

## 186 becoming basque

Allan Ansell



Grove Street with its shade trees and waterwheels was Boise's first tourist attraction. Pictured: the historic streetscape, proudly restored.

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## Remaking

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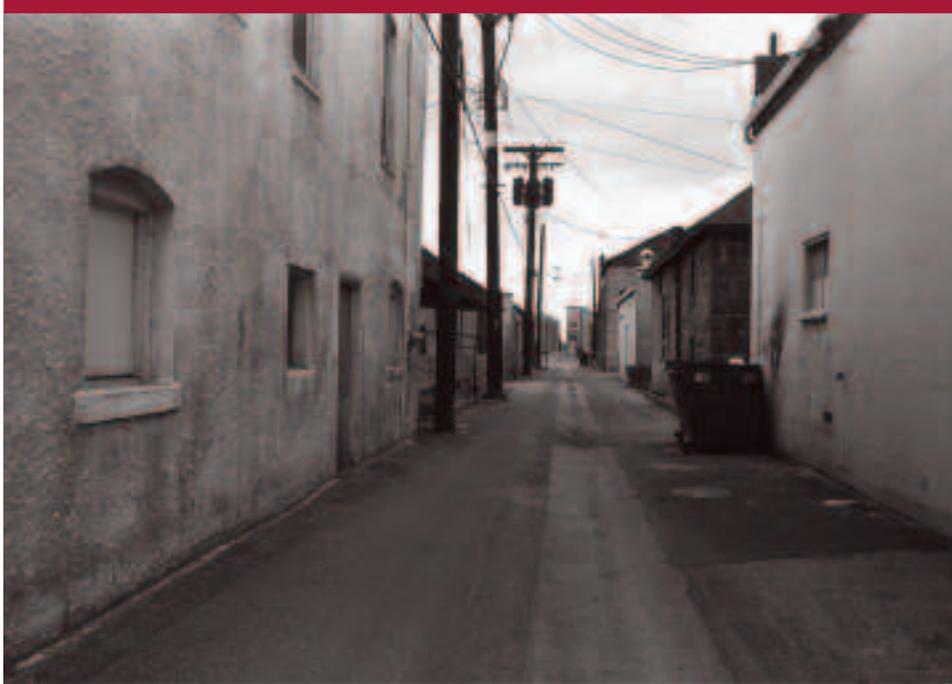
# GROVE

by Jennifer Shelby

I'm amazed at what goes on here over the course of a week," said a recent visitor to the Basque Block on Grove Street between Capitol Boulevard and Sixth Street in Boise. "There are all kinds of things that I've never seen in my life." Indeed, the diverse activities there offer a surprising array of choices. Interested in Basque food? Try the Basque pub Bar Gernika or Leku Ona Restaurant and Hotel. Want to learn how to prepare some Basque dishes yourself? Sign up for a cooking class offered by the Basque Market. Want to explore Basque history and culture? Tour the Basque Museum & Cultural Center and nearby Cyrus Jacobs-Uberuaga boarding house. How about language classes? Yes, Mondays and Thursdays at the Basque Museum. Basque sports? Check out the 100-year-old fronton to watch games on Mondays, Wednesdays or Thursdays. Basque dancing? Sure, Tuesdays for little kids and Sundays for the older group. Basque card games? Just about any afternoon or evening at the Basque Center.

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City of Boise Department of Arts and History



A Chinese dormitory, left, flanked the Basque Center in Grove Street's immigrant district. During the heyday of the boarding houses, Basques shared the 600 block with the Hop Sing tong from Canton.

And these are only a few of the Basque events that keep the Basque Block scene alive almost every night of the week. Often the streets are closed for catered dinners, fundraisers and street dances. As longtime philanthropist/preservationist Adelia Garro Simplot put it, the Basque Block is the "gateway into Boise for the Basque culture." Only today it is even more. The block that connects to the Basque life in Boise has evolved into a gathering place for all.

The first Basques who came to Boise could never have imagined this Basque Block. The 1900 census identified 61 Basques in Idaho, a number that is probably far too low because many never registered a residence or filled out the census paperwork while on the range. Most young male immigrants came to work as sheepherders. The annual work cycle called for a reliable place to lodge without the demands of ownership. Boarding houses



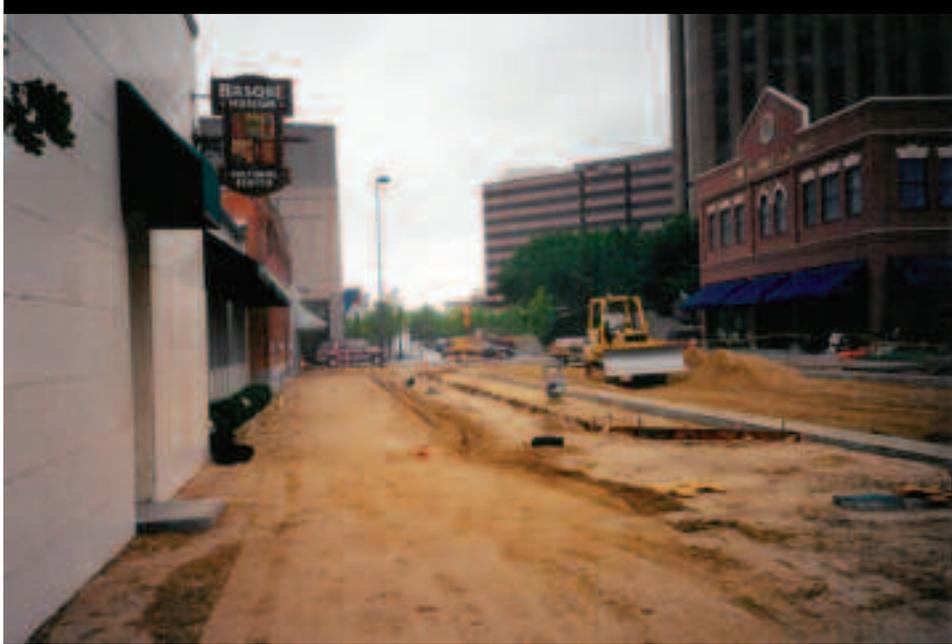
Warehouses became a tourist attraction on a street once dismissed as too blighted for urban renewal. Pictured: Leku Ona, opened in 2005.

served that purpose, providing places where herders could stay connected to their homeland through the familiarity of food, language, dance, music, games and sport. Boarding houses preserved the culture of the new immigrants while also guiding their transition into life in Idaho. Boise's boarding houses were generally in the same downtown area bounded by Idaho Street to the north and Front to the south, and spanning from Third to Fourteenth streets. Usually someone from the boarding house would meet the trains with greetings in *Euskara* (Basque), both to help a fellow Basque and to gain a customer. The downtown boarding houses served many functions—hospitals, sports facilities, employment agencies, translating centers, post offices/message centers and depositories for herders' valuables. Many young Basque men and women met, sang, danced and fell in love at the boarding houses. Often these young couples came from within a few miles of each other but had never met in the Old Country.

The need for boarding houses faded because of a combination of simultaneous circumstances. In her book *Boise Basques: Dreamers and*

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Resurfacing Grove, 2000. Opposite: Ward Hooper, assisted by the Bieter brothers, (right) pushes his laiak sculpture to Capitol at Grove, 2000.

*Doers*, Gloria Totoricaguena described how the combined effects of the 1934 Taylor Grazing Act, the National Origins Act and the Great Depression slowed Basque immigration, which led to the decline of boarding houses. By the 1970s, the area around Grove Street fell into disrepair. From the outside, it was a rundown street with some vacant buildings. With the wrecking ball knocking down many of Boise's old buildings, it seemed likely that this block was going to meet the same fate. The primary Basque connection that remained was the Basque Center, a fixture on Sixth and Grove since 1950.

However, the destiny of the block changed forever with a few timely acquisitions by someone with a passion for cultural preservation: Adelia Garro Simplot, whose father emigrated from the Basque Country. The historic Cyrus Jacobs-Uberuaga boarding house, built in 1864 and the oldest brick building in the city, was about to be torn down for parking. In a spur-of-the-moment decision, Adelia volunteered to buy it from the Uberuaga descendants. Her father-in-law, potato magnate J.R. Simplot, loaned her

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money for the down payment. The property was in rough shape when she acquired it in 1983. She had no immediate vision for its future, but knew it should be saved and remain a part of the Basque community

because it had significance in both Basque and Boise history. She decided the building should be for the community.

In 1985, she led the formation of a nonprofit group—the Basque Cultural Center of Idaho, Inc., later to become the Basque Museum & Cultural Center, Inc. They agreed the property would become the home of the new Basque Museum & Cultural Center, the only one of its kind in the U.S. The community pitched in to make repairs and rehabilitate the old building. Adelia made the mortgage payments for three years, and in 1986, with her husband, the late Richard R. Simplot, she donated the house to the Basque Cultural Center “for and in consideration of our love and affection for the Basque heritage and history in the State of Idaho.” The Basque Museum & Cultural Center assumed the loan payments beginning January 1987 and an official dedication ceremony took place on June 19, 1987. “When you are young, hard or easy isn’t the issue; it was fun. It was a joy. It was amazing how much the community helped get things done,” Adelia remarked in a 2013 interview.

The former boarding house was home to the museum until it moved its offices and main gallery next door in 1993. The museum then restored the Jacobs-Uberuaga house to its original state, with rooms representing both the Jacobs’ era in the 1800s and the Basque boarding house era in the 1920s. The restored house opened to the public at the 2005 Jaialdi festival and thousands have taken guided tours since then. The Cub Bar, now Bar

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Mayor David Bieter beams as Adelia Garro Simplot struggles with oversized scissors at the ribbon cutting for the restored Jacobs-Uberuaga House, 2005.



Chorizos, red beans and patio dining lure tourists to Leku Ona, built in the 1930s as a boarding house.

Gernika, was the next property for the Basque Museum & Cultural Center to acquire. The gateway to the block, the Cub was going to be torn down for a few parking spaces for an adjacent bank. Saved in 1990, today the building is home to a thriving Basque pub and restaurant.

The building next door to the Jacobs-Uberuaga house, at 611 Grove Street, stood vacant for many years. Adelia contacted friends at a local bank, which offered to gift the building to the Basque community. However, in the meantime an individual who wanted to purchase the building and replace the older portion of it with a parking lot had already put money down on the property. If the Basque community wanted it, they would have to deal with the new owner, who wanted to tear down the older section of the building. Its lot extended inches from the Uberuaga house, so the planned parking spaces would have extended alarmingly close to the porch of the historic home. The community stepped forward to help. The museum group hosted a luncheon at the Uberuaga house for a number of business people. J.R. Simplot addressed the group. "She wants to do this, and I am going to

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Red-green lauburus swirled into the pavement make Grove indelibly Basque. Pictured, dancers Lily Achabal Papapietro and Henry Lachiondo Turcotte.

give her this money and you have to match it," he said about Adelia's plan. They agreed to those conditions, and another Basque monument was saved from demolition. The Basque Museum & Cultural Center began holding language classes there in 1991 and relocated offices, a gift shop, collections and permanent exhibits there in 1993.

Juan "Jack" and Juana Anduiza built a new hotel and enclosed fronton in 1914 at 619 Grove Street. Briggs Engineering owned the building for almost 50 years after it closed as a boarding house. When they were ready to sell, Mrs. Briggs called Adelia to ask if she would like to purchase it. Adelia called her friend, Richard Hormaechea, to see if they could purchase it

together. They did, closing the deal on January 7, 1993. The boarders' rooms now serve as offices and the former kitchen and living space serve as storage areas for the museum and a rehearsal spot for the Basque band Amuma Says No. The fronton, the oldest enclosed Basque court in the West, is still in use. With this purchase, all of the buildings on the south side of Grove Street, all significant to the Basque community, were preserved.

In addition to the preservation of its historic buildings, the Basque Block's streetscape also went through an extensive renovation during the 1990s. Community members interested in preserving the historic Basque areas around Grove Street organized in 1987. Mary K. Aucutt and Francis "Patxi" Lostra led the organization, which represented members of Euzkaldunak, Inc, the Oinkari Dancers and the Basque Museum & Cultural Center. They secured a grant worth approximately \$13,000 and formed the Basque Neighborhood Marketplace, Inc., which focused on rejuvenating and restoring the Grove Street neighborhood. The grant funded a study on how best to develop the area.

The group hired city planner Jerome Mapp in 1988 to do an analysis and master plan for the area. His analysis and plans covered two areas within the portion of Old Boise/Eastside from Capitol to Fifth Street between Main and Front, focusing primarily on the area between Capitol Boulevard and Sixth Street due to the Basque community's ties to buildings on the south side of Grove. Mark and Betty Heath of Business Interiors of Idaho owned the majority of the north side. Mapp's original analysis was a reconnaissance survey, currently filed at the Idaho State Historical Society. The intent of the survey was to identify each building along with its key features and historic significance. He also created a vision for what the block could be, including a rendering of the block inspired by his research on the Basque Country and the possibility of an open-air market. In her book about the Basques in Boise, Totoricaguena explained how more than two years and 500 pages of research devoted to the plan demonstrated the seriousness of the Basque community's intentions to renovate and restore the Grove Street area. While the Mapp plan was not implemented, it furthered the momentum to change the block.

The first wave of streetscape improvement occurred in 1991-92 on the Basque side of the street. An excavating company removed pavement and volunteers planted sod donated by Cloverdale Nursery. Boise City donated seven trees, and Euzkaldanuk Inc., Albertson's executive Warren McCain and West One Bank donated three old-fashioned street lamps. Volunteers updated the look of the museum and painted its front panels.

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Preservation Idaho, in 2000, honored Grove Street's Bardenay with a coveted Orchid Award.

Several years later, a series of events in 1999 led to the eventual redevelopment of the block. The city's Visual Arts Advisory Committee selected the Basque Block for a \$30,000 public art project later dedicated to Pat and Eloise Bieter, two pillars in the Basque community who were killed that year in a car accident. The arts committee selected the entry to Grove Street as the site for the artwork. The committee met with the Basque community to get a sense of what symbols, ideas and materials would be appropriate for the piece.

These meetings ignited a desire by the Basque community to do more than a piece of art. They hoped for a larger project, one that would rejuvenate the whole block as a place to preserve their unique culture and provide a better space for festivals and celebrations. The changes would include both the practical elements of street reconstruction as well as design elements to make the Basque culture more visible to the community. City leaders agreed. The Capital City Development Corporation came on board to oversee the



Jon C. Hodgson - BasquePhotos.com

Summer dancing can be contagious on a block that quickly converts to a tented festival plaza. Pictured: kalimotxo (red wine and cola) t-shirts, 2005.

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www.centrocaro.net

Executive Director Patty Miller of the Basque Museum & Cultural Center effectively served as Mediator-in-Chief of the block's restoration. Opposite: matchbox from the museum's artifact collection.

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process and bring additional resources. They hired planners from Jensen-Belts Associates to draw designs and create a budget. At the same time, the arts committee issued a call to artists asking for their ideas for an entrance marker. They selected *Laiak*, a sculpture by Boise artist Ward Hooper, as the piece to welcome visitors to the Basque Block and honor the memory of the Bieters.

This project marked the first time that the Arts Commission had gone beyond the installation of public art and used design to change the nature and the feeling of a space. It provided evidence that

redesigning a space can bring economic development to an area, according to Karen Bubb, public arts manager for the city's Department of Art and History. She attributed the successful synergy of the project to the grassroots nature of the campaign. Public, private, non-profit and community sectors combined creative and financial resources to strategically shape the character of the neighborhood. Calling it an example of "creative placemaking," Bubb said, "It really changed the nature of the space. It's a 'there' now." And the block's successful development, Bubb added, was a key factor when the city passed a 2001 ordinance that allocated one percent of every city capital project to public art.

The completed project gave the block a new roadway with colored concrete and *lauburus* (Basque cross) design elements, curbless sidewalks to facilitate festivities, new landscaping, new street furnishings and the entry artwork. Additional design elements included engraved granite squares in the sidewalk featuring Basque coats of arms, Basque surnames and the lyrics to songs. A mural on the side of the fronton depicts scenes from Idaho and the Basque Country. The streetscape project was completed in time for the Jaialdi International Basque Cultural Festival in July 2000. Various community entities split the \$417,472 cost of the renovation. The City of Boise added \$100,000 beyond the funding of the entryway art piece; the Ada County Highway District, \$50,000; the Basque Block property owners, \$100,000; and the CCDC the remaining \$167,472.



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The Basque Museum houses professionally archived research collections. Its whaling exhibition was a reminder that open-range sheepherding was mostly foreign to ancestors from the Bay of Biscay.

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Restoration also was afoot on the north side of Grove. Mark and Betty Heath converted an old warehouse/garage into useable commercial space with the opening of the Bardenay Restaurant and Distillery in 1999. The Basque Market began leasing space in 2000 and the Leku Ona Restaurant

and Hotel opened next door in 2005. "People say, 'Oh you are so lucky to have your culture,'" said museum director Patty Miller as she surveyed the buildings owned by Basques on Grove Street. "But it has nothing to do with luck. It takes hundreds of volunteers to support the cause."

Boise Mayor Dave Bieter, himself a leader in the Basque community and the son of the late Pat and Eloise Bieter, explained the importance of the Basque Block in an email interview. "Without a physical presence of an ethnic group, past and present, it is difficult to get any sense of their history. While you could designate any block or area with some monicker (arts district, sports district, etc.) that very block has such geographic and historic significance, with the fronton as the centerpiece, that no other area would do," Bieter noted.

"Many who did not know about the block or its significance in Boise history and Basque culture have found it. This has brought additional tourism and activity to the previously rundown street." He added that the Basque Block is successful as an economic development project because it gave new life to vacant or underutilized land, buildings and infrastructure. This created new jobs as businesses located on the block.

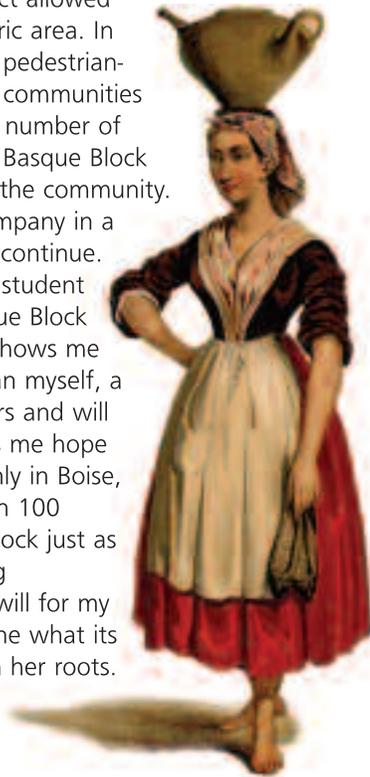
What does the future hold for perpetuating the heritage of the Basques in Boise? Looking forward, Adelia Garro Simplot hopes that what began in 1983 continues. She said the Basque Block has added so much to the Boise community. She is sad that the Spanish Village and downtown Chinese buildings from her childhood are all gone. People now realize the value in preserving the Basque Block, she said. "It was a series of steps, done little by little. Here we have ended up with the entire side of the street honoring the Basques of yesteryear. It's turned out to be quite wonderful. It is what we had always hoped for but didn't know would happen for sure." Her hope is to somehow see an addition. "I have an even bigger vision for it in the future," she said.

The original planning study done by Jerome Mapp in 1988 also included the block of Grove Street to the east of the existing Basque Block, between Fifth and Sixth streets. Currently that block is dominated by parking lots, making it the ideal place for an extension. Clay Carley, a developer and property owner in the Old Boise/Eastside area, owns the majority of the land on the north side of Grove Street. "The streetscape here is very attractive. I think extending that eastward makes a lot of sense," he said, describing how the low-key, inviting, comfortable pedestrian scale of the historic area makes it a perfect location for the mixed-use commercial/residential/retail development that he envisions for the north side of the street. Katina Dutton, development director for Capital City Development Corporation, confirmed that



The Basque Block came into being because of vision and effort. A collaborative dream among the Basque community, local property owners, the city, planners, designers and the highway district allowed the preservation and development of this historic area. In the process, they also built something more—a pedestrian-friendly place that the Basque and non-Basque communities alike embrace and enjoy through the countless number of activities and events that take place there. The Basque Block functions as a front porch for the members of the community. It is a place to bring friends and enjoy their company in a comfortable setting. Indications are that it will continue.

Sixteen-year-old Emily Pape, a Boise High student and Oinkari dancer, said it this way: “The Basque Block represents a home country I’ve never seen. It shows me that I am a part of something much bigger than myself, a culture that has come before me for many years and will hopefully continue long after I’m gone. It gives me hope for the future of the Basque community not only in Boise, but all over the world, and that Basque children 100 years from now will be able to dance on the block just as I have since I was five years old. It’s a humbling feeling knowing I belong to these people and will for my entire life.” For Emily, the Basque Block has done what its founders intended. It has reconnected her with her roots. It has given her, and many others, a chance to experience part of what makes Boise unique.



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**Jennifer Shelby** is a Boise State graduate in economics with a minor in visual art. She is now enrolled in the university’s graduate program in community and regional planning.