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The Basques In Idaho

By PAT BIETER

Idaho State Historical Society

The Basques In Idaho

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THE MOUNTAIN WEST presents an interesting problem to the student of history. For here lives a group of people which has presented an enigma to scholars since the time of the Romans. They settled here thousands of miles from their homeland in a place which bears little resemblance to anything they ever saw before, and then took jobs which were alien to many of them. These are the Basques of Idaho, Nevada, California, and other states, whose history, although it begins before Christ in Europe, scarcely dates back eighty years in America. What brought these people to the west? One must look to the Basque country of Europe for the answer.

The Basque country lies in northwestern Spain where the Pyrenees Mountains jut sharply into the Bay of Biscay. The same border which divides France from Spain also separates the four Spanish Basque provinces—Guipuzcoa, Viscaya, Alava, and Navarre—from the three French Basque provinces of

Labaurd, Basse-Navarre, and Soule. However, since the Basque immigration into Idaho has been nearly entirely from among the Spanish provinces, we shall consider only these.

In a section one hundred miles along the coastline and approximately eighty miles in depth live 450,000 people of one of the purest and oldest races known in Europe. The Basque history is lost in antiquity, purely a matter of historical speculation. Anthropologists are not even positive how they got into Spain. Certain facts, however, are known by historians about them.

They have lived within the same area since before the time of the Roman conquests, for:

Roman historians make frequent references to a tribe living in or near what is now the Basque country, a tribe speaking a peculiar language which their neighbors did not understand.¹

¹ Rodney Gallop, *A Book of the Basques* (London: MacMillan, 1940), 9.

The Basque Symbolic Tree at Guernica

Mendoza Castle

The rugged Pyrenees together with the fierce disposition of the Basque tribes themselves seem to have protected them from the ravages of the Gothic hordes. Feudalism never took hold of the Basque provinces, for the nature of the land was such that large estates were impossible. The hilly land could best be farmed in small individual plots. Besides, much of the Basque economy was directed toward the sea. For centuries they had fished the waters of Biscay and searched the North Atlantic for whale. Basque ships had reached Newfoundland and fished the Grand Banks a full two centuries before English-speaking fishermen began to take the Newfoundland cod.²

² Janette Guthman, "Basque People of the Northwest," *The National Woolgrower* (December, 1945), 35:14; interview with Professor Lawrence Kinnaird, University of Oregon.

THE SPANISH BASQUES were probably converted to Christianity before the seventh century. In Lequeitio, in the province of Viscaya, there is a Catholic church which was built in the year 730. Early in the Basque history two important principles, which were to be carried with their sons to America, were established—a fierce love of freedom based on individual land ownership, and a deep feeling for their religion. Their political history, however, was not fortunate.

They had been unable to withstand the rising Spanish monarchy but had been conceded what we today might call dominion status. They had a representative assembly much in the model of the Greek city states with a council of elders who presided. Their liberty was symbolized by the oak tree of Guernica, later to be blotted out by the Fascists in the

American Basque Fraternity Auxiliary, 1933

Spanish civil war. Thus, from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century, the Basques remained aloof from European politics. Theirs was a small semi-independent island in the sea of conflict during this period. They were, however, still under the Spanish sovereigns. During the Carlist Wars of the nineteenth century they saw the possibility of complete independence and became embroiled in the conflicts. Here the Basques first showed their propensity for picking the losing side in civil wars, and after 1876 lost not only their dominion status but also any hope for complete independence. The Basque language was officially suppressed, Basque enthusiasm for Spanish rule dwindled. It was during this period, just after the second Carlist War, that the Basque immigration to the United States began.

In any migration there are factors which both drive one from his native soil and attract him towards other shores. In the case of the Basques both sorts of forces were at work.

A modified form of the law of primogeniture was in effect in Euzkadi (which is what the Basques call their homeland). That is, the father would nominate after careful consideration one of his sons or daughters to take over the farm or business after his death. This process left the remaining children with the alternative of either staying as tenants on the family farm, or leaving.³ Generally they stayed until conditions in Spain became such that other countries were more attractive. Another pressing factor was the compulsory service in the Spanish army, for a period of four years.⁴ That service could, however, be waived for a price which, if it were paid, would allow the youth to leave the country and return without the stigma of desertion. It is significant that many Basques coming to the United States paid this fee, showing that they probably intended to return eventually to Spain.

³ Interview with Boni Garmendia of Boise, an early Basque immigrant to the Boise Valley.

⁴ Interview with the late John D. Archabal, Berkeley, California, his family paid this fee when he left Spain.

Picnic at Mode Country Club, Boise, 1933

Fiesta, Boise, about 1930

PICNIC

Big Basque picnics were popular events in early days, before there were too many Basques for one picnic. This panoramic view was made in 1934 at the Mode Country Club, Boise.

Boise Music Week, 1948

Echevarria Family Reunion

Six Echevarria Brothers and Wives

Another factor causing many Basques to leave was poverty coupled with the imminent possibility of the despised Spaniards overrunning their hitherto isolated homeland. The stories of the wealth to be gotten in the American west were known among this practical people. News of California's gold rush and the silver riches in Nevada reached them at the time when it would appeal to them most. Consequently, many Basque youths set out to make their way to California, which to them was the American west.⁵ It is significant that in this early period Idaho is nowhere mentioned as a stopping place, nor is the sheep industry (today so commonly considered attractive to the Basques) considered as a means of livelihood.

WHEN THESE VANGUARDS of the Basque movement reached California they found the road to riches was a bumpy one. Gold was not in the streets. Their language presented a nearly impossible barrier to their getting work. They found themselves in a strange country, speaking a strange language, equipped to do little but farm or fish. A group made their way from California to northern Nevada looking for work. Some of them took jobs as farm laborers. These men were sturdy and fearless, accustomed to life in the outdoors. Sheep ranchers tried them as herders to replace some of their untrustworthy Indian and Mexican hands, and were pleased with the result. The bands of sheep came back fat and intact. The Basques took, if they did not welcome, these jobs because herding required no prior education—only honesty and

⁵ Letters from Euzkadi are still received addressed to persons in "Boise, Idaho, California, U.S.A."

a strong body. They found themselves at no disadvantage because of their lack of English, for there were only the dog and the stars to talk to. But they were new at herding sheep. Few of these Spanish Basques, in contrast to their French brothers, had ever herded anything but a team of oxen or a fishing boat loaded with tuna. As one older Idaho Basque once said, though, "Dammit, we had to eat!"

The towns of McDermitt, Nevada, and Jordan Valley, Oregon, became centers of dispersal for these early immigrants.⁶ They gradually worked their way into the Boise Valley, where they found employment as herders and laborers in and around Boise City, which in the last decades of the nineteenth century was becoming a rapidly growing center in the Snake and Boise River Valleys.⁷ The news soon reached the people at home that there were jobs available to Basque youths as herders in Idaho and Nevada. Then the rush was on. Young Basques began to leave Spain by the hundreds, head-

ing this time not for California, but for the fleecy gold of Nevada and Idaho. Many went to work a few days after they arrived here. One can easily imagine the feelings of these men when they first found themselves in the hills with a band of sheep. They had been accustomed to the lively communal life of the temperate Basque country—a life of feast days and dancing, of pelota games and good wine. They had worked hard and long but seldom alone. Now they found themselves in the dry desert mountains of Nevada and Idaho, alone with perhaps 2,500 sheep put in their charge for six to eight months. They had chances to go to town, but few of them went. They couldn't talk to anyone anyway, and they were unable to enjoy the laughter of the local people as they fumbled with the English language. So they remained in the hills, hoping for the day when they could send home for a wife or girl friend and run their own band of sheep. It is not easy to get a Basque to talk about his feelings during those first days of herding, because too many times they were painfully lonely and unhappy days. To those who came to town only embarrassment lay in their attempts to learn the language. Once a Basque herder

⁶ Interview with Bob Gingery, Richmond, California, who for some years ran a bar and general store in McDermitt, Nevada.

⁷ Guthman, "Basque People," 35:13.

*Grandfather,
Grandson,
and Son-in-law*

who had been out with the sheep for several months came into Mountain Home, Idaho, and made a practice of eating in one restaurant in the hope of picking up some English words. After two or three weeks without success he confided to a friend that he could never learn to speak English. His friend told him that Chinese ran the restaurant and they couldn't speak English either!

SOME OF THE MORE ENTERPRISING Basques began through thrift and industry to acquire a few sheep of their own and eventually were in a position to help others to come to America. Among these were typical Basque names: John B. Archabal, Antone Uranga, Miguel Gabica, José Bengoechea, Joe Uberuaga, Antonio Ascuenga, and José Navarro. Stories of their thrift and skill became famous. It is said that John Archabal's total expenses for one year were \$50. Basques became skillful in getting the maximum use out of range land, sometimes even illegally. The story is told of a Basque herder who took the bells off his sheep at night and ran them into the lush grass of the Idaho State Penitentiary.

This early movement of the Basques was nearly entirely male, for few, it seems, intended to stay here. Eventually, though, wives and sweethearts were sent for and Basque families began to settle in southwestern Idaho towns. Boise soon became the center of Basque immigration. Boarding houses sprang up to shelter the new arrivals who now came straight by train to Boise. Every newcomer of those days has a different story to tell of his passage over and his train ride west. As boys, they left a homeland

where a trip of fifty miles was a momentous undertaking. After crossing the Atlantic and landing in New York, they would embark by train for Boise, having no idea where to get off because they had no slightest conception of how far it was. They carried all their possessions on their back or in a battered suitcase held together with a rope. Sophisticated eastern travelers must have been both amused and abused, for often zealous mothers would pack a string of *chorizos* (Basque sausage) and some bread for the trip. They traveled in coaches for the most part, where the strong smelling *chorizos*, many times tossed over the back of a young Basque along with a guitar, must have made quite a hit with his fellow travelers.

One of them told of his mother's warning, before his departure, to be careful of his faith in that irreligious country. When he was on the train heading for Idaho he noticed many people's lips moving much like those of the women he had seen saying the Rosary in his own village church. He wrote his mother after arriving, saying she need not fear for her son's faith because many of the people on the train were praying. He later learned that these people were chewing gum, something he had neither seen nor heard of before. None of these Basques could speak English and few of them were skilled. They usually arrived by prearrangement in Boise during lambing time and often only one or two days would elapse before they were put to work. After lambing, they selected dogs and headed for the hills with an experienced herder and camp tender.

As the Basque population began to grow

Jose Erquiaga

a serious religious problem presented itself. They were almost to a man Catholic, and were moving into a predominantly Protestant area. They had a problem even among Catholics because none of the parish priests could speak Basque, making confession impossible. In 1911, Alphonse J. Glorieux, Bishop of Boise Diocese, arranged with the Bishop of Vittoria in Spain for the services of a Basque priest. He sent the Reverend Bernardo Arregui to attend to the religious needs of the Idaho Basques. He was rugged physically and sympathetic to the problems of the Basque herder. Father Arregui made frequent trips into the hills bringing the comforts of religion to the isolated herders.⁸

FOR THE MOST PART the Basques kept to themselves. They lived in the southeastern section of Boise, where several Basque boarding houses became the center of their town activity. The establishment of these boarding houses greatly aided in bringing Basque women to the United States, by providing employment as cooks and housekeepers. Pelota courts were constructed alongside them; the Basques in America had not for-

gotten their national game. The picture of herders sitting around Anduiza's *fronton*, drinking from *botas* of wine and shouting encouragement while betting on their favorites, brings vivid memories to Boise Basques. Three *frontons* were built in Boise and one in Jordan Valley. The latter is still in excellent condition, although a Basque there says that a game hasn't been played in it since the start of World War II.

This trait of keeping to themselves allowed slower assimilation into society and delayed the eventual influx of Basques into other occupations. Practically all of them started out in the United States herding sheep.⁹ Sheep owners did not encourage their Basque herders to learn English, for with the English language came the possibility of other jobs, and a good herder was very valuable. But twenty-five percent did stop herding as soon as other jobs became available, often within two years after their arrival.¹⁰ Today the coin is inverted: less than five per cent of second-generation Basques are sheepherders.

The twenty years from 1900 to 1920 saw the greatest influx of Basques into the Boise

⁹ Interview with Boni Garmendia.

¹⁰ John B. Edlefsen, *A Sociological Study of the Basques of Southwest Idaho* (Ph.D. Thesis, State College of Washington, 1948).

⁸ Cyprian Bradley and Edward J. Kelly, *History of the Diocese of Boise* (Boise, 1953), 307.

Valley, but it is difficult to determine exactly how many came because they were given the general title "Spanish" in the Bureau of immigration statistics. Besides, it is impossible to tell how many jumped ship! One Basque gave the number of slightly illegal entrants at close to 750 since 1948 alone.

SHEEPHERDING did not hold the Basques for long and many got into other jobs as soon as possible. Herding, it seemed, was just a method of getting to America. As one Basque got out of herding another was ready to take his place. Thus a constant stream came to the United States until 1921, when immigration restrictions began to check the movement.

In 1921 the United States made a drastic change in its immigration policy. Up to that time practically any person who was in good physical and mental health, not illiterate, of good moral character, and not racially ineligible for naturalization could enter the country. During the war a reaction against immigration set in which led to a widespread demand for restriction. It was largely due to the belief that the country had been admitting immigrants more rapidly than it could assimilate them and to the fear that following the war the country would be swamped with immigrants desiring to escape the distress in Europe.¹¹

Thus the quota system was born.

For all practical purposes the quota system ended further extensive southern European immigration. However, the sheep owners began to find themselves in a difficult situation. Herders were quitting, drawn to more attractive and higher paying jobs because, as one herder told me, "there *had* to be something in the United States better than herding sheep" and so, under pressure from wool growers, Congress passed a bill to "provide relief for the sheep industry by making special quota immigration visas available to certain alien sheepherders."¹² The bill was spearheaded by Idaho and Nevada Congressmen. It allowed 250 Basque herders to be admitted, providing they were guaranteed permanent employment and were skilled herders. Many Basques have come into the United States during the last twenty years on the basis of this legislation although strangely enough, few of them are "skilled"

herders. A Basque who came in under this quota system said, perhaps none too facetiously, that he had to go to a farm in Spain to count the number of legs on a sheep because he had never seen one! These men after serving their time in the sheep camps have gotten into all forms of occupations.

The Basques, it seems, have never had an inferior position in western society. People recognized early their values of sincerity and industry. Furthermore, they entered a frontier area where labor was scarce, which made them doubly desirable as citizens. The period of enclavement for them was short.¹³ Today, second generation Basque-Americans have, somewhat sad to say, been completely Americanized. Rarely do they speak accented English, but they are proud of their old-country customs and their language, and they have managed to keep them alive through such groups as Euzkaldunak, a social organization in Boise. When, for example, Juanita Uberuaga Aldrich saw that Basque children were growing up unable to dance their native dances, she organized classes through Euzkaldunak to teach them. Euzkaldunak also sponsored the Boise appearance of the Basque ballet and singing group.

FOR THE BASQUE, language and music represent their way of life. Both are an integral part of the Basque home in America as well as in Europe. The Basque language is one of the most difficult in the world. It defies anyone not raised speaking it to pronounce its mouth-puckering, tongue-trilling sounds. But, this language, which presented such a barrier to the early Basques in America is now becoming one of the major things which help to keep Basque culture alive here in a new land.

The Basque people are now Americans. Their grandchildren will probably not be able to speak Basque, and, like every other nationality, they will become amalgamated in the American melting pot. They may even lose many of their colorful old-country customs—but not if they can help it. They are today a unique part of southwest Idaho—accepted and yet different. They are proud of their heritage and at the same time proud of their new homeland, and Idaho is proud of them.

¹¹ Frank L. Auerbach, *The Immigration and Nationality Act* (New York: Common Council for American Unity, 1952), 7, 20; Edlefsen, *Basques of Southwest Idaho*, 67.

¹² 64 U. S. Statutes at Large (1950), 306.

¹³ Edlefsen, *Basques of Southwest Idaho*.

High Kick

Dance of the Warriors

Wood Chopping Contest, Hailey

Playing the Txisto

NEW YORK 1964

Oinkara Basque Dancers at the World's Fair—the "Arco Dantza"

Mrs. Narcisa Gestal

PIONEERS

The Uberuaga Brothers and Their Wives

WEDDING BELLS

July 19, 1913

*Mr. and Mrs. Joe Uberuaga
(seated)*

July 4, 1910

Mr. and Mrs. John Uberuaga

December 23, 1911

Mr. and Mrs. Domingo Onederra

June 12, 1915

Mr. and Mrs.

Felipe Arriola

These 1926 photos show the Modern Hotel, Boise, when it was a favorite Basque boarding house. Many more early Basque photos like these are needed to make a later edition of this book more complete. Can you help?