The Basques of Oregon*

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Typewritten Manuscript, July 18, 1925. P. 37-41, 44 are all that relate to the Basques. (Tratándose de un trabajo de mayor extensión y amplitud temática, sólo se reproducen las páginas relativas a los vascos.)

The Southeast corner of Oregon harbors one of the strangest and most interesting peoples of all her diverse races. The Basques, whose origin is lost in obscurity, whose native tongue -the Eskaura- is a puzzle to philologists, have answered the call of climate and settled in the semi-arid region of Malheur and Harney counties.

From the northern coast of Spain the towns of Bilbao and Viscaya sent forth the vanguard about thirty-six years ago (1889) to seek in the New World a location similar in topography and climate and adapted to their ancient occupation of sheepherding. This they found in the Nampa Triangle of the great American Desert where Steens Mountain, the finest example of a faultblock formation in the world, rears its perpendicular face. The creeks and small lakes supply water; the soil supports various varieties of grass; the climate is dry; the location is remote from the civilization that is detrimental to sheep raising. A sweep of country stretching two hundred and seventy five miles between the nearest railroad terminus at Crane, Oregon, and Winnemucks, Nevada, on the 41st meridian, furnishes a wide range.

The settlers -ambitious young men- entered the United States by way of Ellis Island, and quickly drifted across the continent in search of the familiar habitat for sheep herding. This they found at various points in the Inland Empire. Today the principal Basque settlements are at McDermitt on the northern Nevada border; at Jordan Valley, at the intersection of the 43rd meridian with the Idaho boundary; at Anderson, one hundred and twenty miles south of Crane; at Fields, fifteen miles farther south; and as far north as Ontario at the juncton of the Malheur River with the Snake.

The Basques proved to be so much better herdsmen than the Mexicans that the latter were quickly driven out. Their method was to take bands of sheep into the hills and stay for years until their accumulated wages would enable them to buy flocks or ranches of their own. Then their friends and relatives could be sent for. It is surprising how many entire families have come to this country. Usually a cousin or brother came first; then before many years the whole clan was with him. They arrived in great numbers just before and during the Great War. Since the War many of the American ranchers have sold out to the Basques, either because their fortunes were made or because of the depression in stock raising.

The leading man among the Basques at McDermitt, Joe Uguesia, was worth over twenty thousand dollars, owning many large bands of sheep and the largest store in town.

Near Westfall, a Basque owns one of the finest ranches, has three large bands of sheep, drives a Buick, and carried ten thousand dollars life insurance. He and his three bright, beautiful children speak good English, the mother speaks the Spanish and "Bosco" -the colloquial name for themselves and their language. An interesting and unusual point about this man is the fact that on his ranch he hires only Americans as herdsmen, ranch-hands, or camp-tenders. This is unusual because as a race they are extremely loyal and clannish.

McDermitt is strictly a Basque town, only two stores in the entire village are owned by Americans.

At Fields there are five families, while around Andrews there are some fifty of sixty single men. The pioneers of this section were Felix Urizar, Angel Egurrola, Eusabio Azuerey and Henri Seudagasta. Jordan Valley is a strong Basque settlement. At Ontario a "Bosco" boarding house accommodates twenty or thirty young people. At one time two cultured Castilian women were with them.

The pioneers among the Basques kept rather closely to sheep-herding; very few became naturalized, they expected to return to Spain when "the fortune" should have been accumulated.

The second generation, however, has taken up various occupations, becoming auto mechanics, chauffeurs, merchants, or hotel proprietors. These occupations are chosen because they offer a better opportunity to "get rich" quickly. More "cousins" are sent for from Spain to carry on the prosaic business of sheep-herding.

They are thrifty, energetic, and peaceful. They make good citizens. Around Jordan Valley and Ontario many of the leaders in all the community enterprises are Basques. In the county track meets, declamatory contests, and county fairs their children are creditably represented and they win their share of the honors. All of them are more or less educated, speaking Spanish besides their own Eskura and they are very apt at learning English. A large proportion of the children attend high school and many enter college. The Catholic faith is their religion, but as they become Americanized they drift away from the faith of their fathers. In Spain while they are devoted to the Church, they allow no priests or lawyers to take part in the political affairs. In America, however, more time is devoted to business and less to politics and religion.

One of the most interesting points noted was the effect of the climate on the type of houses. In the remote districts where American influence was less pronounced the houses were like those of the Spanish Basques.

The low stone houses were divided into many small rooms, insuring warmth in winter and coolness in summer. Their homes are not particularly sanitary or attractive. This may account, perhaps, for the fact that while the Basque young men marry into the best American families, not a single case of an American marrying a Basque girl was noted.

Brilliant colors are used in their costumes, which is customary among Latin races. Many of the young men wear a bright kerchief or sash, which sets off their dark beauty to perfection. They are very attractive in appearance and make a favourable impression on the sojourner among them.

1. Ripley, W.Z. Races of Europe, 184
2. Letter of Miss Grayce Sage, a teacher at McDermitt, who has lived among them.
4. Letter of Mr. George Smith, merchant at Fields.
5. Letter of Mr. Conklin.
7. Letter of George Smith.
10. Interview with Dr. Warren D. Smith, of the University of Oregon.
11. Letter of Mrs. Moran. Letter of Miss Grayce Sage; "the food is quite similar to the usual American repast. A great deal of meat is used, but few vegetables. They seldom eat hot bread and only the most sophisticated use butter. At the hotel they majored largely in stews, hot with garlic and peppers, tomatoes and pimentos were featured also.
12. Personal Interview with Professor Roland Dickerson, of the University of Oregon.
The typical Basque—of which Marshal Foch is a good example—has a remarkably clear, olive complexion, with large sparkling dark eyes, and a perfect teeth shining through the extremely red lips. Occasionally a Basque with blue or grey eyes and fair hair is seen. They are socially inclined and are fond of gathering in the plaza or around the stores, where some will play the accordion, guitar, or harp, while others of the group stand in a circle with their hands on each other’s shoulders and sing. They dance the American dances, and have also their own graceful Spanish and folk dances. The Arresku is a famous ancient Basque dance resembling a Polish mazurka. Though they play cards they do not gamble, and though they drink they do not become boisterous of vulgar. They are clean in language and exhibit a great deal of self-respect and deference to woman.

The Basque population in Spain is about 700,000 of this 100,000 have emigrated to Chili and Argentine. They are a proud, conservative, self-reliant people. The old quotation “Every Basque a noble” is justified by the character of the people.

It is unfortunate that an effort is not made to attract more such self-respecting, tireless workers to Oregon.

THE BASQUES OF SOUTHEASTERN OREGON

A. Original Sources
1. Manuscript
a. Personal Letters to Ione B. Harkness
d. Grayce Sage, Teacher, April 3, 1924, McDermitt, Oregon.
e. George A. Smith, Merchant, April 15, 1924, Fields, Oregon.
2. Personal Interviews
a. Professor Roland W. Dickerson, University of Oregon.
b. Dr. Warren D. Smith, University of Oregon
B. Secondary Authorities

13. Francis Xavier was of this type.
14. Personal Interview with Professor Roland Dickerson of the University of Oregon.