

SHEEP RANCH
OF THE
EIGHTEEN NINETIES

MARY FRANCES DAMON RUDE



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Dedication

To
my son Inslee
and
his family
this book is lovingly dedicated

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Introduction

As indicated by the title the following story deals with Sheep Ranch, a mining town of the East Belt of the Mother Lode, that fabulously rich gold-bearing quartz vein that drew thousands from every quarter of the globe to California, many of whom drifted into Calaveras County in the early eighteen-fifties.

By recording the exploits of a venturesome lad the history of every locality in the surroundings of Sheep Ranch and within miles of its border is brought into the story and woven into a historical whole, documented where possible.

No claim is made that the history of the region is complete. That would be impossible in a book of this size or in this type of story. However, that one might understand what went on in the 'nineties,' a brief synopsis is given of the mine and the region prior to that period. Moreover, an incident or two that occurred at the turn of the century is recorded.

A stranger coming into Sheep Ranch and seeing the remains of her glorious past might classify the village as a ghost town. Nothing would be farther from the truth. Sheep Ranch is not dead, but sleeping, as if having lived too strenuously for a time, she is merely catching up on her beauty sleep. Sheep Ranch has other resources than mineral wealth,

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but even that has not been exhausted, the rich vein's extension never having been found.

On a plateau as she is, Sheep Ranch provides a panoramic view of the geographical features surrounding her: the tablelands, the canyons of the San Antone and O'Neil Creeks, the valleys dotting the landscape, and the forested slopes of the hills between.

The brooding mesas hover near awaiting the time when Sheep Ranch, like a butterfly from a broken and discarded cradle emerges and assumes a greater beauty. When home-seekers straggling back to the hills from which the city's wealth was taken see the glorious possibilities, new life will be injected into her veins. Already some with vision are getting in on the ground floor.

Now that the mountain counties of California are protecting their water rights, abundant water to the right and to the left could be returned with little additional expense to the passes, the plateaus, the valleys carved out in the remote past by San Antone and O'Neil Creeks. Wise generations will not permit this water to escape to the sea before, at least, it has watered the land of its origin.

So lavishly did Nature strew her tablelands, canyons, and streams about and cover them with trees and flowers among which she placed her fauna that one knows that she had no intention of their remaining hidden from reverent gaze. How John Muir's eyes must have feasted when he found occasion, as told in the story, to drop into Sheep Ranch to replenish his exhausted supplies.

The story is related by a native of the town who attempts to place before her readers a word-picture of the scenes that passed before her eyes during her maidenhood. She feels that too much interest lies in the history of the old mining town of her birth to allow it to drift out of public knowledge into a forgotten past. With what tools the old town gave her she has tied Sheep Ranch and its environs into a romantic story.

The family whose struggles to live on an undeveloped homestead in a mining community furnished so many exciting and often amusing, as well as dangerous, adventures is the author's own, and her pioneer spirit looks back with pride to a father who was the soul of goodness and to a mother whose many feats were accomplished by strength of character and will-power rather than by Amazonian stature, which she

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did not possess as one might be led to believe. She was merely made of the stuff of the pioneer woman of whom too many praises cannot be sung. In fact, the "Native Daughters of the Golden West," the California organization which is preserving the history of the State, has registered the names of both my parents in their "Pioneer Roster" kept at their "Grand Parlor of the Native Daughters of the Golden West" in San Francisco. Charles Warren Damon came to California by ship and across the Panama Strip in 1865-1866 while his wife Medie (Palmetta) Cox was born in El Dorado in 1865.

Grateful acknowledgements are extended to the following who helped recall dates and furnished history that took place before the author's time:

J.A. Smith, Superior Judge of Calaveras County for his account of the interment staged by Desire Fricot for his Indian servant, 'Old Limpy,' a "First American" as Fricot expressed it to emphasize the importance of the funeral, which was the largest ever seen in the County, and to which every member of the 'elite' society was petitioned, either by a letter or the personal appearance of Fricot, to attend; Mary Queirola and Charles Valente of San Andreas, County Seat of Calaveras County, who was injured in an accident in the Sheep Ranch Mine and lamed for many years, for verifying matters concerning the coming into the country of Desire Fricot and the building of his modest home by Lanky's father. When he inherited the wealth of his Uncle Andre Chavanne he built another home (now establishment of the 'California Youth Authority for Correction and Training of Delinquent Boys'); Eugene and Ann Gardella of Murphys for data on the philanthropy of Fricot, and the history of Macaroni Flat; Charles Hogate for an account of Dogtown's early days; Clorinda Domenghini for data on the establishment of her father's store and boarding house on Indian Creek, and the secret trips of Joaquin Murietta to Cave City for sanctuary with the friends living there; Mary Valente Osselin for facts concerning the construction of the Emery Ditch and Emery Reservoir (now Brown's Reservoir); and facts concerning the drainage of the Sheep Ranch Mine through the Old Pioche tunnel, and the names of the three courageous men who stood before the great column of water when the first indication of the water's breaking through took place; Rose Casey of Campo Seco for the loan of

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“An Early Day Letter” by Timothy Davis which tells of the little mining town of Humbug, its founding and history of 1853; the little mining town at the junction of Humbug; Gulch and the old stage road where Wm. Clary, later Superintendent of the Sheep Ranch Mine, got his experience both in mining and the keeping of a store; Louis Domenghini for his research on Mountain Ranch, the Post Office where the mail was first delivered by the Pony Express and picked up by the residents of El Dorado; Miss Lizzie Kaler for data on the San Domingo School; Thomas Denslow, old wooden stamps stems found on San Domingo Creek; Edgar Allen Poe for data on events in Sheep Ranch beyond the author’s knowledge; Mrs. Gladys Poe, daughter of Ben Stephens and wife of Edgar Poe for help in obtaining addresses and permission to use photographs of Sheep Ranch, its residents, and the famous Old Mine; Don Butterfield, grandson of Dr. Butterfield, whose praises were sung in the ‘90s for his faithful attendance in all kinds of weather on his patients scattered all over the large area of which El Dorado or Mountain Ranch, as it is called today, was the center; for his help on the subject of the hydraulic mines and the Emery Reservoir, the source of their water power, and names of Joaquin Murieta’s friends; Virginia Butterfield, his wife and the Postmistress of Mountain Ranch, for facts about the source of the name of El Dorado being adopted from a lumber mill in operation when the town was settled, and changes in the Post Office from early days; Dave Zwinge for facts about the Table Mountain Ditch surveyed by Wm. Clary in the early ‘50s and of his, Dave’s help in widening the same to bring down more water for hydraulicking; and the South Fork of the Mokelumne River water ditched by Cuneo and Solari to the Emery Reservoir; Percy S. Peek, now tax-collector of Calaveras County, for the evidence he gave of overhearing, when he was a boy of twelve, the angry reaction of the old-timers to the execution of George Washington Cox. (Alice Boone and Tan Boone, her husband and a direct descendant of Daniel Boone. Monuments, Columbia, Tuolumne County, California.) In the presence of the author

Mary F. Damon Rude

Foreword

The original manuscript of this book, *Sheep Ranch Of The Eighteen Nineties*, was written by my grandmother, Mary Frances Damon Rude, between 1945 and 1966. She passed away in 1973 and the manuscript remained unpublished until I located it in family archives and had it published in 2006. My original intent was to offer it to family members to give them new insight and understanding of their family history from my grandmother's perspective as she was growing up in Sheep Ranch during the period of the Eighteen Nineties. After this book was published it began to find a wider audience, beyond family members, from others who became aware of it and who have an interest in Calaveras County and the town of Sheep Ranch. To oblige their interest I have added photos and other information to this book and had this second edition published. Though I noticed that my grandmother did research many facts for her manuscript, much of it is still a recollection of her memories and does not purport exact historical accuracy.

Inslee Damon Rude

Acknowledgments

I am especially indebted to Janice Cook of Lakeport, California for her expertise and tireless effort in completing all editing and indexing of the second edition of this book and for her insight offered to increase the readability of Mary Rude's original manuscript. Janice Cook and I are third cousins and are descended from Mary Crapo Cox and George Washington Cox.

I would also like to acknowledge Eleanor Cook, Janice Cook's daughter, for editing pictures used in this edition, Shannon Van Zant, Calaveras County Archivist for a map of Sheep Ranch and Cate Culver, Calaveras County Historical Society Resource Coordinator for contribution of pictures used in this edition.

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An Unsung Hero

The eerie cry of a coyote trembled on the midnight air. Guard lifted his head from his mat on the porch and tested the wind. No taint of the wilderness creature offended his nostrils, so he yawned sleepily and closed his eyes once more. However, every sense was alert to the approach of the distant prowler.

Thoughts crowded upon the watcher's mind, and sleep was out of the question. He got up, stretched to awaken his muscles to active duty, and clicked across the porch and down the steps. The sound of the wind in the pines was music to his ears, and he sat for a moment on his haunches watching the dance of the boughs against the moon. He fought off an almost uncontrollable desire to point his nose at the moon and howl an accompaniment to the coyote's mournful cry.

He circled the house, listening to the gentle snores of those he protected. How he loved them all!—the Master, the Mistress, and their six children. The only boy, a lad of fourteen, turned over in his sleep, mumbling dream words that cocked the dog's ears to a listening pose, then resumed the slow breathing of a sleeper. The Damon family was taking their well-earned rest after the cares of the day, leaving the night to him.

Guard loved the boy with a deep abiding passion and would have liked nothing better than to follow him wherever he led. This wasn't

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always possible for it was Guard's job to protect the place, Shep having attained a lazy old age.

As he stalked about the house, Guard recalled the adventures that he and the boy had had on their trips for the mail to the town of Sheep Ranch, a distance of three and one-half miles by trail. Some gave him a thrill of pleasure while others were attended with bitterness or shame.

In the summer they always stopped at the point where the trail led from the road to the old swimming hole, a bathtub-like cavity gouged out of the solid rock at the junction of the O'Neil and Batista Creeks. While he waited for the boys of his own age to arrive from town, the boy Lanky always tied his horse in the shade and slept.

There were mountain lions, wild cats, lynxes, and bears roaming the woods at that time; and whether or not that was the reason, Guard was always reminded of his duty. Not that he had to be, but the boy always felt more secure for having assured himself that the dog would not leave his post.

While Guard lay panting in the scant shade of the wild lilac that overhung the path, he had many temptations to be up and away on the trail of small woodland creatures whose scent tormented his twitching nose: cottontails that slipped noiselessly from cover and stole over the burning sand and gravel to the refreshing water of the creek or hunched in the shade and munched contentedly on the plants nearby; ground squirrels that first challenged the dog with their piercing whistle, sitting like little upright sticks on the mounds of their burrows; and then, getting no response from boy or dog, dropped to all fours and crept about in the grass; lizards that spiraled up the trunks of standing trees or, catching sight of the dog, raced for a way over fallen ones, then paused to shrug their questioning shoulders as if not knowing whether to advance or retreat.

Once as Guard lay there with dripping tongue, eyes scanning the landscape for movement, a rattlesnake crawled out from under a rock and slithered along in the shade in quest of unwary rodents or other delicious morsels. Although the snake was not within striking distance and, in fact, was headed away from his young master, Guard gave the alarm instantly. Well he knew the danger of such reptiles to barefooted, naked, heedless

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boys. The snake, quickly reduced to a head-flattened harmless by a hail of well-placed rocks, peace and quiet again prevailed.

Except for the common summer sounds: the drone of flies, the shrilling of a cicada, the crackle of a colorful-winged grasshopper, the buzz of a passing bee, the hum of a mosquito, the distant call of a bird, the protesting sounds of the fly-fighting horse; no sound but the musical gurgling of the creek was heard. The monotonous blend of tones served to intensify the silence. How startling then in the midst of such peace was the shrill whistle of the squirrel!

On one occasion the boys approached stealthily, having in mind the fun of scaring Guard's master by their sudden appearance at his side. But they reckoned without Guard. He had not scented them, for what stir of air there was carried their scent in the wrong direction. They had counted on this factor and were almost upon the sleeping boy before Guard was aware of their nearness. Instantly the dog leaped to his feet, straddled the boy's body, and broke into savage barking.

Startled awake, his master put both arms around the dog, which was not much more than a pup, and egged him on, laughing delightedly with the boys over Guard's protective frenzy. From then on this was a weekly performance.

When the boys were in the pool, it was Guard's job to lie upon his master's clothing to protect it from the mischievous thieving of the boy's companions. Everyone else had his garments tied in knots or weighted with rocks and sunk in the stream, or hidden out somewhere among the boulders that bordered the pool. Guard always wondered why his master so enjoyed the howling protests of the other lads as they searched barefooted among the burning sands for their clothes.

Now, in his midnight vigil, Guard reached the place where the ground sloped away to the barns and the corrals. All was quiet there. A tinkle now and then of the goat bell as Old Nanny scratched her back with the tip of her horn, or the rattle of the hitching-chain against the manger of the horse barn only emphasized the contentment of his animal charges.

The rooster flapped his wings and crowed his midnight "All's well" from the hen house, causing a protesting disturbance among his flock. In the distance, another took up the signal and passed it on. How silly

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these birds are to announce to passing prowlers the whereabouts of their roosting places! Guard wondered if it were the security of a roof over their heads that lent them courage or if they would be so daring from a perch in the trees.

How peaceful the buildings looked in the soft mellow light of the moon and the shadow cast by the tall yellow pines at the rear: the large barn with the loft from which the children climbed like monkeys at play, or turned somersaults into its store of hay from a tie-beam above; the flanking sheds, one for farming machinery, the hay wagon, and buggy; and the other for the riding and work horses. A smaller stable for Bossy and her calf stood between the horse barn and the goat sheds. Each set of buildings had its own corral.

Guard trotted around the fences and recalled the story he had heard from Shep of the one time when things were not so peaceful here. A lynx or bobcat had vaulted the pole corral of the goat pen, made its way to a sleeping kid, killed it, and took it up a tree on the ridge at the rear of the buildings. Just how this was managed was not known, but the mangled hide and fleshless skeleton were found the next morning lodged in the crotch of the tree. No explanation was ever found to account for the tragedy, Shep had confessed in shame, feeling that he had slipped up somewhere in his vigilance. What Master thought he kept to himself, but that he agreed with Shep was evidenced by the fact that that afternoon he set out for town.

He brought back a short-haired brindle pup that wobbled about for some time on uncertain legs. The fellow, in whom the blood of bulldogs and blood hounds fought for supremacy, would put an end to such performances, Master announced.

Old Shep told the little fellow the history of the family as far as he himself knew and informed the growing pup of the responsibility that rested upon his young shoulders. That Guard took the old fellow seriously was evidenced by his conduct throughout his whole life. Guard was his name and a guard he became.

As he sat on his haunches looking back with pride at the house that reflected the moonlight, he remembered the time he had saved his mistress from drowning. He was only a pup then, afraid of his own shadow.

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Perhaps the memory of this youthful display of courage was the more deeply engraved for the very reason of his abject cowardice.

Mistress, in company with the five girls, had taken a picnic lunch and gone to the O'Neil Creek for the day. The descent into the canyon at this point was a rocky trail on the southern slope of the ridge. This path was used mainly by cattle and was literally cut to pieces by their sharp hoofs. Lupine and fragrant phlox joined with wind poppies in an eternal struggle to beautify the slope. By the time the creek bed was reached the girls were exhausted by their many departures from the trail to discover and exclaim over the flowers, and their faces pulsed with heat.

Guard's pads had been severely punished by his scramblings over the hot rocks in the wake of the girls, and his thirst was intense. Upon reaching the stream, he waded out until the water was belly-deep and lapped up mouthfuls of its tepid fish-flavored fluid. Then he lay down in the shallows, letting the water flow over his back.

Meanwhile Mistress and the girls were attending to their own comfort, stripping off their limp, dusty garments and donning the voluminous bathing suit of the period—the 1890's. First came a sleeveless, low cut woolen dress with a wide skirt reaching below their knees. Next, ample elastic-banded bloomers were stepped into and pulled up under the sheltering skirt, for “even the woods have ears,” their mother told them, “and there's never been a pair of ears yet that didn't have eyes to keep them company,” she laughed.

Guard watched the operation in puzzled wonder. Why did they have to change clothes or wear any at all in order to get into the water? Why not leave off clothes as well as shoes? These last were more essential than garments, it seemed to him, for the close-packed imbedded gravel between their alder-shaded ‘dressing room’ and the water lay in the full sunshine and was “hotter than Billy-blue” to put it in Master's forceful language. Truly female humans were strange creatures! How much more sense boys have, Guard concluded.

Ash, alder, and bracken pushed into the crevices among the tumbled boulders of the complaining rapids down which the water escaped into the pool. The ferns, more reluctant if possible, to see the water pass, bowed a gracious farewell, the lower fronds caressing the surface as it sped on its way. Canyon oaks shaded the moss-covered cliffs uprearing

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on either side of the stream and lent their strength to the weathering rocks forever resisting the downward pull of gravity.

The beauty of the stream meant nothing to the dog whose whole attention was taken up by the line of females parading to the pool. Never before had he heard such shrieks of laughter. A bare toe dipped into the water called for a great deal of gasping mirth and challenges hurled back and forth. Compared to the girls, the boys, whose swimming hole was far below, were dumb. Echoes of merriment batted forth and back from canyon wall to canyon wall. Unable to account for the racket, Guard leaped to his feet and raced up and down the margin, barking nervously. The reaction from the restraint imposed upon female humans in that generation was perfectly normal but Guard didn't know that. He saw nothing wrong, but worry drove him up and down the beach in nervous frenzy.

Mistress saw his agitation and whispered to the girl near her. Word was circulated among them that Mistress was going to put on an act and wanted them out of the pool. Without a word in reply, they glanced at Guard and crawled out on the bank. Left alone in the water, the mother thrashed about as if unable to keep her head above water. She was sitting on a great boulder unseen from the shore because of the rippled surface of the pool. "Help! Help!" she called and let her head sink below the surface. But those stupid girls just stood and looked at her.

Guard snatched up a twig, two feet long and about as thick as one's finger, and plunged into the water. Beating the waves set up by his own dive, he swam out to the distressed woman and offered her one end of the stick, believe it or not! The five girls looked unbelief at each other. (Six persons, including the author, witnessed this almost unbelievable feat of the puppy.)

Mistress grasped the stick and swam frog-fashion, making no noise to attract his attention, until they reached the shore.

What laughing and patting those females indulged in! That the whole thing was a conspiracy to test his courage never dawned upon the dog.

Just wait until Lanky found out he, Guard, had saved his mother's life.

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That evening the story of his valor was told to the men folks, and Guard came in for more patting and praising. It mattered not that winks passed around as freely as the pats. Guard's little eyes shone with happiness for days to come. Even now in thinking it over, the dog lifted his head proudly and made a resolution to give his life for those loved ones if need be.

A far distant yapping told Guard that the coyote which had roused him from slumber had joined forces with others of his kind and left for less-closely guarded flocks. A sigh of relief showed the concern under which the dog had been laboring. He had nothing to worry about as long as the goats were in their sheds; he could look after them then, but when they scattered over the hills next day for the purpose of browsing, he likely would not be with them. Anything could happen then. Why, just a day or two ago Old Nanny had been dragged down on the other side of the ridge by a coyote, maybe by this same fellow; and would have been killed if the old goat hadn't been missed from the herd as they filed down the hill on the run. Mistress had caught up her gun and sped along the trail in time to rescue the goat, who was waging a battle for her life. Mistress had shot at the fleeing killer, but he had reached some brush and dodged behind it just as her gun went off.

Slowly Guard made his way over moonlit patches to the dwellings—one a quickly-thrown-up board structure made to provide sleeping quarters temporarily and the other a log cabin where the cooking and eating were done.

Judging from the outside appearance of the last named, one would never suspect what a comfortable sitting room it made after the frugal meal was disposed of. The furnishings were simple. The long dining table and benches were made of planed unpainted boards. A few sturdy chairs with woven rawhide seats were scattered here and there. A great stove constructed of rocks kept the air warm and cozy. A cupboard built against the wall kept the dishes and cooking utensils free from dust when they were not in use.

No floor had been put in the log cabin because the use to which it would eventually be placed required none. Repeated wettings had hardened this dirt floor, that would otherwise be ground to powder by

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the many feet, into a surface much like beaten earth. As a makeshift, the floor was most satisfactory.

For the family this was one of those rare happy occasions when the Sheep Ranch Mine was closed down for a few days for the installation of new machinery, and Master could be with his family day and night.

To return to the log cabin, the setting of the first scene. The family have gathered round the great stove in characteristic poses of comfort; that is, those not engaged in removing the evidence of the evening meal. The oldest two of the girls are washing and wiping dishes, leaving their chairs standing vacant by the fireside. But Guard, the opportunist, has already seized advantage of the vacancy and joined the family circle.

This performance of the dog is a nightly occurrence and furnishes much amusement for the members. There are just enough chairs for the family; so Guard, from his place on the floor, watches every opportunity to get one. After all he felt that he had just as much right to the dignity of a chair, for hadn't he helped to carry in the wood?

Master had cut and stacked with Lanky's help a tier of oak wood next the road to town where the family met him every evening on his return from work. He intended to haul the wood to the house on the week-end, but the thought came to him that if each member of the family took a few pieces, what each could carry easily, by the time the week-end rolled around the wood would be in the shed, and the job of hauling wouldn't be hanging over his head. Of stove length the wood had to be hauled in the spring wagon, which was in need of repair; otherwise Lanky could have done the job.

Everyone gladly assisted. When Guard selected a stick, picked it up in his mouth, and joined the gang, surprise and approval mingled with unbelief looked out of their eyes. They watched to see what the dog would do with the stick, whether he was actually helping or only amusing himself. That he would carry the wood all the way to the house wasn't likely, but by dropping it now and then to relieve his mouth of the slobbers he got it there.

Guard never undertook anything he didn't intend to finish. He carried that stick right up to the pile in the shed, leaped upon the stack, and dropped it next to Lanky's load. Whether he foresaw the eventual

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use of the wood is doubtful, but you will agree with me that he had earned a right to his place by the fire.

So, the moment a chair was vacated it became possessed of an occupant who sat with dignified presence and turned his head toward the speaker as if to weigh his words before passing judgment upon them. Later in life this pose lost none of its effect because of the bite of a huge rattler, that while yielding to the treatment of blue and whiskey, nevertheless caused such a swelling that Guard was left with a Roman nose.

When the absentee returned, there was a tussle to see who would possess the seat. Guard always lost, for his opponent had only to tip the chair to that angle which aided gravity, and Guard slid to the floor. Guard was philosophical and was learning to take things as they came, so he never bore a grudge. Had anyone suggested that his place was on the floor and he ought to be made to stay there, every other member would have leaped to the dog's defense, so greatly did they enjoy every evidence of his intelligence.

As far as the children were concerned, Guard was a personality. To say that they idolized this friend is little short of the truth. The lack of other children's companionship made them fall back upon the dog, and as a substitute he certainly filled the bill.

