Basque to the Future

_Becoming Basque_ mulls the challenges of Boise's present as much as its past

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Confusing _Becoming Basque: Ethnic Heritage on Boise's Grove Street_ with another history book would be a mistake: assuming that it's simply a bouquet from Boise State University to the mayor would be another. In fact, a rare and fascinating photograph of a young Dave Bieter as a Basque dancer (tucked into page 127) is one of the book's only references to Boise's most famous Basque resident.

This latest publication from Boise State's Center for Idaho History and Politics does include a definitive chronicle of the city's Basque heritage. But it's also an exploration of this city's ethnic patchwork, and it delves into a current ripped— from-the-headlines downtown Boise controversy (BW, News, "The Centre Piece," May 7, 2014). And, perhaps most importantly, it includes a long— overdue examination of the political turmoil and oppression that defined Spain and its Basque country through the latter half of the 20th century and how that turmoil affected Idaho.

"I had to push really hard for this book to include Anaiak Danok. This has been an area that a number of people just didn't want us to get into with this book," said Dr. John Bieter, editor of _Becoming Basque_ and co-director of the Center for Basque Studies at Boise State. "Well, it's time."

"Anaiak Danok" is "Brothers All," a little—talked about Boise group that was comprised of immigrants and their children that openly supported Basque nationalism in their homeland. At its peak, Anaiak Danok had few— but powerful— members, including then— Idaho Secretary of State Pete Cenarrusa. But at the same time, quite a few people in the local Basque community had mixed feelings about the political unrest in their homeland, defined in large part by the iron fist of Spain's dictator, Gen. Francisco Franco.

Decades later, that era of oppression still burns deep into the head and heart of Dr. Bieter. In 1974, Bieter, who was 12 years old at the time, went with his family to the Basque country (Franco remained in power until November 1975).

"I grew up in Boise, where you're taught that the police are our friends," said Bieter. "But as I was sitting, talking with a friend, we were passed by Franco's Guardia Civil (military police) with submachine guns. My friend quieted me down, saying, 'Don't you see who just went by? They're listening to our conversations.' It was a presence that most of us would never understand."

Years later, when Bieter returned to a post— Franco Basque country to attend a family wedding, he was handed a family treasure: 55 letters from his late grandfather that had been written about his journey to, and his new life in, America.

"But they were all censored," said Bieter. "It's so hard to understand that kind of a police presence."

Many Basques who had emigrated to America during and even before Franco's reign of terror, had moved on, in more ways than one.
"My grandparents were in a new world. They had already left, physically and emotionally," said Meggan Laxalt Mackey, co-author of Becoming Basque, a Basque Museum and Cultural Center volunteer and board member, and the external affairs program manager with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Sitting in Boise State's downtown offices in BoDo, just a few hundred feet away from the Basque Block, Boise Weekly spoke with Mackey, Dr. Bieter, recent Boise State grad Heidi Coon, also a co-author of Becoming Basque (the book has no fewer than 13 contributors), and Dr. Todd Shallat, director of Boise State's Center for Idaho History and Politics and series editor for the Center's many publications.

"I'm sitting here listening to John talking about his own experiences and it's bringing back a big flood of memories for me," said Mackey. "Both of my grandparents were French Basque. My grandfather was a sheepherder in Nevada, and when I was a little girl, I would spend time with him the Sierra Mountain sheep camps."

If there is such a thing as Basque–American royalty, Mackey is a part of its bloodline. The words "son of a Basque sheepherder" often accompanied the name of her uncle Paul Laxalt, a former U.S. senator and governor of Nevada, also referred to as "The First Friend" to President Ronald Reagan. And Mackey's other uncle, Robert Laxalt, is considered by many to be the definitive Basque–American writer.

"His book Sweet Promised Land is still, to this day, a must-read in the Basque community. It's a classic," she said. "That book captured the tension between the old and new of becoming Basque—what it is to be, say, an American senator or governor or a prominent writer, but your father is a Basque sheepherder."

And that assimilation, according to Shallat, is still to this day a palpable tension.

"Even now, the city of Boise is suspended between the past and the present," he said. "The other books that we have published over the years may have been about innovation or economics, but this book is about the character of Boise—truly an immigrant city and what it means to be us."

Among the multiple other books that Shallat has, let's say, shepherded are a chronicle of Ada County's climb out of the great recession (BW. News, "Down and Out," May 2, 2012) and a reconciliation of the Treasure Valley's agrarian roots and its present-day food production (BW, News, "Thought for Food," May 22, 2013).

"But this time, Becoming Basque evolved into a community research publication," Shallat said. "We recruited scholars and authors who had already written extensively about the Basque culture; and we added a few students—a very select few—who teamed up with mentors."

One of those select few was 23–year–old Heidi Coon, the youngest of the book's contributors. She teamed up with another familiar name with strong Basque ties—John Ysursa, director of the Basque Studies Center at Boise State—as her mentor.

"And my work all began with Jay," said Coon with a huge smile.

Jay is Juanita "Jay" Uberuaga Hormaechea, who, beginning in 1936 and continuing for generations, taught countless Boise children traditional Basque dances, such as the jota and porrusalda.

"And by doing so, she began a formal transformation of the Boise Basque community," wrote Coon in Becoming Basque. "Her dance lessons provided a valuable metaphorical sense of glue—a community that learned to dance together would continue to stay together."

To an outsider, the thought of dance lessons helping to refine the definition of a growing metropolis may seem frivolous, but Boiseans have come to learn that the 400 Basque dances are indeed, a living museum of story and significance.

Which brings us back to that rare photograph of a young Dave Bieter. The picture (see the image to the upper right) of a Basque dance troupe, taken at the Boise Depot in 1975, may cause a double–take. But there he is, sixth from the left in the back row: the man who would be mayor.

"And when he was elected, my brother was the only Basque–speaking mayor of any major city in the world, including the Basque country," said John Bieter.
That, in turn, leads us deeper into the Bieter clan and, in particular, its matriarch.

"The first thing people usually assume is that it was my father, Pat Bieter, who was Basque. He was not. He was a Midwestern Irish lad, and he didn't know a Basque from a bass," said Bieter, the fourth of five children.

"It was my mother Eloise Garmendia who was the daughter of Basque immigrants to Idaho. My father fell in love with her and fell in love with the Basque culture."

And indeed it was Pat Bieter who established Boise State's first Basque studies program, beginning with that 1974 trip to Spain, when Pat and Eloise took their five children, 75 Boise State students and seven faculty members to launch America's first-ever extended studies program on Basque soil. Pat Bieter went on to be elected and re-elected to the Idaho House of Representatives, but in 1999, Pat and Eloise were killed in an automobile accident, north of Horseshoe Bend on State Highway 55. Their son David succeeded Pat at the Statehouse, thus launching his highly successful political career.

"When we went to the Basque country in 1974, it instantly changed our family. But it changed Boise, too," John said. "It launched a whole host of exchanges."

And as Boise has evolved, so has its Basque Block on Grove Street.

But perhaps the two have never been in greater conflict than now, tension simmering over what is to become of the Grove Plaza, the Basque Block's neighbor and part of the Grove Street spine stretching from the canal to a still-working waterwheel at Grove and Fifth streets. In early May, Boise Weekly examined the Gardner Company's grand plans to transform the space in and around the U.S. Bank Building on the Grove Plaza. Among the dramatic changes proposed by Gardner is a significant blockage of any view of the Grove from the Basque Block—instead filling any open space with office buildings and huge driveways leading to a subterranean transit center. (BW, News, "The Centre Piece," May 7, 2014).

That has gotten under Shallat's skin. Not one to shy away from controversy, in his introduction of Becoming Basque, Shallat penned a scathing indictment of the proposal:

"Ethnic stakeholders on the Grove still fear the wreckage of urban renewal to the west, near the entrance to the Grove, is a brewing dispute over a phalanx of bus ramps for an underground transit center. Neighbors foresee a traffic nightmare. To the east in the grey-field of surface parking, the concern is that glassy construction might dwarf Grove Street's pedestrian scale."

And Shallat even offered a political lifeline to officials at Boise City Hall—including Mayor Dave Bieter:

"If the damage can be mitigated, if the city can work to preserve a walkable streetscape, a treasure unique to Boise can still tell meaningful tales. We dedicate this book to the hope that whatever happens will be rooted in its immigrant story and historically informed."

If some kind of compromise can be reached over the controversy, that could lead to a new chapter—if Becoming Basque were to go into a second printing.

"We've made this mistake, over and over again. And I'm afraid that we might make it again," Shallat said. "I want to be careful because I treasure and respect the mayor and Boise City Council, and I know they're looking out for our community. But as a historian and preservationist, I ask: If this thing is going to happen, please, let's not forget our cultural resources."

Mackey added her own concern.

"When you have a culture as important as the Basque culture and that culture has a voice, why is it that this particular voice was not heard from?" she asked. "The Basque voice is also a Boise voice."
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