

## **THE GREAT SHEEP TRAILS, 1870-1900**

The first great sheep drives in the American West resulted from the demand for food created by the California gold rush. Sheep worth a dollar a head in the Golden State rose to fifteen dollars a head a few months after gold was discovered. One drive by Colonel W. W. Hollister brought nine thousand Merinos from Ohio to the Pacific shore. The basic result of this early westward sheep movement was that it improved the quality and quantity of the flocks in the coastal region, setting the stage for the massive drives eastward after the Civil War.

The early bands on the trail came from the swollen flocks in California. Major Groom Gates Kimball, of Red Bluff, was perhaps the first to trail a band, totaling 3,700 head, to Boise in 1865. Unable to sell his sheep in Idaho, Kimball continued the drive into Montana. Several others followed his lead and drove sheep to the mining areas and also to stock the ranges of Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, and Utah. In the 1880s the development of irrigated agriculture left farmers with surplus feed, especially in Colorado and Nebraska; sheep were driven in to be fattened on the refuse left over from the processing of sugar beets. They were also used to forage for food after grain had been harvested.

Trail bands numbered from three thousand to seven thousand, and often a single owner had enough bands on the trail to total twenty-five thousand. Each band required three men, "one at the point, or lead, one at the swing or about the center, and the other bringing up the trail." Cattlemen on the trail had to worry about flooded rivers, stampedes in storms, bandits, and Indians. Sheepmen on the trail had all of these concerns plus fear of poisonous weeds, wolves, bobcats, coyotes, and eagles. Their job was made more difficult because sheep are more temperamental and harder to handle than cattle. To drive these bands of sheep, experienced hands were required. Many of them were Basques from France and Spain, and others were of Portuguese or Mexican origin.