Young couples crowded the dance floor at the 1936 Sheepherders’ Ball as music filled the air with tunes from their homeland. But something was missing for Juanita “Jay” Ubersaga. The dancers, try as they might, didn’t know the steps to the traditional Basque dances like the jota and porrusalda. She explained to her friends how sloppy the dancers were and how disappointed she was that their parents had not taught them how to dance properly. She even confronted some sheepherders who were incorporating “western American elements” into traditional Basque dances. The men challenged her to teach them the correct dances.

Years later, Jay accepted the challenge. And by so doing, she began a transformation of the Boise Basque community. Her dance lessons provided a valuable metaphorical sense of glue—a community that learned to dance together would continue to stay together.

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Dancers and other groups.

With her initial class in 1948, Jay became the first person to teach formal
Basque dancing lessons in the Boise area. By instructing thousands of stu-
dents until she died in 1997, Jay pre-
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Basques have been referred to as a ‘living museum’ because
even though their neighbors in Europe once had very similar traditions at
one time, the Basques kept theirs alive. There’s an incredible diversity to
Basque folk dance. Often, specific dances from a particular town or region
have their own music, steps and distinct costumes. Depending on how they
are counted, there are approximately 400 distinct Basque folk dances, each
with its own story and significance. Such a variety of Basque folk dances
demonstrates the Basques’ deep love of dance.

What is a Basque dance about? The answer begins at a different time
and place. Generally, Basque folk dances have derived from a context or
foundation that includes three key elements:

Rural-Agrarian—Today many people live in urban areas, which is a more
recent development in human history. Most dances came from a world
well before asphalt streets and concrete high-rises. They were created
by people primarily from a rural and agrarian background.
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Boise-born Juanita “Jay” Uberuaga Hormaechea understood the power of dance as a birthright and cultural bond. Opposite: Basque Abarkak dancing shoes.

Commem Emphasis—One of the biggest revolutions of modern times is the shift in emphasis from the community to the individual. Pre-modern, traditional societies always accentuated the importance and supremacy of the community. That is reflected in many dances; solos are rare, while dancing together in unison is the norm.

Ritual-Social Distinction—There are many ways of categorizing Basque folk dances. One general way is to divide dances along the lines of ritual (religious) and social (recreational). The majority of traditional folk dances are ritual in origin, and most all of those were initially reserved for men.

While most Basque folk dances can be traced back across centuries, some are more recent in origin, including what has essentially become the de facto national Basque dances: the fandango/jota and arin-arin/porrusalda. The fandango and jota are similar, but vary in that the former has four distinct parts while the latter has three based on the music; the same distinction applies to the arin-arin/porrusalda. No Basque gathering with dancing is complete without these popular numbers. The Basques borrowed the fandango/jota from Spain’s Aragon region, which lies below Euskal Herria (the Basque Country). With their love of dance, the Basques appropriated it and made it their own. The jota and the accompanying porrusalda became the central elements of Jay’s dance lessons.

Jay was born in 1908 to immigrant parents who ran a boarding house at 211 South Sixth Street. She learned the traditional dances, including the jota and porrusalda, as a young girl, practicing the art form during the Saturday dances held in the local boarding houses. As a young woman, she performed traditional Basque dances for organizations such as the Boise Elks Lodge and at police balls and charity events. By the mid-1930s, Jay became concerned that the culture she was so proud of was disappearing. A 1939 newspaper article saved in her scrapbook reinforced her concerns about the loss of the traditional Basque ways: “American influences are transforming...
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the Basque and within another generation or two ... as soon as the Basque Pioneers pass on ... the Basque individuality will be gone. The Basques will have almost been completely absorbed.”

But Jay proved the article wrong, one dance step at a time. When she began teaching in 1948, she found a willing clientele eager to learn the dances of their homeland. Lessons for 50 cents each were held for two to three hours on Sunday evenings at the VFW Hall. Soon, her students, or her “kids” as she liked to call them, grew from 18 to 40 dancers. In a newspaper interview she told the reporter, “The kids don’t miss a single time after they first come ... I have to tell them to go home; that’s how thrilled they are.”

Students in Jay’s first classes, taught in a ballroom in Boise’s Hyde Park neighborhood, ranged from teenagers to adults in their early 30s. Espe Alegria and Jay’s two sisters, Marie Alegria and Petra Cengotita, assisted with the instruction. Her classes featured live traditional music played by Jimmy Jausoro on accordion and Domingo Ansotegui on tambourine. There was no single Basque version of the jota; it was a borrowed dance since many of the Basque neighbors throughout Western Europe had their own variations. But for the purposes of basic instruction, one standard had to be adopted. So when they dance the jota and porrusalda today in the Boise Basque community, many are repeating the particular step arrangements set in place generations ago: it’s pretty much the “Jay Hormaecheo Jota.”

The revival of traditional dancing not only preserved a piece of Basque culture, but it also provided a way for the Basques to connect to the larger Boise community—and for the general community to relate to the Basques. The 1949 Boise Music Week provides an early example of how “becoming Basque” is a two-way street, with Basques themselves choosing to stay connected to the ethnic heritage and non-Basques choosing to embrace their neighbors as part of their community. The annual Music Week’s planning board suggested that the Basques stage a “fiesta night” to showcase their culture. Jay chaired the event, which involved 200 Basques in the production. Called “Song of the Basque,” the show featured Basque music, song and dance in traditional attire. The May 9, 1949, performance at the 2,000-seat Boise High School auditorium was packed, with an estimated 3,000 disappointed patrons turned away. The Euzkaldunak organization offered another performance so more in the community could see it. Again,
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the auditorium filled to beyond capacity. Even the dress rehearsal drew a crowd of 1,000.

The newspapers of the day sang the praises of the “Song of the Basque” performance and Jay received many letters of congratulations from people throughout the community. One person wrote: “You and your group have given Music Week another night that will be remembered for more years as one of the few really outstanding achievements of our history. The whole performance carried out a note of sincere beauty that is impossible to describe. All of you should be very proud.” Jay received requests for newspaper clippings from Basque organizations all over the U.S. The next year she staged a similar Music Week program, only held outdoors, that drew an audience of 5,000.

The Music Week experience in a very real sense introduced the Basques to their community neighbors. While the language was not readily understood, the dancing needed no real translation. Basque dance then and now remains one of the easiest means of accessing Basque culture for Basque and non-Basque alike. Consequently, over the ensuing years, Boise’s Basque community developed a strong sense of ethnic pride. Buoyed by the work of the Jay Hormaechea’s of the Boise Basque world, Basque culture—song, dance, language, food and customs—survived, even thrived, in the ensuing decades. Not only had Jay and her crew established the foundation for the ongoing dance lessons that today go by the name of Boiseko Gaztek (the young Basques of Boise), but they also blazed the trail for the Oinkari Basque Dancers, Idaho’s Basque dance ambassadors.

What Jay started required others to sustain, and for many years—nearly 40—the group was coordinated by Gina Ansotegui Urquidi. The daughter of Domingo Ansotegui, who was part of Boise’s Basque musical duo with Jimmy Jausoro, Gina grew up with Basque music and dance. “If you could walk, you could go Basque dancing. For us, it was just a way of life,” she explained. Her passion for dance helped keep the culture alive as she and other volunteers continued to teach children. Today, the Boiseko Gaztek...
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Jay's Jota

More than 800 dancers have performed not only in Boise or Idaho but also throughout the United States at Basque and non-Basque venues alike. They have also traveled to perform in the Basque Country on several occasions, as well as in countries of the worldwide Basque diaspora. They've even performed in China as guests of the Basque government, illustrating the global expansion and retention of Basque ethnic heritage.

During a 1948 interview, Jay talked about how the older Basques were apprehensive about her teaching traditional dancing. Eventually, given enough time and positive results, the apprehension changed to support. The classes brought parents together as they socialized while waiting for their children. These social ties contributed to the push to create a formal social organization known as Euzkaldunak that went on to build the Boise Basque Center. Dance helped to bring Basque people together, and Basque dance still plays that same role in perpetuating Basque identity in the Boise Basque community. At the same time, dance has also served to meld Basques with the larger Boise community. Basque folk dance is a visible, dynamic and easily accessible form of Basque culture that is engaging for Basques and non-Basque alike. It will remain a central element in "becoming Basque," just as Jay hoped for more than 65 years ago.

Heidi Coon graduated from Boise State in fall 2013 with a bachelor's degree in social science with emphases in criminal justice and sociology. She plans to attend graduate school at Boise State in a year or two.

**Future mayor David H. Bieter of Boise, a third-generation Basque and an Oinkari dancer, poses at the Boise Depot, 1975.**

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