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**Nevada Arts Council**

## Aspen Art Rubbings

An Interview with Phillip I. Earl and Jean Earl

By Joxe Mallea-Olaetxe

*The Earls of Reno deserve the recognition of the Basque American community, because they took an interest in recording the art of the sheepherders when few others were doing it. In the process, they created an original technique, called "aspen rubbings." Phillip is a historian and was a curator of history at the Nevada Historical Society in Reno until he retired in 1999. Jean, a nurse at the V. A. Hospital, retired in November 2001. The following is an interview with the Earls, conducted on April 19, 2002.*

*JOXE MALLEA-OLAETXE:* The first question we Basques always ask is, "Where are you from?"

*PHILLIP I. EARL:* I was born in southern Utah and moved to southern Nevada when I was four years old. I consider myself a Nevadan.

*JEAN EARL:* I was born in Virginia, in rural Virginia, went to school in Kentucky, and came to Reno in 1963. I met Phillip, got married, and I have been here ever since.

*J.M.-O.:* Did you know about the Basques before you became involved with aspen carvings?

*P.I.E.:* I knew about Old World Basques . . . about the Spanish Civil War . . . that their language is not Indo-European, but I didn't know much about the Basques in this country, except that at some point they came to herd sheep . . . In southern Nevada I never met a Basque, but I heard those funny stories about Columbus's navigator being Basque, which the Polish also claim, and the French. . . .

*J.E.:* I hadn't even heard of the word *Basque* until I came to Reno. I heard it first in association with John Ascuaga. At that time I used to work as a public health nurse, and I used to make some home visit to the Basque shepherds who were living at the Santa Fe Hotel. So I knew a little bit about them . . . but this was before we became involved with the aspen rubbings. . . . I didn't ask the right questions when I was at the hotel. . . I only knew that the Santa Fe was a Basque Hotel . . . I probably missed some great opportunities there.

*J.M.-O.:* How and when did you discover the aspen carvings of the sheepherders?

*P.I.E.:* We discovered them during an exhibit of aspen drawings at the University of Nevada, Reno [Phillip is referring to the embellished drawings of Frances Wallace and Hans Reiss, which were exhibited in 1969. They had a

little map of the aspen groves there, and we decided to go out and see if we could find some.

*J.E.:* If those hikers [Wallace and Reiss] hadn't found these and put that exhibit up, and, we hadn't seen it, we probably wouldn't have known about it either. We just happened to be there . . . it was interesting.

*P.I.E.:* We just saw that they were interesting, ethnographic, folk art, and something I had never seen before. And we talked to people that had seen them . . . but they just saw the nudes on the tree, and they just thought, *oh, those dirty Bascos*, I don't even think they knew hardly anything about them. So we began reading, studying, and learning about Basques to get into this, and then we put together a slide show.

*J.M.-O.:* What made you decide to use your technique to record the carvings, rather than say, a camera?

*J.E.:* We tried to take pictures, but some of the carvings were so big that you could not get the total picture with the camera [in one shot] . . . We wanted something that went around the tree to get the total image. The [rubbing] material will go around the tree, and you can pull it tight—you cannot do that with paper. . . . We had seen how they [Wallace & Reiss] had done the rubbings, the tracings, and when we got to the grove, the actual carving was so different. . . . So we decided to take some clear plastic up and trace . . . , and that didn't turn out very well. All of the sudden it occurred [to me] that there was a scar there [on the bark], and we could do a "rubbing." So we took some fabric up, did a rubbing, and worked, and that is what we have been doing ever since.

*J.M.-O.:* What materials are needed to do a rubbing?

*J.E.:* We used a muslin, a heavy muslin, and through the years I have learned to use a lighter-weight muslin . . . , and just recently I have started using rice paper, which is ok for the small ones, and it is better when the scar is not very pronounced. And we started out using charcoal . . . , as a matter of fact, the first time we did a rubbing we used a keno pencil, one of those wax pencils. Eventually we got some black rubbing wax, [and] we have used that ever since.

*J.M.-O.:* Have you perfected your technique?

*J.E.:* I do most of the rubbings. Phillip helps me stretch the material; he is tall . . . Yes, I think the rubbings we do now are better than the ones we did earlier. I have learned to get a sharper, clearer image. At first we used charcoal, but it is not as dark as rubbing wax, and it smears. . . . After we finish the rubbing, while it is still on the tree, we spray it [the fabric] with a fixative so it doesn't smear. Then the fabric can be folded or whatever [without damage to the rubbing].

*J.M.-O.:* How long does it take you to get a rubbing from a tree?

*J.E.:* It depends. Part of it is to get to the grove, finding the groves. Because

we had no directions, we just went out and looked. If it is a small one [carving], you can do it maybe in twenty minutes. If it is a large one, it can take up to four hours. You have to stretch that material around the tree, and with a large one you have to take the ladder . . . [we did] some of them in fairly precarious positions. I remember a couple of times I was leaning over, trying to do it, and Phillip was holding on to me so I would not fall while I was doing the rubbing. One time there was a bee's nest at the bottom of the tree. Other times Phillip has to hold the other tree [which had grown too close] back so that you can do the rubbing. . . .

*J.M.-O.:* When did you start making rubbings?

*P.I.E.:* I think it was in 1969 or 1970.

*J.E.:* It was 1970.

*P.I.E.:* I took three or four rubbings to the Basque Studies, which at the time was [located] in Stead. . . . They didn't know [what the rubbings were]. . . . They were more interested in the Old World Basques than the Basques in this country. . . . After we did the portfolio [of the rubbings] in 1980, we gave a portfolio to the Basques Studies . . . We also sent a portfolio to senator Laxalt. We didn't hear from either one of them.

*J.M.-O.:* Which carvings are more difficult to trace?

*J.E.:* The ones that the tree has scarred the carving, but the hardest are the letters, the writing, unless it is in block letter form. The script is difficult . . . , because I didn't even know how the name was supposed to [be] spell[ed]. I have very few [rubbings] of those, because they are so difficult.

*J.M.-O.:* Are you offering any of the rubbings for sale?

*J.E.:* In 1980 we did the portfolio with that goal in mind. We marketed the libraries, we sold some portfolios to them. . . . We really did not find any outlet for them. We did some cards, and we had those on consignment in a couple of places. . . . People we know have some originals, but mostly we gave them away. . . . I was always disappointed that they did not sell better, because I thought they were so different and unique, but there wasn't an audience out there.

*P.I.E.:* We did some things: [attended] three or four Basque festivals. . . . I went to the one here in Reno.

*J.E.:* I went to Salt Lake once and exhibited one year [ca. 1980], and we had some sales. . . . I only went once to the Basque festival in the fairgrounds in Reno . . . , and people were very interested in the Old World Basques. They bought t-shirts. . . . They were not interested in the carvings, not enough to purchase them. . . .

*J.M.-O.:* Can you explain what you have going with the Amaranth Gallery of Reno?

*J.E.:* Yes. I read in the paper that they like to feature Nevada artists. So one day I was walking by, and I saw something interesting in the window. I went

in and I met Tara Bertucci [the manager] and told to her that I had been involved in an art project for the last thirty years, and she immediately knew what I was talking about when I said Basque carvings, which astounded me because most people don't know [about them]. She was very interested in seeing them, so I took down some original rubbings, and she felt that they would like to mount a show. . . . We thought, well, the Basque festival is coming up: Why don't we do this in conjunction with it? I was excited that someone else was excited about the carvings. We are going to exhibit about twenty-five original rubbings, and we will have the prints, the cards, and we will probably do some tiles as well.

*J.M.-O.:* So, you offer prints of the rubbings, cards, and even tiles painted with the carved images?

*J.E.:* Yes. They will be offered to the public at the Amaranth Gallery of Reno [135 N. Sierra Street, Suite D, near First Street and the Century Theaters] during the Basque festival, July 20 and 21, 2002. At this point in time, I will offer an original, framed rubbing. It will be [sold] on silent auction, and, whoever bids the highest, gets it. The money will be donated to the Center for the Basque Studies. There are only five people in the world that have an original rubbing of it. . . . If there is an interest [in the carvings] the Amaranth Gallery will carry the cards, the prints, and the tiles permanently.

*J.M.-O.:* How would you assess the carving phenomenon?

*J.E.:* I think it is every bit as significant as petroglyphs.

*P.I.E.:* It is folk art, art by untrained people, art by people who are not intending to be artistic. They are just intending to mark their passage in the world.

*J.E.:* But whether they intended to be art or not, it certainly is an art form in my mind.

*P.I.E.:* I do not know of any other ethnic group that came to this country [and] that did anything that focused on their ethnic group. I don't think that the shepherders were thinking necessarily in terms of their culture. They were just thinking in terms of the everyday life, boredom, fantasizing about women, and home.

*J.E.:* Years after it is done, we look at it one way, which is a different way than the people who actually put it on the tree were thinking.

*P.I.E.:* It occurred to us later that this is really folk art, and after we saw that the trees had deteriorated, we thought, *these trees are going to be on the ground in a few years*. There must be a lot trees out there in obscure groves that no one has seen that went down, and once they are down, they are lost. Whatever the carvings signify, it is part of ethnography, Basque be found anywhere in the index. Phillip taught Nevada history at Truckee Meadows Community College for years, and he was probably the only instructor who included a lecture on Basques, showed a slide presentation of tree carvings, and brought to class a couple of the rubbings of the arborglyphs).

People do not know Basque from bread and beer. They hardly ever heard of them.

*J.E.:* The real impetus, the driving force behind us [was] when we went back [to the grove], and the tree was gone, the image was no longer there. I remember feeling . . . this is terrible! That is really what made us make a more conscious effort. Before that it was just fun, to find the grove, see the carvings, and do a couple of rubbings here and there.

*P.I.E.:* We camped out there with our kids, took our tent trailer out there. . . .

*J.E.:* Yes, but then it became more important when we recognized that the trees were going to die.

*J.M.-O.:* So, at first it was fun, and then it became work?

*P.I.E. AND J.E.:* (Laughing) It was always fun.

*P.I.E.:* I just felt that by the bark falling off the tree some documents of history were being lost. We think of documents in terms of paper, and paper does deteriorate, gets lost, unless it is cared for, and these [carvings] were the same thing.

*J.E.:* What I find most fascinating about the carvings, is that the tree has the final say-so on what the image looks like. The tree finishes it.

*P.I.E.:* I think sometimes the sheepherders came back to take a look at the carving they did on the first year . . . , and maybe they added something or corrected something. . . .

*J.E.:* I think the sheepherder would be startled to see what the final image turned out to be; it wasn't what he put on the tree.

*J.M.-O.:* Phillip, from the historian's point of view, how would you assess the role of the Basques in the West? Do you think that they were singled out in any way by the society at large?

*P.I.E.:* I understood that the Anglo cattlemen didn't like the Basque sheepherders. There were traditional hostilities between them. I don't think you can compare the Germans, the Italians, and the Basques. They did different things.

*J.E.:* I think the language had a lot to do with it. The Basques had no opportunity to learn English. . . . They had to associate with other Basques, the Basque hotels, all of those things they grew up with . . . so they sort of had a closed culture.



*That was the end of the interview. I would like to thank Phillip and Jean Earl for their time and especially for their concern about the tree carvings, at a time when even the Basques themselves showed little interest in this unusual ethno-historical phenomenon they created in the mountains and kept quiet about it.*