



The Bunkhouse Chronicle

Craig Rullman
Columnist

Still standing

There is an old red barn just south of Lakeview on the verge of collapse. I've been watching this barn for the last 10 years, gauging its precarious buckle and lean, keeping a private book on its chances for surviving yet another round of hard winter. By whatever law of physics, it's going down one knee at a time, stubbornly, like an old prizefighter who carries our hopes on his shoulders and whose ultimate fall will mark the end of something we can't articulate so much as feel.

I'm happy to report: it's still standing.

Last week I went on a mission for meat. First, to the Wagontire unit to hunt up a buck with a cadre of partners who have been hunting out there for a combined two hundred years. But there are no bucks in Wagontire this year. At least not between Brothers and Christmas

Valley, where we made a dozen good hunts and saw nothing but cat tracks and very old deer sign.

A good friend remarked that the bucks had all been rounded up and sent to re-education camps, which is entirely possible in the current climate. Still, for me it is more about the hunt than the kill — though that is a nice bonus when it happens — and the country was exactly the way we wanted it: cold and crisp, ancient, and the light over Soldier's Cap so sharp it could cut glass. I'll take that.

With the hunt behind me I headed south, into the old home range, to pick up our steer, raised by my folks, then butchered and wrapped by a store in my hometown known as the Idaho Grocery. The store was founded by Ignacio and Marceline Urrutia — Aita and Ama — Basque emigrants who came, like so many other Basques, from the Pyrenees to the Great Basin in search of opportunity and employment.

Ignacio, whose name was shaped and shortened by the vernacular into "Idaho," started the grocery with his wife a very long time ago, when photographs came only in black-and-white and the print's edges were jagged.

They never grew out of the original building, and today Idaho's is still run by the Urrutia children, now middle-aged adults: Robert, Joey, and Renee. The kids have kept the grocery close, and they've kept it alive, a

tradition, a family enterprise, a pillar of the high desert. It's a Basque thing, that stubbornness, that refusal to give in, and it shows up in their language, Euskera, which has no known relatives.

That can only mean one thing: the Basque were never conquered. By anyone. Ever.

Aita and Ama have passed on, and the kids have had to adjust to wildly different market pressures, to learn to compete with and beat the box grocery outlets and even a WalMart Superstore that landed like a giant alien spacecraft on the edge of town — where an old barn used to be.

These days, Idaho's is a butcher and meat shop, resplendent with virtually every spice and rub known to humans, and a meat counter second to none. And nobody knows meat, and how to cook it, like the Basques.

When I was a boy, and town seemed like a faraway place, a foreign land where we didn't go much, my stepdad would sometimes take me into Idaho's for a treat. Ignacio sold baseball cards at the checkout counter. A quarter apiece, with a stick of gum inside the wrapper. The gum never lasted long, but baseball cards last forever.

Decades later, I pulled into the back of Idaho's before the sun was up. The store opens at six, I was early, and Robert and Joey were already inside.



PHOTO BY CRAIG RULLMAN

Defying age and gravity, battered and brave.

Joey brought out the meat, 22 milk crates of home-grown beef. My step-dad and I loaded it into the mass of coolers in the back of my truck, and there was something of tradition in that, too, he and I back at Idaho's together for the first time in decades, two creaky grey-beards in the dark, loading meat.

There is a line from one of the more famous William Stafford poems, "Travelling Through the Dark." The poem is about a man who encounters a dead doe on a dangerous mountain road at night. She was pregnant. The speaker stands at the rear of his car as the exhaust turns red in his taillights. The engine purrs. The wilderness seems to listen. He says, "I thought hard for us all — my only swerving — then pushed her over the edge into

the river." As I drove home, through the Madeline Plains and north, through Alturas, over the Pit River, and then along the edge of that dry flat known as Goose Lake, I kept thinking about Stafford's poem, about our failed hunt, about a little family grocery known as Idaho's.

The road was rolled out in front of me like a grey ribbon, and the truck, loaded down, swayed ever-so-slightly in the turns. I kept thinking: it doesn't get any better than this. And then, coming into Lakeview, I saw again that old red barn — battered and brave, just refusing to finally go down.

I suppose it's the impermanence of good things that hurts the most, a kind of dull aching in the marrow, because we know. But I had my dogs with me, and I couldn't let them see me cry.

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