

NORTHEASTERN NEVADA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

QUARTERLY

Basque Ranching Culture in the Great Basin

by Mike Laughlin

Forests of Northeastern Nevada

by Thomas J. Straka

“The Most Extravagant Picturesqueness” of Northeastern Nevada

by Thomas J. Straka

The Pony Express 150-Year Anniversary

1860-1861

2010 - 3 & 4

Basque Ranching Culture in the Great Basin

by Mike Laughlin

The Basques are a people with a homeland, but without a nation. The countries of Spain and France claim their homeland. Four provinces in Northern Spain and three adjacent regions in France make up what is today considered the Basque Country. The Basques inhabit the region that includes the Bay of Biscay and the forest and the granite crests of the Pyrenees Mountains. This legacy dates from the Treaty of the Pyrenees in 1659.

The origins of the Basque people are still a mystery. Their unique language is called Euskera and is unrelated to any Indo-European language today. Linguists and scholars have not been able to link it with any other known language. It appears that Basque is the only language remaining

of those spoken in southwestern Europe before the Roman conquest.

The Basques are considered by some to be direct descendants of the Iberians, people who once inhabited Spain. Basque are a friendly, fiercely independent people who were known in the middle

ages as skilled boat-makers and courageous whale hunters. These people often ranged far across the Atlantic Ocean in their boats. The latter generation grew up in a agrarian society and worked with their livestock on isolated mountain farms throughout the Pyrenees Mountains.



Basques in America

Basque people immigrated to the Western United States from their homeland in the Pyrenees

Mountains, first arriving in California around 1850. This immigration to the American West was inspired by the discovery of gold in California. Many of the Basques soon found that gold was very hard to find



A sheep wagon, pulled by a team of horses, with the shepherd's dog in the background.

Museum photo

and turned to working and owning livestock on ranches. Basque-owned traveling sheep bands soon ranged from the Pacific coast to the High Sierra. By the late 1850s, many Basques had become established ranchers.

A Century of Immigration

By the 1870s, expanded agriculture and overcrowded rangelands pushed stockmen beyond the Sierras east into the high desert of the Great Basin. This arid country with its vast rangelands and snow-capped mountains became a magnet for Basque people in America. Coming from a country barely 100 miles across in any direction, Basques, when arriving in the Great Basin, were amazed at the size and scope of the land. Ambitious Basque sheepherders became sheep owners and sent back to their homeland for friends and relatives to come herd their sheep bands. This began an immigration chain that would continue for over a century. Most knew little of their destination. All some knew were names such as Elko, Ely, Mountain Home, Jordan Valley, and other places that they had heard before from their relatives that had been to the American west.

Poverty was one reason for young men to leave their homeland. While the Basque sheepherder was near the bottom of the social order in the West in the early 1900s, many men viewed this life as something

to be endured temporarily because they would be rewarded with enough saved wages that when they returned to their homeland they could purchase their own business or farm. Another was that the Basques were reluctant to serve France and Spain in their colonial wars. The posting of draft notices often prompted an overnight emigration of young men from the Basque country.

Basque Stockmen in Northeastern Nevada

Bernardo and Pedro Altube, who were born in the Basque country, came to Elko County from California in 1870 and put together a large cattle kingdom. They had first settled in San Mateo County and then moved to Palo Alto, California. Pedro was reported to have stood six feet, six inches tall and was known as Palo Alto, or "Tall Pine." It is said by some that the town of Palo Alto, California takes its name from him. Pedro Altube was elected to the Cowboy Hall of

Fame at Norman, Oklahoma as Nevada's candidate in 1960. The Altube brothers ranch, located in Independence Valley, near Tuscarora, was roughly 20 miles long by 10 miles wide with thousands of additional acres on which they ranged their cattle.

In these early days, the Basque stockmen were cattlemen who brought to Nevada the customs and traditions of the Old California Spanish Vaqueros.



Pedro Altube, one of the founders of the Spanish Ranch in northern Elko County.

Museum photo, donated by John & Edna Patterson

The customs and traditions that these cattlemen brought could well have been the start of the buckaroo tradition in Nevada, as we know it today.

Range sheep did not begin to arrive in earnest in the Elko County area, in northeastern Nevada, until the beginning of the 1900s when the Altube brothers, who started as cattlemen, began to also run large bands of range sheep using Basque herders. The Spanish Ranch, today operated by the Ellison Ranching Company, was part of the vast domain of the Altubes and is still one of the largest ranches in Elko County.

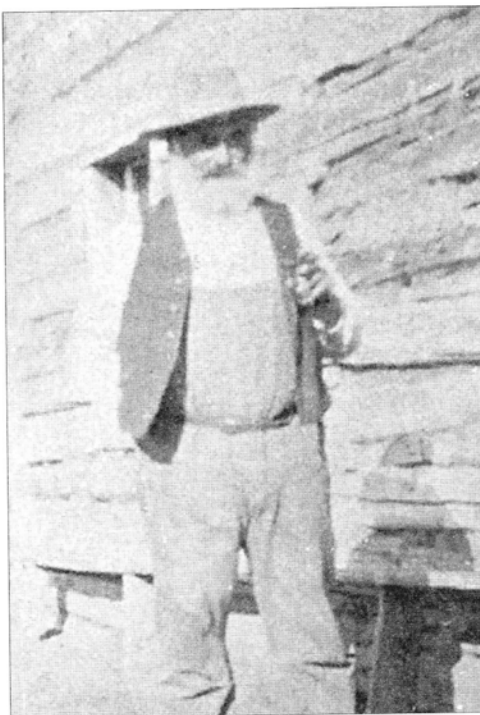
Another Basque livestock family, the Garat Family, reportedly drove their cattle herds over the Sierra Nevada Mountains from California and settled in northeastern Nevada.

The large ranch they started is now owned and operated today by the Jackson Family and is called the YP Ranch.

In the annals of western history, there is perhaps an over-fictionalization of the conflicts between sheep and cattle on western ranges. In reality, often both sheep and cattle were run on the same ranch. A good example is the Spanish Ranch where they were reported to have run at one time 18,000 cattle and 12,000 sheep on the same ranch. One reason this was possible is that sheep and cattle do not compete for the same forage. Sheep are browsers, eating forbs and brush. Cattle are grass eaters-grazers.

Basque Shepherders

A young Basque herder arrived in America from half way around the world and



Bernardo Altube, along with his brother, Pedro, settled the Spanish Ranch in 1870.

Museum photo, donated by John & Edna Patterson

was met by the sheep owner, who many times was a relative. At the main ranch the young herder would be provided with a pack burro or mule, pack saddle and paniers (canvas pack bags), a bedroll of heavy blankets and canvas tarp, Dutch oven for cooking, rifle, canteen, sheep hook and other articles for daily sheep work. A sheep dog completed his outfit, serving as a companion and an essential partner in working sheep on the open range. Many seasoned sheep dogs knew more about herding sheep than the young Basque immigrant

While the right clothing and equipment could help in getting the young herder to be able to withstand the physical elements of the Great Basin, nothing could prepare this individual for the empty and endless distances

that would surround him in his new environment.

Strength to Survive

These Basque were tough, hardy individuals but the aching loneliness and vast country made for a difficult adjustment. Some were overwhelmed by the country and loneliness, and became victims of a condition the Basque referred to as txamisuek jota, or "struck by sagebrush." These men wanted no human contact and often would hide if you rode into their camp. However, most of the herders adapted well to their new life in America.

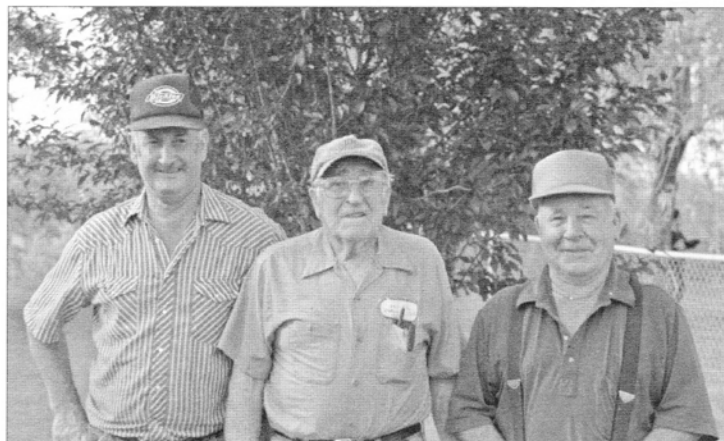
The Basque herders became some of the very best in western range sheep operations. These men came from a mountainous country in Spain growing up in rough mountain terrain



J.P. Garat, founder of the YP Ranch, came to Elko county from California.

Museum photo, donated by John Humphrey

and an agrarian society. They understood the land and the animals. Hard work was nothing new to Basques. They were real stockmen. They were very dependable and could be counted upon to stay for long periods alone and not leave their flocks. It is an



Former Basque shepherders, left to right, Eustaquio Murubarria, Nicolas Fagoaga and Jose (Chapo) Leniz.

Lee Raine photo

art form to handle sheep alone with no fence and no night corrals. The herders had to constantly guard against predators such as mountain lions, bobcats, coyotes and bears, and had to keep moving the band to fresh grazing. Efficient management of a band of range sheep demanded total teamwork between the herder and his animals.

Cattle needed to be fenced in or handled by a crew of cowboys on horseback, whereas one shepherd would handle 1500-2000 head of sheep alone relying only on himself, his horse and his dogs.

In a personal interview with three former Basque shepherders, Nicolas Fagoaga had this to say about his early years in the sheep business: "I came to Nevada from Spain in 1951. I had no experience in handling sheep; I was a cabinetmaker in the Basque Country. My brother talked me into coming to America. They sent me into the Ruby Mountains with a pack burro and a tent to work for sheep man Tony Smith. My first camp was in a place called Rattlesnake Canyon, near Lee. I hated the Rubies. They were rough and steep and I did not like to be alone." Herders often referred to the Ruby Mountains by the Spanish term "Mata Hombres" (man-killers.) These steep, rocky mountains were hard on both horses and men.

"The camp tender would come to my camp every five days." Fagoaga continued. "If I

was out with my sheep he left the groceries near my camp and went on. I lasted four months. My brother said to stick it out—I would become use to it. I told him no, I was leaving for California. I went to work on a ranch out of Dixon, California, where I helped take care of the sheep on the ranch. There were other people around, and we ate our meals as a family. I liked this much better, although it was much harder work than sheep herding in the Ruby Mountains. I stayed with the sheep business for five years," Fagoaga continued, "and then came back to Elko and started a construction business. Shepherding in the Rubies was not for me." Nick is now retired from his construction company and lives in Elko.

Jose (Chapo) Leniz also talked about his sheep herding experience. "I came to America in 1954 and first went to work in the Jarbidge Mountains in northeastern Nevada for sheep man, Pete Elia. I lived in a tent, and packed a burro, and walked to my sheep. I did this for three years. Then I came to the Rubies and went to work for the Sorensen sheep outfit. They made me the camp tender. I took care of six summer bands and baked the bread for the herders. I rode a horse and packed the supplies for each herder on mules. We visited each herder every five days. Our main camp was in Secret Pass between the Humboldt Range and the Ruby Mountains. I enjoyed the life of a camp tender." Chapo is now deceased.

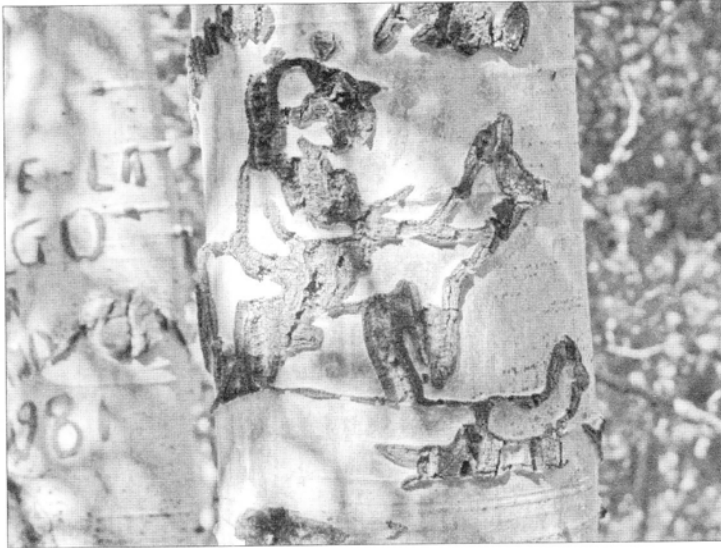
Eustaquio Murubarria, who worked for sheep man Paul Enchauspe out of Austin, Nevada in the Toiyobe



Sheep on the summer range

Lee Raine photo

Mountains for 25 years, talked about his life as a herder. "I went to work as a sheepherder for Paul in 1957 and stayed on for 25 years, 18 of these were



Basque tree carving, depicting a herder on his horse, with his dog by his side

Lee Raine photo

spent sheepherding and then I moved to Paul's main ranch and took care of cows, horses and sheep. I herded sheep year-round for 18 years. In the winter, we would take our bands south into the Ione and Gabbs country. I stayed alone most of the time and it did not bother me. After 25 years herding sheep and ranch work I moved to Elko and got out of the sheep business. I was glad to be in town and around some people. I now work for the Elko School District as a janitor and own a home in Elko."

Basque Tree Carvings (Arborglyphs)

In the remote mountains of the west, during the summer months, sheepherders camped alone in tents with a pack outfit, horse or pack burro, and dogs to tend their flocks. Camp tenders with a pack string visited the herder, usually once every five days, bringing groceries and other necessities. Many times this camp tender was the only other person the herder would see and speak to during the entire summer grazing period. The herder's sheep would leave the bed ground on an open hillside just after sunup and begin to graze downhill toward water. The herder would put his sheep on water and then after they had "watered up" the band would shade up during the heat of the day. There was not much for the herders to do during this period so they would spend this time recording their thoughts on aspen trees. Around 4:00 pm, the sheep would start grazing uphill

toward their bed ground. When the sheep were put on the bed ground for the night the herder would return to his tent, many times after dark,

A portion of the history of Basque herders has been recorded on aspen trees throughout the mountains of the Great Basin. Solitary during their time in mountains for four or five months during the summer, seeing only the camp tenders once a week, herders used tree carving to alleviate boredom and loneliness and record events. They wanted to leave their mark on the landscape and carved a record of their presence on the bark of aspen trees with a knife or other sharp object for other sheepherders to see. Black scar tissue builds up on the tree's white bark. As the tree continues to grow vertical scratch lines widen more than horizontal ones, causing a unique tree carving style.

Some of the earliest tree carvings by Basque herders date back to 1895. There is no known tradition of tree carvings in the Basque Country. With no record of this carving technique being passed from one sheepherder to another, it is assumed that the new sheepherder artists simply saw the work of past sheepherders who camped in the same spot and added their own drawings.

The carvings provide a glimpse into the herders' idle moments away from their sheep bands. Most frequently, the carvings were only a name and date. Occasionally there were drawings of women, animals, or objects. Some herders left messages telling where they were going or where they had been, where the best feed and water was, etc. Tree carvings provide a valuable tool for historians because they marked the herder's whereabouts and movement of the sheep herds.

The Basque Studies Program, Desert Research



Basque tree carving with date and name.

Lee Raine photo

Institute, University of Nevada in Reno, Nevada, has done several scientific studies of these tree carvings, called "arborglyphs." This information can be found at <http://basque.unr.edu>.

Another distinctive remnant of the Basque herder is the harrimutilak, or stone boy. Basque herders



Stone cairns, called harrimatilak, were stacked up by Basque sheepherders, and some of these can still be found in many places in the Great Basin.

Lee Raine photo

piled up rocks into monuments in their idle time to help other herders locate a campsite or trail in the midst of the "sage brush" sea on the open range. This activity also helped the herder pass away the lonely hours away from all civilization.

Seasons of The Herders:

The daily and seasonal routines of sheepherders in a range sheep operation varied little throughout the Great Basin. Each cycle began by driving the sheep to spring lambing grounds. The ewes (female sheep) were sheared (the fleece shaved off) before the birth of the lambs. The lambing grounds were chosen for the protection they afforded from the prevailing winds and for plentiful grass and water. Some outfits built wooden buildings called lambing sheds to protect the newborn lambs from the elements. When all the lambs were born, they were processed. Male lambs were castrated, all the lamb's tails were "docked" (bobbed) for cleanliness and they were marked with paint using the owner's brand.

After lambing, the herders set off on the trail with their summer bands headed for the mountains, moving up from the sagebrush flats, through juniper

foothills, into the aspen-lined creeks of the mountains for the summer. All these movements were made slowly because the herd grazed its way along the trail. Ten to twelve miles in a day would be a big day trailing sheep.

Fall comes early in the high country. Aspens start to turn color in late August and heavy frost lines the meadow bottoms in early mornings. At this time, the herders would point their band back down out of the mountains toward the lower desert. Generally, two summer bands would merge and aging ewes and lambs were sorted off and sent to market. With the size of the bands reduced, some of the herders would go to town to spend the winter. The remaining herders would head their bands toward the winter range, which was, sometimes, hundreds of miles from the summer range. On the trip to the winter range and during the winter months, the herders lived in sheepwagons. The sheepwagon, a forerunner of the modern travel trailer, is a camp on wheels with beds, a table, and a wood stove. It was pulled in the old days by a team of horses and today by a pickup. During this time, two herders would sometimes share a camp. One would drive the team or pickup pulling the sheep camp; the other would ride his horse and move the sheep, with the help of his dogs, down the trail.

Elko County, years ago when there were over a million sheep in Nevada, had the largest concentration of Basque sheepherders in the United States. Basques in later years were brought to America on contracts



A modern-day sheep camp

Lee Raine photo

worked out with the U S Immigration Service set up by the Western Range Association. The herders came to work specifically on sheep contracts for three years and then returned to their homeland. Sometimes

they would sign up to come back for a second or third tour. In the early years, before strict immigration laws were enacted, many herders came, stayed, and obtained American citizenship and became sheep owners or went into other businesses.

Basque Hotels:

Several Basque hotels still operate in towns throughout Nevada. One of these is the Star Hotel in Elko. The 22-room hotel, built in 1910, provided a winter home for sheepherders. It was the meeting and resting place for Basque herders who had no other home. It still serves as a home for retired Basque herders.

Basque food and drink is a popular specialty of the Great Basin region. Meals are served family style as they always have been, both to residents and the appreciative public.

Current Range Sheep Industry

Today most of the sheep on the open range are gone as are their Basque herders. Most contemporary contract sheepherders come from South American countries, primarily Peru and Chile. In 1973, there were 50,000 head of sheep on the Ruby & East Humboldt Mountains on the summer ranges. In 12 years, most range sheep operators were gone. Reasons for the range sheep industry demise were increased government grazing regulations, lamb and wool prices and imports, predators, changes of class of livestock from sheep to cattle, introduction of Rocky Mountain Big Horn Sheep by Nevada Division of Wildlife



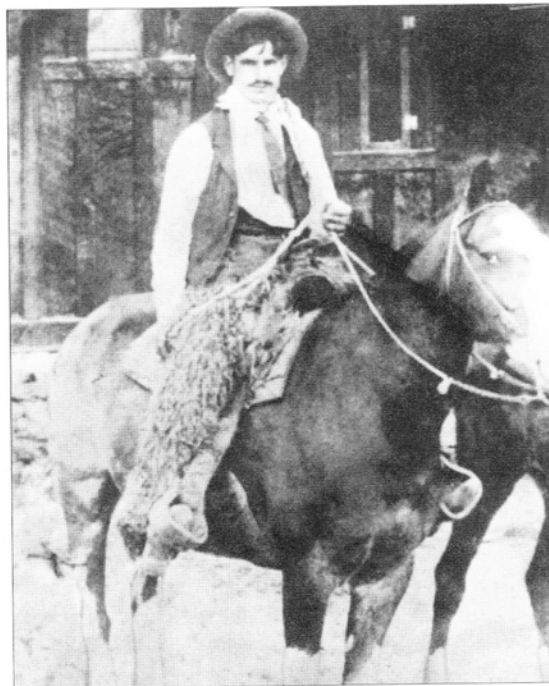
The Star Hotel in Elko, c1918.

Museum photo

added, "I salute these Basque herders!"

Basque Descendants in the United States

Descendants of the early Basque herders still live throughout the west, especially in California, Idaho, and Nevada. Many of these are in Elko. One of these descendants, Anita Anacabe Franzoia, carries on a business in Elko called Elko General Merchandise, started by her father, Jose (Joe) Anacabe, a former buckaroo, stagecoach driver and sheepherder. Some 69 years later, this store still provides stockmen, miners and others with quality boots, coats, hats and other outdoor gear.



Jose (Joe) Anacabe, founder of Elko General Merchandise, when he was working as a buckaroo.

Photo donor unknown

and United States Forest Service, labor problems, and so on.

The author states he has the opportunity to work with many fine Basque herders who would greet visitors and feed them and their horse and dogs when they rode into the sheep camp in the mountains. He felt very fortunate to have met, eaten, and camped with many of these men. He

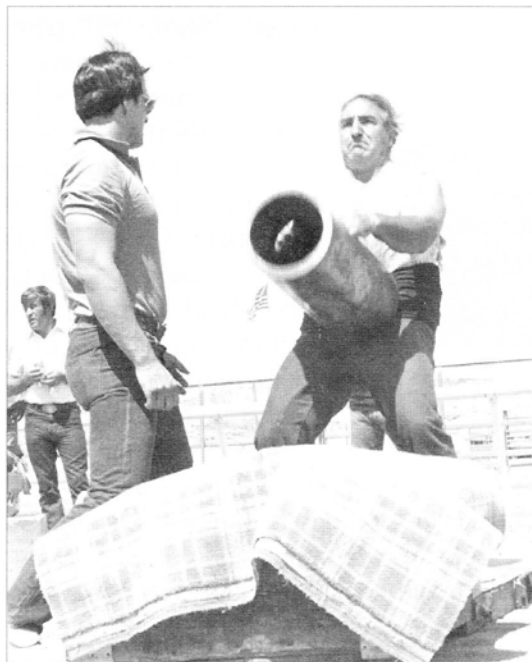
The National Basque Festival

The main center of the Basque culture in Nevada is Elko. Basque descendants continue to carry on traditions of their homeland, including customs, language, dances, dress, and food. Basque people are very proud of their cultural heritage and each year since 1964, Elko has been host to a summer festival. This festival, held annually the first weekend in July, is now proclaimed the National Basque Festival. People come from all over the world to take part in these festivities. Many times,

Catholic priests, woodchoppers and weight lifters from the Pyrenees Mountains in Spain have been invited to participate in this festival.

The various events are:

- Basque traditional dancing in authentic costumes
- Weightlifting
- Wood chopping
- Basque Relay
- Handball (pelota) tournament
- Basque Picnic and Barbecue
- Golf tournament
- Interactive living history programs
- Shepherd's Bread Baking Contest
- Outdoor Catholic Holy Mass



Weightlifting event, during the Basque Festival.

Museum photo, donated by Elko Daily Free Press

Those who would witness a proud people, carrying on their heritage and traditions and passing it along to their children, should visit Elko, Nevada the first weekend in July and "become Basque for a weekend."

Research material for this article was gathered from the works of Dr. Jose Mallea-Olaetxe, UNR Basque Studies Program and his work on arborgyphs. It also contains material gained from Anita Anacabe Franzoia, Cathy Fagoaga Laughlin, the Elko Basque Club, the Northeastern Nevada Museum, as well



Dancers at the National Basque Festival, held in Elko the first weekend in July every year.

Lee Raine photo

as the author's own experience living and camping with Basque herders in the mountains and deserts of Nevada.

For more information contact:

Mike Laughlin

mikelaughlin@hotmail.com

Lee Raine

www.cowboyshowcase.com

Elko Jaietan

www.elkobasque.com



Basque dancers, performing at the Elko County Fairgrounds during the annual festival.

Museum photo, donated by Elko Daily Free Press