enclose their own holdings with wire fences, usually barbed wire. Mr. Cox states, however, that he cannot recall any occasion for difficulties with the cattlemen.

In the days prior to the railroads, or before 1883, sheep marketing conditions were far different than today or after railroads were available. Usually in the early spring, around lambing season, buyers rode in on horse-back from the Montana country or points farther eastward, looked over the flock, and then contracted with the grower for a certain number of sheep. During the shearing season, these buyers and their help re-appeared, separated their choice by count, and after shearing was completed started the selected band towards the east into Montana, grazing the herd along easily each day. The trail usually followed was the old Mullan road route into Montana, or as close to it as possible. Sometimes these buyers would represent Montana interests and sometimes marketed for interests of Chicago and other eastern points. The period of 'dickering' with these buyers, as Mr. Cox recalls, was a time for shrewdness and good business, as well as jovial visiting, bantering and tall tales. The buyers were men of quick wit, quick to close a bargain, shrewd but usually honest, and good judges of stock and markets. When their choices were made and all bargains closed and the bands started eastward, they rode away for another year, promising to return upon the following lambing season for further trade. These men, states Mr. Cox, were as able as the sheepmen themselves at glancing over a flock, knowing their condition and number, and usually would come within the hundreds of telling the number of sheep at hand. When sending the sheep through chutes for counting, with the buyer on one side and the rancher on the other, the number determined was usually the same by each, although sometimes the buyer would banter about a lesser number than that counted by the rancher to see if the rancher was as alert as the buyer. Usually honesty prevailed and the sheepmen were well satisfied with the propositions of the buyer. Mr. Cox noted that never were any sheep sold in the fall, whereas today many sheep are bought and contracted for in the fall months.

With the advent of the railroad, marketing was a lesser problem for the members of the Cox ranch. Before the shearing season the flock was grazed towards a railroad point at Sprague, some 60 miles from the ranch, where the shearing was conducted. Then the sheep selected for market were loaded into box cars and shipped to eastern points. The balance of the herd, saved to build the flock, and including the better rams, ewes, and lambs, was then sent to range the open country. The wool, clipped from

the sheep, was bundled into sacks and also shipped to market via the box car.

One of the key employees of the Cox' Ranch, as at other sheep ranches, was known as the camp-tender. His job was to maintain contact with the various bands of sheep, leaving supplies with the herder, camping nearby and giving aid, when called upon. Usually he contacted each band once a week, and in between times returned to the home ranch for further instructions and food supplies. On necessary occasions he made trips to Walla Walla for food supplies.

Mr. Cox states that for purposes of identification, the sheep were branded with red and black paints, the brands usually being a variation of X's, circles and dots. Another mark of identification used by every sheep man at that time were ear marks, and usually the ewe lambs were the only ones so marked, the left ear usually having a slit so that part of the ear would hang down. The ears of the rams were left long, and by such marks of identification the male and female sheep were separated or counted at the chutes "by the ear".

Mr. Cox states that the Snake River hills and the Big Bend Country have always been a good place for the raising of sheep. Stockmen were never bothered, except on rare occasions, with any kind of disease or scab on sheep.

Mr. Cox recalls that at one time a buyer from Montana contracted 6,000 head of sheep, and then, after the shearing season, drove them back over cattle and sheep trails to Chicago, taking all summer and part of the fall months to arrive at the destination. The buyer claimed he had good grazing conditions all the way to Chicago.

Another difference in marketing methods, when comparing present-day uses with the pioneer era, was in regard to the age of sheep. Sheep sold in 1890 were usually two year olds or three year olds, and sometimes older. Today, the sheep are marketed from the time they are lambs until their old age, and at all times of the year.

Aside from an occasional scab disease, the sheepmen had little to worry about in the raising of bands. Occasionally coyotes and cougars would attack the bands at night, and there were times when bear would do the same. The most difficult seasons were lambing time and shearing time.

Shearing was always done by hand on the Cox' ranch, and the modern method of shearing sheep by machine was never used. Shearing time was always an occasion for exciting competition between the sheep shearers, and Mr. Cox states that a good sheep shearer could shear approximately 100 sheep per day, a good record among all of the shearers of that time.