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QUARTERLY

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ELKO, NEVADA

Basque Tree Carvings

by Richard Lane

Introduction:

During the past summer I examined numerous aspen groves on the western slope of the Ruby Mountains between Lamoille Canyon and Mitchell Creek, in the Red Rock area west of Jiggs, and on the Mountain City and Gold Creek districts of the Humboldt National Forest. The carvings that were located were always interesting and sometimes very beautiful. Many persons, including shepherders, who frequent the mountains give these carvings only a cursory glance and thereby miss the enjoyment and confrontation by some small evidence of the lives of the strong men who followed this solitary occupation in the past.

This is a loss to all concerned and especially to those interested in the range history of the West, for neglecting to consider the actual roles of the shepherd and sheepmen distorts our understanding of how the present attitudes and situation came to be. Aspen carvings are only a small part of the necessary evidence, but a very enjoyable part.

Several persons have provided valuable assistance in the preparation of this paper: William Douglass, Luis Garcia, Jess Goicoechea and Richard King.

Basque Tree Carvings

by Richard Lane

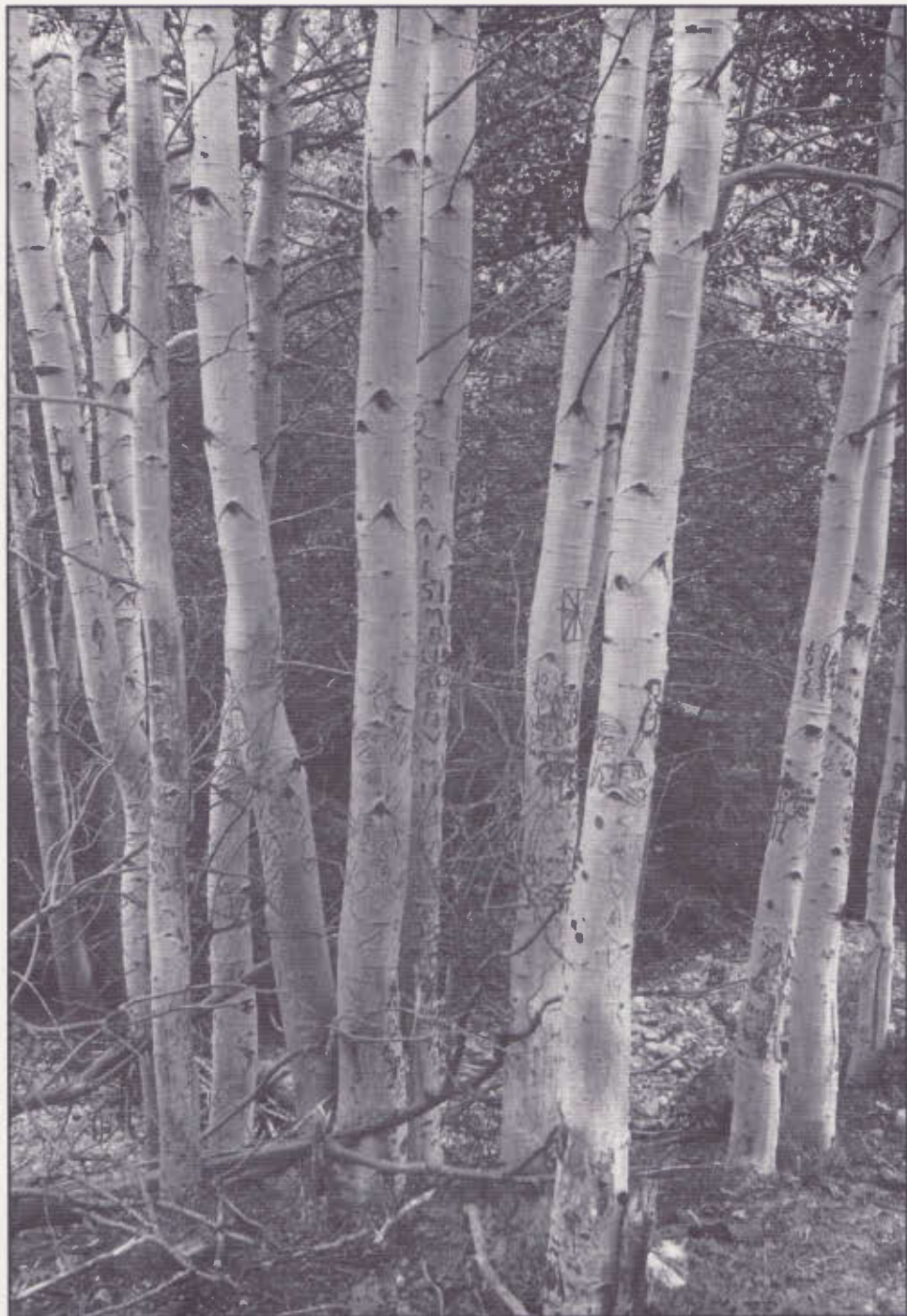
Scattered among the aspens in northeastern Nevada are clusters of carvings etched by shepherders and camptenders; a legacy for the anthropologist and testimony that thoughts of other people (oftimes females) occupied a good deal of the lonely herder's time.

The carvings - dating from the turn of the century - provide a glimpse into those idle moments away from sheep husbandry and camp routines when a man took knife in hand to leave his successors with evidence of his presence.

Most frequently he simply carved his name and the date. On a few occasions an artist here and there expressed himself with drawings of women, houses or other objects. More verbose carvers left complete quotations or cultural statements, evidently the direct results of frustrations of this often lonely occupation.

The earliest identifiable carvings date from a few years later than the influx of Basque shepherders into this area about 1895.

Since there is no tradition of tree carving in the Basque Country, it is likely that the early herders learned the skill from persons in the United States. To my knowledge, no pre-Basque aspen carvings from the nineteenth century are still living. The Basques and other Iberians were preceded in their occupation by northern Europeans, predominantly from the British Isles.



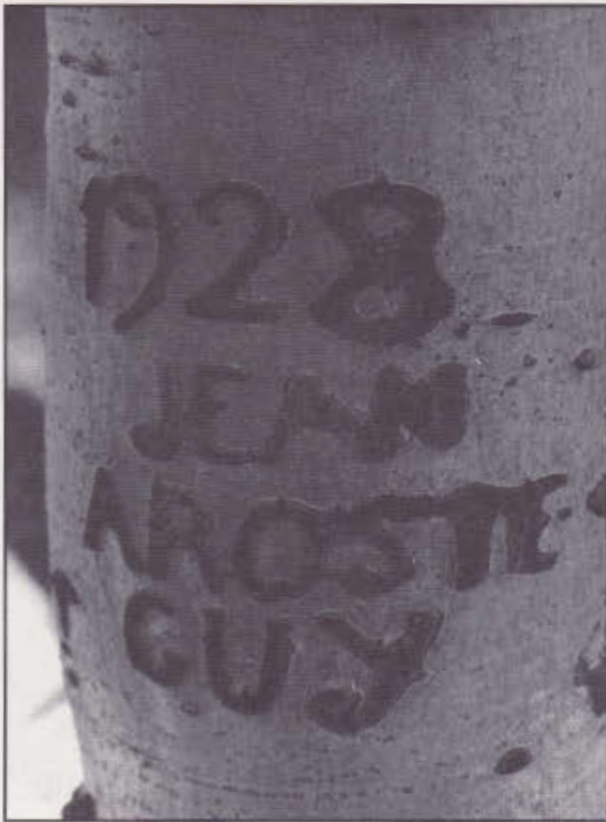
Aspen grove with tree carvings.
Museum collection

During the present century Basques and Spaniards have provided most of the labor on Elko County summer ranges.

The medium which these men have used is a living material that changes in size, color and texture over the years at the points where incisions were made.

Should the incisions be too wide or too deep, the resulting bark which grows to heal the wounds will cover so large an area that the intended shape of the carving may be obscured. There are numerous examples of this error that can be observed. The appropriate technique for producing clean, narrow lines is a single very light incision which barely penetrates the surface of the white bark. Though penetration with the knife into the cambium will doubtless place a stress on the life support system of the tree, densely carved living aspens exist which surpass seventy years of age. The surface of a dead tree deteriorates and destroys the carvings.

An overwhelming majority of carvings consist of names and dates (Figure 2); more rarely, direct statement of Basque ethnic identity and, in the cases of many of the Spanish Basque herders, farmstead (very rare) or town, province, and country of origin (Figure 3). The earliest of these which I have located was carved in June, 1903, and it is just barely discernable (Figure 4). It was spared the depredations of the beaver that many of its neighbors have suffered.



Jean Arosteguy, 1928 (Fig. 2).
Museum collection



Juan Lano, 1921, also shows a province in Spain (Fig. 3).
Museum collection



June, 1903 (Fig. 4).
Museum collection

In a few places herders have made remarkable carvings of human figures (Figures 5, 6 and 9), animals (Figures 8? And 9?), and buildings (Figure 11) and geometric shapes (e.g., a star). Some of the women are identified as prostitutes in either Spanish or Basque. No carvings of sheep have been located.

Occasionally a herder has left a few words of warning on appropriate herding practices to his successors, exclaimed on the fine conditions of his lambs, or registered a lament (Figure 12): in Spanish, "el que tiene que estar aqui es por que esta medio loco no se una puta"/ "the guy who has to be here must be half crazy because there are no prostitutes to be seen." Or on at last preparing to return home to the Basque country feelings are expressed (Figure 13): in Spanish, "Adios la sierra papa siempre"/ "Good-bye forever, mountain." There is also an instance of an untranslatable Spanish expletive being directed toward a sheep foreman. The most surprising kind of item missing from this category is anything referring to conflicts with cattlemen.

Statements occur in either Spanish or Basque, but none in French have been found. Some Basque speakers inscribe their messages in Spanish.

There are some carvings which often produce a strong, discomforting emotional reaction in me (Figures 14 and 15) because of odd staring eyes within unidentifiable shapes.



Carving of human figures (Fig. 5).

Museum collection



Carving of human figure (Fig. 6).
Museum collection



Carving of human figure (Fig. 7).
Museum collection



Carving of animal (Fig. 8).
Museum collection



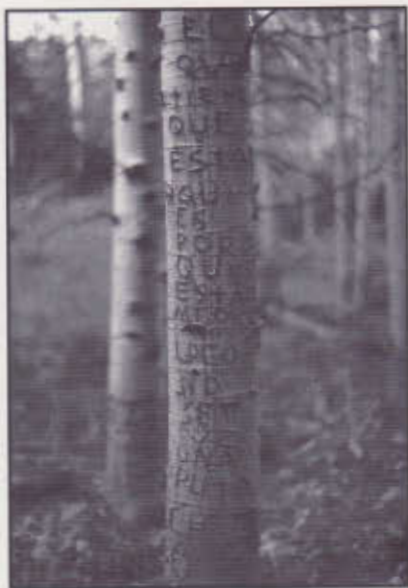
Carving of an animal? (Fig. 9).
Museum collection



Carving of a man riding an animal (Fig. 10).
Museum collection



Carving of a home complete with chimney (Fig. 11).
Museum collection



Notice carved on aspen: "el que tiene que estar aqui es por que esta medio loco no se una puta"/"the guy who has to be here must be half crazy because there are no prostitutes to be seen." (Fig 12).

Museum collection



Carving on tree in regards to returning to the Basque country: "Adios la sierra para siempre"/"Good-bye forever, mountain" (Fig. 13).

Museum collection



Distorted figure (Fig 14).
Museum collection



Distorted figure (Fig 15).
Museum collection

There is, of course, no assurance that all of the items illustrated here and others upon which my statements are based were actually made by sheepherders or camptenders. The human and animal figures are difficult to document with certainty because so few include the apparent signature of the artist. Moreover, to provide but one example, in one of the aspen groves near Red Rock there are patriotic carvings in English and of our flag dating from World War I which are intermixed with those definitely by sheepherders.

The photographs of humans, animals and the house in this article are from areas which lack any evidence of non-Basque, non-French, and non-Spanish language carvings. However, it is possible that there are carvings in Chinese, Japanese, Portuguese, Italian, one of the Philippine languages, or, perhaps, others, since speakers of each of these languages did some sheep herding.

The author:

Mr. Lane is a graduate student in the Department of Anthropology at Yale University. He came to Elko in May, 1969, and has been conducting research on sheepherders and the development of the sheep industry in northeastern Nevada from 1870. The investigation is being done with the cooperation of the Basque Studies Program, Desert Research Institute, University of Nevada, Reno. This work will result in a Ph.D. thesis to be completed in 1971. Prior to coming to Elko he received his Bachelor of Arts degree from Johns Hopkins University and the degree of Master of Philosophy in anthropology at Yale.



Tree carving of a man's face
Museum collection