

Stokes Nature Center
History & Lore of Logan Canyon Podcast Series
Too Many Sheep

After 1880, sheep overtook cows as the primary livestock of Cache Valley. Herders took their flocks to the West Desert for winter grazing, to irrigated farms in the valley for spring lambing, and to the mountains for summer grazing. Between 1880 and 1900, the sheep population of Cache Valley rose dramatically to 300,000, and Logan Canyon became congested with sheep. As the herds moved, they kicked up so much dust that residents of the valley several miles to the west could see huge clouds of it rising from the mountains.

During the summer months, pastures were effectively stripped of vegetation. After consuming all the plants, sheep would pack the bare soil down with their hooves as they moved. Soil compaction and the area's low level of precipitation guaranteed that nothing could grow back. Plant cover allows snowmelt to sink into the soil and replenish the groundwater supply. It also lets the spring runoff trickle down gradually throughout the summer. Without plant cover, snowmelt plunged straight down the mountain all at once leaving the rivers and valleys below dry by late summer. The plunging waters also took the unanchored soil downstream. In spring, muddy water filled with animal waste and dead sheep flowed out of the canyon, polluting the valley's irrigation and drinking water.

Mayor Moroni Price of Smithfield was disgusted by the dead sheep and other animals he had seen in the river. He said at a meeting of concerned citizens that he had just about reached a decision to "drink whiskey from now on." This was a shocking statement coming from a Mormon community leader, for whom drinking was close to taboo. The situation prompted citizens to approach the federal government about creating a Forest Reserve to protect the watershed.

After the Forest Reserve was created, grazing was limited by permits, and the canyon's environmental health was greatly improved.

Sources:

Sweeney, Michael S. *Last Unspoiled Place: Utah's Logan Canyon*. National Geographic Society, 2008.

Johnson, Michael W. "Whiskey or Water: A Brief History of the Cache National Forest." *Utah Historical Quarterly*. 73.4 (Fall 2005).

U.S. Forest Service website: <http://www.fs.fed.us/aboutus>.