

Geography professor traces history of state sheep trails

RENO — The mystery started for Paul Starrs when the University of Nevada, Reno geography professor was looking at maps in the geography department's library.

He stumbled upon 1972 maps of Nevada public lands that listed old sheep trails as part of the public domain. That got Starrs wondering: what had happened to the trails in the intervening years?

Long ago, the federal government had set these trails aside for livestocking by withdrawing them from multiple use, thus closing off the land from mining claims, homesteading and designation as national parks or other uses.

"As a rule, the U.S. government doesn't do those kinds of things," says Starrs, who is widely published in academic journals. "It supports multiple use, not a commons (land set aside for pasture) or easement."

But it turns out the withdrawal of the lands was not forever. In the early 1980s, the Bureau of Land Management in Nevada returned the sheep trail easements to the public domain.

Part of the reason it did so, Starrs says, is because the government would face no opposition from sheepmen, whose use of the trails had died off by then. But its original withdrawal still intrigues Starrs, from a historical standpoint.

"The main importance of (the trail withdrawal) is it represents a different kind of land use that the federal government created for a time," he says.

And the reason is rooted in history, which Starrs is happy to

provide.

He pulls out a multicolored 1938-39 map of "the Intermountain Region," from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which he dug up on a trip to Esmeralda County. He lays it across a desk in his cramped office and points out a series of broken and unbroken black lines spidering across the topography of Oregon, Nevada, Idaho, Wyoming, Utah and Colorado.

The lines represent the rare easements that the federal government withdrew from other public uses to set aside as stock driving and grazing trails intended for sheep. The broken lines represent stock driveways for grazing movements and the full lines driveways for trailing movements.

It was illegal to block or deny drovers access to either.

Uncle Sam set the territory formally aside in 1916 under the Stock-grazing Homestead Act, guaranteeing sheep drovers access to trails from one area of the Intermountain West to another. Politics were responsible for the rare withdrawal of federal land from multiple uses.

The Homestead Act allowed families to claim up to 1,280 acres of land for ranch property. But sheepmen worried that would allow cattlemen to set up ranches and fence off the range to keep sheep away from grazing lands. So they had language added to the act to ensure access.

"Sheep interests in Congress forced Congress to agree to designate certain areas in the West as stock trails that could not be contested," Starrs says.

That meant that cattlemen who

hated the close grazing of sheep that left little browse for their stock could not block access to the trails.

Cattle interests complained bitterly in testimony to Congress, claiming that setting aside stock trails would break up traditional cattle ranges.

Some of the trails run for 300 miles. Sheepmen in California and Arizona would start trailing their sheep through Nevada in spring. But the sheepmen's 1916 victory didn't last.

"The cattlemen had the last laugh," Starrs says.

The 1934 Taylor Grazing Act said that anyone grazing in the public domain was required to have deeded acreage that was generally close to federal grazing allotments. Many of the sheepmen were the equivalent of long-haul truckers, just using the trails for grazing on long treks.

District boards set up to approve usage of the stock trails often ended up at odds with sheep drovers. Nevertheless, drovers persisted for several more decades. But in the early 1980s, the Bureau of Land Management in Nevada finally returned the stock trails back to open-access public domain.

Starrs adds two footnotes:

- In France, North Africa and Spain (where they are called cañadas), such trails are still designated as commons although the rights-of-way are being converted to back-packing trails.

- In America, mountain bikers have started using former stock trails that were returned to the public domain.