I have to admit, when I was a Montana kid trailing sheep for days on end, I did not think the route was leading to Sun Valley.

But here I am, thanks to Diane Josephy Peavy and the other leading lights of this festival, and while I don’t know whether the pair of pieces I’m going to read to you tonight are festive, they sure as the devil are about sheep.

I wouldn’t say there is an over-abundance of literature dealing with sheep, but what there is goes back a long way--in the King James Bible, remember, David is a shepherd boy when he “chose
him five smooth stones out of the brook,” as ammunition for his slingshot when he went forth to face Goliath. In American writing, there was an interesting episode in the 1920's when The Atlantic Monthly, back there in its Brahmin Boston office, became infatuated with the work of a South Dakota sheepherder named Archer Gilfillan, and readers of the magazine were treated to sheepwagon observations such as this one by Gilfillan:

“It is necessary to differentiate between the sheepherder of fact and the shepherd of romance. The shepherd leads his flock with a song, the herder follows his with profanity.”
I can testify from personal experience that Gilfillan was right about the profanity part. But I also have to report, as someone who is supposedly licensed to dabble around in history, that one of the greatest historical works I’ve ever seen is about a village of shepherders in medieval France—Montaillou: The Promised Land of Error, by the French historian Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie. Le Roy Ladurie used the old records of an inquisition conducted against the religious heretics of the village of Montaillou to reconstruct the daily life of that community. One of the intriguing things I found in that superb book was that the trailing of sheep, or for that matter cattle, back and forth between
ranges has a regal scholarly name: ‘transhumance,’ defined as “the movement of livestock and herders to different grazing grounds with the changing of the seasons.”

Well, my family certainly didn’t know we were engaged in anything as fancy as transhumance when we were herding in Montana. I come from what I called in my book *Heart Earth* the lariat proletariat. Ours was a family line of ranch hands—my mother and both my grandmothers were ranch cooks, and my dad was sometimes a sheepman, sometimes a cowboy, sometimes something in between. In our part of the livestock world there wasn’t really any of that old shoot-em-up tension between
cattlemen and sheepmen--people often switched back and forth, according to market prices--and it was a common saying that during the Depression, Montana cattle ranchers all ran a band of sheep or two to be able to afford to dress like cowboys.

My folks always ran livestock on shares--we were a Western version of sharecroppers--taking a couple of bands of sheep through lambing, and shearing, and herding them all summer, until the lambs were shipped, and then wintering them until it all started over again.

It was a time, in the history in our part of the West, when some days you would swear the hillsides were as much wool as
they were grass. Sheep were a basic part of the scenery when I was growing up on ranches in the 1940's and 50's. That woolly aspect of life really hadn't changed much, then, from this 1939 scene I conjured for my novel **English Creek**.

The narrator is Jick McCaskill, the son of a forest ranger in the heart of Montana sheep country, who doesn't know yet that as fate will have it, he'll grow up to be a sheep rancher himself. Jick here is fourteen, helping his father count the sheep onto the national forest grazing allotment for the summer, and the sheep belong to his eventual father-in-law, a salty rancher named Dode Withrow. The Withrow band of sheep have just come into view
near the counting vee in the mountains of the Two Medicine National Forest, and Jick pitches in to help push the sheep along:

"Into view over there between some trees came Dode's herder, Pat Hoy. For as long as I had been accompanying my father on counting trips, and I imagine for years before, Dode and Pat Hoy had been wrangling with each other as much as they wrangled their sheep. "How do, Jick. Don't get too close to Dode, he's on the prod this morning. Wants the job done before it gets started."

"I'm told you can tell the liveliness of a herder by how his sheep move," Dode suggested. "Maybe you better lay down, Pat, while we send for the undertaker."
"If I'm slow it's because I'm starved down, trying to live on the grub you furnish. Jick, Dode is finally gonna get out of the sheep business. He's gonna set up a stinginess school for you Scotchmen."

That set all three of us laughing as we pushed the band along, for an anthem of the Two Medicine country was Dode Withrow's lament of staying on and on in the sheep business. "In that 1919 winter, I remember coming into the house and standing over the stove, I'd been out all day skinning froze-to-death sheep. Standing there trying to thaw the goose bumps off myself and saying, 'This is it. This does it. I am going to get out of the
sonofabitching sheep business.' Then in 1932 when the price of lambs went down to four cents a pound and might just as well have gone all the way to nothing, I told myself, 'This really it. No more of the sonofabitching sheep business for me. I've had it.' And yet here I am, still in the sonofabitching sheep business. God, what man puts himself through."

Jick goes on.

That was Dode for you. Poet laureate of the woes of sheep, and a sheepman to the pith of his soul."

Jick continues, "Myself, I liked sheep. And for a person partial to the idea of sheep I was in the right time and place. With the encouragement of what the Depression had done to cattle
prices the Two Medicine country then was a kind of vast garden of wool and lambs. Beginning in late May, for a month solid a band of sheep a day passed through the town of Gros Ventre on the way north to the Blackfeet Reservation, band after band trailing from all the way down by Choteau, and other sheep ranchers bringing theirs from around Bynum and Pendroy.... This was a time on the reservation when you could see a herder’s wagon on top of practically every rise: a fleet of white wagons anchored across the land.”

Well, about fifteen years after Jick found himself at the back of the band of sheep, in that little fictional but historically based
scene, the kid hoofing along after ewes and lambs in that part of Montana and anchored in one of those white wagons would be in fact me. This concluding scene that I’m going to read, from This House of Sky, is at the point of the year when the three of us in our family--my father, and my grandmother--my mother’s mother, who gallantly shared in the raising of me after my mother died--and me, fifteen years old, are about to trail the sheep we were running on shares--two thousand ewes and their lambs--from a small leased ranch south of Dupuyer, Montana, up Highway 89
--some of you may know it as the road to Glacier National Park; it's still an old two-lane road--to the summer lease on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation. Here we go:

When the sheeps' hooves hit the road at the edge of the ranch on the last morning of May, we flung ourselves into three desperate days of trudging, yelling, dogging, cursing, fretting. Our Reservation range lay forty highway miles north, and every step of it threatened to joggle loose the dim panic at the center of each sheep's brain. Pushing the skittery thousands of animals up the strange dike of pavement became a guerrilla struggle against
every yapping farmyard dog, any blowing bit of paper—and worse, each and every auto that came along like a hippopotamus nosing among penguins.

Grandma would be seething against the motorists within the first half-mile: “God darn them, don’t they have enough brains to even take themselves through a band of sheep?” Tourists stopping innocently in the middle of the band to ask why the lead sheep had a bell on and all the others didn’t would find themselves fiercely invited to “git on through the sheep here, how would you like it if I laid down in your front yard and started asking you questions?”
The three of us were to live for the summer in a much-traveled small trailer house; Dad had it in tow behind the Jeep--our cat, named Kitten, an indignant yowling passenger inside--and roved nervously with this worn-looking convoy in the wake of the sheep, jumping out to whoop stragglers down the highway and hustling around to catch any exhausted lambs which needed to be ferried in the Jeep for a time. I did whatever he couldn't get to, and as well panted off in endless arcing jobs around the sheep to flag down cars in blind spots in the road.

I had made, each for Grandma and myself, a noisemaker called a "tin dog"--a ring of baling wire with half a dozen empty
evaporated milk cans threaded on so that it could be shaken, tambourine-like, into a clattering din. Mile upon mile, with our ruckus behind them, the dubious ewes and their panicky lambs edged north.

Water/described each day’s push on the sheep. From the ranch, we had to make the sixteen miles north to Birch Creek the first night, in order to bed the tired band where they could graze and drink. It meant funneled the sheep through the little town of Dupuyer at midmorning, the townfolk stepping out to give us a hand as the woolly sea of backs shied from gas pumps and parked cars and the thin neck of bridge across Dupuyer Creek; pushing on
across a broad chocolate-and-gold bench of farmland; and then into the long tight trench of fenced lane, a full afternoon of battling traffic and time.

The only ones happy with the summer trail were our dogs—Tip, who saw it as a feast of sly nips among the sheep, and Spot, who adoringly would begin to herd half the band up the highway by himself and loll tonguey grins at us for appreciation. The pair of them had their grandest moment of the year here where the sheep had to shoved like a vast ball of wool into the neck of a bottle. Time after time an exasperated ewe would prance out and, like a knight’s charger for a single haughty instant, stamp a front
hoof at the dogs in challenge. Then, it dawning on her that she was entirely helpless against the knife-toothed pair, she would whirl and waddle in panicked retreat. One of my chores was to try to keep Tip from tearing these bold ninnies to ribbons, and he regarded me with his puzzled hurt whenever I shouted him back in time. At last, after hours of working the tin dogs and the real dogs and ourselves--by sunset if we had been lucky--the sheep would spill off the highway to the graveled banks of Birch Creek.

The second day the same straining push to water, this time a dozen highway miles to Badger Creek. In places the road now whipped into sudden curves, and I would spend most of this day
flagging the coming cars in front of the sheep. We were on the Blackfeet Reservation now, and I passed my time between baffled tourists by wondering what our life here would be like. All I knew of Indians was that carloads of them whirled into Dupuyer most nights of the week....The state highway department sternly put up a white cross wherever an auto victim died, and some curves on the highway here on the Reservation were beginning to look like little country graveyards. And I had read avidly what a Reservation correspondent named Weasel Necklace wrote in one of the region's weekly newspapers about the doings of his tribesmen: “Some of the people went to town to do some
shopping, and they all managed to come back through Dupuyer. From there they came home fighting and singing.” The Blackfeet seemed a rambunctious people; I wondered what they thought of our white faces and gray sheep against the backcloth of their prairie past.

As we passed the accident crosses nearer and nearer to our Reservation lease, like silvered warnings along a route of pilgrimage, the landscape emptied and emptied until there was no hint of flowing water or tree cover. Then sometime beyond noon on the third day, a sudden earth-splitting trench of both: the Two Medicine, a middling green-banked river which somehow had
found itself a gorge worthy of a cataract. We came behind the sheep down a long sharp skid of slope, looking below to high clumps of cottonwoods on the river bank, a few tribal houses, even what seemed to be an entire tiny ranch or two. Lazing east, the Two Medicine would out of sight beneath a cliff face which banked about a hundred feet high, like a very old and eroded castle wall. We were told later that the site had been a buffalo jump, where the horseback Blackfeet stampeded the animals over the edge to death.

Then the final bridge of our route, across the mild flow of river, and the highway ramping up the facing canyon slope. The
Two Medicine carved the southern boundary of our summer geography, our lease rimming off there at the fortress cliffs. And so, late in the third day, the sheep at last fan onto the summer pasture. We call in the disappointed dogs and let the band ease, graze, rest. Now for the next hundred days and more, the slow munch of the ewes and lambs across the ridges will be our pace of life.