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Trailing of the Sheep Basques carve their history

As influence wanes in Blaine County, the Basque legacy charts a path for future immigrants

Mark Dee Oct 9, 2019



The Oinkari Basque dancers of Boise carry their culture's banner in the Trailing of the Sheep Parade. The city has the largest Basque community in the United States.

Express photo by Roland Lane

"Whatever opportunity he had, he took. He wanted to get ahead—that's what's driven him his entire life. Because he had nothing."

Jodie Goitandia, on her father Joe

The first Basques in Blaine County wrote their stories in the trees.

Thin blades through old-growth aspen, that worked best. You'd see nothing at first, a paper cut in parchment bark. The words grew with the timber, stretched and split and darkening until, summers later, a sign would appear. A map, a name, a history.

Decades on, the carvings would warp and shift skyward. They'd scar, the message smudged, losing meaning but never really gone, so long as the trees still stood.

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On certain trails, Jodie Goitandia recognizes the names in the trees. They're people she knew from youth, back when Basque herders would stop by her family's mid-valley home, trailing sheep from their high alpine ranges toward Hagerman winters. They'd make camp in front of the house, now the offices of Clear Creek Disposal, and they'd eat—lamb stew and shepherd's bread blooming through the lid of Dutch ovens. In the morning, she'd head south a few miles alongside them, toward the old and emptying homes of the Inchaustis, the Arriagas and the Astoriquia's Rialto Hotel.

People ask Goitandia to recruit new blood to the old ways, now that her own children are grown. But generations removed, the kids around here are more Idahoan than anything else, more American, and about as Basque in

culture as Shaquille O’Neal is Irish. Today, with few exceptions, Basque culture is concentrated in the cities that have the critical mass to sustain it. Boise’s the place—with restaurants and markets and Basque-language schools. Gooding manages to keep a cultural center up and running. You have to leave Blaine County to find that connection. So, the Wood River Valley has its history, its names in phone books, on buildings, written in the trees.

Joe Burgy liked to claim his grandfather hired the first Basque shepherders in southern Idaho. “Grandfather Curran,” as Burgy called him, lived and lambed in Hagerman—all potatoes by 1978, when Burgy gave his oral history to the Center for Regional History at Ketchum’s Community Library. Before trucks could handle the country, Grandfather Curran and his Basque staff would run the flock into the Sawtooths and back. All in a year’s work.

“Graze ’em one way, graze ’em another,” Burgy said.

But Basques were in America long before Grandfather Curran. Records put ancestors in what’s now New Mexico as early as 1598, according to anthropologists William A. Douglass and Joseba Zulaika, who literally wrote the book(s) on Basque cultural studies; that man, Juan de Oñate, “somewhat prophetically” brought some of the first domestic sheep to the continent.

Centuries later, thousands more quit their homes in northern Spain and southern France to find their fortunes in American mines during the gold rush of the mid-1800s. The work didn’t suit many. Disillusioned, they chose jobs above ground, tending to the flock. And those who found success sent word home.

“This group reputation for skill and dedication to herding made the Basques one of the prime architects of the region’s sheep industry,” Douglass and Zulaika wrote in “Basque Culture: Anthropological Perspectives.”

As the frontiers began to close—as fences and ranches and, more innocuously, natural preserves began to pop up in California—herders were driven to find open land. Nevada and Idaho had pockets no one would touch. That’s where they went.

Out there, the Basque shepherd cut a mythic image. “Lords of the range,” writer Michele Strutin called them. “The lonely sentinels of the West,” wrote Basque-American author Robert Laxalt. Even scholars like Douglass turned to poets, speaking of “lonely lives under the big sky.”

“There were very few nationalities that could persevere, and stand the solitude and do everything else they did,” said Joe Laragan, an American-born son of Basque immigrants, in a 1983 interview with the Center for Regional History. “It was another life.”

That life belonged to Joe’s father, Marcelino. He came west from Bizkaya—Biscay, Spain—in 1907. Laragan’s mother followed, in 1910. At the time, it was getting tougher to do. A nativist sentiment dominated politics, and choked down immigration with new laws aimed to limit migrants. Language tests were established, quotas put in place. For a long time, the government granted an annual allotment of 500 “Spanish Shepherders,” as Basques were called. During wartime, when labor was short and wool was needed, industry groups lobbied Congress for more. Basques were “imported” by associations of wool growers—essentially indentured, on three-year contracts.

Many were happy to go. The European economy was cratering, and Spain ruptured into civil war. When it was over, Francisco Franco stomped hard on the opposition Basques. In 1939, he banned all languages aside from Castilian Spanish—a language many in Biscay didn't know.

Sebastian Goitiandia, Jodie's paternal grandfather, fled that Bizkaya. He left his wife, Maria, and his sons, Jose and Juan, with the promise of a paycheck in his stead. He'd be gone for years—first, to the sugarcane fields in Australia, and then, eventually, to Joe Oneida's sheep outfit on the Snake River Plain. Oneida was a Basque man with an Ellis Island name, and an American wife. The work was good, and so was the company. Sebastian sent for his family.

Back then, the road south from Ketchum was speckled with the Basque boarding houses along the sheep trail. Shoshone alone had as many as seven of them. The proprietors, like the guests, spoke the same language. They knew the same songs. During the 1950s and into the '60s, Basques owned nearly every bar in Hailey, Julie Stevens remembers. The Mint, the Hiawatha, the Pastime had Basque owners, and served Basque clientele. Her own parents, Epi and David Inchausti, started the Gem Bar on Bullion Street, and made a reputation for themselves in Basque food. Ernest Hemingway ate there, alongside Gary Cooper and Cary Grant. So did Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz. Colonel Sanders told Epi he'd only had better chicken at one other restaurant—his own.

The Basque restaurateurs had one thing in common: They wanted out of the sheep business, Stevens remembers. David Inchausti, her father, had no clue how to manage a flock when he hooked up with a herd in Challis. His family spoke no English. Julie's sister spent her first three years in Spain. In Idaho, she lived Monday through Friday with an American family to learn the language. David and Epi made a rule: That's the language their family would speak. After that, none of their children even learned Basque.

"My dad wanted us to be the best Americans we could be," Julie said. "He knew, to be successful, that's what you had to do."

Stevens remembers when the Goitiandia boys showed up at Hailey High School. They didn't speak English, either. In Spain, Jose Goitiandia had been working in a sawmill, scratching out a living. In America, he became Joe—the name he goes by to this day—and married Joe Oneida's daughter. He worked odd jobs until he could afford a pickup truck, and he started a business: Wood River Rubbish, trash collection. He ran that company for four decades, until he sold it. It's known as Clear Creek Disposal today. His brother, Juan, worked for Sun Valley Co. until he died last year. Neither ran sheep—and neither wanted to.

"Most of the Basque people worked in sheep only as long as they had to," Jodie, Joe's daughter, said. "That was just the thing that got them started. Nobody wanted to be in it for long. It was a lonely life."

"Whatever opportunity he had, he took," she said of her father. "He wanted to get ahead—that's what's driven him his entire life. Because he had nothing."

Franco died in 1975. When sheep contracts ended, many Basques went back. And, U.S. immigration reforms in the 1960s effectively repealed the laws passed decades prior, allowing others to stay.

In 1970, about 90 percent of sheepherders in the western United States were Basque, Douglass said; by 1976, it was down to 17 percent. A new wave of immigrants took the mantle—mostly Mexicans and Peruvians. They settled the

same ground, started their own businesses, built their own lives. Today, you won't find many Basques on the range. You'll find others, speaking New World Spanish, hoping to follow the trajectory that the Basques charted before them. That story, written silent in the trees.

“Essentially, each herder became a part-time recorder of history, and each tree trunk a living document,” Joxe Mallea-Olaetxe wrote in his history, “Speaking Through Aspens.” “The historical significance of these carvings is this: an ordinary shepherd left his mark on the trees, and thereby his memory survived.”

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