

Rangelands

A photograph of a brown and white horse running across a grassy field. In the background, there are mountains under a blue sky. The horse is in the middle ground, running towards the right. The field is green and appears to be a rangeland. The mountains are in the distance, with some snow or light-colored patches. The sky is a clear blue.

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"WAGONS HO!"

Casper, Wyoming's National Historic Trails Interpretive Center will share the stories of Native Americans and pioneers who experienced the West long ago.

By Jude Carino



Editor's Note: We put the spotlight on Casper, Wyoming's newest attraction as SRM members gear up to attend the 56th Annual Meeting of the Society for Range Management February 1-7, 2003 in this historic city. The National Historic Trails Interpretive Center will help set the stage for the theme of the SRM meeting: "Rangelands - Diversity Through Time". Here is a brief overview of the West's storied past and how this unique Center came about:

The landscape in what is now Wyoming has been inhabited for more than ten thousand years. Throughout the millennia, groups of indigenous peoples and later, European emigrants have utilized the landscape. Approximately 9,600 years ago American Indians utilized the sand dune area on the north side of the North Platte River to corral, trap and butcher bison in a parabolic sand dune. The bison provided food, clothing, and sustenance for these native peoples. Their reliance on this food source was critical to their semi-nomadic lifestyle which lasted until the coming of the Euro-American emigrants in the 1800's.

Beginning in 1803, explorers, traders, trappers, mountain men, and missionaries gradually pieced together a pathway that would begin to carry emigrants west as the young United States looked toward the Pacific Coast with thoughts of expansion. This expansion would forever alter the culture of the peoples who had utilized the land for their way of life.

To the sounds of snapping harness and creaking wagon wheels, the pioneers in the vanguard of westward expansion moved out across the North American continent.

Between 1840 and 1870, more than 500,000 emigrants went west along the Great Platte River Road from departure points along the Missouri River. This corridor had been used for thousands of years by American Indians and in the mid-19th century became the transportation route for successive waves of European trappers, missionaries, soldiers, teamsters, stage coach drivers, Pony Express riders, and overland emigrants bound for opportunity in the Oregon Territory, the Great Basin, and the California gold fields.

Beginning in 1841 with the lure of free land and fertile valleys, families decided to risk everything and make a four to six month journey of almost 2,000 miles to realize their dream. They walked halfway across the conti-





Gazelle fawn grazing with domestic goats.

seasonal pastures were allocated to all households. Seasonal ranges were allocated based partly on history in the region; Kazaks generally received spring ranges in the lowest elevation areas. Han immigrants arriving in the 1960's received preferential areas for spring in slightly higher elevation areas. Later immigrants were allocated the least preferred spring areas. At distribution each family was provided herds in the amount of 70 head per family member. Early on, rules required that herd size remain at that size, but these rules were later abandoned.

Kazak pastoralists continued to be the majority of users of Jianshe rangelands until the 1990's. Following the establishment of independent Kazakhstan in 1991, Chinese Kazaks who met specified criteria were allowed by the Chinese government to immigrate to the newly independent state. A number of Kazak families in Jianshe took advantage of this opportunity in the early 1990's and there was a subsequent decrease in livestock numbers. As of 1999, only 16 of about 100 livestock operations in Jianshe were owned by Kazak families, the remainder being owned by Han. Most owners (about 90%) contracted out the herding work and lived in Aksai's county seat. Even among the 16 remaining Kazak family-owned herds, 7 used contracted labor. This pattern contrasts sharply with the practice among Kazaks of the Altay region in Xinjiang (Banks, 2000), where 80% did their own herding even during winter.

Thus, by the time of our study in the late 1990's, the largely Kazak-owned herds had given way to a Han majority, and traditional pastoral practices had been largely replaced by inexperienced contract herders who originated from other regions of western China. These contract herders considered herding a short-term position until they could find more pleasant work. Jianshe's pop-

ulation had decreased by roughly 40%, the small primary school was closed, school-aged children boarded at the county seat school, families no longer herded livestock together, and yurts were rarely seen. Even the small administrative center of Jianshe had taken on a ghost-town quality, with town officials maintaining residences in the far-away county seat, staying only temporarily in Jianshe itself. Except for spring lambing sheds, pastoral "encampments" generally consisted of small patchwork tents inhabited by 1 or 2 young men entrusted with herding duties.

Current Livestock Production System

Under the current system, livestock is privately owned but the land is owned by the state. Livestock operations are legally restricted to grazing only in designated pastures at designated times, but there is some latitude in summer range and in emergencies (e.g. when snow is excessive the county grazing bureau can allow livestock to use other areas). Seasonal ranges are not fenced; instead, most are based on recognizable geographic features.

Spring ranges are grazed from late February to mid-July. All spring pastures are centered on lambing structures made of adobe and mud. Summer pastures are grazed from mid-July to late September and herders find summer grazing areas the least limiting. We interviewed two older Kazak herders that had recently started shar-



Author (Don Bedunah) with Forestry Bureau staff interviewing young Han herder.

ing summer pastures and herding responsibilities, but in general, herders do not share labor. Autumn pasture is intermediate in elevation and is grazed from late September 25 to mid-November. Winter pasture is grazed between mid-November to late-February, and is the second most rigidly defined and defended. Winter encampments are generally stationary through the entire winter season.

