



The Bunkhouse Chronicle

Craig Rullman
Columnist

Euskal Herria

Juanito Mendiola was a Basque immigrant who over many years donated considerable time and energy helping my family with our sheep. He was an enduring presence at our place, during winter lambing seasons when we carried bumper lambs into the house to warm up by the woodstove, at spring shearings when the wool piled up in lanolin-rich mountains, or when the coyotes killed our lambs and we set out to deliver a measure of frontier justice.

Memories of Juanito and his quiet, determined demeanor came flooding back this week as I perused the summer schedule of Basque festivals across the northern Great Basin, from Susanville to Winnemucca, from Elko to Boise.

The Basques are an important, and often overlooked, piece of Western Americana, and they have made an outsized contribution relative to their population. From

John Ascuaga, who built The Nugget hotel-casino in Reno, to U.S. senator and former governor of Nevada, Paul Laxalt, from Olympic swimmer Ryan Lochte to Frenchy Bordagary — who dreamed of a career as a violinist but settled for professional baseball — Basque immigrants and their descendants have quietly made a lasting mark in the story of the modern West.

The Basques began immigrating into the United States in considerable numbers after the gold strikes in California. Those early waves of Basque people came largely from the Spanish colonies of South America, settling in the central valley of California and along the foothills of the western Sierras.

Today, in many places in the high Sierra, it is possible to wander through aspen groves where the carvings from Basque shepherds create a kind of living-history exhibit. Those carvings, sometimes X-rated, remain a fascinating window into the life of the lonely mountain shepherds.

Over time, and particularly during the dictatorship of Franco, waves of European Basques came into California, eventually spreading widely into the Great Basin. Franco was no friend of the independent-minded Basques, banning their language and imprisoning their leadership.

During the manpower shortages of World War II, thousands of Spanish

Basques were recruited into the United States by the Western Range Association, who put them to work as cowboys and shepherds tending enormous herds of cattle and flocks of sheep across the high deserts of California, Nevada, Oregon, and Idaho.

Those immigrants, and their descendants, played an important role in shaping the character of small Great Basin towns like Winnemucca, Lamoille, Fallon, or my own hometown of Susanville, California. The legacy of Euskal Herria, the Basque Country, remains vivid in each of these places and the Basque festivals are a great and inspiring way to enjoy an intensely proud, warm, and accomplished culture that stretches many thousands of years into the past.

One fascinating aspect of Basque culture remains the language: Euskara. Unlike English, which is a Germanic language, or French, Spanish, and Italian, which belong to the family of Latin descendants, Euskara is an isolate, meaning it has no known relative in the world. Many scholars believe that Euskara is the last remaining link to the mists of old Europe, before mass migrations swept the Indo-European languages across the continent.

Theories abound to explain how the Basque were able to retain their language after so many wars of conquest and waves of immigration, but there is general consensus that the rugged,

resource-poor nature of the Pyrenees Mountains, and the fiercely independent culture of the Basque people combined to preserve an irreplaceable legacy.

Even President John Adams, touring Europe in 1786, found much to be praised in Basque forms of government. He wrote: "...this extraordinary people have preserved their ancient language, genius, laws, government, and manners, without innovation, longer than any other nation of Europe. Of Celtic extraction, they once inhabited some of the finest parts of the ancient Boetica; but their love of liberty, and unconquerable aversion to a foreign servitude, made them retire, when invaded and overpowered in their ancient feats, into these mountainous countries, called by the ancients Cantabria..."

My affinity for the Basques was born of an endearing friendship, and apprenticeship, with Juanito Mendiola. Juanito did not speak English, but he had a manner of communicating that transcended language, erasing the barriers of culture and tongue. He was a natural teacher, and so my parents would send me off to work with him on the Susan River Ranch, where he ran his own sheep as part of his wages, and tended the owner's

cattle.

And so it was, one blistering summer afternoon when we had been stacking hay off an elevator into the pole barn, that Juanito whistled loudly and waved me over. It was break time.

We sat sweating in the dust and the chaff of the haystack, and Juanito brought out his bota bag. He held the bag up and squeezed, his head tilted slightly, until a stream of wine hit the corner of his eye, where it ran slowly, like a red tear, tracing a path along his nose and down into his mouth. And then he tossed the bag over to me, gestured for me to try, and laughed and laughed as I blasted my face with errant streams of wine.

Juanito is gone now, but that warm laughter echoes down the decades, and I can still hear it whenever I drive by his old place and see the chair where he would sit in the evenings, drinking his wine on the porch, dreaming of Euskal Herria.

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