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The Basque Center fills some of the cultural void left by the closure of the boarding houses. With dancing, drinking, card tournaments and festival celebrations, the Grove Street landmark remains a social-networking hub.

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# CENTER

by Christine Hummer

**O**ctogenarians socialize over a game of cards; pre-teens learn complicated dance steps; children gather to learn the ancient language of their ancestors through songs; a bride and groom kiss at their wedding reception; an internationally known dance troupe polishes its routines and somber friends and family gather to memorialize a departed loved one. All of this—and much more—is a regular part of the routine under the roof of Boise’s Basque Center, the focal point of the Basque community since it opened its doors in 1950.

The Center was born of the Basques’ need for social interaction, of their desire for a place to share, to celebrate, to simply “be Basque.” For decades, the boarding houses served as surrogate homes for new immigrants and sheepherders. By the mid-1940s, most of the permanent Basque families had left the boarding houses to establish residences throughout the Treasure Valley but still longed to stay connected to fellow Basques. They rented halls from fraternal organizations to hold their weekend dances, but

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that didn't fill the need for a central meeting place. In 1949, 500 charter members founded *Euzkaldunak* (those who speak the Basque language), a social club limited to people of Basque extraction and their families. That year, club members found an ideal location where they could build a center to meet and socialize—the corner of Sixth and Grove, on the Uberuaga boarding house garden plot in the heart of the downtown Basque neighborhood. The determined group sold \$200,000 worth of bonds in the community to purchase the lot and build the long-awaited Basque Center, one of the early efforts by a Basque community in the U.S. to build a place to carry on its cultural traditions. The first phase, finished in 1950, featured a basement meeting room, a bar and an upstairs card room. Two years later, they added the main dance hall, a basement dining hall and kitchen. The Center was funded and built from the ground up—no bank loans were needed—because of a very strong volunteer community that still thrives in the current Boise Basque culture. The Center's construction drew some opposition, mostly from boarding house owners nervous about losing clientele who would no longer attend their dances and other events.

Today, most of the Basque Center, including the bar, is open to the public, but parts of it remain a members-only social club. *Euzkaldunak* is one of the largest Basque social organizations in the U.S., with a membership of approximately 1,000 in 2014. Only about 40 of the original charter members are still living. With its Spanish Mission style, the Basque Center is a familiar architectural landmark in Boise. Its original cinder block exterior was upgraded in the 1970s to look like a Basque Country farmhouse (*baserri*) complete with white stucco exterior and red Spanish tile roof. This familiar look provides a sense of home and inclusion for the Basque community, especially for those who remember their days in the Basque Country.

The Center fosters the preservation of Basque traditions, a space for those who long for the heritage that makes the Basque culture so distinct. It is common to walk into the Basque Center and see half a dozen first- and second-generation older gentlemen taking a break from their *Mus* card game (played in the upstairs "members only" card room) to grab a coffee or a glass of red wine. Whether they go there daily or weekly, simply being at the Basque Center has become a ritual integral to their daily lives. As a social hub, it is common for local Basques to meet at the Center after work, after church or before dinner. And passersby often peek into the bar just to see who is there, or to join their friends to enjoy one of the least expensive libations in Boise.

Since opening more than 60 years ago, the Basque Center has played a key role in the lives of multiple generations. Three women spanning three



Idaho State Historical Society

A smiling hostess poses for *Statesman* photographer Leo J. "Scoop" Leeburn at the Basque Lounge on Boise's Ninth Street, 1953. The postwar bar predated the Basque Center on Grove.

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Basque Museum & Cultural Center



The Basque Center began with \$40,000 in local donations and a ten-year high-yield bond. Pictured: digging the foundation, 1950. Inset: the cinder-block building as it appeared in the 1950s and '60s.

generations—Lydia Jausoro, now deceased; daughter Juliana Aldape and granddaughter Jill Aldape—talked about the Basque Center and its role in their lives in an October 2013 interview. Lydia, who with her husband Louis were charter members, said in the early days Basques were slow to warm to the idea of the Center. “They weren’t drawn to it at first. A lot of them weren’t for it ... they didn’t think it was necessary or didn’t want to support it financially. Then, it gradually got better and better. Eventually just about everybody who was Basque joined.” Today, the Center provides a home base for new generations of Basques to sample their culture and nurture friendships, added Jill, who is making her own contribution to Basque culture as the lead singer of the popular band Amuma Says No. “This space is a touch-point for all things Basque. It has made a huge difference. We are lucky it is located where it is; it is pretty accessible, really convenient.”



Basque Museum & Cultural Center

Remodeling crew at the Basque Center, 1971.

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Like so many families, the three women have experienced life-changing events in the Center. Jill and her mother, Juliana, held their wedding receptions there. The community celebrated Lydia's 90th birthday at the Center with a Roaring '20s party in 2010 and honored her life at a November 2013 funeral dinner. In between were dances and dance lessons, dinners, card games, Christmas parties, Shepherders' Balls and many other events. It is a place filled with memories, explained Jill. "The wood floor ... just to see the emptiness and imagine how many events have taken place there, to imagine it full, to think of all the ghosts in that main hall ...," she said. "We all married Basques," noted Juliana. "It is easy for us to make the Center an important part of our lives. It seems like we do everything here because we are

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Euzkaldunak card players (from left) Nick Beristain, Julian Hormaechea, Zenon Izaguirre and Rufino Hormaechea, about 1960. Opposite: Julian Lete tends bar, 2013.

interested.” Added Lydia: “My whole life has been the Basque Center. We’re all friends and we all gather here.”

The Basque Center has a cultural calendar of events that occur on a weekly, monthly or annual basis. Dinners for Center members were among the first traditional events. They have been held every month since the beginning. Different charter members of the Center hosted the dinners in the early years, explained Lydia, whose father herded sheep in the Mountain Home area. She was part of the first kitchen crew long before the members hired a chef. Lydia and other women helped shop for, prepare, cook and serve the monthly dinners. She attended almost every dinner at the Center until her passing.



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The Mortzillak Dinner every November is another tradition on the Center’s calendar. Mortzillas are Basque blood sausages, and their savory cooking smells are probably more famous than the sausages themselves. When the sausages cooked, the aroma clung, absorbing into clothing, jackets, purses and about everything else in the room. “You could smell it all over town; it was a good smell to me,” Lydia joked. The familiar scent lingers in the large dance hall, where mortzilla, along with wine, has soaked into the pores of the oak floors.

The Shepherders’ Ball, held every December near Christmas, is one of Boise’s well-known Basque traditions, dating back to 1929. After spending months tending sheep during the boarding house era, men came down from the mountains dressed in their “ball” attire—jeans and casual shirts, usually white, for men and cotton dresses for women. Lydia recalled that in the early years one enterprising gentleman sold Levis from the back of his wagon near the entrance to the ball. Admission into the Shepherders’ Ball has always been a tough ticket; in the early days only Basques could get through the Center’s doors. “At the time it was very exclusive,” explained Lydia. Approximately 600 attended each year from the 1930s to the ‘70s. In

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1974, the event was opened to the public and 1,000 showed up at the Western Idaho Fairgrounds site. The event moved back to the Basque Center in 1985.

The Center also hosts a Children's Christmas Party in early December. Parents drop off gifts for their children and have Santa Claus (*Olentzero*)

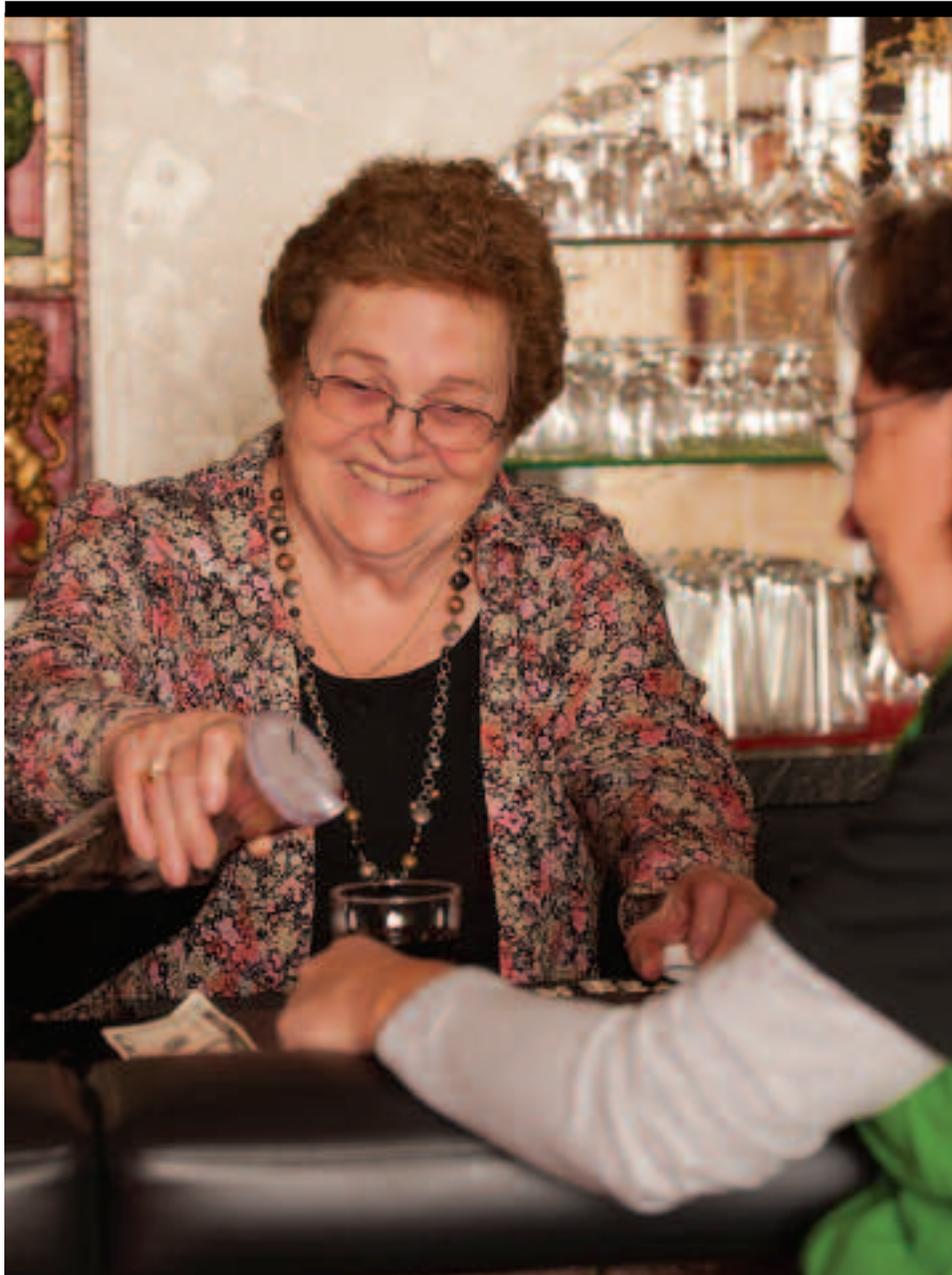
deliver the presents during the party. Along with hosting large events, the Center provides local Basques a place to practice one of the art forms that makes their culture so unique—dance. For the past 50 years, the Center has been home to the weekly practices of the Oinkari Basque Dancers, as well as the Boiseko Gazteak, a children's dance troupe, and the Txantxangorriak music school that teaches children above the age of 8 and adults to play traditional Basque instruments such as the *trikitixa* (accordion) and the *pandareta* (tambourine). The Oinkari's history is as much a part of the Basque Center as the oak floors of the dance hall. A group of Boise Basque teenagers went to the Basque Country for a summer in 1960. They learned many traditional Basque dance techniques and came back to Boise to begin a new troupe that became the Oinkari dancers. Juliana Aldape was part of the "new kids" who replaced the first group of dancers as they grew older. Years later, she recalled a group of students from the Basque County who visited



*Ongi etorri* (meaning "welcome") underscores a front-door panel with the Basque coat of arms.

Boise. They didn't know the traditional dances, so the local Basques taught them. "They learned how to Basque dance here—they learned about their own culture, their own Basqueness more here in Boise than in the Basque County," Juliana said.

Anyone familiar with the Center knows there will be one of two people behind the bar to greet people—Flora Chucurra Aldazabal or Julian "Juli" Lete. Flora has worked at the Basque Center since 1983, and is as close to a



Allan Ansell

Bartender Flora Churruga Aldazabal lubricates the cultural bonding with a tangy red wine, 2013.

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Allan Ansell



Abby Norton, age 11, attends dance class and hopes to audition for the Oinkaris. Her grandfather Simon Achabal was one of the troupe's talented founders. Opposite: coat of arms flanking the bar.

boarding house host mother as they come. She came to America from the Basque Country during the boarding house era and has many years invested in the care of others. She most likely will be behind the bar on Tuesdays and Wednesdays.

Juli, the bar and operations manager, is another familiar face. November 2013 marked his 25th anniversary with the Center. If the walls of the Basque Center could talk, Juli would already know the stories. The son of first-generation immigrant parents, his father was a shepherd. Flora and his mother worked together and later ran a boarding house together. The Basque Center bar has no bouncers, no doormen and just a few backup helpers. On any weekend the Center can be reserved for an event that can house upwards of 500 people. Juli works most of these events, making sure everything is running smoothly. As the de facto caretaker of this Basque house, Juli hardly ever stands still, constantly washing dishes, organizing the alcohol, rotating items in the coolers, wiping

down the bar and counters over and over and simply taking care of the place only as someone would his own home. The bar, floors and tables are always clean, with nothing out of place.

When asked to identify his favorite spot, he looked around, leaned back against the bar, spread his arms out and rested his hands on top the counter. "Probably right here,"

he answered. Juli explained that the older generation has the most pride in the Basque Center. He says these are the people who built the “home” that the Basque Center has become. It remains a place where the Basque community continues its traditions and preserves its heritage. Within its walls are more stories to be told and memories to be made.

Can new generations of Boise Basques maintain the old-world traditions of an institution that is nearing its 65th birthday? Jill Aldape thinks so. “I don’t see any wavering interest. In time, given how many directions people are pulled today, there might be more who just touch on aspects of the Center rather than a tight-knit group that does everything. But there is enough momentum within the membership and community at large. I don’t really see it being threatened.” Her late grandmother, Lydia, may have the best explanation of why the Basque Center will continue to thrive: “We are around other folks who share an interest. It will survive because we are in it together.”



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