

# Sentinels of the Range

SRM past president Jim O'Rourke and his wife, Lora, have devoted their careers to educating others about rangelands. Now, they've found a unique way to share the Nebraska range through historic sheepwagons.

**By Kindra Gordon**

Jim and Lora O'Rourke have a long history as advocates for rangeland management and education. Jim is a former professor of range management at both Utah State University and Chadron State College in Nebraska. Lora is a rangeland management specialist with the Nebraska National Forest. Both of them have worked with rangelands on the international level, and they are active members of the Society for Range Management, each having served as president of the Nebraska Section, and Jim having served as international president in 2001. He is currently serving as President of the International Rangeland Congress.

Given their commitment to educating others about rangelands and their enjoyment of people, the O'Rourkes have created a unique nature experience on their RuJoDen Ranch near Chadron, Nebraska. They've set up Sheepwagon Hideouts—a secluded, serene getaway in rustic, but comfortable, sheepwagons.

"It's not a bed and breakfast," says Jim. "We want this to be a quiet, private place for people to relax and get away." The restored sheepwagons, situated in peaceful, ponderosa pine canyons on their ranch, are designed to give visitors an experience similar to the old-time shepherd and provide the opportunity to learn about the rangeland, forest, wildlife, and natural setting that surrounds them.

## Reliving the Simple Life

The first sheepwagons originated in Wyoming in the mid-1880s as a home on wheels that sheepherders (and often their



Jim O'Rourke with one of the restored sheepwagons on his Chadron, Nebraska, ranch. Sheepwagon Hideouts are set in private, scenic spots on the property and adjacent to National Forest land.

families) could live in while they and their dogs tended to large bands of sheep grazing the open rangelands. When the sheep were moved to fresh grazing areas, horses pulled the sheepwagon to the new location.

They were so efficient and practical some people dubbed them the first "American mobile home." The historic sheep-



Inside the wagon, a wood-burning stove, small table and bed provide the basic essentials.

wagons all featured a bed, wood-burning stove, table, benches, cabinet, Dutch door, and a window in the back over the bed.

Today, the O'Rourke's sheepwagon stays are reminiscent of those days gone by. For visitors, there are no phones, electricity, or plumbing—it's porta-potties, sunshowers, and cooking your own meals. To enhance privacy, the wagons are situated half a mile to a mile off the country road and guests must walk in and pack their own food, water, and necessities. (The O'Rourke's will pack in the items upon request.) Linens, towels, lanterns, cookware, and utensils are provided at the wagon, as well as camp chairs, a camp table, and a 10-gallon cooler for cold storage.

Currently, the O'Rourke's have 2 restored sheepwagons available for the getaway stays on their ranch—each in its own canyon. Jim says this helps ensure total privacy. "They are arranged so guests don't see another person while they are here," he says.

Although the accommodations are rustic, the O'Rourke's hope that the opportunity for solitude and being surrounded by nature will be fulfilling to their visitors. They request that guests stay for a minimum of 2 nights, "So visitors can truly relax," says Jim.

### Recreation Opportunity

Jim began considering the idea for the sheepwagon stays in the mid-1980s. As a professor of range management at Utah State University at the time, he tells that he always envisioned doing something for alternative income on the scenic property that his family owned in northwest Nebraska. Jim's grandparents, Frank and Jerene O'Rourke, purchased the land in 1950 from the family that originally homesteaded the place in the 1880s. Jim and his father, Joe, an SRM founding member, past president of the Wyoming section of SRM, and Wyoming Section Rangeliman of the Year in 1972, purchased the ranch in 1972.

"It's small, so I always thought that recreation would fit for alternative income, but I didn't know what or how," Jim says.

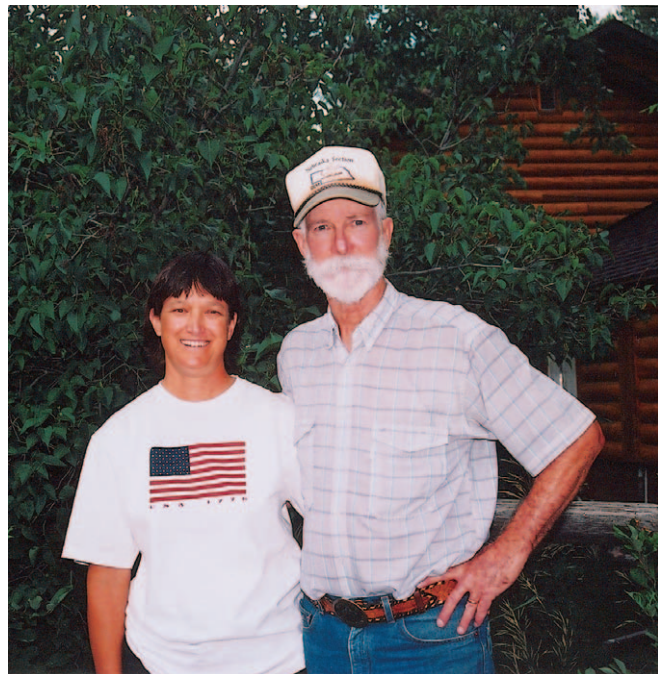
Then, while helping with a cattle drive on a ranch in southern Utah operated by one of his student's families, Jim saw a sheepwagon that was in disrepair and was no longer being used. Jim, who had grown up around sheepwagons and the Basque culture at Buffalo, Wyoming, mentioned to the rancher that he'd like to buy a sheepwagon one day—and the rancher ended up giving it to him. The O'Rourke's collection of sheepwagons and the idea for their recreation business percolated from there.

The couple moved back to Nebraska in 1988, and while working full time—Jim at Chadron State and Lora with the Nebraska National Forest—they set about restoring their small ranch to permanent grass, forbs, trees, and shrubs; expanding and enhancing the riparian areas and wildlife habitat; and collecting and restoring sheepwagons.

The process included returning all previously cultivated fields to perennial grass cover. Two of these fields were planted to Russian wildrye and Newhy, from which certified seed is harvested for sale as a biological weed-control method. Riparian areas continue to be enhanced, while grazed, with the planting of over 80 species of shrubs and trees for wildlife nesting, wildlife cover, and future hardwood lumber harvest. Additionally, Jim and Lora have hand planted nearly 7,000 shrubs and trees to add to the 1.5 miles of windbreaks previously planted by Jim's father and grandfather.

Today, they have an intensive-rotation grazing system with 13 pastures, which are leased for a 90–100-day summer grazing period. The cross-fencing was done with light weight poly-wire cable and grey fiberglass post to keep the area aesthetically appealing and looking like open range.

About 60 pairs of cattle are brought on in early June and then are moved through the pastures every 5 to 20 days—de-



Lora and Jim O'Rourke.



## History of the Sheepwagon

James Candlish, a blacksmith from Rawlins, WY, gets credit for building the first sheepwagon in 1884. However, there is some debate that it was a rancher who had the original idea and asked Candlish to build it. In 1890, a second outfit, the Florence Hardware Co. at Douglas, WY, also began to build the wagons.

But it is the Schulte Hardware Co. in Casper, WY, where blacksmith Marshall Buxton is said to have standardized the sheepwagon by about 1900. The standard design is 11-1/2 feet long and 6-1/2 feet wide, enclosed by a canvas top, with a stove for heating and cooking placed on the left side because the break handle was on the right-hand side.

The compact wagons were designed to be practical with beds situated over storage space and tables that push under the bed when not in use. They proved to be so efficient that the same basic plan served as a model for many early-day campers.

Wyoming native Nancy Weidel has documented the history of the sheepwagon and the early days of the Western sheep industry in her book *Sheepwagon: Home on the Range* published by High Plains Press. The book features many historic photos and shares stories about sheep herders, their superstitions, customs and pastimes; women who designed and lived in sheepwagons; the Basque influence; and even modern-day herders and sheepwagons. It sells for \$19.95 and is available at [www.highplainspress.com](http://www.highplainspress.com).

Jim and Lora O'Rourke include a copy of the book in each of their sheepwagons so guests can learn more about the sheepwagon's role in history.

pending on the size of the pasture, time of year, and precipitation received. Each pasture is grazed only 1 time and allowed to rest and regrow the remainder of the year. Jim says that with the use of deferred rotation, early grazed pastures have up to 16 months of nonuse before being grazed again the following year.

An additional 6 pastures are grazed by horses and mules in a year-round deferred rotation pattern. The O'Rourkes raise Missouri fox-trotter mares that are bred to a Mammoth Jack to produce gaited mules born in the spring and sold as weanlings.

With all of their range management activities, the ranch is also the site of numerous tours, including the Nebraska Range Management short course.

Meanwhile, their collection of sheepwagons has grown to 19—or as, Jim likes to say, “18 and a half” because one is in really tough shape. But some that they have acquired have required very little restoration. The wagons have come from Utah, Montana, Wyoming, Nebraska, South Dakota, and even as far away as Spokane, Washington. The O'Rourkes

have found them through auctions and friends, or simply by driving down the highway and being on the lookout.

However, Jim reports the historic wagons—at a reasonable price—are getting harder to find because some are still being used and many are being kept as family heirlooms. New or refurbished wagons can cost upwards of \$15,000–\$30,000.

Now retired from teaching, Jim does much of the work to restore the wagons with the aim of trying to keep them as authentic as possible. Local carpenters are called in to help with some portions of the project. “We don't want to make it a Cadillac, just get it clean, comfortable, and nice, while keeping it original,” Jim says.

Weatherproofing is also a big part of the restoration process. They often install oak floors and have found a metal siding that has the texture of canvas for the roof. “It sheds water but from 20 yards away it looks like canvas, which helps keep the sheepwagon looking original,” says Jim.

The O'Rourkes have done extensive research through books and museums about the original sheepwagons to help keep their restoration efforts authentic. Through that process they have discovered that one of the wagons they've restored is a Schulte Hardware Company wagon that dates back to the early 1900s. They were able to discern this from a border design on the box and a marking that says “Made by J.E. Schulte & Sons, Casper, Wyo. No. 61, 1909.” Because of the collector's-item status of this one, Jim says he'll keep it in the shed and use it in parades and for display.

He is optimistic that some of the other wagons they've acquired may also be Schulte's because a few have the decorative borders. But he says it is difficult to confirm because as people changed from wooden wheels to rubber wheels on the wagons, many of the boxes were altered and a lot of early markings were obscured.

Still, the mystery and the history is what he delights in. “Every one of them is interesting and that's what is fun about this,” Jim says of the sheepwagons. He adds that with each wagon they purchase they try to learn as much history about it as possible, so that can be documented and included with the wagon.

It wasn't until about 1995 that the O'Rourkes had their first sheepwagon restored and ready to rent. They placed it in a picturesque canyon on their property surround by timber and offered it as a place to stay for their friends and colleagues (many from SRM). They added the second wagon in another canyon and for 7 years simply had friends stay and provide feedback and ideas for their future “sheepwagon stays” business.

Jim says they didn't start commercially because they first wanted to test the waters and see what the response was. In 2002, they decided to move forward and open to the public. They now have a website ([www.sheepwagonhideouts.com](http://www.sheepwagonhideouts.com)) and are members of a rural Chamber of Commerce for their region, called Northwest Nebraska High Country ([www.nebraskahighcountry.com](http://www.nebraskahighcountry.com)), which helps with marketing and promotion efforts.

## Learning While Relaxing

Looking to the future, the O'Rourkes hope more people will seek out the solitude and the opportunity to be close to nature that their Sheepwagon Hideouts offer. Jim believes it's the perfect retreat away from the big city—or for anyone just wanting quiet time. Located adjacent to the Nebraska National Forest, the site offers ample hiking, bird and wildlife watching, and photography opportunities.

The O'Rourkes' property also offers catch-and-release fly-fishing in a trout pond, which regularly yields 20-inch, 5-pound catches, and limited hunting for deer and turkey with one black-powder or archery hunter per season.

Because of the O'Rourke's career experience and passion for rangelands, Jim and Lora also hope that guests will learn about the rangeland resource that surrounds them as part of their sheepwagon stay experience.

If guests request it, Jim and Lora will provide guided nature walks and native plant identification along with information about medicinal plant uses, historical land use, grazing management, and history of the sheepwagons. Books and literature about these subjects are also included in each wagon.

"It is rewarding for us if people go away from here having learned about rangeland use and the ecosystem. We hope people go away with the facts," says Jim, who credits this desire to his career in teaching and role as an educator.

But, he emphasizes that visitors can also come to simply relax and enjoy the quiet solitude with no set agenda. "People won't enjoy their stay if they are trying to race in and race out of here," Jim says. Instead, the sheepwagon retreat should be viewed as a destination to come and enjoy seclusion for a few days.

## Continuing to Collect

The O'Rourkes plan to continue restoring sheepwagons and making more of them available for rent. Two more are close to being completed.

Because the wagons only offer a double bed, the stay is really designed for 1 or 2 people. To accommodate families in the future, the O'Rourkes plan to position 2 wagons next to each other and position them closer to the road for easier access.

They also want to add more wagons on their property so they can rotate the use of them. Jim says, "Just like with grazing management, the areas that get used around the wagon get trampled, so we want to be able to rotate to a new wagon and use fresh areas for our guests."

Jim admits that the greatest challenge with their new business has simply been getting the word out to the right



Jim O'Rourke says he enjoys collecting sheepwagons because "they aren't making old ones anymore."

audience. He says, "Many people don't know what a sheepwagon is, so they aren't searching to stay in one."

He adds, "If we were just a bed and breakfast we'd be full all the time." But that is not the experience the O'Rourkes are looking to offer their guests. Rather, they want their visitors to enjoy nature, the outdoors, and a slower pace of life.

Asked how many more sheepwagons he'll collect, Jim says "There's no limit." However, he admits that his wife says he's past the limit. But it's likely this collector will continue to pursue his hobby that has grown into a unique business. Of the historic sheepwagons, he says, "People aren't making old ones anymore."

*Sheepwagon Hideouts is located 5 miles south of Chadron on Hwy 385. The fee for overnight stays is \$80/night with a 2-night minimum. Overnight stays are not required for fishing, which is \$20/hour or \$30/hour with a guide. For more information visit [www.sheepwagonhideouts.com](http://www.sheepwagonhideouts.com).*

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