

The Basques in Malheur County*

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Malheur konderriko bi herri, Jordan Valley eta McDermitt, euskaldunen bizileku dira. Eleanor Davisek –Oregon estatuko hegomendebaldean aurkitzen den Konderrri horretako bibliotekariak– kontatzen duenez, mendearen hasieran iritsitako artzainak, berrogeigarren urteetan ordura arte amerikarrak bizi ziren herrigune txikietara aldatu ziren. Etorri berrietariko gehienak, oso jende pobrea, euskaraz mintzo ziren, baina ez espainieraz. Ez ziren amerikarrekin nahasi eta beren hizkuntza eta kultura mantendu dituzte.

Jordan Valley y McDermitt son dos poblaciones del Condado de Malheur habitadas por vascos. Eleanor Davis –bibliotecaria de dicho Condado, en el sudoeste del Estado de Oregon– relata como los pastores, llegados a comienzos de siglo, se trasladaron ya en los años cuarenta hacia pequeños núcleos hasta entonces poblados por americanos. La mayor parte de los recién llegados, gente muy pobre, hablaban vasco pero no así el español. No se mezclaron con los americanos y han conservado su lengua y su cultura.

Eleanor Davis –bibliothécaire du comté de Malheur au Sud-Ouest de l'Etat d'Oregon– évoque le cas de deux villages, Jordan Valley et McDermitt, situés dans ce Comté et peuplés de Basques. En effet, les bergers arrivés au début du siècle se sont déplacés dans les années 1940 vers de petites agglomérations jusqu'alors peuplés d'Américains. La plupart des arrivants, très pauvres, parlaient basque et ne parlaient pas l'espagnol; ils n'ont pas éprouvé le besoin de se mêler aux Américains; ils ont conservé leur langue et leur culture.

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Photostated complete. Typewritten manuscript in the University of Oregon Library archives. Prepared under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration about 1939.

"We are just a few Americans living in Spain", said an American resident of Jordan Valley, one of the two Basque communities in the extreme southeastern corner of Malheur County, which in turn occupies the southeastern corner of Oregon.

To such and extent have the Basques retained their own language and identity that a stranger in Jordan Valley, seeing these handsome, dark-haired, dark-eyed people and listening to the strange castanet-like rattling of their language with its trilled r's, feels that he is in a foreign country.

The extreme isolation of this sparsely populated corner of the state makes it easy for a foreign group to retain its identity. Of the two Basque villages, Jordan Valley, with a population of perhaps 300, is 65 miles from the nearest railroad point to the north; while McDermitt, Nevada, reaches its nearest railroad point 80 miles to the south.

In Jordan Valley one of the grade teachers said, "I have 27 children in my room and 22 of them are Basques". About this proportion holds through the school. In McDermitt there is only one American boy in the school on the Oregon side, and his mother bewails the fact that he talks like a Basque.

The first Basque came to this region 35 years ago as a shepherd, the occupation of practically all the Basques who followed. Though this first immigrant was soon joined by his brothers, cousins and fellow townsman, they remained on isolated ranches and the real migration did not begin until within the last 20 years. Since then they have come in increasing numbers until the present immigration law went into effect.

The Basques have been highly successful sheepmen. In this semi-arid region with no irrigation for crops except in a few valleys along streams, with scarcely enough grass for cattle range, sheep are the best crop. The Basques are natural sheepmen. Possibly their natural reticence and aloofness makes the solitude of a shepherd's life more tolerable to them than to most. Most of the shepherders all through this region are Basque, while others have become owners of large flocks.

More recently the Basques have moved into the two towns of the region which had been settled long since by Americans. Jordan as a stage station and trading point, McDermitt as a mining town. Of recent years the history of both towns has been the displacement of Americans by Basques.

During the years the two races have lived side by side, there has been little intermingling. The Basques are said by Americans to be clannish and self-satisfied, preferring rather to remain Spanish, and retain their own traditions, than to become Americans.

They have their own dances, at which native Basque dances, sometimes in native costume, are said to compete with the foxtrot and the Charleston.

In Jordan Valley they have their own church with a priest who conducts services in the Basque language. On Sunday

mornings in summer, one sees whole families starting churchward, with the mother and all the little girls' dresses in immaculate stiffly starched white.

Yet the Basques have made very little impression and apparently no material contribution.

In physical appearance Jordan Valley does not differ from any small town except in two particulars: its stone houses and huge piles of sagebrush, house size in each backyard. The reason for both of these distinguished features is the same, lack of wood. In the 65 mile drive to Jordan from the rail road over sagebrush hills, one sees no trees except a few shrub-size willows along a creek and a few cotton woods around the houses on two or three of the half dozen ranches passed.

In McDermitt, to reach which one crossed 105 miles of desert, south of Jordan, there is a Basque trace in the architecture. Several of the Basque homes are of smooth whitewashed cement with trimmings in such bright colors as pea green or forgetmenot blue. Combined with the roofs, this gives a striking color effect. In the bright sunlight of the desert, this glare of white and bright colors furnishes a striking contrast to the bare slack masses of the mountains rising abruptly from the plain to the south.

As far as I can learn, practically all the Basques speak their own language at home. This language is quite distinct from Castilian. And although the Basque provinces are in northern Spain, very few of these Basques understand or speak Castilian. This, perhaps, is because most of them are peasants, uneducated and frequently illiterate.

The first Basque woman to come to Oregon told me something of her life.

"My husband and I never went to school a day in our lives", she said, "yes, there were schools in our province. You could go, all right, or not go, all right. The poor people did not send their children to school. They needed them to work. I never had a pencil in my hand until I was sixteen. My husband had gone to America then. I could not write. But one of my friends had been to school and she taught me so I could write letters. I came to this country 34 years ago", she continued, "there was not many Spanish here then. My husband's cousin was the first. I was the first woman. The priest in Boise had to send to Salt Lake for the marriage service in Basque and learn it in order to know if I gave the right answers. Then we were married through an interpreter.

It was lonesome at first with no woman to talk to. My nearest neighbour was five miles away. She had no Basque and I had no American. When she came to call, she talked American; I talked Basque. We did not understand each other, but we made signs and laughed".

Most of the Basques, apparently, find little need of learning English. The school is the only Americanization agency, and through it the younger generation is becoming American. They are law abiding and peaceful, orderly, clean, and industrious.