Sierra Basques

By Jennifer K. Crittenden

The movie *Thunder in the Sun* recounts the adventures of a French Basque pioneer family as it makes its way west, narrowly escaping an Indian attack at Whitney Portal. The movie highly amused real Basques with its depiction of a *jai alai* game baton being used as a weapon and of characters screeching at each other, as though that's how Basques talk. The movie was accurate however in positing Basques in the Eastern Sierra. And if you pay attention, you can still see the marks they literally left behind on the landscape.

Basque country covers a region of the Pyrenees in northern Spain and southwestern France, and its people are defined by *Euraska*, the language they speak. Basques have a long history of shipbuilding and exploration; some even claim that Christopher Columbus was Basque. Basques began to immigrate to California in significant numbers after the 1860s when gold was found in the Sierra although Basque sheepherders had been working in southern California since the 1850s. By the 1880s, Basques had also moved on to northern Nevada, Idaho, Oregon, Utah, Montana, and Wyoming, seeking cheap farmland, but significant Basque populations remained in LA and San Francisco. Several large families settled in Kern County and employed many Basques in their *ostatuak*, their boarding houses and hotels. By 1895, there were allegedly about 10,000 Basque-Americans in the United States. Although Idaho is most closely associated with Basque culture today, the largest population base by far is in California, with over 20,000 self-reporting Basque-Americans.

During the mining era, there was a great demand for sheep, and until 1905, sheep grazing was unregulated. Sheep owners could graze hundreds of thousands of sheep on the Sierra meadows at no charge, as long as they duked it out with the cattlemen, who also wanted free grass. Basques were drawn to the western Sierra because the green pastures and mountains reminded them of their homeland, although the magnitude of the land was astonishing. They could maintain enormous flocks here in contrast to the Pyrenees where their herds might consist of only a few head. The Basque sheep industry flourished, with flocks growing into the hundreds and sometimes thousands. Several sheepmen, Fred Fulstone and the Basque Altube brothers, built empires that extended from California to Nevada.

Mary Austin described the shepherds in Owens Valley at the turn of the 20th century as "wild, hairy men of little speech, who attested their rights to the feeding ground with their long staves upon each other's skulls." She suggests that "the shepherds have not changed more than the sheep in the process of time… they are hardy, simple livers, superstitious, fearful [and] given to seeing visions."

After the U.S. Forest Service was created in 1905, it began overseeing public lands that were organized into grazing districts to cut down on nomadic herding. In 1934, the Taylor Grazing Act was passed and enforced by the U.S. Forest Service which decreed that sheepherders had to own or lease the land they grazed on. Depending on your viewpoint, this legislation reduced damage to the land caused by overgrazing or protected the interests of powerful ranchers, or both. Regardless, it dramatically ended the heyday of Basque sheepherding.

The Mono Basin itself however remained full of sheep. Joe Mendiburu, a Basque sheep owner, established a ranch in Round Valley on land leased from LADWP and had an enormous herd, one of the largest in the nation by the 1960s. He employed many Basque sheepherders who had a reputation for skill with the animals. The idea of allotments was established for public land, and Horse Meadow and Bohler Canyon were allocated for sheep grazing. Locally, that is where we see the greatest evidence of those European men, working in a foreign land, and the physical expression of what was on their mind.

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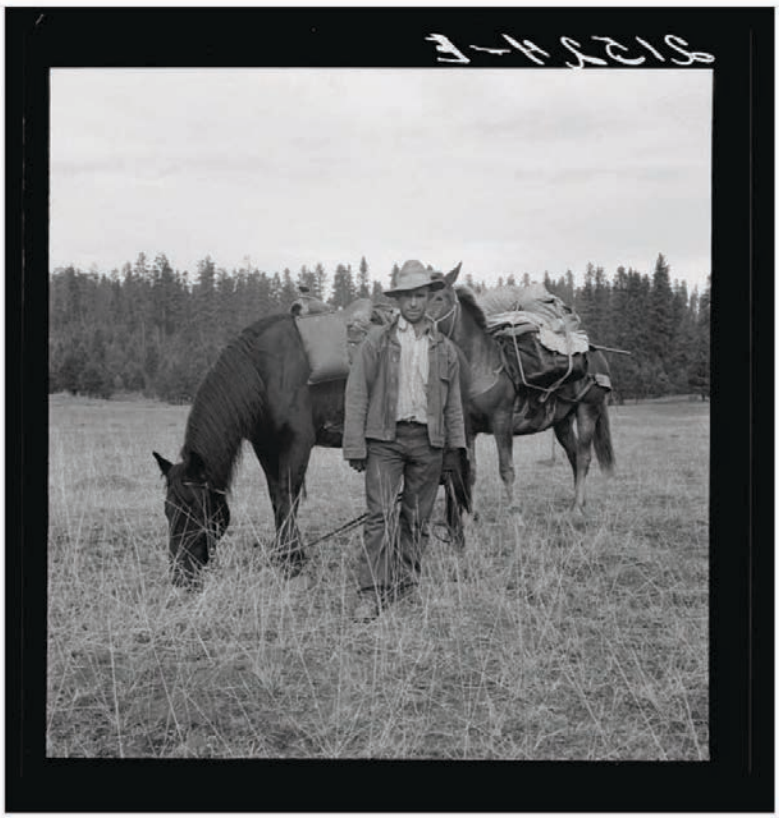

Basque sheep herder who speaks broken English coming down from summer camp with pack animals. Adams County, Idaho. Photo by Dorothea Lange, 1939.

Unlike other immigrants who typically gravitated toward urban areas, the Basque sheepherders were by necessity located in the rural landscape, surrounded by meadows, mountains, and trees. Augie Hess reports in his book *The Kid from Mono Mills* that, despite their isolation,the sheepherders enjoyed being part of the social scene in his tiny Lee Vining community. They would drive their sheep from Bakersfield and Lancaster to Mono Lake for summer grazing from the 1920s to the 1970s, and the sight of a flock of sheep strolling up U.S. Highway 395 with a donkey at the front was a sure sign of spring. During the summer they were around town, buying gas and services at Augie's gas station, and shopping for supplies at the Lee Vining Market. He recounted that they had nice cheese and wine and baked their own sheepherder's bread in a large stone oven at Conway Ranch. They even shared their mountain oysters, special treats made of sheep testicles. Faithful to their Basque heritage, they were good partyers and liked to whoop it at the bars and BBQs.

The Basque shepherd, or *artzain*, was also known for his steadiness and dependability, to be less likely to succumb to becoming "sage-brushed," to go crazy because of their isolated situation. Basque workers were in such demand that when the war generated a labor crisis in the 1940s, western sheepmen pressured their senators to pass special regulation, known as the Sheepherder Laws, to allow the importation of Basque herders. Writing and negotiating these bills turned out to be a bit tricky because the ranchers wanted Basque sheepherders, not just Spanish ones, and were hard-pressed to explain why those jobs should not go to native-American or Mexican-American sheepherders. It got particularly dicey when the organizations were negotiating with

Mexico to import Basques who had been displaced by the Spanish Civil War and were living in Mexico. The Mexican government raised an eyebrow as to why Mexican sheepherders wouldn't be good enough. Nevada Senator McCarran, who sponsored most of the sheepherder legislation, wrote frantically, "[I have urged] that all herders brought in from Mexico be of *Basque* ancestry, rather than Mexican… time has long since passed for consideration and consultation. We need action now with a capital A."

Spain also raised questions about the special treatment for Basques and established upper limits on the number of men who could be exported from their home country. Despite these problems, Basques continued to enter the Eastern Sierra during the 1940s. For example, in 1944, over 40 men from Navarre were whisked across the ocean to Reno, given breakfast, and then sent off to their employers' ranches. One day later, they would be in the middle of nowhere, herding sheep, alone in a foreign country, suffering from culture shock.

In the 1950s, under continued pressure from the Nevada Sheep Owners Association and the California Range Association, new legislation was passed to bestow permanent residency status on sheepherders already in the country and permit the importation of additional herders. Nevertheless, the flow of Basques into the Eastern Sierra began to slow over the next few decades resulting in a shrinking in the sheep herds. In addition to labor shortages, the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management undertook a policy of reducing grazing allotments. Writing in 1965, former Sierra Club President Francis Farquhar proclaimed, "the damage wreaked long ago has served as a warning against uncontrolled use of natural resources, and the grazing of sheep is inherently uncontrolled." In 1915, over seven million sheep and goats were grazed on national forest land; by 1970, only two million remained.

By the mid 1970s, with improved economic conditions in Spain, sheepherding jobs began to go to South Americans, especially those from Chile and Peru. Today, approximately 1,500 foreigners work as shepherds on ranches in the U.S. They are exempted from minimum wage laws and earn $650-750 per month. In an article decrying the treatment of modern-day shepherds in Wyoming and Colorado, the *New York Times* reported that the "harsh lives of foreign sheepherders in the American West have long been unchanged." These sheepherders are here as part of federal temporary worker program and suffer from isolation and poor living conditions. They live alone in remote areas with minimal housing, miles from any other people, with no human contact or cell phone coverage and only their flocks for company. William A. Douglass, emeritus professor of Basque studies at the University of Nevada, Reno, said in an interview that sheepherding "placed a man in a situation which at times bordered on total social isolation." One Chilean sheepherder said the loneliness is hard to endure. "I think about my family," he said.

An article in the*LA Times* in 1989 reported that fewer than 10 percent of sheepherders in Kern County were Basque compared to 95 percent twenty years earlier. Every large sheep ranch but one was still owned by a Basque, but the next generation was not stepping up to make the move from shepherd to owner. Antero Iturriria said, "I'm 44 and I'm the youngest sheepman in Kern County. Who will take my place?" The sheepmen complained that young Basques were no longer willing to endure that hard life. Elias Aleman, who had lived the nomadic life of a California shepherd for 21 years commented, "When I was young, this was our only opportunity."

The early Basques fared better than their modern brethren, partly because the economics of the period allowed an ambitious man to flourish. Many early sheepherders became herd owners and imported their own family members to work their herd. A saying about the Basques went, "The first generation herds sheep; the second owns the flock; and the third owns the bank that finances operations." Indeed, a bank ad in 1952 depicted a Basque sheepherder, in black beret, and staff in hand, with the caption, *Portrait of a capitalist;* it crowed that "to do business with him… is a matter of pride of every home town Bank of America."

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Before they turned into capitalists however, the Basque Eastern Sierra sheepherders had a lot of time on their hands. Some of them frequented the area's hot tubs, one of which is named Shepherd's Hot Spring. When I visited the spot, its steaming surface, set among sagebrush, boulders, and grass, with views of mountains covered with snow, sparked an image of a scruffy guy, doffing his stinking clothes, and settling down into the hot water to ease his joints in a rare moment of leisure. In later years, a few took the time to write long poems on the water tanks in the Mono Lake area with pencil.

Other industrious shepherds however put their free time to use by carving into the soft aspens near their campgrounds. A Forest Service archeologist remarked, "In the 19th century, you were your own entertainment." From what we know, these Basques did not have a tradition of carving in Spain; they appear to have been inspired here by the wide open palette of the light-colored aspens. Thousands of these carvings, or so-called "arborglyphs," have been found across the West, in California, Idaho, Colorado and New Mexico. Locally, they have been studied by park rangers Nancy Hadlock and Richard Potashin who have documented carvings in an area around Lee Vining and are working on a book about the images. The carvings are made with a knife, a nail, or sometimes a long fingernail, and date from the early 1900s through the 1990s. Considerable skill was needed to make a cut that was just right, so that as the tree grew, the carving would become blacker and more visible, but not so much so that the letters blurred.

Basque sheepherders have been called the "lonely sentinels of the American West." So, what's on the mind of these sentinels when they are out carving on trees? Women, you say? Although some of the carvings depict naked women or X-rated scenes (these were young men, after all, and some of them frequented the brothels of Reno and Tonopah), far more represent writings or slogans, such as "Vive vino [long live wine]," and even "Vive mujeres [long live women]." Elaborate scripts were sometimes used, beautiful flowing fonts spelling out the name of the artist. Some are huge, seven feet high, going all the way around a tree causing Richard to chuckle that some were like personal ads. Images of people, dogs, and stars are common. One shepherd, Jose Maria, developed a style of carving that Nancy and Richard called "sheepherder pointillism," where little holes were bored into the bark to make a line of dots in the shape of a letter. The sheepherders were multi-lingual, writing in Spanish, badly misspelled English, and, rarely, in *Euskara*, the Basque language.

A word here about Basque: although it uses the Latin script, it is one weird language, unrelated to any other European language, or even any other language anywhere from what linguists can tell, what's known as a *language isolate*, appropriate for our lonely shepherds. The most likely theory is that it is the last remaining descendant of pre-Indo-European languages, but scholars have tossed out various suggestions that it might be related to languages in regions as geographically distant as Chechen and Mali. Having spent a summer in San Sebastián, or *Donostia*, as it is called in Basque, I can attest that Basque is like no other European language I've seen before, full of a's, z's and k's, but no f's. The square where I dropped my son off for school was named *Gipúzcoa*. Friends would invite you to drink *txakoli*. We went to a contest to see the *harrijasotzaile* lift their weights (a traditional Basque sport). And like the Inuits' language, Basque is ergative which means there is a special case marker for direct objects (of course). Just when you thought you were doing okay, you'd have to ask directions to something like *Belaskoenea herrikastetxea*. So, when some poor guy with the nickname of *Etchelar Belxa* has to go around carving that into trees, you feel pretty sorry for him.

Because the carvings were made in solitude, with perhaps only a dog for company, they reflect intimate thoughts of these isolated men, and sometimes homesickness. Many of the Basques came from Navarre, and pictures or slogans from the homeland appear, including an elaborate drawing of the running of the bulls in Pamplona in the festival of San Fermin. Patriotism for their new home also emerges, with "Vive America." Slogans are mostly pro-Basque and anti-Spanish, particularly during Franco's regime. In 1939, one wrote, "The

war has been declared, poor France." As new sheepherders moved into an area of pre-existing carvings, they would comment on each other's posts, by carving in a few words in response, a sort of really slow Twitter exchange. One wrote, "Women and wine are good," and another added years later, "but hard on your pocket." Upon discovering a carving by Manez, a herder added, "Poor Manez, you departed from this world," to memorialize his passing.

In the 1960s, many Basque shepherds suffered from a life of isolation, low pay and lack of options, as described by Joxe Mallea-Olaetze in *Speaking through the Aspens: Basque Tree Carvings in Nevada and California*, although we don't hear as much about these less-than-successful men. With no options, pursued by Immigration, they were locked into a life of summering in the mountains and wintering in the Basque hotels, where their money went to drink and cigarettes. Their carvings expressed their desire for a different life; one carved, "The life of a sheepherder is a sad life." Another wrote more hopefully, "Very soon I must leave this job." Other earlier markings express regret about their situation; one reads in Basque, "In Spain, they consider us great men, but here we are nothing." Another wrote more baldly, "If life is what the old-timers told me it was, my balls are carnations."

Nancy and Richard, as preservationists, have their work cut out for them (sorry). Aspens only live to be about 85 years old, and when the tree dies, so does the carving. Historians are in a race against time to photograph and copy the old marks. In Upper Horse Meadow, pines, which grow faster than the aspens, are shading them from the sun, causing the trees to become stunted and damaging the drawings. In Bohler Canyon, which is wetter, the aspens are growing too fast and are distorting the shapes and letters. Trees can also burn, which Nancy and Richard learned the hard way when they were pulled away from their work to attend an event in Bodie in August 2015. While they were there, they heard about the Walker Fire which eventually would burn over 3,700 acres between Lee Vining and June Lake. They rushed back to discover that the fire had jumped to Bohler Canyon where it burned many of the trees carrying arborglyphs. The photographs of the blacked and distorted carvings are sickening, detailing the graphic destruction. Although many trees were damaged or the marks rendered illegible, Nancy and Richard believe they were able to document about 80% of the burned carvings.

Some now over 100 years old, the sheepherder carvings are recognized for their archeological significance, even though, as Basque historian Joxe Mallea-Olaetxe writes, "we may be unaccustomed to this unusual form of historical document." U.S. Forest Service and national parks websites report that the carvings help us understand land use and who was where when. They hurriedly point out however that it is illegal to make any carvings of your own. I couldn't help but think of the hearts and initials of recent lovers that deface the aspens in Lundy Canyon. What Richard refers to as "recreational carving," some people would describe as graffiti, although some marks are quite old and certainly overlap with the sheepherder carvings. Perhaps in 50 years, we'll linger over those, dream of a more romantic time, and mourn their loss. But I doubt it.

Creepytings, the artist/vandal who painted acrylic images on rocks in national parks, caused an outrage in 2014 when she posted photos of her work on Instagram and became the most hated person of the week on the Internet. Her actions incited an incendiary conversation about the definition of art, vandalism, rule-breaking, and narcissism. Creepytings pled guilty to seven counts of injury or depredation against government property and was sentenced to community service and restitution. Presumably, those sheepherders who carved in the trees also broke the law, at least in the later years. But that's not necessarily the interest of historians.

Richard explained that he and Nancy make an aesthetic choice about what they document, that there's no bright line about their selections. As they are not working under the auspices of a particular agency, he said they are not under anyone's microscope. Generally, they focus on the Basque arborglyphs, and generally, they collect those that pre-date 1970, but they also include some Mexican, Peruvian, or Chilean carvings. Richard

said he might even document something from an Anglo if it demonstrates an interesting technique or "something cool." All of them, he says, are signs that "someone came through" the area.

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Another legacy that the Basques left us besides the hot tubs and arborglyphs is bread. Their grazing lands extended down to Bishop where the Schoch family, immigrants from Vienna, had opened a bakery in the early 1900s. The sheepherders convinced the baker to build a stone oven and showed him how to make the big round loaves that they used to bake in the Pyrenees. Eventually the bakery was purchased in the 1960s by the Schat family from Holland. Today, the Bishop bakery is owned by Eric Schat and his family, and his son Paul has opened a Schat's Bakery in Mammoth Lakes. They have continued to make sheepherder bread, and it is their most famous and widely copied product. They import special radiant-heat ovens from Germany and use a natural fermentation process to bake the popular bread. Eric offered another perspective on the Basques. "They ran bands of sheep right through Bishop," he said. "These guys lived on whiskey and beans and bread." Maybe that was after the wine and cheese ran out. Or maybe, coming from Holland, Schat had a different view of the Spaniards.

Adele Reed, in her book *Old Mammoth*, has a wonderful photo of hundreds of sheep crossing the suspended bridge over the North Fork of the San Joaquin River. The bridge was built by the U.S. Forest Service in the 1920s. Augie Hess's special friend, Nani, began coming to the area in the 1920s and lived in his van during the summers. He told Augie that he had walked the route between Bakersfield and Mono Lake 37 times. Augie reported, "The Basque people are hard-working people, friendly and warm hearted." I would agree to this broad generalization based on my experience in Basque country and add, "And FUN!" Restaurants and bars were noisy, happy places, and any group of Basques together is an instant party. While there, I decided I wanted to retire to a Basque old-folks home because they are so lively and full of laughter. Except when you try to talk about the Basque separatism or the ETA, the armed Basque nationalist group that has killed 829 people since 1968. Then things aren't so funny.

Sheepherding, and carving, mostly ended in 1999 in the Mono Basin when a controversy arose about whether domestic sheep carried a respiratory disease that was fatal to the native Sierra bighorn sheep. People came to believe, as John Muir did, that sheep were "hoofed locusts," and scientists blamed the grazing of domestic sheep for the decline in the bighorn herds. After the Sierra bighorn was listed as an endangered species, the Forest Service closed two grazing allotments to sheep, and LADWP kicked the sheep off all its land in the Mono Basin. However some sheep grazing persists in Mono and Inyo Counties on Bureau of Land Management and national forest land, based on a formal risk assessment of how likely the domestic sheep are to cross paths with the bighorn. Basque sheepman Joe Echnique from Bakersfield still owns several large herds, one of which is often grazing along U.S. Highway 395 near Toms Place. The next time you drive past them, imagine a lonely Basque shepherd, with marginal English, a head full of ideas and a heart full of feelings, armed with a carving knife, and give a tip of the old *txapela* to the ghost of those guys who left their mark on the Eastern Sierra.