

## FIVE GENERATIONS

### Chapter 10

#### MOVING AHEAD – To disaster (1912-1920)

##### *The Sheep Ranch*

In 1915 Nephi Harker took over the operation of the Harker Sheep Ranch from their fifty year-old father. Nephi was employed full-time at the ranch for another ten years thereafter,<sup>1</sup> well past the prolonged winter and deep snows that would soon spell financial disaster for Levi Harker.

Back about 1907, forty-two year old Levi had first leased the land for his sheep ranch near New Dayton and Warner, importing further sheep stock from Scotland.<sup>2</sup> In those early pioneer days, few fences were found in that Southern Alberta country. Don Harker remembered his grandfather telling him, “I could get on a saddle horse and ride to the [sheep] ranch... and never open a gate.”<sup>3</sup>

In a detailed account of the Sheep Ranch by Nephi’s daughters Phoebe and Mable, the ranch is described as being “50 miles east of Magrath in the Warner, Foremost, Skiff area.”<sup>4</sup> That region covers a lot of territory, which explains why there are sometimes conflicting descriptions as to the location of the ranch. Ten thousand sheep were divided into five camps. At one time, Levi leased a full two townships of land (each 6 miles square, almost 50,000 acres total) at Writing-on-Stone near the Sweetgrass Hills, for \$400 a year.<sup>5</sup>

The ranch headquarters was located about 15 miles from the town of Skiff. The house had two bedrooms upstairs and a large kitchen and two small bedrooms on the lower floor. The building and barns stood at the bottom of a hill to protect them from the west wind, with miles of open grassland to be seen to the north, east and south. A lake

was located “about a half mile from the house [with] beautiful blue herons... and there were pretty wildflowers everywhere.” Herds of antelope abounded. Three miles to the west lived Peter and Adam Walker, on their own land, in a new home. They had come from Scotland with their mother and sister to herd sheep for the Harker’s. To the east was the John T. Heniger family, on King’s Lake.<sup>6</sup>

In another reference, the ranch house is described as having four bedrooms upstairs, each located on a different section of land—the house having been constructed over the section pin. Chin coulee is said to have been a half mile east, with Skiff and Conrad 8 to 10 miles north.<sup>7</sup>

Recalled Nephi’s daughter, Lamar (b. 1916), “In the summers we lived at the sheep ranch [and] Grandpa would come to visit often.”<sup>8</sup> Because their father was frequently away on Harker family business, Lamar’s sister, Mable, felt her grandparents paid special attention to their family. “My dad was always at the sheep ranch,” she said, “so I think that Grandpa and Grandma felt a little responsible.”<sup>9</sup>

Even as late as the mid 1920’s there was little development in the area. Said Don Harker (b. 1915) of a ride to the sheep ranch with his grandfather by car; “It was almost an all-day tour, as there was no road, just a trail.” The routine called for having two or three flat tires en route, and patching them on the way.<sup>10</sup>

At least a portion of the sheep ranch lease must have remained under Harker family

control well into the 1930's. Keith H. Clarke recalled how the summer that he was sixteen (1936), his grandfather and two of his uncles were still trailing horses to the lease. Keith,

no longer a seasoned rider, begged to go along, but was "awful sore and awful sorry" before he got back.<sup>11</sup>

## Sources

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- <sup>1</sup> Harker Heritage. 1993. Verona Harker Merkley (ed.), Book Committee, Magrath, Alberta. p. 104.
- <sup>2</sup> Harker Heritage, p. 42.
- <sup>3</sup> We Remember - Grandparents are for Loving and Remembering. 1993. Roy and Kathy Harker (eds.), Harker Grandchildren, Magrath, Alberta. p. 15.
- <sup>4</sup> Harker Heritage, p. 315-320.
- <sup>5</sup> Harker Heritage, p. 57 (citing an article in the *Lethbridge Herald*, July 1939).
- <sup>6</sup> Harker Heritage, p. 315-317.
- <sup>7</sup> Harker Heritage, p. 47 (photo captions).
- <sup>8</sup> We Remember, p. 9.
- <sup>9</sup> We Remember, p. 6.
- <sup>10</sup> We Remember, p. 15.
- <sup>11</sup> We Remember, p. 26.