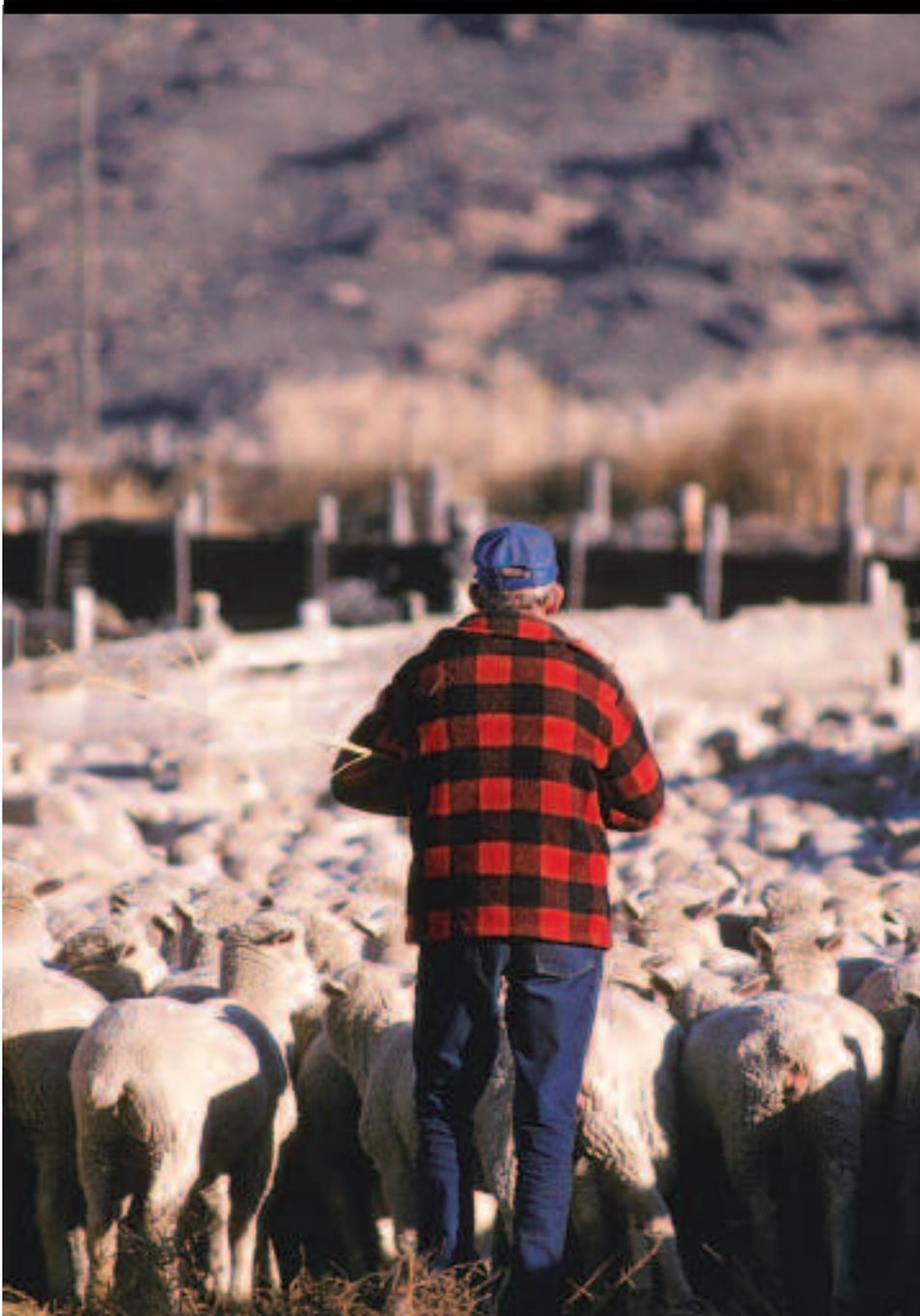


14 becoming basque

Steve Bly



Basque herder tends sheep near Hailey, Idaho.



Trails to
IDAHO

by John Bieter with Dennis O'Dell

I come to Boise on 26 December 1958. In Basque Country and Spain no one had much work, and when I had a chance to tend sheep on a contract, I decide to come," said the now 73-year-old Jose Luis Arrieta. This was the beginning of a 53-year career for Jose Luis in Idaho's sheep industry. But this new beginning came with a price. "It was not easy to leave my family. My family is still in the Old Country. My mother and father passed away, but I still got one brother over there and I have one brother here in Mountain Home."

Jose Luis got the job through family connections, a common method of sheepherder recruitment during the 20th century. "Somebody tells the boss, 'I want to bring over my cousin or my brother.' That is how most of us get sheepherder jobs in Boise." Jose Luis' arrival reunited him with part of his family. "My mother's first cousin was working in Boise. She wanted to know what the family was doing, all the information. After staying for three days, we went to work in Notus."

16 becoming basque

BoisebyBurns.com



Basque herder with dogs and wagon, Idaho, about 1925. Opposite: sheepherder Jose Luis Arrieta, an immigrant to Boise in 1958; iron spring-handled sheep shears, 1980.

Jose Luis heard stories about shepherding in the United States from older generations of herders. However, unlike earlier Basques who came by boat, the 18-year-old flew with 11 other young Basque men and enjoyed the network of those who had come before. "We come into Boise and somebody was at the airport waiting for you," he remembered. "Most of us got good friends that already worked for the outfit we were going to." Jose Luis came over on a contract designed to alleviate the shortage of shepherders needed in Idaho. Contracts between the individual Basques and the sheep companies allowed them to travel and work in the United States, but only for a fixed period. Jose Luis explained: "We came over here by a sheep company's three-year contract, but at the end of the three years we had to go



Basque Museum & Cultural Center

Library of Congress

back. We came over legal with full passport, visa and everything. With contract we were here legal—nothing illegal.”

Jose Luis made three trips between the Basque Country and America within an 11-year period. “The first trip, I made it for three years and eight months because of an extension. At that time ... the contract was like you come in

January, which is lambing time. You need more people then, and when spring come in you need more people and then in August you need more people for lamb shipping. After that you send

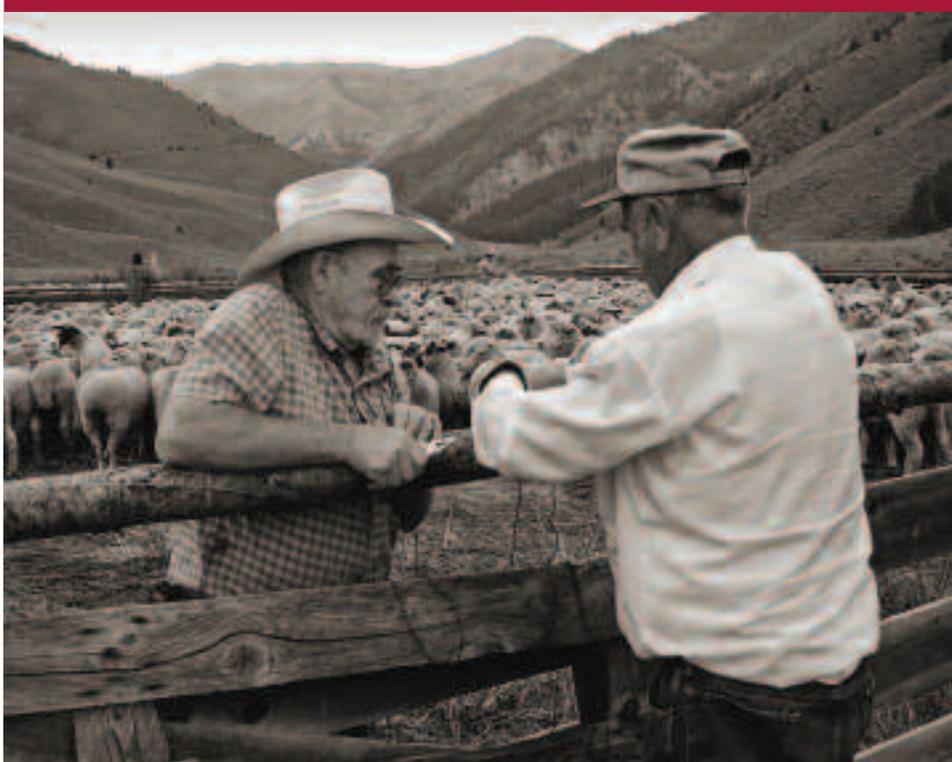
them back to the Old Country.” This process continued until he obtained his green card in 1971.

Contracts were only given to each sheep man based on his job performance and his desire to return. Jose Luis explained the informal ground rules for a contract renewal. “You do a good job and the boss likes you, he bring you back on a new contract. Some people no good, no like the sheep and the owner no bring them back. Somebody who gonna work more with the sheep, the company gonna bring you back.” The contract guaranteed employment, food and lodging, but “even with contract, we have to pay transportation,” Jose Luis remembered. “Now the company pays for the tickets, but then we have to pay both come and go.” Other expenses not covered under contract included clothing, boots, winter coats and bedding.

Jose Luis didn’t mind the long hours and isolation that came with herding sheep. “You were a very young guy; work here no bother me at all, but working over there [in the Basque Country] was hard work, like mining and everything else over there. But working here, keeping sheep, rolling hay and all the other chores, was nothing for me; I started working over there at 15

18 becoming basque

Mike Edminster



Sheep boss John Faulkner, left, with his Basque foreman, Julian Larrabeiti, near Gooding, Idaho, 2005.

years old mining, working with marble rock in the mines." The work here wasn't as stressful as leaving home itself. "Leaving mother over there, that was hard. I come over here at 18 years old and away from home and I have to start cleaning my own clothes. I never cleaned my clothes in Spain; my mother do all that for me and when I started cleaning my own clothes here, then I remembered my mother and that was hard."

He started on the ground floor, cleaning the corrals, clearing weeds and putting canvas covers on the lambing sheds. "Sheep was out yet; we just fixed up the camp getting ready for lambing," he said. Jose Luis described his first experience working with sheep. "We had two guys in camp at this sheep company, one camp tender and a herder. I never tended



Library of Congress

Echeverria and Mendiola families pause for a photograph at their desert sheep ranch, about 1979.

camp. The first year they put me into herding and that was it, straight into sheep herding," he said. "Usually, the young guy was camp tender and the older guy was the herder. I was put in as herder and had a 65-year-old man as the camp tender, a nice man. He told me what to do, tended the camp and helped herd the sheep," recalled Jose Luis. "We were together for about two years. Then he retired and went back to the Old Country and I just kept going. I worked for six years herding sheep." In April 1965, Jose Luis became the foreman. "I no want it, but the bosses said this and said that, so I started being foreman. I was foreman for 44 years." During a 1971 trip to the Basque County, Jose Luis married the love of his life—his wife Josune, who he had met in Boise when she came to visit relatives. "I marry over there, a Basque girl. I didn't marry young; when I marry I was about 32 years old. I brought her back later and she is still here." Jose Luis and Josune have a

20 becoming basque

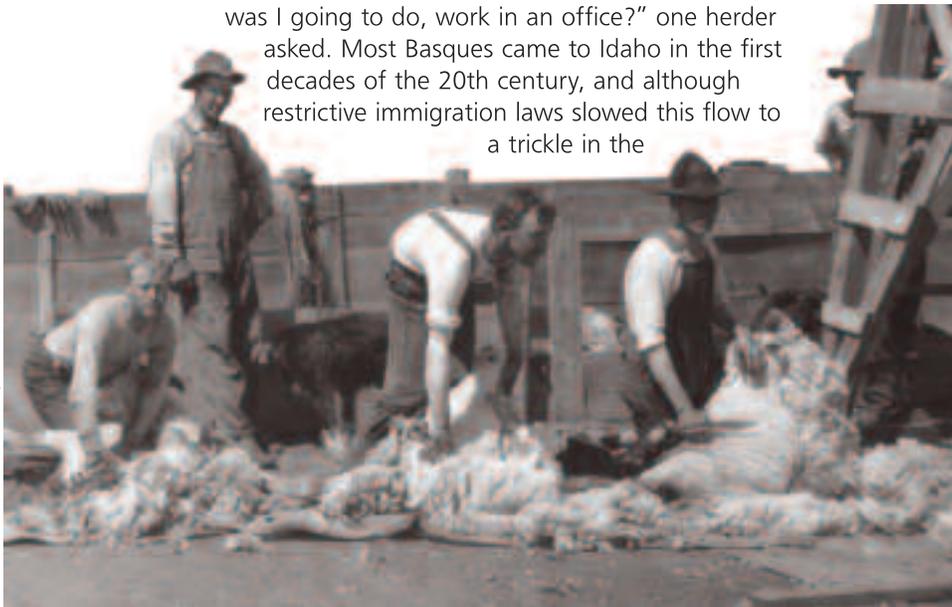
married son and grandchildren. They are doing what they can to ensure that their grandchildren master the Basque language, Jose Luis said.

The life of a Basque shepherd is generally defined as a lonely one with multiple hardships. But sheep camp life for Jose Luis was more positive than negative. "Sheep camp food—good food! Lots of food, oh yea. We got plenty of meat and food like ham, bacon, eggs, green beans, garbanzo beans, everything. All kinds of food."

Jose Luis represents the last generation of Basque immigrant sheepherders in Idaho. Beginning about the time of statehood in 1890, Basques found opportunities through herding sheep, a job few others sought. In Australia, Basque immigrants became known for their work as sugar cane cutters, but in Idaho and the American West, Basques became synonymous with the sheep industry. This way of life established the parameters of settlement for Basque communities in Idaho and throughout the West. Boarding houses sprang up to meet the temporary lodging needs of these itinerant workers and provided Basque women opportunities for work. Basques celebrated festivals like the Shepherders' Ball in Boise and other communities during the winter months of the lambing season when herders came out of the hills and enjoyed themselves in town.

Although few had any experience in herding, their agrarian background and work ethic prepared them well. With little education and no knowledge of English, few other possibilities remained. "What the hell else was I going to do, work in an office?" one herder asked. Most Basques came to Idaho in the first decades of the 20th century, and although restrictive immigration laws slowed this flow to a trickle in the

Idaho State Historical Society



1920s—and later an improved Basque economy made leaving home unnecessary—that trickle remained steady until the 1970s. The sheer number of Basques made them noticeable in sparsely populated Idaho. Although there might have been more Basques in California or Argentina, few areas had such a high concentration.

The migration into Idaho represented only the most recent involvement of Basques in America. From working on Columbus' crew to the exploration and settlement of the New World, Basques involved themselves throughout the Americas. By the 19th century, they controlled much of the sheep sector in Argentina; the migration into the American West during the 1849 California Gold Rush represented a secondary movement. While few Basques succeeded in gold mining, many decided to stay, working in the livestock industry to feed the growing population.

By the middle of the 19th century, almost every small town in the Basque Country had at least one success story in the Americas, where possibilities for wealth seemed limitless if one were willing to invest several years of hard work—and hard work was already a fact of life in the future of a young Basque in the Old World anyway. Only one member inherited the family farm, which forced the others to make a life elsewhere. In the United States, thousands of miles of barely trod upon grazing land meant sheepmen expanded beyond California, over the Sierras into Nevada, where the range spread northward, hastened by the completion of the transcontinental railroad. By the late 1880s, Antonio Azcuenaga and Jose Navarro struggled over the desert of northern Nevada to Jordan Valley, Oregon. In summer 1889, Azcuenaga guided his sheep up the Owyhee Mountains, crossing into what was still the Territory of Idaho. "Thus," one author wrote, "it can be rightfully said that the Basques followed the sheep into Idaho."

Basques looked at shepherding in Idaho as a good opportunity to make money and return to the Basque Country as quickly—and as wealthy—



Allan Ansell

Brickwork at the restored Jacobs-Uberuaga House, the oldest brick structure in Boise. Opposite: a sheep "blading crew" near Hagerman, about 1910.

22 becoming basque

as possible. However, young Basque men were involved in an industry that was hardly glorified by American society. One author noted that one could not fire a shotgun into a crowd in the West without hitting somebody who had herded sheep, "but it would probably take the charge in the other barrel to make him admit it." Furthermore, Basque immigrants challenged the dominant WASP (White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant) cultural model, thus earning monikers like "dirty black Basco" while regularly fighting for acceptance.

To add to their difficulties, most Basque immigrants had no sheepherding experience. If they had herded sheep at all, it was with small bands providing cheese and wool for the family, with none of the loneliness, financial responsibility or dangers that came with large-scale herding in Idaho. These inexperienced herders had to learn quickly, often within days of arriving in Idaho, the system of herding up to 2,500 head of sheep. They had to grow accustomed to the bloody, messy process of the lambing season from January to mid-March, when they helped deliver thousands of lambs and form bands. They learned to shear the sheep in March and April and move them to the foothills to feed on the spring grasses in May. During the summer, herders drove the bands up mountains, following the retreating line of snow, steering them from one meadow to another, descending only once to ship the lambs in July. They trailed down to the valleys before the first snowfall in October and corralled the sheep by December. Sheep men then began to prepare for the birth of the first lambs, and the process started again.

They learned, however, that often the hardest challenges of sheepherding were not physical, but mental and emotional. The worst part of herding for most was the loneliness and isolation. "I remember when I got the first letter from my mother," one Basque herder said. "I had to go behind the tree to read it because I was crying like a baby." Their homesickness and longing for companionship became more acute during holidays. One herder wrote home, "Make sure to buy good fish and wine because Christmas ... is for people to enjoy ... at least, for those who can. I'm planning on spending it with the sheep." In extreme cases, the isolation created an "occupational hazard"—insanity. The herders called it being "sheeped" or "sagebrushed." Later, when Basques in Boise formed a health insurance organization, part of its coverage included return passage to the Basque Country for any member who suffered from mental illness.

Experiences like these gave Basques who braved the barriers of America and succeeded a new, bigger world. "(Sheepherding) makes you self-sufficient," a Basque immigrant said. "You learn to survive no matter what. Even if a snake bites you, you say, 'I gotta make it on my own.' You know that nobody else is going to help you. Your mother is not going to be



Library of Congress

Basque-style chorizo pork sausages fry in a sheepherder's skillet, Nevada, 1978.

24 becoming basque

kissing you.” Some went back to the Basque Country and made a better life for themselves after saving for a number of years. However, for many who dreamed in the hills of Idaho about going back to the Basque Country, something unexpected happened when they returned to their homeland.

Basque Museum & Cultural Center



They realized they had changed and that their home and future was in America now. Success stories such as Juan Achabal (who Americanized his name to John Archabal) fueled the imagination for future Basque immigrants to Idaho. Archabal survived a shipwreck during his passage to America, ran one of the largest sheep operations in the nation and by the 1920s was one of the wealthiest men in Idaho.

Basque migration took place within a broader national and international societal context that often

severely impacted immigration. For example, legislation setting immigration quotas in 1924 ended open entrance into the United States and drastically reduced numbers. Consequently, some Basques “jumped ship,” worked illegally and paid the consequences. One former herder remembered his boss telling him, “I pay legal guys \$225 [a month], but for you guys that are not legal, \$175 ... Hey, you don’t got your papers, if you don’t like it ... ” “So he paid me \$175 a month for the year of work,” the herder recalled. “As if my sheep knew I didn’t have papers.”

Besides immigration legislation, events like the Great Depression and passage of the Taylor Grazing Act in 1934 spelled the end for some Basques already here and for those coming. The Depression created especially economically challenging times for Basque sheep men, while the grazing legislation closed the American West to open-range itinerant herding. Basque herders could no longer trail their sheep on open range and instead had to purchase land and negotiate grazing permits, which meant a far greater



Mike Edminster

Idaho herders still use a long-handled crook to snag ewes ready for lambing. Pictured: Faulkner Ranch, 2005. Opposite: Augustin Uriarte at sheep camp, about 1950.

26 becoming basque

Basque Museum & Cultural Center



The Modern Hotel at 613 Idaho Street fell victim to urban renewal on the lot that is now City Hall. Pictured: birthday party at the Modern, 1931.

investment and a more complicated process if they wanted to continue working with sheep.

Many took jobs elsewhere. Of 119 Basque immigrants interviewed in the 1940s, 75 percent first worked as shepherders in Idaho. But one-third left the industry after two years and by the mid-1940s, only one-fourth remained in the sheep business. Many sought positions that kept them closer to town and allowed them to start families. In the 1920s, for example, many Basque men took jobs east of Boise at the Boise-Payette Lumber Company's (later, Boise-Cascade Corporation) mill in Barber. Later, when the mill relocated to Emmett, most of the Basque families moved along with it.

Shepherding, though, remained the occupation that brought most Basques here initially. The industry demanded labor. In 1910, sheep numbers in Idaho totaled slightly more than 3 million head, and that number grew until it peaked just after World War I. Basques commanded much respect in



Sheep foreman Jose Luis Arrieta became a champion weightlifter. His image is iconographic on Capitol Boulevard's heritage mural.

the industry, demonstrated most prominently by a series of laws enacted to help Basques sidestep immigration quotas. By the 1940s, there was a severe labor shortage in the sheep industry, partially caused by the influx of workers into the war effort. Desperate to retain reliable Basque employees, Western sheep owners pleaded with their government representatives to help grant residency to Basques who had entered the country illegally. The movement led to a series of "Shepherd Laws" that granted residency to hundreds of Basque men in the American West and paved the way for the legal entry of hundreds more in the next decades.

28 becoming basque

Mike Edminster



Memory and tradition still guide the Trailing of the Sheep Festival in Ketchum and Hailey. Pictured: Festival sheep wagons near Hailey, 2005.

Following the efforts of other Western members of Congress, Idaho Sen. Henry Dworshak in 1947 wrote a letter to an immigration official requesting that a group of Basque shepherders be allowed to stay in the country since they were “well qualified and exceptional” workers. In the late 1950s, Sen. Frank Church also requested the Judiciary Committee to consider a bill to help 13 Basques achieve citizenship. “In Idaho,” he wrote the committee chairman, “we do not look at immigrant Basques as foreigners but as Idahoans. They have contributed much to Idaho’s culture, its economy and its history.”

Jose Luis Arrieta provides an example of those later herders who benefited from this legislation. When he entered Idaho, a Basque-American com-

munity was already flourishing from the efforts of earlier generations. Newcomers like Jose Luis, who continued to work in sheepherding, represented a minority: less than five percent of second-generation Basques stayed in sheepherding. Instead, Basques worked in almost every occupation in the state: lawyers, bankers, stenographers, beauticians, teachers, butchers or salespeople. In 1967, one of their own, Pete Cenarrusa, became Idaho's secretary of state. Their parents had provided not only an education, but they also had earned a reputation as valued employees, thus improving job opportunities for their children.

By the 1970s, the sheep industry was on a downward trend. Synthetic materials in clothing increasingly replaced wool, and pressure on the land from a growing population made the sheep industry more challenging and less profitable. Reflecting a nationwide slowdown, sheep outfits in Idaho began to shut down. In 1940, almost 1.4 million head of sheep grazed in Idaho; by 1970, there were only 773,000 and by the mid-1990s, fewer than 250,000. Immigrants from Mexico and South America began to replace Basques in the shrinking pool of sheep industry employees. An *Idaho Statesman* headline in the late 1970s reflected the new trend: "Mexicans, Peruvians Supplant Idaho's Sheepherding Basques."

Even though very few Basques are directly tied to the sheep industry today, it remains the strongest identifier of Basques in the West. For good reason—sheepherding provided an opportunity for Basques to make a livelihood in Idaho, and they took advantage of it. From their parents' humble beginnings with the sheep, many in the second generation pursued their education and advanced in society. By the time the third generation and beyond came of age, few worked in the sheep industry, yet the trappings remained. Sheep-themed items stock the shelves of the gift shop in the Basque Museum & Cultural Center and each year the new dancers in the Oinkari troupe make their inaugural performance at the Sheepherders' Ball. "It's one of the first times I've been around sheep," one dancer commented. "But I know how important it's been to our culture. Without sheep, I wouldn't be here doing this."

• • •

John Bieter is an associate professor in the history department at Boise State and a co-founder of the Basque Studies Program.

Dennis O'Dell graduated in December 2013 with a bachelor's degree in general studies and a communication minor.