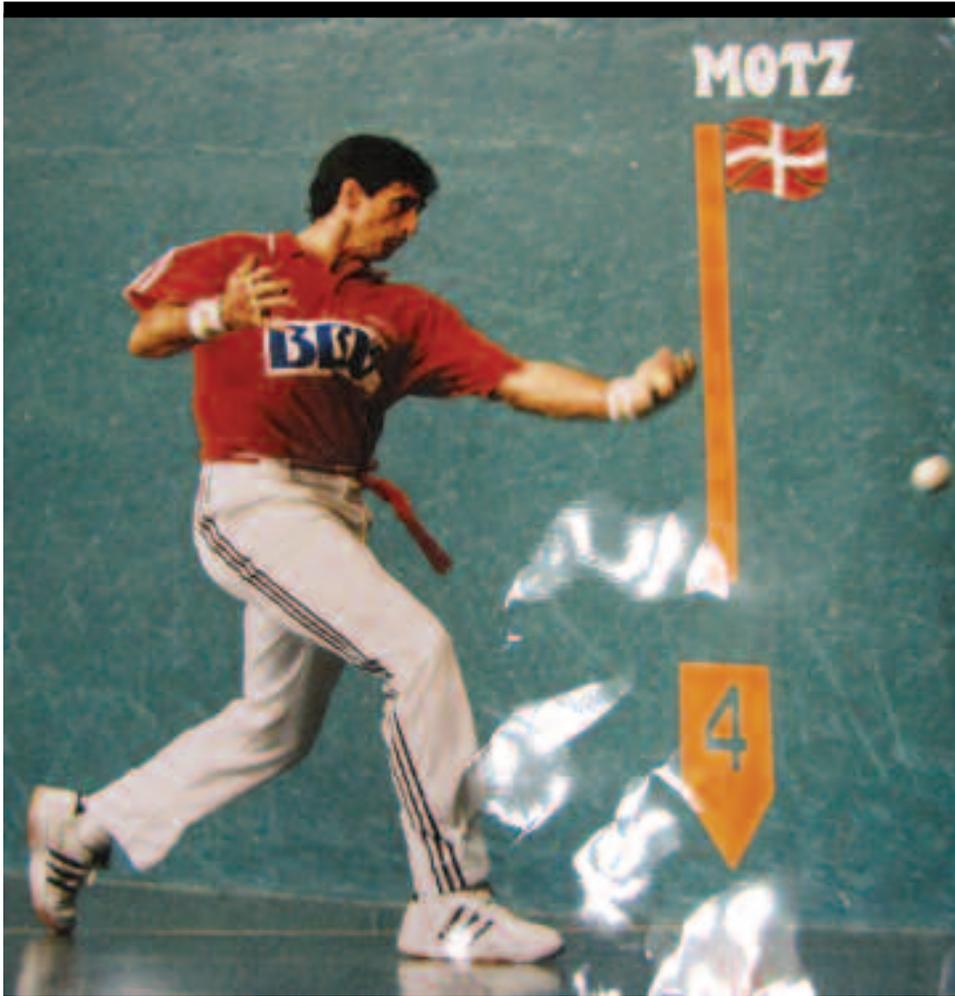


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Basque Museum & Cultural Center



Basque handball champion Retegi II lunges into a forehand below the national flag at the Arizbatalde Fronton, 1997.

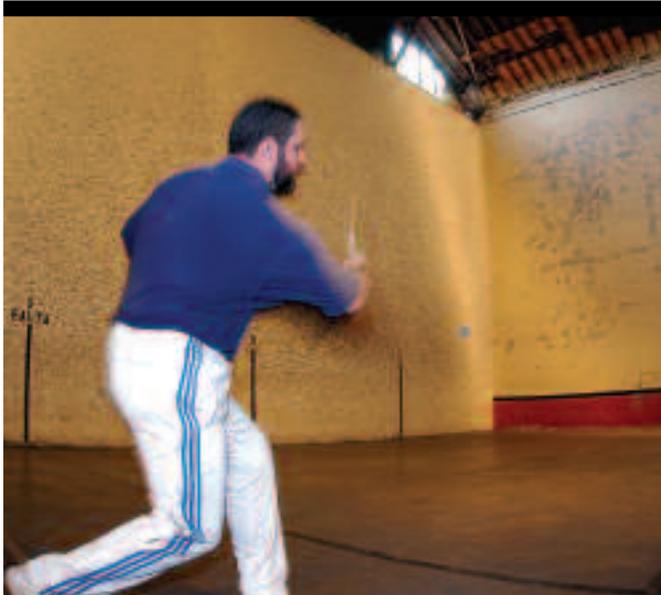
4 Boise's Wrigley FIELD

by Mark Bieter and John Bieter

There aren't that many active sports facilities in the United States that are 100 years old. Fenway Park in Boston turned 100 in 2012. The Wrigley Field in Chicago turns 100 in 2014. Soldier Field in Chicago, the oldest NFL stadium, was built in 1924. In Boise, there are few 100-year-old buildings of any kind. But there is a 100-year-old sports facility—the indoor handball court (*fronton*) located on the Basque Block. John Anduiza, born in 1915, grew up with the handball court outside his door. It was inside his parents' boarding house in downtown Boise. As a boy, he could step out any time and watch the games. Usually the players were young Basque boarders. Thousands of miles from home, they spent almost all year working lonely manual jobs in the middle of nowhere, mostly herding sheep. When winter came, they drove the sheep down from the hills and into the camps. Then they were out of work for a while. Most of them went to places like the Anduizas' boarding house.

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Kirk Keogh www.first2lastlight.com



The boarding house, which opened in 1914, was like a piece of home. Meals like home, conversations like home, games like home. The court was right outside their rooms under the same roof. There was always somebody to play with. Many of them played *pala*, slapping the rubber ball to the towering front wall with

wooden mallets, leaving hundreds of marks that stayed for decades. Some of the braver ones played handball. Most had not played for months, maybe years, and that created a challenge. A Basque handball isn't rubber. It's hard, almost like a baseball. The cover is leather. There's very little bounce. It takes a lot of force to get the ball moving fast enough to get a game going. It's not a sport for casual players. It's best played frequently, so the hand has a chance to build up the right calluses.

The boarders had strong hands from their manual labor, but it probably hurt like hell for them to play, John Anduiza thought decades later. But none of them would let on. "They would hit that ball," he said, "and in maybe four or five points their hands would swell up." They could barely play anymore. At that point, he recalled, some would seek help from his dad, "Big Jack" Anduiza. Big Jack would have the players put their hands flat on the stairway by the court. "He'd use this wooden board to step on their hands to take the swelling out." Since Big Jack weighed 240 pounds, his son recalled, that seemed to do the trick. "They'd go back, and play five more points. Those guys from the old country were tough."

There were at least three other places to play in Boise at the time. But Anduiza's court had a lot of advantages. It was the only indoor Basque handball court in the United States at that time. It was the biggest in town by far. The Anduizas put a lot of effort and money into this aspect of their



Basque Museum & Cultural Center

Henry Alegria and Stack Yribar dress smartly for pelota at the Anduiza Fronton, 1937. Opposite: Edu Sarria of the Boise Fronton Association.

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BoisebyBurns.com

The Anduiza Hotel and Fronton Building, built in 1914. Inset: *palas* (thick wooden paddles) smack the *pelota* (leather or rubber ball).

hotel. “Everything about that building was tied to the court,” Dave Everhart of Preservation Idaho said. “It wasn’t like a boarding house with a court attached. It was more like a court with a boarding house attached.”

The Anduizas knew what they were doing. Big Jack and his wife, Juana Gabiola, were born in the Basque province of Bizkaia, immigrated to Idaho, settled in Boise in 1891—a year after Idaho’s statehood—and eventually got into the boarding house business, opening the City Lodging House on Ninth Street in 1906. Not long after, they decided to make a bolder move. In 1914, they bought a lot on Grove Street, near the corner at Capitol Boulevard. It was a few blocks from the Idaho State Capitol, whose east and west wings were still years from being started.

There were many other Basque boarding houses throughout Idaho at the time, but this building was different. It was designed entirely around the



BoisebyBurns.com

Historic view of the Anduiza Fronton. The wooden-truss construction opens the court to daylight.

handball court. The first floor had 11 rooms, the Anduizas' private apartment, a dining room, a kitchen and storage rooms. They all opened onto the court. Above, there were more rooms opening up to a balcony that overlooked the court. The fronton itself was big—28 feet wide and 122 feet long. It rose about 50 feet, but since it was fully enclosed, its purpose was undetectable from Grove Street. They installed a wooden truss to support the roof, which had openings to bring daylight onto the court and into the rooms and dining area. They installed netting to protect balls from escaping. And they surrounded it all with mounds of concrete, all the way up and down the walls and over the playing surface. The Anduizas didn't seem to think of the building as a short-term investment. There wasn't much else the fronton could be used for.

The Anduiza's was the fourth and last fronton built in Boise. The first went up in 1910, at the Basque Hotel on 631 Lovers Lane, an address that

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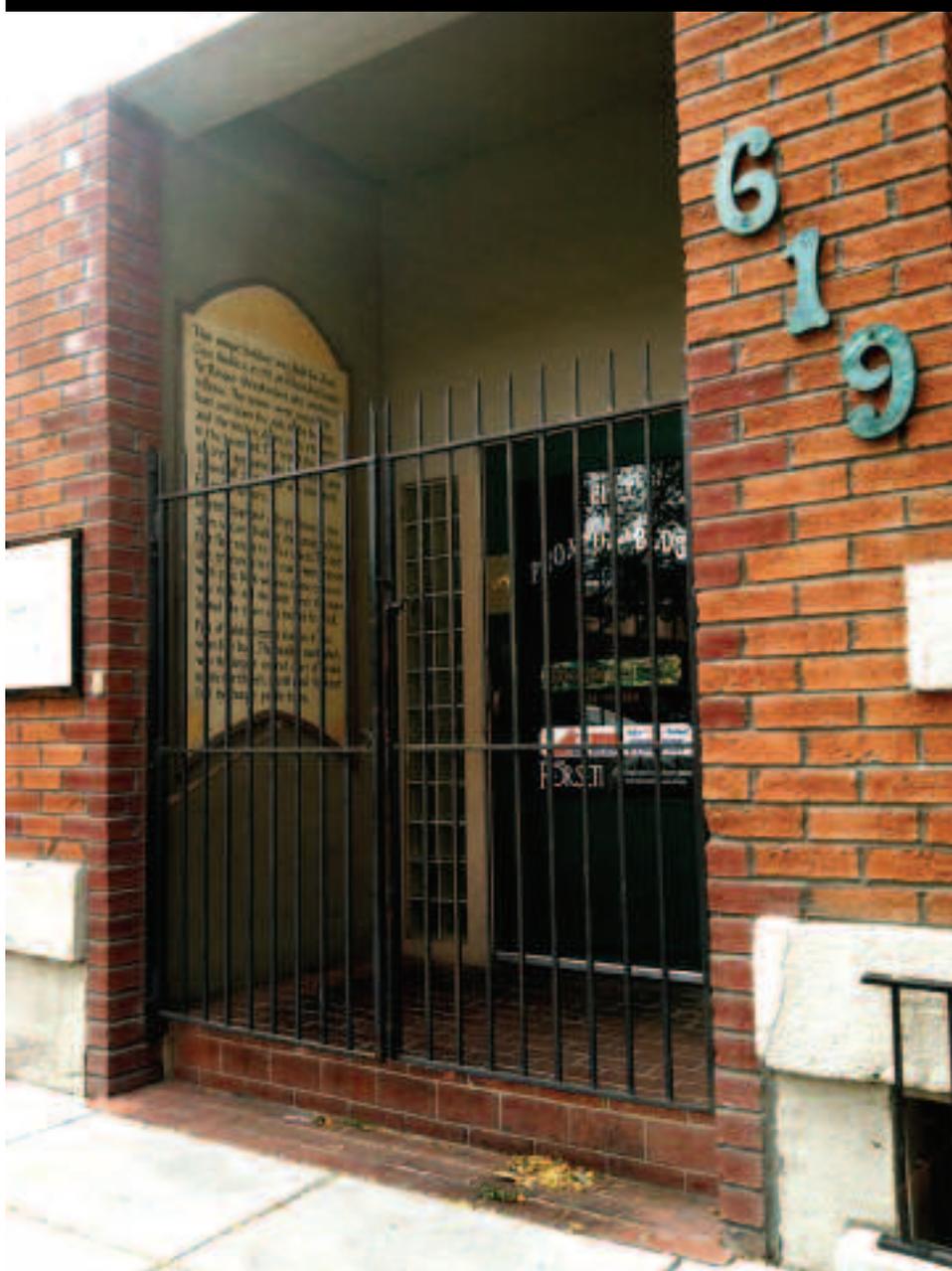
doesn't exist anymore. Another was constructed that same year on the west side of the Iberia Hotel on South Ninth Street. Both were outdoors and had a sidewall to the left. In 1911, the Uberuaga family built a fronton by their boarding house at 512 West Idaho Street. Firefighters at the nearby firehouse would climb the sidewall and watch the strange games. The sidewall of the Uberuaga fronton still stands today, bordering a parking lot.

But none of them could compete with Anduiza's new court. It was bigger, covered for year-round play and had a third wall in the back. There was a lot of anticipation surrounding the first official game played on the court on Friday, January 29, 1915, between Boise and Shoshone. The Boise players were Big Jack and Henry Alegria. Big Jack covered the backcourt, Alegria remembered, "and I played in the front with him ... We won the game, but it was close. The balcony and downstairs were full. People came from Shoshone, Mountain Home, and even farther away. It was a capacity house." The *Idaho Statesman* covered the game, reporting that the Boiseans won 50-48 with "prowess." "Shouts and hurrahs coming from the vicinity of Sixth and Grove streets caused some conjecture as to what might be the matter Friday afternoon," the *Statesman* reporter wrote. "It is an odd game played in a walled court, the ball is batted about with small paddles." The "Spaniards" watching, he wrote, "were deeply engaged. This game means as much to the [Basques] as baseball and football do to the Americans."

The collection of Basque ball games known as *pelota* goes back centuries. The Prussian scholar Wilhelm von Humboldt, who studied the Basques extensively, wrote in the 1820s that "the game of pelota ... is the principle fiesta of the Basques. Not only does every town have its own fronton, erected with greater or lesser splendor, but also everyone participates in the game ... [R]egardless of social class differences, much of the town, men and women, and even the mayor and the priest show up on Sundays to watch the players." Even the tiniest of Basque villages has had at least one fronton for centuries, typically in a central place and quite often next to the other pillar of every Basque community, the church. In many cases, the side or front playing wall was the church.

Although it has developed variations over the years, *pelota* is a fairly simple game—or maybe better said—group of games. In its most basic (and probably oldest) form, two teams of two players alternate hitting a solid ball wrapped in leather against a wall with their bare hands, trying to keep it within the side boundary, above the front fault line, and as far away as possible from the opposing team. One player on each team covers the back of the court and the other the front. While courts may differ between the northern and southern sides of the Basque County, most often there is one

wrigley field 71



Carl Burnett/Wikimedia Commons

The Anduiza hosted its first hand-swelling game of pelota in 1915. It remains the nation's oldest still-active indoor fronton.

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Josu Landaluze



“Eh ... Txo Txo! Your Amuma doesn't play Pala here, so pick up your mess!” So says the posted flyer at Anduizas' fronton.

wall on the left side, which is both an obstacle and a strategy tool. Pelota is a good sport for the ambidextrous. Returning a ball that's careening along the wall can be difficult. The front players, if positioned just right, can bank shots that hit the left wall, the front wall, and then the floor, eventually spinning out of bounds and beyond the reach of the opposition. Or they may go deep, whacking the ball with such force that it travels to the far end of the court, where it can be difficult to return. A simple but challenging game, it became highly popular in the Basque Country. It didn't require much equipment or money. All they needed was a ball and a wall.

Pelota became so essential to Basques that they took it with them as they moved to all corners of the new world—as participants in the Spanish explorations and conquests, as settlers in the colonies, as refugees from war, as immigrants looking for a new future.

Once in the Americas, as Carmelo

Urza of the University of Nevada, Reno wrote, Basques “tended to confront the unpredictabilities of a strange land by banding together to conduct business and to share the language, foods, and festivals of their native land. Basque pelota was one of these cultural icons which served both as a form of recreation and as a cultural sacrament.”

Frontons were introduced early in the Basques' settlement in the Americas and spread quickly and widely. By 1634, there were at least two frontons in Lima, Peru. In the 1700s, Basques in Santiago, Chile, built one on the central Calle San Isidro, which became known as the *calle de la pelota*. Hundreds of courts were built in Uruguay after a flood of French-Basque



Allan Ansell

immigration in the mid-19th century. More than 300 adobe or stone frontons are still playable in Bolivia. There are about 200 in Cuba. Over the centuries, there have been at least a thousand built in North and South America with a wide variety of materials and sizes. The builders and players had the advantage of pelota's flexible and informal rules. Frontons are somewhat like major league baseball fields. Each has a different size and different quirks.

As Urza pointed out, the spread of pelota by Basques in the Americas led to some adaptations and spin-offs. In 1905, a Basque player in Argentina began to bat a ball around with the shoulder blade of a cow. He thought he was on to something. He asked a local carpenter to make a wooden

mallet in the same shape. It led to the creation of pala, which is the form of pelota most widely played around the world. Another variation became the



Arthur Hart

Ruin of the Star's fronton, Idaho Street, 2013. Inset: Pedro Anchustegui Pelota Court, Mountain Home, Idaho.

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Sege Camy/Merry Festival



Jai alai spread to Miami via Cuba with the Basque diaspora. Pictured: leaping No. 2 Sege Camy in a Miami casino fronton, about 1970.

world's highest-profile version of pelota. Recovering from a broken wrist, a Basque-Argentine player began to use a wicker basket to hurl the ball. It was the birth of *jai alai*, a sport that's known for having the fastest ball in the world and the source of a multi-million dollar industry. It has been played in places as varied as Las Vegas, Caracas, Manila and Shanghai.

Basques immigrated to the United States later than they did to Latin America, largely in the latter half of the 19th cen-

tury. Frontons sprouted wherever Basques moved to—California, Nevada, Oregon and Idaho. Basque boarding house owners usually built the courts to draw customers, much as a hotel chain today features a pool or workout room.

In Idaho, besides the four Boise frontons, there were two in Mountain Home finished by 1920, one of which is still used. There was a court right across the border in tiny Jordan Valley, Oregon, built between 1915-17 from stones quarried in the nearby hills. In California, where there are large communities of French-Basques, more modern frontons have been built in recent decades in cities such as Bakersfield and Fresno. The crown jewel of frontons in the United States—aside from the jai alai gambling centers in places like Orlando and Miami—is the one located at the San Francisco Basque Cultural Center, built in 1982, which hosts tournaments featuring players from around the world.



Josu Goni Etxabe/Wikimedia Commons

Jai alai rebounds in Manila, 2009.

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But the oldest fronton still in use in the United States is the one in Boise that Big Jack and Juana Anduiza built in 1914. It was a success from the beginning. Thousands of games followed the inaugural January 1915 match. "I loved to play pala," said Stack Yribar, whose family ran a boarding house across the street. "I lived it. Every chance we got we played. We even played with golf balls." The Anduiza fronton, he said, "was the best in the United States."



trophees-prestige.com

Because it was covered, it was particularly popular in winter, when most of the immigrants were on breaks. "Christmas day the handball courts of Spanish Frank, on Idaho street between Fifth and Sixth streets, and of Jack Anduiza at 619 Grove street were the scenes of spirited matches," the December 26, 1918 edition of the *Idaho Statesman* reported. "It was like the flash of sunny Spain incorporated

into the holiday festivities of the Boise organizations and families, despite the fact that the cold, nipping air of winter held the thermometer below freezing throughout the day."

The game might have been simple, but getting the right equipment wasn't. It was the same everywhere pelota was played outside the Basque Country. In 1557, the Basque governor of the Spanish colony in Chile went to great lengths and expense to import 3,000 handballs, and there may not have been a larger single shipment of pelota equipment to Latin America for the next four centuries. Players in the Americas had to improvise. In the late 19th century, virgin American rubber was incorporated into the balls, making it, as Carmelo Urza described, "livelier and dramatically transforming pelota into a much quicker and more interesting game." Players used whatever they could. They used tennis balls. Golf balls. All kinds of wood were used to make palas. Sometimes they would shatter to bits on a cold day, and the carpenters had to start over. It wasn't any easier for players at Anduizas'. Big Jack had to make balls. Everyone had to cut palas themselves, just as the

Argentine inventor had decades earlier, modeled after the shoulder bone of a cow.

Many of the Basque shepherders, who had thought they would only be in the United States for a few years, began to realize they would be there for the rest of

their lives. They married and had kids, and those kids grew up watching and playing pala and handball at Anduizas'. But they were also playing baseball and football. And there were fewer new pelota players to watch and learn from. By the 1940s, after federal legislation had essentially shut down open range sheepherding in the western United States, the flow of Basque immigration slowed, and so did the number of boarders and the number of games. "As the second-generation Basques progressed through American schools, their interests shifted to American sports," John Edlefsen wrote about Boise Basques in the 1940s. "The foreign-born became too old for this fast, strenuous game [of handball] ... the pelota courts will probably never again resound to the smash of the pelota on concrete walls and to the shouts of the excited spectators." Joseph Harold Gaiser predicted in 1944 that most of the frontons "will probably remain as ruins when the last foreign-born pelota player has passed away."

By then, Big Jack was getting older (he would die in 1947). He didn't play anymore. The Anduizas opened the fronton to boxing matches on the weekends instead of pelota games. The bouts were crowded and smoky. People leaned over the rails of the balcony to watch and bet. Babe Anduiza, Big Jack's grandson, fought in some of the bouts as a kid with "the big gloves ... the most important part of the experience was after the fight.



Boise Fronton Association

The Boise Fronton Association sponsors league play, tournaments and a children's camp. Opposite: pelota trophy.



Promoting "world's best" pelota extravaganza in Bordeaux, France, 2013.

Everybody threw money into the ring, and we'd get coffee cans and pick it up and take it home."

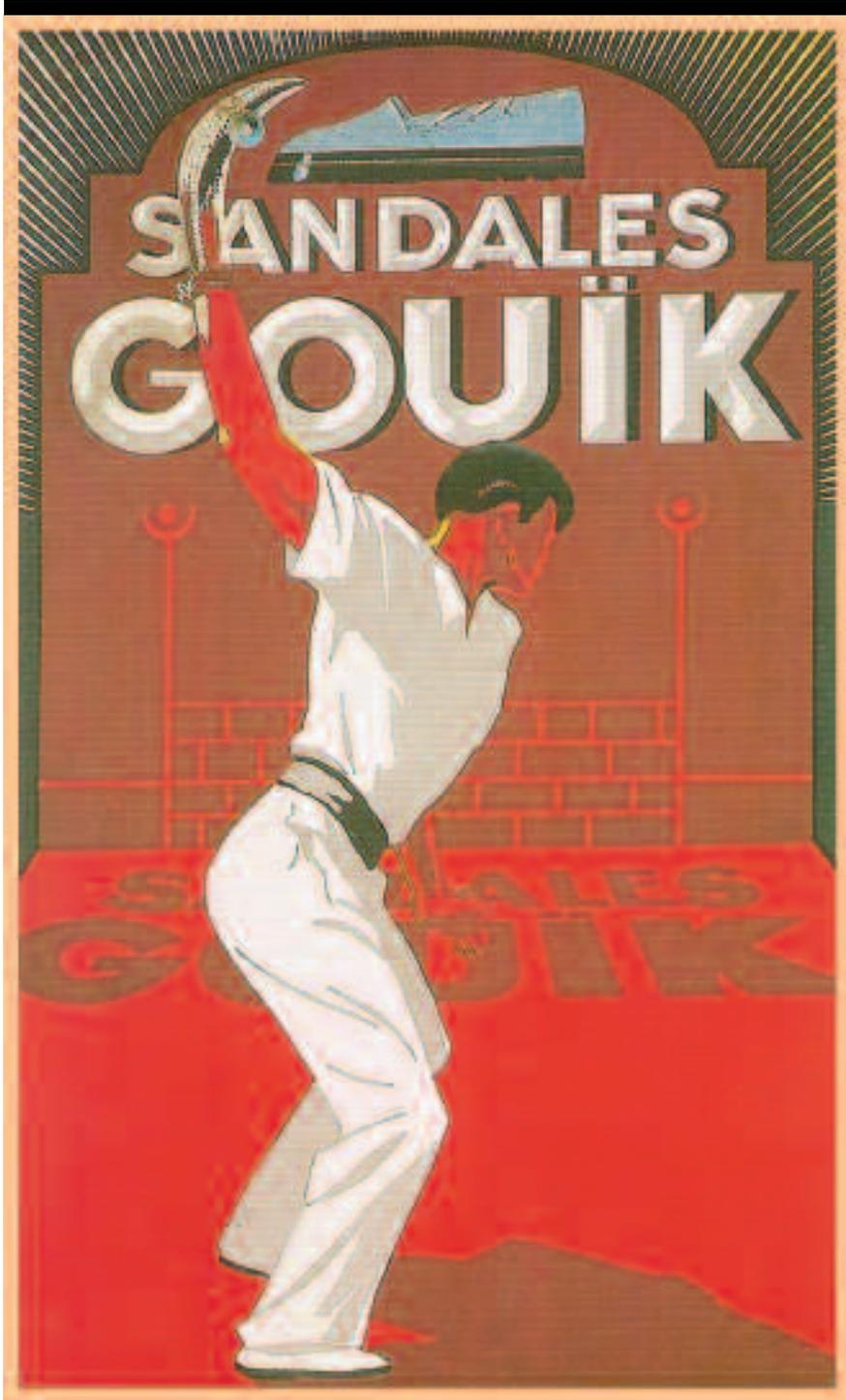
The Anduizas sold their boarding house, including the fronton, in March 1945 to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, which used it for a few years for meetings and drills. There were no more games on the court. The VA painted a large red, white and blue star in the center of the court. The VA sold the building to Briggs Engineering, Inc. in 1948. Briggs converted the boarders' rooms upstairs by the balcony into offices. It used the court downstairs for equipment storage for the next three decades.

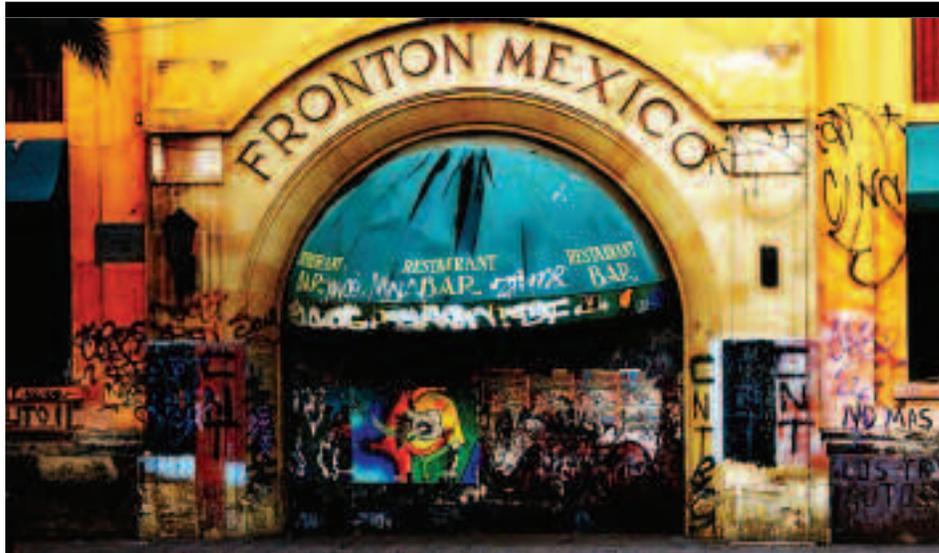
In the 1960s, Boise had a population of about 35,000, but it doubled over the next ten years. The Boise Redevelopment Agency, created in 1965, soon began to raze Boise's iconic buildings. As L.J. Davis wrote in *Harper's Magazine* in 1974, "If things go as they are, Boise stands an excellent chance of becoming the first American city to have deliberately eradicated itself." Partly to inspire a rebirth of central Boise, the BRA in the late 1960s and early 1970s wanted to build an 800,000 square-foot shopping mall in the middle of downtown, requiring the clearance of eight blocks. One of the buildings directly in the path of the agency's plan of destruction was the 1927 vintage Egyptian Theater, then known as the Ada Theater. It was just a block from Anduizas' fronton, which could have been a prime spot to install an underground parking lot for the new shopping mall.

Maybe it was because the BRA's dream of a mall downtown died. Maybe it was because the area near Grove Street was like a desert then or maybe because Boise's economy in the 1970s was sputtering. But somehow the Anduizas' fronton, filled with bulky equipment and dust, survived the wrecking ball. In 1972, the newly formed Idaho Basque Studies Center reached an agreement with the owners of the Briggs Engineering firm to begin using the fronton again. As Gloria Toticaguena wrote in *Boise Basques: Dreamers and Doers*, the groups undertook the Herculean task of cleaning and restoring a court that hadn't been used for play in almost 30 years. Volunteers "renovated the fronton by cleaning and painting the walls and surfaces, replacing the lights for night time practice and games and building a screen to protect the spectators from being hit by errant balls." They made multiple trips to Seaman's Gulch landfill "with years of trash and accumulated Briggs storage," she wrote.

The court became playable again. Younger Basque immigrants began to put on handball exhibitions on Saturday nights. "For many," Toticaguena wrote, "these games and gatherings brought back the memories of the decades when the boarding houses were full of emigrants and

The Beret Project





Grahmc99/flickr

Mexico City's Art Deco Fronton Building, opened in 1929, was "the place for pelota" before its decline in the 1990s. Opposite: Deco shoe advertisement, France, about 1936. Next: pelota players, Valencia, 2012.

the sound of a ball repeatedly smacking a cold, hard wall was an everyday occurrence."

Anybody who wanted to play could get the key from the bar at the Basque Center on the other end of Grove Street. Henry Alegria and other older players gave occasional handball or pala workshops to children on Saturdays. Occasionally, experienced players from the Basque Country would come play. In August 1977, a group of eight Basque handball players put on an exhibition at Anduizas'. Young Boiseans watched them play and met them afterwards and shook their hands. It was like shaking hands with a brick. It seemed like a game worth playing.

The fronton had barely changed since 1914. It was really just a big concrete room, dimly lit. It was suffocating in summer, freezing in winter. The rain leaked down the sidewall and pooled, sometimes freezing overnight. It was a musty, dark place with lots of echoes. Shafts of light came through the few windows at the top and spread over the walls, on the hundreds of marks from all those balls over the previous decades. You could smell the 1920s. You could hear pigeons in the beams.

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There was chicken wire at the roof, but it had holes and the balls would sometimes sneak through them. Since equipment was still precious, the games would stop and players would run to the alley behind the front wall, trying to get lucky by finding an escaped ball underneath a dumpster or in the gutter. If the ball was lost, the game was over. You couldn't run to the sporting goods store for a replacement.

But people somehow kept playing. In

1993, Rich Hormaechea and Adelia Simplot bought the Anduiza building, and they

eventually leased the court to the

newly created Boise Fronton Association. The association welcomed anyone who wanted to play for a small membership fee. The group began to sponsor

formal fall and spring leagues and tournaments to decide who would represent Boise in the annual pelota championships of the North American Basque Organization, which were played throughout the West. It also encouraged women to play, something that didn't happen when the fronton was first built. Dozens of women competed in a league that also sent representatives to the NABO tournaments. The organization also raised thousands of dollars to remodel and improve the fronton. They



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repainted the walls, installed more lights and cleaned up the floor. The faded red, white and blue star from the VA days was sanded off and cracks in the floor were filled, leaving a smooth playing surface. Today, players use the renovated court almost every day.

The Anduiza fronton is now a good enough facility that it takes a turn as host of the NABO men's and women's pelota championships every four or five years. When the fronton association hosted the championships in 2010, men and women from the United States, Venezuela, Argentina and the Basque Country came to play. The fronton was packed and the games were simulcast to the Basque Center, where Jaialdi 2010 was underway. In the Basque Country, Euskal Telebista, the Basque public television station, featured live play-by-play and interviews with the coaches and players.

During that NABO tournament, a pala player from California, accustomed to playing on the beautiful, more modern court in San Francisco, won a match despite having to negotiate the many challenges of the cramped old hot Anduiza fronton. Somebody asked him if it was hard to play in those conditions. "No way," he said. "To us, it's like playing at Wrigley Field."

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John Bieter is an associate professor in the history department at Boise State. Together, they co-authored *An Enduring Legacy: The Story of Basques in Idaho* (University of Nevada Press 2000).