

BASQUE ASPEN CARVINGS

by
Jose Mallea

Basque aspen art is not a new topic to *Newsletter* readers¹, but aspen carvings, used as historical documentation, is. Tree carvings represent roughly a one-hundred-year period in the story of Basque immigration to the American West, from the last decades of the nineteenth century until the 1970s. The Basque shepherders inscribed thousands of messages on aspens in ten states from California to Montana. Many people have seen them, but few give them a second thought. For years, U.S. government archeologists and historians were well aware of the myriad arborglyphs in the forests and public lands of their districts. But, according to Toiyabe National Forest archeologist Arnie Turner, they did not know what to do with them.² They faced two main problems: one, the carvings were written in languages other than English; and two, many appeared distorted by the natural growth of the tree and, therefore, were difficult to read. To the archeologists, the problem with the carvings was not unlike that of the petroglyphs, which are not well understood yet.

Thanks in part to several grants from state and federal agencies (see "Highlights," no. 8, this issue), during the last two years considerable progress has been made in reading, photographing and videotaping the aspen carvings in northern Nevada. The principal finding is that most carvings are not "doodlings", as some writers claimed.³ Furthermore, the bulk and the primary substance of the resource is not artistic, but historical.⁴ Aspen carvings are simply the summer record of the Basque shepherders in the American West. The documentary pieces

are necessarily laconic; nevertheless, historically, the carvings are as valid as a royal edict.

As a sample study, let us consider the evidence on Peavine, a small mountain in Nevada's northern Sierra. (Incidentally, below this mountain, and overlooking the Reno skyline, stands the National Monument to the Basque Shepherd).

There are three main groves in the Peavine area, and they are heavily carved in three languages, Spanish, Basque, and French, in that order. The exact number of carvings is not yet available, but the readable ones surpass five hundred. They attest to the intensive use of the area by shepherders.

Six carvings are not dated, but the names of sixty-five others are in this "outdoor museum," from the oldest--G. Paul, in 1901--to the present. In 1989 two herders spent part of the summer on Peavine: a Peruvian and his camp-tender, a Basque. A third herder, a Mexican, stayed in the foothills for a few days. The camp-tender said he never carved, and neither did the Mexican, but at least two trees with the Peruvian's name on them were found in the area.

Fourteen of the carvers have non-Basque surnames; however, we do know that some of these--but not all--were Navarrese. For the 1901-1989 period, twenty-three years are unaccounted for. No carvings have been found yet on Peavine for the following years: 1902-06, 1910-15, 1918, 1920, 1923, 1928-29, 1944-45, 1948-49, 1966, 1968, 1979, and 1983. Not surprisingly, most of the missing years are pre-1930s, a phenomenon explained by the aspen's short life span of sixty to eighty years.

The dates should not be taken as a reflection on the sheep business. We know from other sources that during the first decades of the century, more sheep roamed Nevada than at any other time. Interestingly, evidence suggests that, in spite of the great losses suffered by sheep owners during the Great Depression, herding continued unabated in the 1930s. World War II, on the other hand, appears as a probable cause of the 1944-45 lapses.

No fewer than seventy-one herders were responsible for the carving of around 500 catalogued trees on Peavine. The rule is that no herder carved just one aspen. For historical purposes, those who carved a lot are the most interesting, because normally they supplied more information than others who carved just a few aspens. The last name is a good indicator of where the sheepherders were born in the Old Country. When the name alone is not sufficient, oral information gathered from older herders can fill the vacuum. Other names, however, resist classification; the following is a breakdown of the regional origins of the immigrants on Peavine:

Navarrese	19
Lower Navarrese	11
Biscayans	9
Non-Basques	4
Zuberoans	1
Unidentified/unclear origin.....	27

For example, the national origin of G. Paul cannot be identified. He carved many trees in the Nevada/California Sierra, but never gave out any more information than the first initial, last name and the year. He was still inscribing trees on Peavine in 1942, which makes him one of the longest lasting herders anywhere. Another curious detail is that in ninety years of herding history, no two herders

carved on the same day, except once, October 10, 1960, when two Navarrese herders from the town of Lerga coincided, in spite of the fact that in 1954 four different herders left their records on Peavine, and as many as seven did so in 1959.

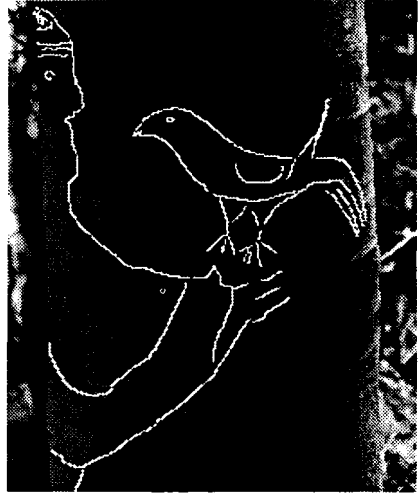


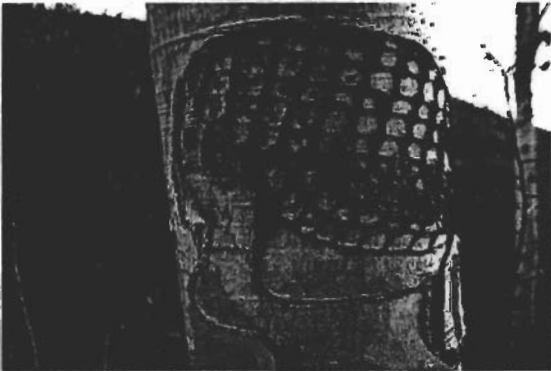
Photo: Shirley Altick (computer enhanced)

The carvings on this mountain range furnish information on a variety of topics regarding the sheepherders' life such as dates, names of hometowns and regions, loneliness, erotic and sexual fantasies, news on herding and transhumance, poetry, politics and religion, among others. There are even Latin words and Roman numerals.

Some of the most interesting--and never before studied--are those in the Basque language. Unfortunately, due to bark distortion, poor grammar and worse spelling, a few of the messages cannot be deciphered. Northern Basques carved in *euskara* (the Basque language) the most. On Peavine, one Biscayan defined himself as *euskotarra* (Basque, by race). A Navarrese man informed us of his hometown: *Iruritacoa* (native of Irurita), and he carved the date as *seigarren illearen ogeita zortzie 1956* (the twenty eight of the sixth month, 1956). The same fellow may

have carved this ambiguous message: *Nik arapa banezaque daquiten bat zer in nezaque* (If I could catch someone I know, what would I do?). And still another: *auteure ta berze iztereco izure* (This and that and the rest, thigh problem). The herder may be alluding to a problem/pain (*izurre*) in his thigh, unless the word "thigh" is a euphemism for sexual needs. Another Basque message, written beautifully, presents similar difficulties: *Arno onak parerik ez du batonbat baino hobe...biga ez dea egia banaski hobe*. The words *batonbat*, *dea* and *egia* are problematic, but the carving could be a paraphrase of an old song, and it means: "A good wine has no equal, better than one (are) two, (but) the truth is better yet."

Switching from philosophy to more prosaic matters, one tree located near a brook simply states: *Gocho da itzalian* ("It is nice in the shade"). Another reads: *Ez dut bertze penik nesca batena* ("I have no other pain but that of a girl!"). Although the carving is starkly simple, it echoes a universal theme of aspen carvings: the solitary young male's longing for female companionship. There are a few more graphic descriptions of sexual fantasies, one reminiscent of archaic imagery. Sometimes the text is accompanied by explicit figures of couples; one of these suffered from the wrath and axe of a self-appointed censor.



A carving of a woman known as "Trini."
Photo: Jose Mallea

In another grove a romantic herder carved a poetic verse:

*Iguzki denean
zion den eder itzala
maitia mintzo zira
plazer duzun bezala
egiten duzula mila
falzuki mintzo zira*

(Translation:)

When it is sunny
how beautiful the shade is
my love, you speak
as you will
as you make one thousand (excuses?)
you speak falsely.

This is dated July 1951 and although it would appear that the herder left some words out, the verse possesses the beautiful ring of the dialect of Lower Navarre. The following musing by a Zuberoan, dated three years later, is one the most impressive carvings anywhere:⁵

*Zer pina
zer chato ederra
haulehen
neure marie quartekin
gustura ny(n)tzan e(ne) sortean hemen
maiterik gabe zahartuz
gero Ziberoan*

(Translation:)

How fine
what a beautiful castle
at Haulehe
with my Marie Guarte
I was contented with my destiny here
having to grow old without a lover
afterwards in Zuberoa

No one expected the Basque immigrant to leave so much "hard evidence" concerning his

lifestyle in the mountains. If the small area of Peavine alone contains all the messages mentioned--and several more--in the Basque language, which are in the minority, we can imagine the extent of total data in western states. For example, one herder from Baigorri (Lower Navarre) wrote whole paragraphs in four languages on the walls of a cabin near Lakeview, Oregon. Nevertheless, typically, the shepherders themselves think nothing of the carved legacy; a certain modesty seems to

prevent the Basques from talking about, much less praising, their own deeds. Regardless of their historical value, in terms of quantity the aspen carvings may surpass even Indian petroglyphs. They are unique to the American West, where the Basque peasants broke with the past and made the transition from oral to carved literature. This cultural resource is a silent witness to a by-gone era; the carvings deserve to be recorded before the last tree takes a tumble.

NOTES

1. See No. 5 (1971) and No. 19 (1978).

2. Personal communication.

3. The title often reflects the author's primary view of the aspen carvings: Jan Harold Brunvand and John C. Abramson, "Aspen Doodlings in the Wasatch Mountains: A Preliminary Survey of Traditional Tree Carvings," *Forms upon the Frontier. Folklife and Folk Art in the United States*, Monograph Series, Vol. XVI, No. 2 (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, April 1969), pp. 89-102; Jack Muldoon, "The Art of Boredom," *International Arts and Crafts*, No. 1, pp. 15-18; Ed Vogel, "Lifestyle. Doodlings," *Nevada Appeal* (Carson City, Nv., December 29, 1989), p. C1.

4. Textual data items outnumber graphics by at least ten to one. However, David Beesley and Michael Claytor wrote: "...the carved messages and statements of the Basque are a minor art form compared to the rich and imaginative carved images." See "The Basque and Their Carvings," *Sierra Heritage* (Auburn, Calif., June 1982), p. 20.

5. Some parts of the text and its translation are tentative.

A Time We Knew

One of the newest additions to the Basque Book Series published by the University of Nevada Press is *A Time We Knew*, with text by Robert Laxalt and photographs by William Albert Allard. *A Time We Knew* is an emotional visual record of a peasant culture that is rapidly disappearing.

Publisher's Weekly says that Laxalt's poetic vignettes combine with seventy photographs "to create a spellbinding flow of words and images.... Allard's photographs glow and, with the text, form a prepossessing volume that allows a poignant glimpse of a vanished lifestyle."

This strikingly beautiful book sells for \$34.95 and is available from the University of Nevada Press, Reno, NV 89557.