

Long DNA journey leads to the Pyrenees Mountains

Solitary old men in berets, taciturn and self-sufficient as black basalt poking out of the thin desert soil. They are still honored back in their homeland.

"The oldest brother, they got the land. The younger ones, they went to North Dakota, Montana, Wyoming," our Basque host told us last month. Freshly shorn sheep dot the sheer, exuberantly green hillsides of Basque Country in Spain and far southwestern France. Sheep remained the tribal business America, too — with those immigrant little brothers spending months at a time alone in their canvas-sided sheepwagons out on the soul-stretching emptiness of America's vast high prairie.

Like the unfathomable inhabitants of far-flung islands floating in an ocean of close-cropped grass and sagebrush, they were perfectly accustomed to being left alone. But they also delighted in visiting by their campfires, sharing boiled black coffee in chipped enameled metal cups. Just writing these words brings back a strong whiff of sage smoke.

In a 2005 story in the *Casper Star-Tribune*, my old newspaper, Cat Urbigkit wrote of the enduring "transhumance" method of raising sheep, a practice that started in the Pyrenees Mountains — home to the Basques and Gascons. It is an artfully calculated migration between low country and alpine meadows, pursuing the best new grass while avoiding killing winter snows.

"Basques began moving to Wyoming in the early 1900s to herd sheep. Many of their descendants are still here. For example, sheep herds belonging to one Basque family, the Arambels, migrate to high country along the Continental Divide in the Wind River Mountains in the summer, then travel several hundred miles through western Wyoming to winter on the desert south of Interstate 80 near the Colorado border," Urbigkit observed.

Within Basque Country, only the size of Maryland, this seasonal cycle is compressed within only a few miles but an elevation change of as much as 6,000 or 8,000 feet.

With amazing continuity, families have made their homes in these mountains and valleys for thousands of years. In amateur genetics circles, we revere the ice age refugia — the Steppes of southern Eurasia, the upper Black Sea coast, the Italian Peninsula — places that harbored our European ancestors when the glaciers advanced southward, swallowing lands and making much else nearly uninhabitable.

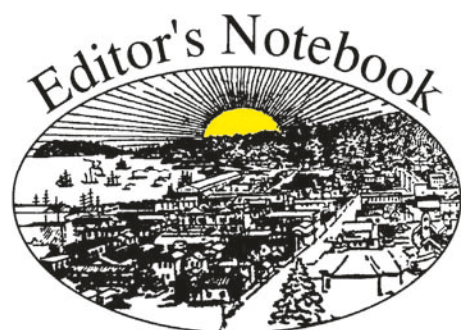
Honeycombed with limestone caves, the Pyrenees formed the northern boundary of the relatively warm Iberian refuge. If your heritage is any kind of Western European, your direct distant relations lived and worshiped in these caves. They are our old family homes, as much as the little wooden house you grew up in.

On June 22, my wife and I threaded our way up along wildly twisting mountain roads to the Grottes de Sare, a Cyclopean-sized cave system. Some say it cuts all the way through to Spain, making it a handy avenue and hiding hole for the village of Sare's former main business, smuggling or "night work."

There's no danger of confusing it for a snug and comforting Hobbit hole, but the Sare cave does offer obvious advantages. It is fairly dry but has a pure (except for the droppings of a dozen different bat species) little stream running through it. It opens onto a fertile and defensible forest glen. Its crooked nooks and soaring crannies could proba-



One of many amateur marching bands makes its way toward the Bay of Biscay during saint's day celebrations in the French Basque town of St-Jean-de-Luz.

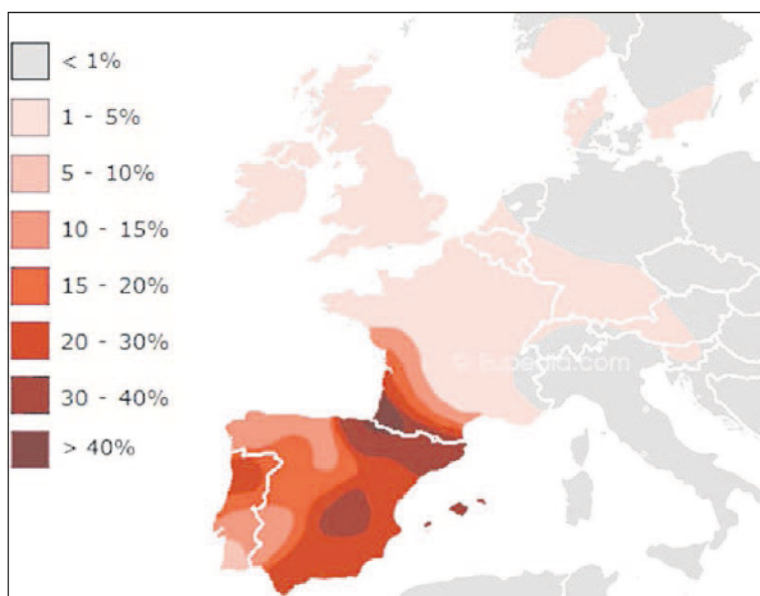


bly hide hundreds of people and their herds from blizzards or war parties — though its actual population probably was never more than an extended family at any one time.

I, the only English speaker, trailed the end of a small tour group that meandered along a path illuminated by flickering motion sensor-activated lights. Occasionally, I peered backward into darkness seeking that frisson of recognition, a DNA-level feeling that my people were here before. The slow, dripping silence of eons answered.

Though I didn't manage to spot any cave-man ghosts, my wife and I did love meeting a great many Basques in our temporarily adopted town of Saint-Jean-de-Luz, which celebrated its patron saint's day on June 21 with happy community parades, bands and parties that Sunday and several days leading up to it.

Like the African-American descendants of slaves whose only hope of identifying a long-lost ancestral homeland is genetic testing, 10 years ago I turned to DNA to gain a sense of where my distant Winter forefathers started out. Eventually, traditional genealogy led us back to early colonial Massachusetts and beyond that to London. But



A map from the Eupedia website identifies the homelands of men with the genetic marker DF27. It reaches its highest concentration in Basque Country in northern Spain and Southwest France. Matt Winters is DF27.

genetics may now carry our family story even farther, to the wine-growing region of Aquitaine/Bordeaux in what is now Southwest France but which was part of England from 1154 to 1453. Wine merchants from the region, called vintners, became economically entrenched in London. Four vintners served as mayor in the reign of Edward II. In England, the occupational surname Vintner morphed into Winter.

Aquitaine, the Pyrenees and Spain are thick with my distant cousins including the Basques — men defined by a genetic marker called DF27. All of us who have this marker are descended from a man who lived in the region about 4,600 years ago, part of a Neolithic immigrant group that arrived with new farming and metallurgy techniques.

None of this means I'm specifically a Basque — Basque men are DF27, but so are a great many

Spaniards, Gascons, Catalonians and Portuguese. But Basque Country has the strongest concentration of us. My trip was a kind of valedictory homecoming, a quiet way of paying tribute to dozens of generations of younger sons whose migrations, in my case, culminated at the mouth of the Columbia River.

Wearing my red and black jacket, the Basque colors, I sat in Saint Jean's plaza listening as a pop singer belted out in Basque one of my favorite songs, Curtis Mayfield's "People get ready, there's a train a-coming, you don't need no baggage, you just get on board."

After a long, long journey, one of us came home.

—MSW

Matt Winters lives in Ilwaco, Wash., with his wife and daughter.

Jimmy Carter, his legacy and a rabbit

By NICHOLAS KRISTOF
New York Times News Service

Quiz time: Which American president was attacked by a "killer rabbit"?

It was Jimmy Carter, although the incident says more about the news media than it does about Carter.

He was fishing from a boat in a pond when a rabbit swam frantically for the president's boat.

Where's the Secret Service when you need it? Carter fended off the rabbit with an oar.

A few months later, Carter's press secretary happened to mention the incident to a reporter. Soon there was a flood of articles and cartoons about a hapless president cowed and out-matched by a wet bunny.

One of our worst traits in journalism is that when we have a narrative in our minds, we often plug in anecdotes that confirm it. Thus we managed to portray President Gerald Ford, a first-rate athlete, as a klutz. And we used a distraught rabbit to confirm the narrative of Carter as a lightweight cowed by anything that came along.

The press and chattering class have often been merciless to Carter. Early on, cartoons mocked him as a country rube using an outhouse or associating with pigs, writers pilloried him as a sanctimonious hick, and in recent years it has been common to hear that he's anti-Israel or anti-Semitic (This about the man whose Camp David accord

ensured Israel's future!).

Now that Carter is 90 and has been an ex-president longer than anyone in history, it's time to correct the record. He is anything but an empty suit.

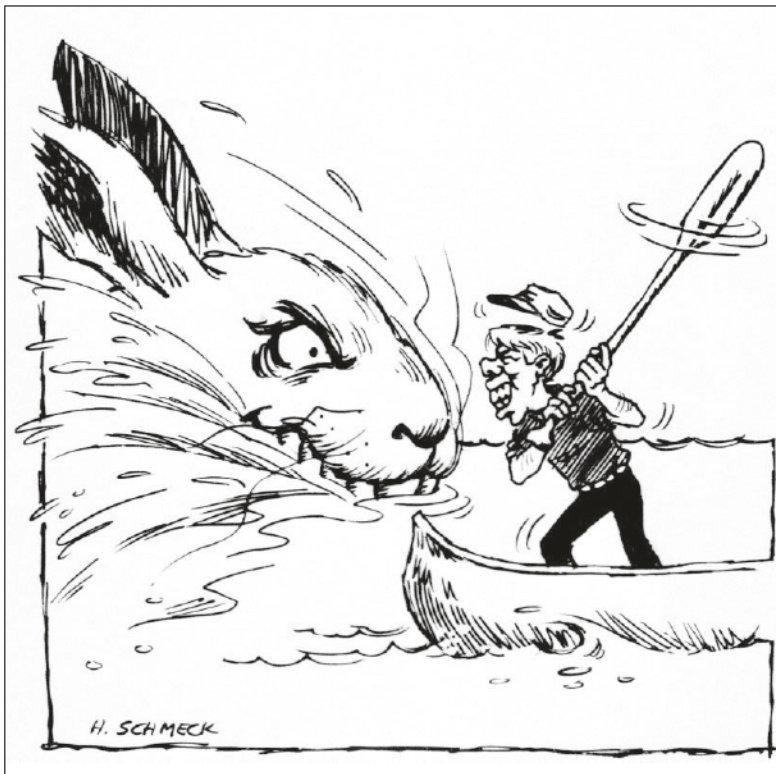
At a time when "principled politicians" sometimes seem a null set, it's remarkable how often Carter showed spine.

He has a new memoir, *A Full Life*, out this week, recounting that his father was a segregationist. Yet Jimmy Carter says he was the only white man in his town who refused to join the White Citizens' Council, and he fought to integrate his church. At one point, after a racist slur was posted on his door, he considered giving up and moving away.

Carter persevered. When he was inaugurated governor of Georgia, he declared, "I say to you quite frankly that the time for racial discrimination is over." He then erected a portrait of Martin Luther King Jr. in the State Capitol.

A black woman who was a convicted murderer, Mary Prince, was assigned to work at the governor's mansion in a work-release program. Carter became convinced that she was innocent and later applied to be her parole officer, so he could take her to the White House to be his daughter's nanny. Prince was eventually pardoned.

It's true that Carter sometimes floundered as president. He also had great difficulty, as an outsider, managing Washington, and suffered from a measure of anti-Southern prejudice. When the Reagans took over 1600



AP Photo
President Jimmy Carter wards off a killer rabbit attack with a canoe paddle in this cartoon depicting the president's encounter while he was on a fishing trip with an aggressive, swimming rabbit, shown Aug. 30, 1979.

Pennsylvania Ave., their interior decorator reportedly couldn't wait to "get the smell of catfish out of the White House."

But Carter was also a pioneer. He was the first to elevate human rights in foreign policy. He appointed large numbers of women, Latinos and

blacks. He installed solar panels on the White House (President Ronald Reagan removed them). He established diplomatic relations with China.

Carter also had a deep sense of honesty — sometimes too deep. Other politicians have affairs and deny them. Carter didn't have affairs but nonethe-

less disclosed that "I've committed adultery in my heart many times." File that under "too much information."

After leaving the presidency, Carter could have spent his time on the golf course. Instead, he roamed the globe advocating for human rights and battling diseases from malaria to blinding trachoma.

Because of Carter's work, the world is very close to eradicating Guinea worm disease, an excruciating ailment, and has made enormous headway against elephantiasis and river blindness as well. Only five cases of Guinea worm disease have been reported worldwide in 2015: It's a race, Carter acknowledges, between him and the Guinea worm to see which outlasts the other.

I'm betting on Carter. In 2007, I joined him on an Africa visit because his aides said it would be his last major foreign trip. So as we sat by a creek for an interview, I noted that this was his last major overseas trip and ...

"Whatever would give you that idea?" Carter interrupted. His icy tone made clear that he planned to be touring remote Ethiopian villages until at least his 200th birthday.

Carter, the one-termer who was a pariah in his own party, may well have improved the lives of more people in more places over a longer period of time than any other recent president. So we in the snooty media world owe him an apology: We were wrong about you, Mr. President. You're not a lightweight at all, and we can't wait to see what you'll do in your next 90 years!



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