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LOOKING BACK: The Boise – Oñati Study Abroad Program, 1974-75

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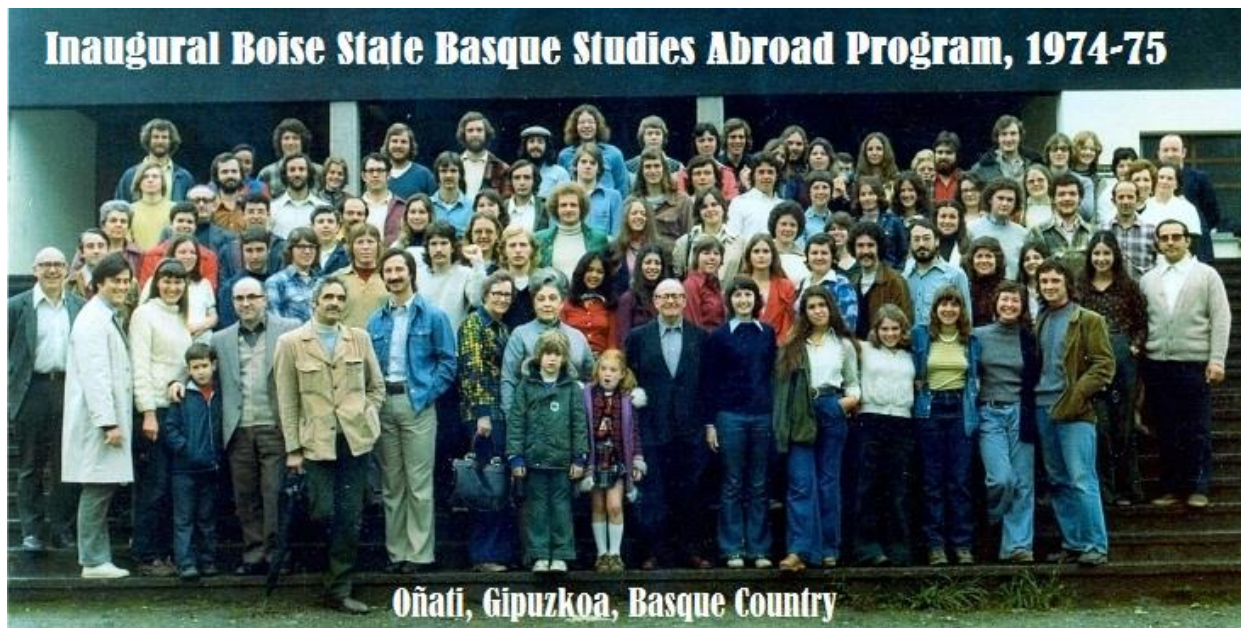
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**LOOKING BACK:
The Boise – Oñati study abroad
program, 1974-75**

PART I: From the Boise State Basque Studies website

<http://basquestudies.boisestate.edu/gutaz-basques/gutaz-our-program/onati-program/>

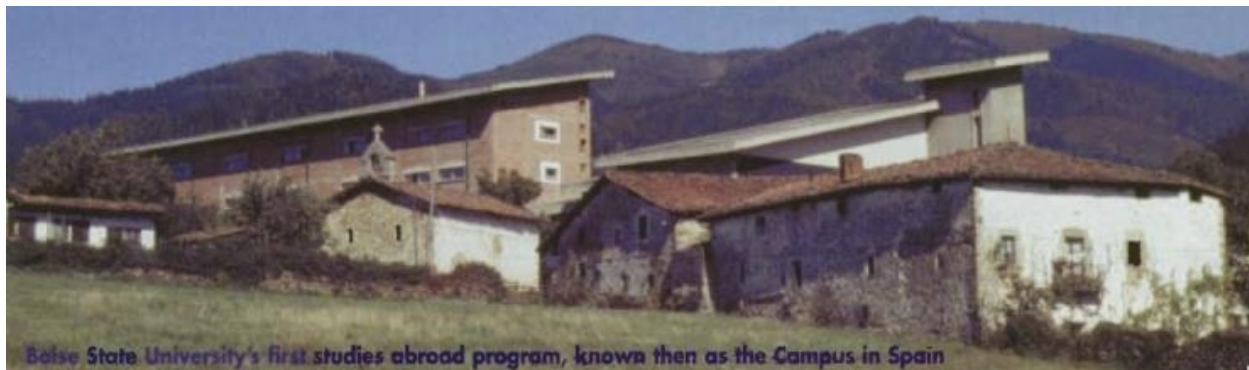


Having had success in being awarded a National Endowment of the Humanities (NEH) matching grant in the early 1970s, Boise State's Pat Bieter and four other Boiseans traveled to the Basque Country for a summer of studies. It was then that Professor Bieter meeting with Jon Bilbao, decided to work together to develop a year-long study abroad program.

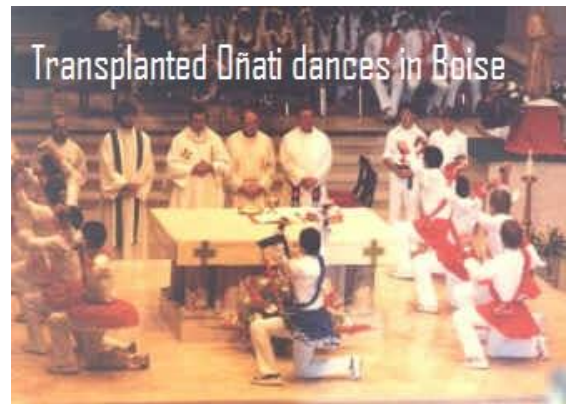


A fine facility was available in the Gipuzkoan town of Oñati, in the heart of a primarily Basque speaking region. "It was the perfect place to study," said Bieter, partly because the dialect spoken in Oñati is similar to the Bizkaian dialect of most Idaho Basques, and in the midst of Francisco Franco's repressive regime aiming to dissolve Basqueness, residents of the community were eager to keep their language alive according to Bieter.

In 1974 Boise State University inaugurated the program, with eighty students making the first trip including Dr. Bieter and his whole family. The classes and dormitories were all in one building, the Colegio San Lorenzo, and soon the students began to connect with the local community. In fact, thirty-five marriages between visiting students and Oñati natives soon followed. There were many other benefits as well, in particular how it benefitted participants then by extension the Boise Basque community upon their return. It helped to trigger a renewal among Boise's second and third generation Basques to learn Basque again; exposure and contacts with dance groups in the Basque Country spurred the Boise Oinkari Basque dancers to expand their repertoire to include other authentic dances.



The Oñati program continued for five years, then it was successfully merged with the creation of the University Studies Abroad Consortium (founding members were Boise State University, and the Universities of Nevada at Reno and Las Vegas) that today offers international learning opportunities for college students that includes program in Donostia/San Sebastian and Bilbao in the Basque Country.



TESTIMONIAL FROM ORIGINAL STUDENT:

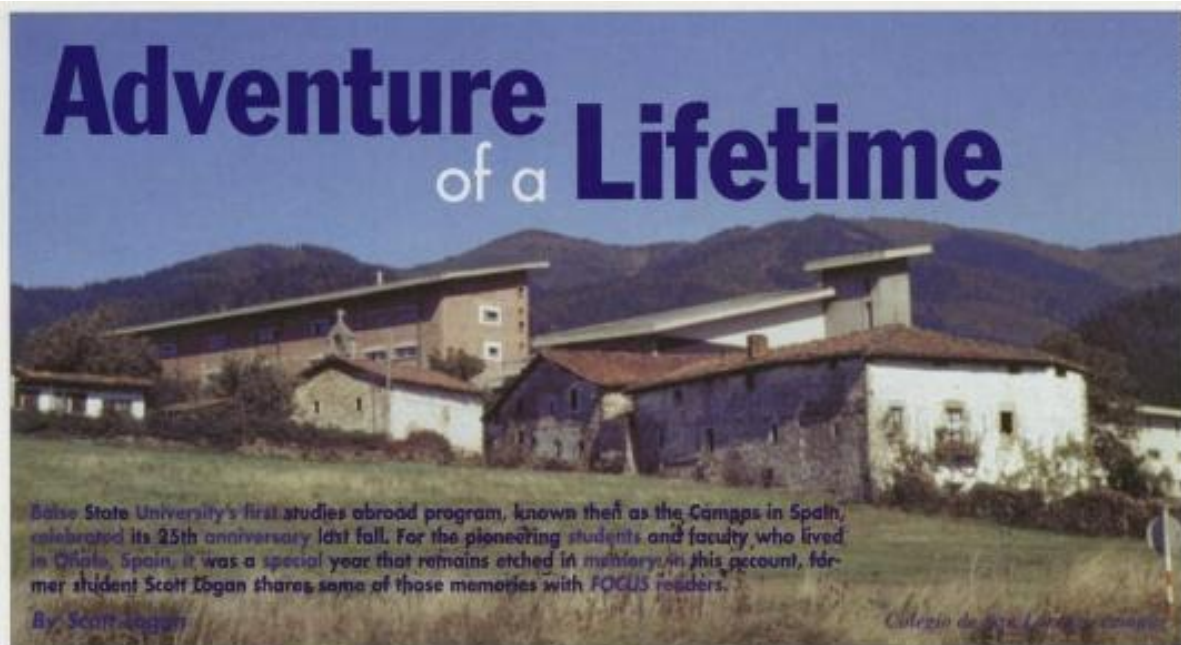
"Pat Beiter took his family, Carmelo Urza, now director of University Studies Abroad Consortium, Jon Bilbao, one of the Father's of Basque Studies at the University of Nevada, Jon Oñatibia, euskaldun "peto, petoa", Joe Eiguren, ditto and other faculty were also on board. Pat got the Agustinian Father's in Oñati and their new facility called San Lorenzo that also housed ETEO, a part of the Mondragon educational system to be the campus. One Spanish tank led the way into town, two bus loads of Americans, mostly students, and then another tank followed. That was how we enter Oñati only to eventually win over the hearts of most of the population. We even brought some of those hearts back here, and there were some that stayed there. It was a rocky start when we didn't know bombs had gone off [previously] in protest at our facility. Our group was fingered out as CIA agent, especially those of us that were fluent in the native languages, to the point our group pictures made the national Spanish magazines." ~Anita Anacabe Franzoia



Farewell: Singing "Agur Jaunak"

[Source: <http://sanlorenzotimes.ning.com/photo/singing-agur-jaunak?context=featured>]

PART II: "Adventure of a Lifetime" article from the Boise State University *Focus* magazine (Winter 2000).



Boise State's first campus abroad program in Oñate, Spain, began with a bang — literally.

A few days before 100 Boise State students and teachers arrived in September 1974, an explosion rocked the Colegio de San Lorenzo. To protest the presence of Americans in the Basque country, somebody set off a bomb in the building where the students were to study and live.

Nobody was hurt, but the incident was a dose of stark political reality for the wide-eyed students.

The Basque country, known as Euskadi, was in turmoil as the first class arrived in the tiny, isolated town in northern Spain. General Francisco Franco had ruled the country since the end of the Spanish Civil War in 1939. He took extreme measures to suppress the Basque culture and language, one of Europe's oldest and most unique tongues. He imprisoned and tortured many people who advocated Basque independence. In the early 1960s, the Basque separatist group known as ETA began armed action against the Franco regime.

As the Boise State program started, violence was everywhere — even in Oñate. But that didn't discourage students who were ready to begin their adventure, even if it meant living in a bombed-out building.

"At one point we were told we might have to all live on one floor, barracks style, like in the military. We didn't care; we were willing to take sleeping bags and rough it all year if we had to," says former student Mike Brunelle, who is now an industrial designer in Charlottesville, Va.

That Americans were in the Basque country at all was due to the efforts of then-Boise State education professor Pat Bieter, who along with wife, Eloise, was killed in an automobile accident one year ago.

Bieter had adopted his Basque wife's culture and was determined to begin a program that would give Boise State students an opportunity to live in a foreign country and, in this case, expose them to the Basque homeland.

He worked out a deal with the priests who ran the Colegio de San Lorenzo to rent space.

Then he recruited students and teachers. Boise State's first studies abroad program was a reality.

"It was Pat's baby one hundred percent," remembers Boise attorney Willis Sullivan III, who taught Spanish in the program. "He conceived it. He set it up. And he enlisted whomever he could to help him."

Sullivan believes Bieter's most inspired faculty selection was Joe Eiguren, who taught Basque. Eiguren was born in Jordan Valley, Ore., to Basque immigrant parents who returned to Spain when he was young. He was a self-educated man who wrote a history of the Basque Country and a Basque-English dictionary.

"Joe Eiguren had absolute respect on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean," says Sullivan. "Pat Bieter was the spark that started the program. But Joe Eiguren was the glue that held it together."

Other faculty members had equally impressive backgrounds.

John Woodward, who died of natural causes that year in Oñate, was a professor emeritus at Boise State. He taught English and drama. The day he died, the students kept an all-night vigil in a building at the town cemetery where his body rested.

Woodward's wife, Rebecca, taught a pottery and art class. After she accompanied her husband's body home, she returned to finish the year in Oñate.

Jon Onatibia was a Basque musician and language instructor who taught Basque in northern Spain through a radio program called Radio Ikastola. Jon Bilbao, on loan from the University of Nevada, was a veteran Basque scholar. Carmelo Urza, a local Basque who is now at the University of Nevada, taught Spanish along with Sullivan.

Only two — Urza and Sullivan — are alive today.

Students arrived under sunny skies as summer weather lasted well into the fall.



Campus in Spain founder Pat Bieter.

But eventually it turned cold and wet. Very wet. It rained 44 days straight. The bad weather turned the drafty building at San Lorenzo into an icebox.

Kay Hummel, now a Boise consultant, remembers: "We had no heat in the building for the first 40 days due to the government's inability to get a high-voltage power line to San Lorenzo. I remember sitting in bed with gloves on studying with my two roommates. It was a big relief to go to town to socialize or just walk around. It warmed us up."

In spite of the heating problems, which were ultimately fixed, the students fell in love with life at San Lorenzo.

"Having the classrooms in the same building as our rooms was great," Brunelle recalls. "I could wake up at 8:55 and make it to a 9 a.m. class. After a few months, some girls would come to class in bathrobes. Some would bring coffee and bread from the dining room. Others would show up with some hairy hangovers."

"We would often sit on the outside ledges to sun ourselves, until the priests banned the practice. San Lorenzo was like an island — an American place in the middle of Spain and Europe."

As the students settled into their academic schedule, they also began to bridge the considerable cultural gap with the people of Oñate.

Jesus Alcelay, now owner of Boise's popular Onati Basque restaurant, lived in Oñate when the first students came.

"All sorts of rumors were going around before the Americans arrived," he says. "Some said the Americans were drug addicts and alcoholics sent to Oñate to get off drugs and booze. Other rumors had the Americans being part of a CIA conspiracy."

Bieter and Eiguren soon held a meeting with the townspeople and quickly quashed the rumors.

Alcelay remembers the first American student he saw. "We Basques in Oñate prided ourselves on dressing well, in fine clothes. Here came this guy walking down the street with big holes in his blue jeans. I mean, so casual. And the way he walked, we couldn't believe it."

Alcelay later learned the student's name was Billy Peterson. In his drama classes, Woodward quickly saw the raw acting talent in the young Bishop Kelly graduate and took him under his wing. Peterson went on to become a successful stage and screen actor.

Peterson also brought over his girlfriend, Joanne Brady. They married in Oñate and she gave birth to their daughter, Maite. The name means love in Basque. It was that kind of year.

Students and faculty became like family. And there was, of course, a family within the family — the Bieter family. Pat and Eloise brought their five children with them.

"When I look back," says Mary Bieter, now a teacher at Bishop Kelly High School, "I realize what a risk my dad took, not only with 75 college students, but with the five of us."

"We ranged in age from 7 to 18, and the four youngest had no Spanish or Basque language skills whatsoever. Finding schools to put us in was a real challenge. Mark [her brother] was in second grade and went to the Basque school. Mom used to talk about his first day there when all the kids made a ring around him and just stared. I'm sure she wondered what her husband had gotten us all into."

As an American Basque, Eloise Bieter had tremendous credibility with the people of Oñate.

"There is no way that Dad could have made it without Mom," says Bieter. "Dad barely spoke Basque and knew no Spanish. Mom was Dad's interpreter, at least for Basque."

The Bieter kids weren't the only ones frustrated with a culture and language that appeared so impenetrable. Most of the American students felt they would never learn the language they had chosen to study, be it Basque or Spanish. Everything just seemed so overwhelming.

But they learned, as Pat Bieter knew they would.

Remarkable friendships flourished between the American students and the people of Oñate. Mutual respect and admiration grew.

Love affairs blossomed and later turned into marriages. Brunelle is one of many American students who found their spouses in Oñate. He married Beatriz Cortabarria.

"There was a lot of shared emotions between the Americans and the people of Oñate," Brunelle says. "A birth, a death, a wedding, a baptism and all of the political stuff going on as Franco faded away."

"Oñate changed forever," says Alcelay, who ultimately married an American student and immigrated to Boise.

"Imagine all those Americans in a little town of 7,000 Basques."

"What a gift our father gave us!" says Mary Bieter. "Our perspective of the world changed. We learned the importance of learning another language. We made lifelong friends in Oñate."

The first year of the Campus in Spain succeeded beyond everyone's wildest dreams. The program was transferred to San Sebastian a few years later and remains a cornerstone in Boise State's Studies

Abroad program that now includes sites in 18 countries.

Twenty-five years later, the students on that first venture on foreign soil remember the academic and cultural adventure of a lifetime. And they realize their year in Oñate was unique. They were the first large group of Americans to descend on a small Basque town in the turbulent moment of world history that was the end of the Franco era. It can't be done again.

For the students, the defining memories of that first year in Oñate are of the relationships they established with the Basque people, relationships that wouldn't have been possible without the dedicated teachers who guided them throughout the year.

Today, they are as alive in memory as they were 25 years ago in Oñate. There's Joe Eiguren, taking those long dignified strides, walking into town with a group of enthusiastic college kids in tow. And Pat Bieter, a beret on his bald head, scuttling off to play cards with his Basque buddies downtown. He's put in a long day at San Lorenzo and is looking forward to some time to relax.

But Pat can't stop thinking about those kids back at that college he created just outside town. Can't stop wondering what antics they're up to, what stories they're telling, what wonders they're experiencing in this beautiful, ancient land he loves.

Those teachers, gone now, will always be remembered for the adventure of a lifetime they gave their students.

Scott Logan attended the Oñate program from 1974-75 and returned to live in San Sebastian, Spain, from 1977-79. He has reported from three continents as a foreign correspondent and currently is a reporter for KBCI television in Boise.



Students enjoying a lunch break, Oñate style, included, from left, Delores Totorica, Ann Johnson, Joan Winder, Irene Totorica, John Blackburn and Cory Naftinger. On the ledge at far left is professor Jon Onatibia.

RON WINDER PHOTO