

## THE BASQUES The People from Nowhere

There is a legend about the Basques that goes like this:

God, wishing to punish the Devil for tempting Eve, banished him to the land of the Basques until he learned their language, which is one of the most complicated and difficult languages on earth to learn. It's origin is as puzzling as the people themselves. But after seven years, the Devil had succeeded in learning only two words, "bai" and "ez" (yes and no). So God took pity on the Devil and ordered him back to Hell, the Devil found this much more pleasing. The fault wasn't all the Devil's, as the Basque language has no clear affinity with any other European tongue. Although their country straddles the border between France and Spain in the Pyrenees Mountains, they are neither French nor Spanish. Scholars maintain the Basques to be the oldest racial group in Europe, perhaps dating from Stone Age times. Europe's first whalers were Basque and so were some of the early seafaring adventurers. A band of 35 Basques arrived in California in quest of gold during the rush times. They were too late to make their fortunes in the gold fields, so they turned to raising sheep to feed the miners. They have been strongly associated with sheep in the West. At present, the sheep industry has dwindled with the herders drifting to the cities where they took new jobs. There are probably under a million Basques in Europe with possibly 100,000 in the United States.

Basque social and family life is unique. Everything revolves around the home and family. The Basque is also a good cook.

The beret is the national headgear. It is always worn by the oldtimers even at meals, removing it only in church, in bed and playing sports. Music is bred in the Basque soul with fine voices and dancing the "jota" which is written in a curious 5/4 or 5/8 time, a tempo which is quite rare. They are adept at fast-moving dances and sports such as "pelota" or jai-alai.

Christmas among Basques has that deep, religious significance with Basque carols, lots of food and customs handed down for generations.

But here, as in Europe, their common language and loyalty to a rich heritage unite them at their Basque festivals yearly. Winnemucca has their yearly festival, the second weekend in June. Basques from several Western states attend most festivals starting in California in May and continuing to Boise, Winnemucca, Elko, Ely, Reno and ending in Salt Lake City. Traditional Basque costume is white shirts and trousers for the men, with wide bright red sashes around their waists. For the girls, it's red skirts with black stripes and white blouses with black laced vests. An outdoor Mass in Basque with a Basque priest is held during which their are offerings of a live lamb, bread and garden vegetables by children in Basque dress which precedes the picnic. Contests of strength and skill, weight lifting and wood chopping and a

tug-of-war with jota contests entertain guests. Also sheep dog shows with live sheep are a favorite.

Many Basque hotels were havens for the herders when they came to town and centers for Basque cookery. The menu usually consisted of lamb chops or stew, chorizoes (Basque sausage), Basque beans, garbanzos, and "bota" for wine. Bota contests provide entertainment showing their skill at drinking wine with a squeeze of the hide container with the hair turned inside. The squeeze ejects a thin stream of wine into the mouth. The trick is to draw the bota away from the mouth without losing your aim or staining your clothes. A bota can provide lots of entertainment for the guests trying their skill for the first time.

Basque folk dancers in large groups attend festivals. The Boise group that have performed and won prizes nationally and abroad. Dance schools begin with the very young to learn dances, songs, and instruments. Music camp is held every year for pupils taught by an instructor from the Basque country. It's remarkable how they learn so much in just two weeks. Our Irrintzi Dancers entertain for organizations during the year.

Still unanswered are the questions:

Where did the Basques and their unique language originate? How did they get where they are without leaving some trace behind? And why, have the Basques been able to remain a pure people, retaining a culture and a language that should have perished long ago?

Historians have been unable to locate any written records telling of the Basque History. They are as mysterious a people as ever walked the earth.

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