

The Pearl of the Colorado State Parks

By Cathy F. Hartt

Pearl Lake State Park, located near the Elk River in Routt County, is a place currently noted for its *“rolling green meadows and pasture lands that enfold quaint farms and horse and cattle ranches. Framing the horizons are a string of mountain ranges located within the Routt National Forrest and Mount Zirkel Wilderness Area that include parts of the Park, Sierra Madre and Saw tooth ranges.”* Built in 1962, Pearl Lake is adjacent to Steamboat Lake State Park and the historic village of Hahn’s Peak (1). The history of Pearl Lake State Park predates the building of the lake itself by nearly 70 years.

Seeing the beauty of this mountain lake often leaves tourists believing that the state park is named for the magnificent gemstone. In actuality, the Lake and Park are named for Mrs. (Minnie) Pearl Hartt (2), wife of Wyoming sheep industry pioneer, John Kelly Hartt . The Hartts were officially residents of Rawlins, Wyoming. Over the course of several years, J.K. Hartt purchased many acres of land and established a summer headquarters for his corporate sheep operations on the land that is now Pearl Lake. In fact, during the summers 1916 & 1917 the Hartt family summered in a small cabin that is now under the waters of Pearl Lake (3). It was in 1894, when Hartt stepped off the train in Wyoming, that the wheels of change started turning: A change that would turn primary use of this land from agricultural to recreational use.

“It was said of John Hartt that he was put off the train at Rawlins, because that was as far as his available money would take him. He settled down to amass a fortune . . . John’s winter range

was on Sand Creek, Hiawatha, and Powder Springs west of Baggs, Wyoming. He summered on the Little Snake River and tributaries”(4).

Hartt started his ranching career working for a variety of outfits southern Wyoming (5).

Specifically, he worked for an outfit called the King Brothers from 1894 until 1901 (6). Hartt also was noted to work for a rancher named Ora Haley early in his career. This was during the time Haley was just getting his start in the cattle industry on the Laramie Plains (7). Hartt is known for being “thoroughly acquainted with every phase of the stock raising industry,” including both cattle and sheep (8).

Wyoming was considered to be good grazing land for sheep and often sheep were “trailed” through Wyoming from Oregon through South Pass and down Sweet Water into Carbon County. The bands often had 5,000 to 6,000 sheep each and early sheepmen reported seeing as many as 50,000 sheep in a given day. The dry, cold climate of southwest Wyoming helped to produce a heavy growth of long, fine wool (9). Early sheep ranchers in Carbon County included the King Brothers and, also, the Cosgriff Brothers. These early sheepmen instituted a system that allowed them to build herds of sheep without investing any capital called “running sheep on shares.” Many of the early sheepmen of this era built their herds in this way (10). We know Hartt purchased his first sheep from a Frenchman named Revest (11).

An antidote about the King Brothers is that in 1897, there was agitation over a tariff that raised import tax on woolen goods to 91 cents, called the Dingley Tariff Bill. Australian wool growers felt that U.S. bred sheep could not produce sheep with comparable quality and weight as their

breeds. The King Brothers had a famous exhibition sheep named Ben Hur, a world champion Rambouillet, whose fleece outweighed the others by several pounds. This evidence went in favor of the Tariff (12).

Many years later, Hartt spoke to his daughter, Marge, of the early days in his career and how range wars impacted the Wyoming sheep industry. Hartt stated: “Oh, they shoved our sheep back into Wyoming a time or two, but that was a long time ago” (13). He also told her about how the sheepmen were sought after by a former Pinkerton detective. This former detective turned out to be Tom Horn, the most notorious of the “regulators” hired to kill rustlers and keep homesteaders off the cattle land. His name “spread terror among the guilty and innocent in 1901” (14). Horn was executed in 1903 for these murders.

Hartt’s experience with Horn may have occurred during his years with either Haley or the King Brothers (1894-1901). We know, for instance, that Judge Lacey presented an affidavit from Ora Haley in the trail that convicted Horn (15). We also see the King Brothers mentioned in Horn’s testimony, as follows:

Q. What people do you refer to?

A. Anybody

Q. The Edward’s, Latham’s and Matheson’s?

A. Yes sir.

Q. You eliminated Wedemier's, Matheson's, Kings, Merrifield's as not much of a place?

A. Is it a sheep range?

Q. The King Brother's Range?

A. I did not go there (16).

Free land use of the range went to individual ownership in Carbon County in 1901, when the Wool Growers Association began leasing land and issuing permits for its use (17). The years 1895-1910 saw a dramatic increase in the number of "sheep barons", building on the foundation of the 1880's and 90's. It was during this period that great sheep companies were developed in Carbon County. *"It was a period in which sheep ruled the land developing fortunes and institutions and the community of Rawlins was destined to become 'wool famous'"* (18).

It is probably not a coincidence that 1901 was the same year that the Cow Creek Sheep Company originated (19); Hartt first went into business for himself by investing in this company. In 1903, he merged Cow Creek with Pioneer Sheep Company. The Cow Creek Sheep Company was initially a partnership between Hartt and the Cosgriff Brothers (20). The original incorporation papers, dated 1901, list Hartt, W. A. Barnes and J. E. Cosgriff as the trustees of Cow Creek (21). Hartt had worked for Barnes for \$30.00 a month when he first arrived in Wyoming (22). The Pioneer Sheep Company, originally named the Geddes Sheep Company, was headquartered in Laramie and became Pioneer in 1900 (23). *"The Pioneer Sheep Company. . . passing through the hands of Geddes and Bennett . . . was finally acquired by John K. Hartt, the present owner and one of the best known and respected sheepmen in Wyoming"* (24).

The Cosgriff Brothers were the largest single sheep operators in Wyoming at that time, who at the peak of their career ran as many as 125,000 head. The two elder brothers, Thomas and John, came to Wyoming in 1882. By 1900, their younger brother, James, also joined them. Before coming to Wyoming, the older brothers operated a freight line into Denver and invested their spare earnings in sheep. By 1885, the Cosgriffs had acquired two large bands of sheep and moved their headquarters to Rawlins. The flocks grew and were ranged from Rawlins to Cooperton and Encampment, Wyoming. In addition, the Cosgriff Brothers invested in chain stores and chain banking. Their entrepreneurial endeavors covered the geographic area from Idaho to Wyoming to Southern Colorado. Eventually they owned 27 banks and financed many of the large and small sheep outfits in the region (25).

Winter range for Cow Creek and Pioneer Sheep Company was on the Red Desert of Wyoming with the original headquarters on Shell Creek (26). The Cosgriff-Hartt operation lay just north of the Colorado-Wyoming line. After shearing, the sheep were trailed to the mountains along the Colorado-Wyoming border. Hartt was tantalized with the summer pasturage that lay in the Colorado mountains (27), but was unable to establish an official summer headquarters in Colorado until 1911 when the range wars quieted (28).

It was early in the summer of 1903 when Hartt had a major run-in with the Colorado cattlemen. Word had apparently spread among the Routt County Cattlemen that the Cow Creek sheep were grazing in the Whiskey and Big Red Parks. These parks lay northwest of Steamboat Springs and approximately 15 miles south of the Wyoming border (29). One of the participants is directly

quoted as stating: *“Over three hundred of us rode . . . One of the greatest sheep stampedes in the history of the range warfare occurred that night and the following day. Nothing was ever said about it, and no one was killed; but the sheep were moved out”* (30).

This same source also quotes James Harl Sizer (widely known as the “Cowboy Poet” of Northwestern Colorado), who at the time was wagon boss for Ora Haley’s outfit, as saying of the Cow Creek incident: *“I think it was early June the next year that seven or eight bands of sheep were shoved across the Little Snake River north of Hahn’s Peak onto cattle range into a heavily timbered area where evidently the sheepmen thought that they would not be discovered . . . They had little more than gotten their sheep distributed . . . When one of the herders one of the herders saw two heavily armed men riding through the camp.”* This herder, recalling past incidents with cattlemen, apparently became very frightened and commanded the dogs to drive the sheep back into Wyoming. This terrified flock of Cow Creek sheep apparently panicked several other bands of sheep that belonged to other owners. As a result, approximately 30,000 “exhausted and terrified” sheep ran through this densely forested landscape, with a large number being killed or crippled. It took several days at the sorting pens in Savory Creek Wyoming to straighten out the sheep for their owners again (31).

Taking him many hundreds of miles from the range conflicts, Hartt returned to his childhood home in New Brunswick, Canada, to attend the funeral of his mother late in 1908. Early in 1909, he returned to Wyoming, this time with his bride and the namesake of the future Pearl Lake State Park. Hartt apparently had already been quite successful in his sheep operations by this time, as the following note can be found in the Carleton County Historical Society, New Brunswick, CA

21 December, 1908 pg. 5: *“The death took place at Tracey Station, Sunbury County, on Sunday, Dec. 13th, of Mrs. Hartt, widow of Rev. John Hartt, who was a Baptist minister in Carleton County. Deceased, who was 77 years of age, had been ill with pneumonia for a week, but survived until the arrival of her son, Mr. John K. Hartt, a wealthy rancher, from his home at Laramie, Wyoming. Remains were taken to Carleton County for burial.”*

On their way back to Wyoming, the Hartts stopped briefly to honeymoon in Niagara Falls, Ontario. Hartt's bride, Minnie Pearl (Spragg) Hartt, is the daughter of Arthur Sidney Spragg and Matilda Roberts Spragg. (Minnie Pearl preferred to go by the name “Pearl” or, later, Mrs. J. K. Hartt, and was born in St. John, New Brunswick, Canada.) Pearl attended normal schools and then taught school for several years in Canada before marrying Hartt (32). Her parents moved to Wyoming with their newly wed daughter and son-in law. The Spraggs became early-day Rawlins residents, living with the Hartt's the remainder of their lives. Perhaps typical of his Canadian upbringing, Arthur Spragg is remembered for having always having a starched collar and wearing a tie while pushing a wheelbarrow or performing other types of manual labor (33).

According to the Hartt's daughter, Catherine, it was immediately after the Hartts returned from their wedding that they were greeted at the train station by one of the ranch hands, who told Hartt: “Sir, they shot Wilkes last night.” This was the new Mrs. Hartt's first trip away from the New England/Canada region and her conservative upbringing and, apparently, came as quite a surprise (34). The honeymoon was, most decidedly, over.

John Wilkes was a ranch foreman for Cow Creek Sheep Company in December of 1908 (35). At

the time of the shooting, he was working for the company at Wamsutter, Wyoming, where sheep were often sheered and wool loaded on trains (36). Wilkes, according to one source, had a reputation for being quite a “lady’s man” and had caught one of the Hispanic sheep herders (often hired by the Cow Creek firm) with a prostitute in his sheep wagon. Wilkes apparently ran the herder out (and was in bed with the prostitute himself) when the shooting occurred (37). Another source says Wilkes had gotten into an argument with John Daley while crossing his land about 6 weeks before he was shot and killed by Jim Kyle in Wamsutter (38). Pearl’s brother, Harold Spragg, was made foreman after Wilkes’ death (39).

Similar incidents of “old west” law apparently had their impact on the Hartt sheep operations during the early years. In 1907, Hartt incorporated a third sheep company, Yellowstone, that was headquartered out to Lander, Wyoming. The Board of Directors included Hartt, K. M. Kinney and J. M. Rumsey, all of Rawlins (40).

The story goes that Yellowstone manager, Kinch Kinney, had killed a man, perhaps while performing his duties as manager. (It is unknown if Kinch Kinney is the K. M. Kinney who is listed on the Board of Directors, above.) Kinney was apparently a very high quality ranch manager and Hartt did not want to loose him, so they had a minister’s son named Bastem Skaggs take the rap for the killing, thinking that no minister’s son would be convicted. (It is interesting to note that Hartt himself is a minister’s son.)

Apparently, however, Skaggs was convicted and was to be imprisoned at the state penitentiary in Rawlins after the trial in Cheyenne. Skaggs, who reportedly stood 6’ 2”, was being transported

from the Rawlins depot to the prison by a deputy named Billy Mills, who was apparently a short, stocky man. Skaggs asked Mills to turn his back while he said a final prayer. Mills obliged and Skaggs ran through the Paris Hotel and then through the town to horses that were saddled and waiting for him. These horses were thought to be supplied by Hartt. Skaggs did, apparently, make it to Mexico alive and stayed in-touch with Hartt's new foreman and brother-in-law, Spragg, over the years. Perhaps this contact was maintained so that Skaggs could obtain financial support through Hartt (41).

It was shortly after 1910 that the Cosgriff Brothers decided to end their partnership and divide their holdings into thirds. The Cow Creek outfit went to J. E. Cosgriff with the section west of the Saratoga being sold to Hartt. In the fall of 1914, the stock of Cow Creek doubled in value, going from \$25,000 to \$50,000 after a meeting of the stock holders, with Hartt presiding (42). More evidence of Hartt's success came in 1917, when the stock of Yellowstone was increased in value from \$50,000 to \$500,000 (43).

During the years that followed, it was not just the sheep that multiplied. Pearl and John Kelly Hartt became the parents of six daughters, all born in Rawlins, between April 14, 1910 and January 5, 1921. Raising Pearl, Marie, Marge, Louise, Catherine and Dotty became the focus of attention for Pearl and her mother, Matilda Spragg, during those years.

The picturesque Hahn's Peak Basin became the official summer headquarters for Cow Creek and Pioneer Sheep Companies in 1911, when Hartt was finally able to officially locate in Colorado. Previously located near Baggs, Wyoming, the new summer headquarters was located on the site

that is now Pearl Lake. By the summer of 1916 Hartt was bringing his wife, Pearl, and daughters up to these headquarters, where they lived in a small cabin. The family moved the headquarters to a “little green school house” in Hahn’s Peak Village and, then, to an old ranger station (now under the waters of Steamboat Lake) before actually building their own summer home in 1926 (44). This house is now privately owned and continues to sit on what are now the shores of Pearl Lake.

The Hahn’s Peak area is known for its role in the gold rush era of Colorado history. Gold was first discovered here by a Joseph Hahn in 1862. In 1865, one of Hahn’s friends and companions climbed to the summit of a picturesque old volcano that was close to the gold strike, and named the peak Hahn’s Peak. During the next few years, a mining settlement was located in a community at the base of the mountain, also named Hahn’s Peak. During the years 1877 and 1879, the Routt County seat was located in Hahn’s Peak, although the community never produced significant enough gold to continue in this role (45).

Hahn’s Peak was nearly a Ghost Town by the time of Hartt’s arrival in the area in 1911, with some local businesses and a few residents keeping it alive. Hartt brought the first large sheep company to Hahn’s Peak. A sign in the Hahn’s Peak Museum reads as follows:

The first sizeable herds of sheep to be brought to Hahn's Peak were those of the Cow Creek and Pioneer Sheep Companies, owned principally by John K. Hartt and managed, first by F. Harold Spragg and later by Charles H. Higley. From 1911 until the late 1950's these companies played a big part in the economy of the area, purchasing most of their summer supplies through the stores at Columbine and Hahn's Peak. Each summer the hills and meadows were filled with the sounds

and smells of more than ten thousand ewes and lambs. Separated into ten or twelve individual bunches, the sheep were watched over by Mexican herders and camp movers. The Company headquarter buildings were located on Lester Creek, now Pearl Lake (46).

Hartt began buying out many of the smaller sheep ranches in the Hahn's Peak region. Not all of the area homesteaders were happy about having such large bands of sheep summer in these mountains. Although the range wars had ended, locals voiced concern about the damage done to the landscape by the sheep. In her book, On God's Mountain: The Last of the Hahn's Peak Homesteaders (written about homesteading in the 1920's), author Rose Wheeler writes:

It was the first week of June when Rose heard the sheep. In the early morning hours, sound traveled easily in the clear mountain air. She could hear the dogs barking above the bleating of the sheep as they moved them along the road from Columbine. She wondered how many there were. It sounded like hundreds of them. They must be the Wyoming sheep, (Wheeler refers to the Cow Creek Sheep Company as the "Wyoming Sheep Company" in her book) being moved to the Small homestead from the Red Desert. It seemed bad that the country should have sheep. They destroyed the grass, flowers, and little grouse in their nests on the ground with their sharp little hoofs" (47).

It was typical for Rawlins to be the winter home of the sheep ranchers, and for them to summer their sheep elsewhere. At that time about 100 sheep families and 300,000 sheep wintered in Rawlins. All the families were known to have nice houses in Rawlins and to spend the summers at the sheep headquarters. The sheep families would gather to have parties would celebrate together by serving sage chicken and vermagilin (a form of Jell-O). The sage chicken was

considered a delicate morsel (48).

Despite the fact that some locals were opposed to the large numbers of sheep, the Hartt family became a part of the Hahn's Peak region over the years. Harold Spragg, Pearl's brother and Cow Creek foreman, married Etta Spragg. Etta's sister, Edna Trullinger, is a beloved area school teacher who came to Hahn's Peak in 1917. Edna taught not only in Hahn's Peak, but in many schools in Western Colorado and Wyoming (49). Her school houses remain on display at the store in Columbine, Colorado. Etta Spragg was considered a "crackerjack" with a .22 and would kill the sage chickens (for the parties) while helping at the summer headquarters in Columbine and Battle Creek (50). Sisters Etta and Edna are well known area pioneers and were life-long residents of the area.

As the sheep businesses grew, so did Hartt's other business ventures. In 1907, Hartt had become an original stockholder of Ferguson's Mercantile in Rawlins, where he later became the director. In 1931, he was elected to the Board of Directors of the First National Bank in Rawlins where he eventually became the vice president and director. Hartt had close affiliations with both banks in Rawlins at that time (51). Homer France was the president of one of the banks, and also served as director and treasurer of Yellowstone Sheep Company (52). George Bible, who was affiliated with the other community bank, was a partner in the Cow Creek & Pioneer Sheep Company (53).

At that time, Cow Creek and Pioneer foreman, Spragg, was considered by some to be one of the best sheepmen in the region. He doubled the size of the operation while acting as foreman. But the success did not last. Spragg got into a dispute with one of Hartt's business partners, Robert

Bible. Spragg wanted to continue to buy more land and Bible reportedly wanted Hartt to have competitors. Spragg, now divorced and remarried, left the Hartt operation and bought the Pot Hook Ranch. Hartt's son-in-law, Chuck Higley, had been an understudy to Spragg and took over as foreman during the 1940's (54).

World War II brought with it the downsizing of the sheep industry in Wyoming due to a decrease in man-power. Then, just a few years later, in 1952, Hartt died at Baggs Wyoming enroute (via ambulance) from his summer headquarters in Hahn's Peak to his home in Rawlins (55). He was 81 years old at the time of his death from a heart attack and was an insulin dependent diabetic.

Hartt's pallbearers were chosen because they were some of his closest business associates. They included Cow Creek and Pioneer banking partner, Robert Bible. Also listed are Bud Brimmer and his father, C.A. Brimmer, Sr. (honorary pall bearer) (56). Both the Brimmers were lawyers in the area and the elder Brimmer had been active in sheep-related range legislation during the early part of the century (57). Bible was a financial advisor to Hartt and C. A. Brimmer was his attorney. Being long time business associates, Bible and C.A. Brimmer were also named as the executors of Hartt's estate in his will (58).

Hartt's estate remained very large, despite the changes in company management and the sheep industry. By the time of his death, Yellowstone owned 17,000 acres of land in Fremont County and had 3.5 townships of allotment. It ran 1,800 head of cattle and 7-8,000 sheep. Cow Creek & Pioneer had about 50,000 acres and 44,000 acres of leased land, primarily in Carbon County. It ran 21,000 to 22,000 head of sheep (59). The portion of the estate to be distributed was worth

approximately 1 million dollars (60).

Hartt's death brought bitter disputes to those left behind due to the size of the estate and conflict over the will. Pearl, joined by five of her six daughters, filed four lawsuits against executors Bible and Brimmer. Pearl is said to have filed the lawsuits to contest the "will" after her brother, Spragg, got discouraged by it and sold to executors Bible and Brimmer at a low price (61). Her daughter Marjory was Cow Creek foreman Higley's wife, and therefore, she did not join her mother and sisters in the emotionally charged suit. This vicious dispute split the family for many years.

The Wyoming Supreme Court called the Hartt lawsuits: "A barrage of lawsuits in connection with the estate as finds few parallels in the law books" (62). Of the four lawsuits, three were eventually appealed to the Wyoming Supreme Court. Those which were appealed to the higher court included a contest of probate of the will, an action related to the contents of a safe deposit box, and an action for removal of the executors and trustees.

The second lawsuit was a dispute over stock certificates worth 1,000,000 (63) (solely in J. K. Hartt's name) held in a safe deposit box that was in both J. K. & M. Pearl Hartt's name. That is, should the stock be considered jointly owned? The third lawsuit was, perhaps, the most complicated because it involved possible desolation of the sheep companies, the salaries of the officers of the sheep companies, the sale of stock by one share holder and its resale to foreman Higley and allegations of nepotism by the younger Mr. Brimmer. This lawsuit also questioned Pearl Hartt's right to be permitted to elect against the will after the time had run when she had not

been advised of her rights to do so. It also involved some issues about how to handle moneys earmarked to pay the federal inheritance tax (64).

During the two-year-long appeal to the Wyoming Supreme Court, Pearl attempted to rehire her brother, Spragg, as foreman in an attempt to pull the sheep operations out of debt. The Supreme Court, however, gave the management back to her son-in-law, Higley. Higley, therefore, ran the operation until sold. Bible and Brimmer did liquidate the companies shortly after Pearl's appeals were overturned, even though they had the right to retain the companies for eight additional years (65).

In 1955, the State Supreme Court upheld the decision of the lower court not to give Pearl ownership of the stock certificates and, also, ruled that Bible and Brimmer could not be removed as executors. A year later, the Court overruled the lower court decision that allowed Pearl to dissent provisions of her husband's will and gave the executors control of Cow Creek, Pioneer and Yellowstone Sheep Companies (66). Bible and Brimmer dissolved Pioneer Sheep Company and Cow Creek Sheep Company in 1958 (67) and Yellowstone in 1959 (68).

The lawsuits took their toll on family relationships, especially with Marge and Chuck Higley. However, in time the family were able to mend broken relationships and Pearl, her daughters and their families continued to summer at the Hahn's Peak "headquarters" even though the sheep were no longer part of the landscape. Pearl sold the land for Pearl Lake and much of the surrounding area to the Forrest Service after the estate was settled and, as a result, Pearl Lake was built in 1962. As an enticement for the settlement, which was seen as a turning point in shifting

the land into primarily recreational use, the government promised to name the lake after the seller, Pearl Hartt (69). It bears mentioning that Pearl had become an expert fisherwoman during her many summers at Hahn's Peak and she went on to catch the largest fish of her lifetime at Pearl Lake just a few months before her death at age 93.

Minnie Pearl Hartt died in 1972, with the home at Pearl Lake listed as her primary asset (70). Various family retained the "headquarters" until the mid 1980's, when it was sold to a private individual. The area that had been sold to the Forrest Service previously was upgraded to a State Recreation Area and later to a State Park, after Pearl's death. The acreage that once was home to vast herds of sheep is now the playground for the hundreds of tourists who vacation at Pearl Lake, Steamboat Lake and surrounding wilderness areas each year.

I would end by saying that, as the youngest granddaughter of Minnie Pearl and John Kelly Hartt, when I venture from Denver to the mountains each summer to visit "Grandma's Lake", I sometimes close my eyes and imagine what the fields must have looked and sounded like filled with thousands of bleating Cow Creek Sheep and Pioneer Sheep. This lake is named after a true gem: A gem named Pearl Hartt, after all. *(end)*

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