

Southeastern Corner of State Home of Basques

(Compiled by Oregon Travel Bureau)

The southeastern corner of Oregon, often known as the land of the Basques, is the home of one of the strangest and most interesting of all people in the Beaver State.

Their origin lost in obscurity and their native language, the Eskuara, a puzzle to philologists, the Basques answered a call of climate and settled in the semiarid region of Malheur and Harney counties, far from their native Europe.

From the northern coast of Spain, the towns of Bilbao and Viscaya sent forth a vanguard in 1889 to the new world to seek a location similar in topography and climate and adapted to the ancient occupation of sheep herding. This they found in the Nampa triangle in the vicinity of Steens mountain.

Here creeks and small lakes supply water; the soil supports various varieties of grass; the climate is clear and dry. In addition, the location was regarded as sufficiently removed from large centers of population providing an abundance of wide open spaces best suited for sheep raising. A sweep of country, stretching 275 miles between Crane, Ore., and Winnemucca, Nev., overlapping into western Idaho, furnished a wide range.

The settlers, ambitious young men, entered the United States by way of Ellis Island. They quickly drifted across the country in search of lands embodying the familiar habitat for sheep herding. They found this

at a number of points in the northwest.

In Oregon today the principal Basque settlements are at McDermitt near the northern Nevada border; in Jordan valley adjoining the Idaho boundary; at Andrews, 125 miles south of Crane; at Fields, 15 miles south of Crane. Basques make their homes as far north as Ontario, at the junction of the Malheur river with the Snake.

History says the first Basques in the country soon proved their worth and ability as sheepherders and quickly became topmost in that field of endeavor. They would take bands of sheep into the hills and stay until accumulated wages, from sheep owners there before them, would enable purchase of flocks and ranges of their own. Then the Basques, who had made this progress, would send for their relatives and friends from the "old country."

Usually a cousin or brother came first. Then before many years the entire clan would be on hand. They arrived in large numbers just before and during World War I. In the intervening years numerous American ranchers sold their holdings to the Basques, the latter always interested in extending their holdings. Some Basques are very wealthy in property and finance.

Typical is a Basque near West in Malheur county where he owns one of the finest ranches in the area with numerous

bands of sheep. He and his family speak excellent English, with the parents fluent in Spanish and "Bosco," the colloquial name for the Basque language and for themselves. Usually Basques are regarded as extremely loyal to each other but here and there a Basque ranch operator employs only American herders, ranch hands and camp tenders.

Pioneers among the Basques kept closely to sheep herding and but few became naturalized American citizens. They expected to return to Spain after they had made their fortune in the United States. Succeeding generations have not all stayed close to sheep activities and have taken up a variety of occupations such as mechanics, merchants, hotel operators, engineers and such. More friends and relatives arrived from Spain to carry on the ancestral occupation.

Basques are recognized as a thrifty, energetic and peaceable people, all of them highly regarded. They take parts in community enterprises and the children creditably represent their elders in school, athletic, county fair and other events.

Brilliant colors are often used on their clothes and especially in connection with exotic costumes used at ceremonies and celebrations. Bright kerchiefs and sashes are popular with the younger men, offering colorful impressions for the visitors among them.

The typical Basque has a clear, olive complexion, dark eyes, usually perfect teeth and very red lips. Basque people are socially inclined and are fond of gathering in the plaza or around the stores. Here some will play the accordion or guitar while others of the group

stand in a circle with their hands on each other's shoulder and sing. They dance the American dances and also have their own Spanish and folk dances. As a rule, Basques play cards but do not gamble; if they drink they do not become boisterous.

In the remote districts where American influence is less pronounced the houses are of the Spanish type, low and of stone, divided into numerous small rooms, assuring warmth in winter and coolness in summer.

Cases of intermarriages are reportedly confined to Basque men marrying American girls.



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