



Nevada Silver & Blue is published quarterly by the Division of Marketing and Communications, University of Nevada, Reno.

© 2007 by the University of Nevada, Reno.

Reproduction in whole or part without written permission is prohibited.

Browse the rest of the issue in which this article appeared.

Contact us:

Nevada Silver & Blue

Jones Center/108

University of Nevada, Reno

Reno, Nevada 89557-0108

(775) 784-4941

FAX: (775) 784-1422

Email: <mailto:msilverblue@unr.edu>

- [Submit a letter to the editor](#)
- [Email addresses of staff members](#)
- [Subscribe to the print edition](#)

Other links to the University of Nevada, Reno:

- [Home page](#)
- [Alumni Association](#)
- [Giving to Nevada](#)
- [Wolf Pack Athletics](#)
- [Order an Academic Transcript](#)
- [Office for Prospective Students](#)
- [Nevada News](#)
- [Events](#)

HOMELAND ON THE RANGE

By Deidre Pike '98, '02M.A.

Basque immigrants didn't have a conventional nationality to give up when they moved to Nevada. That didn't mean they were eager to trade in their identity entirely. If the old country and the immigrants' descendants have their way, they never will.

The three Basque men spot the perfect tree to cut down — a cottonwood about 35 feet tall, nearly without branches, growing alongside an irrigation ditch at a Fallon ranch. Green leaves sprout from the top. The tree's alive, but that's good.

At a Basque wood-chopping demonstration, green wood is preferred, says Juan Brana, 47, a Reno construction worker and father of two. A sturdy, muscular man in T-shirt and jeans, he will wield his ax at Reno's annual Basque festival in Wingfield Park downtown on the Truckee River, now a week away.

Gathering wood for the event is an annual tradition for Brana and other members of Reno's Zazpiak Bat ("Seven as one," a reference to the seven Basque provinces) Basque Club, and when it comes to wood, Brana is picky. During a demonstration one year he chipped his blade on a knot in a piece of pine.

"Those axes are expensive," he complains.

But enough talking about wood chopping. Brana's friend Jesus Goni, 58, is impatient.

"Hey, are we gonna cut it down?"

With a few deft applications of Brana's chain saw, the tree falls, missing a fence and the 1959 Ford Custom Cab of club Treasurer Buddy Barrencea, the license plate of which reads "BBASQUE." Brana slices the trunk into sections that Goni measures using a deleafed twig.

"Basque measuring tape," Goni says, straight-faced.

In his memoir *Sweet Promised Land*, published half a century ago by the University of Nevada Press, Robert Laxalt '47 (English), author and founder of the press, foresaw changes for the Basque way of life.

The book describes his father, a Basque shepherd who'd traveled to Nevada from the Basque homeland in the Pyrenees Mountains between Spain and France to make his fortune. He stayed and made the West his home. But adjustments to the New World were costly. The elder Laxalt, in traveling back to the old country later in life, felt awkward. He worried that his children's

Continues on page 36

Photo by Miel A. Elustondo

BASQUE BLVD

STOP

children would not remember their Basque heritage.

Robert Laxalt invoked Hector St. Jean de Crevecoeur's idea of a melting pot into which the singular Basque identity would eventually dissolve.

"And in a little while," Robert Laxalt wrote, "even our sons would forget, and the old country people would be only a dimming memory, and names would mean nothing, and the melting would be done."

Laxalt was wrong, or at least his timing was off. The descendants of the Basque immigrants who flocked to Nevada and other Western states from the mid-1800s through the 1960s to dig for gold, herd sheep, and run hotels are undoubtedly more American than they are Basque. But Nevada's Basques, full-blooded and otherwise, stubbornly refuse to let the culture dissolve entirely into the American broth.

"These people don't melt," declares Margi Silonis, 61, a registered nurse and dental hy-

gienist in Reno. "Their pride's the biggest part of them. They don't melt."

She should know. When Silonis was 9, her mother married the man who is today one of Reno's best-known Basques — Louis Erreguible, proprietor of Louis' Basque Corner.

Silonis grew up working in the restaurant and married a Basque herself.

Erreguible, now 80, cuts his own firewood, tends his garden, and, after 40 years, still serves Basque cuisine at the landmark restaurant on Fourth Street.

"You retire, they gonna throw six feet of dirt in your face," he tells his daughter.

WOOD IS HARD TO COME BY

Back on the ranch in Fallon, Barrenchea, the club treasurer with the aged pickup, rolls a log up an incline. The 52-year-old, retired from the Churchill County phone company,



Joxe Mallen-Olaetxe



Kevin Clifford



Miel A. Elustondo

Lonely Basque shepherders carved words and images on the trunks of aspen trees. This one, in the Tahoe National Forest north of Truckee, Calif., still looks exquisite after 80 years. Lower right: the Villa Basque Deli on Basque Way in Carson City. Upper right: Visiting scholar Pedro Ibarra from the University of the Basque Country with Ph.D. candidate Argitxu Camus Etchecopar in the Center for Basque Studies library on the University of Nevada, Reno campus.

wears a T-shirt with the Basque flag. When he was growing up in Fallon, he says, friends called him "Basco," but he felt little affinity for his heritage. Lately he's been rediscovering his roots.

He traveled to the Basque country and toured parts of the seven Basque Provinces that straddle the western end of the Pyrenees Mountains. Posters and souvenirs from the Basque country now hang throughout the home he built himself in Fallon.

Goni hoists hefty chunks of wood onto the trailer while Brana continues working with the chain saw. Brana and Goni came to the United States from the same territory of the Basque country, Navarra, home to Pamplona and the running of the bulls. Goni is a *bertzolari*, a Basque troubadour who composes verses and sings songs at Basque events and

festivals across the western United States. He has performed at the White House and United Nations.

The men finish their work and clean the site in record time. It's 9 a.m. The sky is cloudy. A few drops of rain fall.

"It was an easy tree," Goni says. "It was going to die anyway, just like me."

Barrenchea goes to his truck for cold Budweisers. The men worry over the future of Basque wood-chopping.

Brana's daughter Stephanie, a sophomore at the University of Nevada, Reno, has been chopping wood since age 13, but she's an anomaly. Wood is hard to come by in Nevada. That makes training difficult.

"It costs a lot of money to keep traditions alive," Brana says. "I wanna retire, but I don't see anybody coming behind me."

Deidre Pike is a freelance writer and writing lecturer in the University of Nevada, Reno's Reynolds School of Journalism. She has contributed to several publications, including *The New York Times*, and her column "View From the Fray" has run for more than five years in the weekly *Reno News & Review*.

LONG NAMES, SHORT LEGS

The Basques who immigrated to Nevada, Idaho and California kept a low public profile for decades. That's changed, says Carmelo Urza, who heads the University Studies Abroad Program, based at the Reno campus. He came from the Basque country at age 6.

"It's safe to say they've come out of the shadows," Urza says. "It's very cool to be Basque these days."

In the 1980s Urza served on the design committee for the Basque Shepherd Monument at the base of Peavine Mountain in Reno. The abstract bronze work, sculpted by Basque artist Nestor Basterretxea, signifies a shepherd carrying a lamb on his shoulders. Its dedication in 1989 drew hundreds of Basques from around the United States, and Urza wrote a book about it: *Solitude: Art and Symbolism in the Basque Monument*.

About 7,000 Nevadans claim Basque heritage, according to the 2000 U.S. Census. The number seems smaller than one would guess from the impact Basque culture has had on parts of the state. Many communities boast restaurants offering Basque cuisine, from *chorizos* (spicy sausages) to lamb chops. Basque festivals sometimes draw tourists by the thousands. And the only academic center in the world dedicated to study of the Basque Diaspora is at the University. (A younger Basque studies program, with a different orientation, exists at Boise State University.)

The Reno center publishes English translations of classic Basque books, and its library includes 40,000 catalogued books and countless uncatalogued manuscripts, many in Spanish or Basque. A center graduate, Joxe Mallea-Olaetxe, studies tree carvings, some of them pornographic, made by Basque shepherders in the West.

Mainly a research organization, the center attracts about 100 students a year to its Basque language courses and to other courses that examine such areas as Basque culture, history, art and architecture. Roughly another 40 students a year take Basque studies courses online. The center awards a Ph.D. in Basque studies and currently has five students in that program.

Being smack in the middle of Basque settlement in the West, it's not surprising that the University of Nevada, Reno counts several prominent Basque Americans among its alumni. Those include John Etchemendy '73 (philosophy), '76M.A., provost of Stanford University; and John Echeverria, a Reno attorney and chair of the Basque center's advisory board.

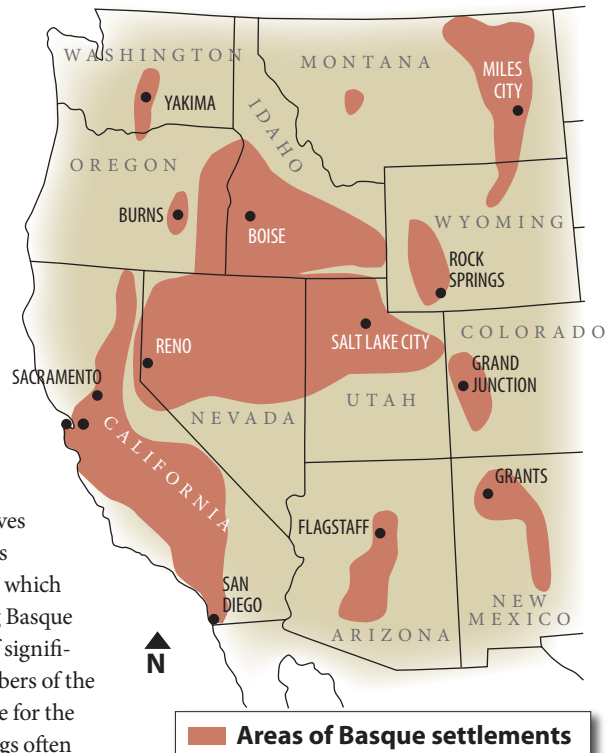
Although it has no political affiliation, the center receives funding for particular projects from the Basque government, which values its efforts in preserving Basque culture and studying issues of significance to Basque people. Members of the Basque government who come for the Nevada center's board meetings often leave impressed, says Sandra Ott, an associate professor of Basque studies.

"They say, 'It puts us to shame. We've heard more Basque spoken in Reno and San Francisco than in Bilbao' [the largest city in Basque country, in the north of Spain]."

Ott, an anthropologist, has spent so much time living in the Basque village of Santazi that, after 30 years, the inhabitants deem her an honorary citizen.

"They say, 'To us, you're Basque, though your name is too short and your legs are too long,'" says the scholar, a tall, slender blonde from Pennsylvania.

The Basque provinces are under the control of Spain and France, but the Basque homeland has in recent years gained the administrative and legislative power to enforce its own laws, collect taxes and run schools. The most infamous group campaigning for complete Basque sovereignty is the ETA or *Euskadi Ta Askatasuna* (Basque for "Basque Homeland and Freedom"). ETA is a paramilitary group listed as a terrorist organization by both the European Union and United States and is



SOURCE: *Amerikanuak Basques in the New World*, copyright 1975

blamed for approximately 900 killings and dozens of kidnappings. ETA declared a permanent ceasefire in March 2006.

Basques like to talk of their ethnicity's mysterious origins. The Basques are regarded as one of the most ancient of European peoples, and some Basques trace their origins all the way back to Cro-Magnon man, the first-known European *Homo sapiens* who survived the Ice Age. Although for centuries other peoples traveled through the Basque lands, traditions and language remained intact for the people of the Pyrenees.

"Everybody went through there," says Dr. Javier Narvarte, a Reno nephrologist (kidney disease specialist) and president of Reno's Basque club. "[The Basques] stayed there and survived."

Some of the Basques who came to the western United States seeking their fortune

Continues on page 38

eventually returned to the Basque country. Others, like the Laxalts, stayed. Journalist and author Robert Laxalt's brother Paul became governor of Nevada and a U.S. senator. He is namesake for the University's Paul Laxalt Mineral Engineering building.

When Robert Laxalt published *Sweet Promised Land* in 1957, many Basque-American families identified with the story. Those who wrote to the author were invited to the first-ever Western Basque Festival in Sparks in 1959. The festival, with folk dancing, weight carrying and wood chopping, was sponsored by the Nugget, a local casino managed by a Basque named John Ascuaga. It inspired similar events in Basque communities throughout Nevada, Idaho and California.

'NOBODY KNOWS WHAT THAT IS'

The sun hangs low on the western horizon. Parents watch from the lawn as the dancers weave along the circular driveway, past potted flowers, SUVs and a card table set up with drinks and cookies.

It's the last practice for the Zazpiak Bat dancers before their performance at Reno's Basque festival. Dance instructor Kate Camino, program assistant for the Center for Basque Studies, shouts praise and directives.

"Ready, jump!"

"Nice, nice."

"Smile, smiling! We love the Basque lands!"

The dancers — male and female, from age 2 to adult — march in pairs. They stop to twirl and leap for the *Behe Nafarroako Martxa*, a traditional Basque dance.

At the festival, girls will wear *poxpolina*, long flouncy red skirts with three black stripes along the hem. Guys will dress in white with red scarves and *txapelak* (berets).

Tonight in the driveway of a home in the Reno foothills, dancers dress comfortably in jeans or shorts and sleeveless shirts.

Tori Barrenchea, 12, sometimes squeezes dance practice in after soccer. She enjoys a heritage that sets her apart from other students at her Reno middle school.

"I like to say I'm Basque and nobody knows what that is — or a lot of people don't," she



Jean Dixon



Jean Dixon



Jean Dixon



Ed Cohen

Wood-chopping competitions and traditional dances are part of Reno's annual Basque Festival. Nevada student Stephanie Brana was the only woman wood-chopping competitor. Jesus Goni (wearing cap) is a bertsolari or Basque troubadour who performs at festivals across the western United States. Bottom, right: A professor of Basque studies, Sandra Ott (third from left), takes one of her classes to an end-of-semester dinner at Louie's Basque Corner in Reno.

says. "It's different and unique."

Courtney Swanson, 15, a Spanish Springs High School student, is learning some Basque this summer as her two cousins are visiting from a Basque province in Spain. They don't speak English. The Swansons don't speak Basque.

The cousins, university students in Spain, watch dance practice. When Camino, who teaches Basque language classes at the Reno campus, translates, the two women — Amaigoia Echebarria, 18, and Iratxe Izurieta, 19

— take advantage of the rare opportunity to communicate freely.

"The music is the same from home," Echebarria says. "But the dance steps are different in our region."

Izurieta is *ilusioa* to see Basque dancers this far from home. Camino frets over a translation.

"Excited?" she says. "No, it's more than that."

Courtney, hair held back in two thick braids, stays after others have left to practice a dance for the festival's close. She grins widely

even without Camino's directive: "Smile, smiling! We love the Basque Country!"

'THEY FOUND IT IN A CAVE'

Lively accordion music drifts over the Truckee River. Curious spectators hike over a bridge to Wingfield Park where dancers in the bright red and white *poxpolina* wait to perform.

Hair is braided. Traditional Basque dancing shoes, the flat leather *abarkak*, are tied with black cord criss-crossing white tights.

Gaven Sarratea, 12, holds a recorder-like instrument, the *txistu*, on which he'll later play a solo, "Ixil Ixilik."

"It's one of the oldest instruments in the world," Sarratea says. "They found it in a cave."

The event gets started late.

"Basque time," says dance instructor Camino, sighing. She's been thinking about the translation of the Basque word *ilusioa*.

"It's more like extremely happy."

A young dancer, about 3, sways with the music near the stage. Her swishing skirt attracts other young dancers. They twirl and snap fingers. Then it's time. A blouse gets tucked in. Dancers line up in pairs.

Master of Ceremonies John Ysursa introduces the dancers who begin with the *Agurra* — a dance of greeting.

Reno's Basque club began in 1966 with 33 people. Dues were \$3. Now membership includes 200 individuals and families. Its annual Basque Festival is a one-day whirlwind of weight carrying, dancing, wood chopping, traditional music and Basque cuisine: lamb stew, *chorizos*, beans and wine.

If turnout at the July event seems low, it's understandable. As part of Reno's Artown celebration, the 2006 Basque Festival competes with a kite-flying competition, the Downtown Reno Wine Walk, kayaking on the Truckee and the *Pirates of the Caribbean* sequel at the Century Riverside.

But *ilusioa* is evident as kids compete by drinking grape juice from bota bags and during the shrill yodel-like trilling of the *irrintizi* (yelling) contest.

An afternoon *txinga proba* (weight-carry-

ing) competition draws a crowd.

By 2:30 p.m. the temperature's nearly 100 degrees. The audience packs into the shade to cheer for women and men who take turns carrying weights across the grass. The rectangular *txingas* (weights) are roughly the size of car batteries, with handles. The women carry 75 pounds in each hand. The men carry two 104-pound weights painted green, red and white — colors of the Basque flag.

The final contestant, Tom Davidson, 43, of Sparks effortlessly outdistances the other contestants, walking back and forth between orange cones, 400 feet, 500 feet ...

"Now he's going for the record book!" Ysura announces. "Tom's going to keep going. We're going to have to turn the lights out and go home. Six-hundred feet and he's still going!"

Davidson, who works for a local paving company, is a Basque weight-carrying champion. But Davidson isn't Basque. He calls himself "a Euro-mutt, like everybody else." One weekend his boss, married to a Basque, invited Davidson to a picnic.

"I guess he thought I'd fit in," Davidson says.

Basques aren't elitists. All are welcome. Davidson fits in.

Chips of cottonwood fly across the amphitheater stage at Wingfield Park. Stephanie Brana, 19, dressed in a white Wolf Pack tank top, chops alongside her father, Juan. Backs are held straight as the choppers stand atop logs. With each well-aimed stroke of the ax, heels rock back. A notch deepens. The logs are split.

Jesus Goni, the troubadour, stands at Stephanie's side offering advice. In the crowd, Stephanie's friends cheer her on. She methodically hacks through two logs.

"My arms are like *uggh!*" she says. "It's a total endurance thing."

A high-school-age dancer walks by. Gone is the bright *poxpolina*, the look of the old country. The teen wears a tank top and shorts. She carries a cell phone.

When the chopping ends, Goni takes the microphone and sings: "Why do you look today for a picnic? Keep the Basque traditions alive. That's the main thing." ■

Sweet promised year

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the publication of Robert Laxalt's seminal work, *Sweet Promised Land*, a memoir of the father of the 1947 University graduate (English) and a reflection on the Basque immigrant experience.

The book, which has never been out of print, is a landmark of Nevada culture that helped redefine literature about the American West.

Throughout 2007, the University of Nevada, Reno Reynolds School of Journalism and several other University programs and statewide culture organizations will be celebrating the anniversary.

The University of Nevada Press is publishing a 50th anniversary commemorative edition with a foreword by English Professor Ann Ronald. Nevada Humanities, the Nevada State Library and Archives, the University's Center for Basque Studies and Friends of the University Library are organizing several events, including public readings from the book and communitywide reading programs.

For more information and a schedule, visit www.unr.edu/journalism/laxalt.

