

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the history of Basques as an ethnic group in the United States. The discussion starts with a general background of the Basques and chronicles the migration of Basques to the United States. Then, this discussion describes common characteristics of the American Basque community, and, in particular, examines the Basque colony in Boise, Idaho.

- **Background**

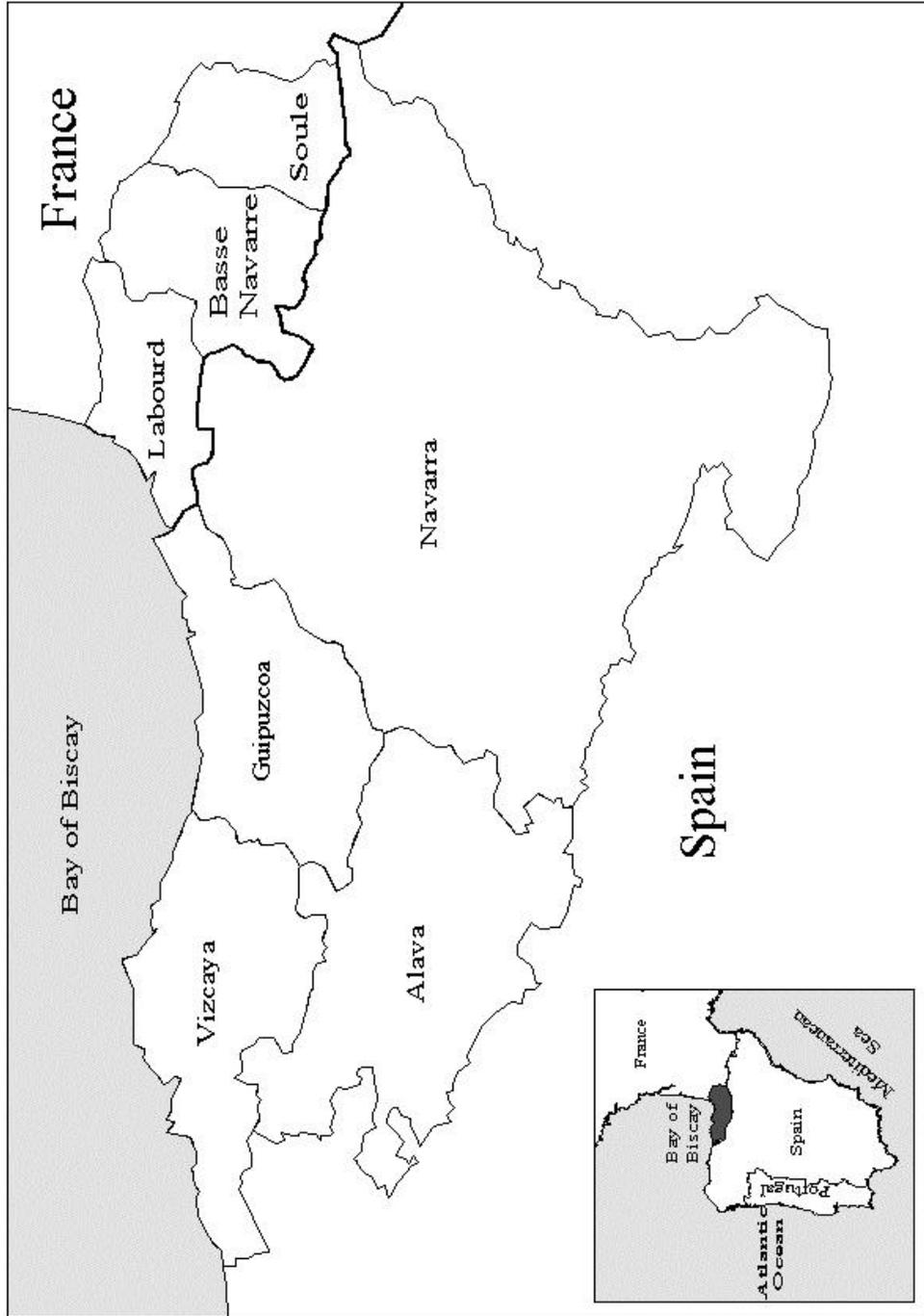
The Basques often are referred to as Europe's mystery people, due primarily to the enigma which surrounds their origins (Douglass, 1980). For several centuries, the intrigue of this enigma has created a number of theories about the Basques' origins. For example, Gallop (1930) described several older theories which argue that the Basques are related to other groups, including the Turanian family, the Uralo-Altaic group, the Berber tribes, the North and South American natives, the inhabitants of Atlantis, the Celts, and the ancient Egyptians. More recently, the geneticist Boyd (1969) has suggested that the oldest race in Europe is characterized by no incidence of the B blood type and a high incidence of the Rh negative blood factor. Since the Basques have the lowest incidence of the B blood type in Europe and the highest incidence of the Rh negative blood factor of any ethnic group in the world, there are theories that conclude the Basques are the oldest European race (Goti Iturriaga, 1972). Also, other theories contend that the Basques are the direct descendants of the pre-historic tribes who left the cave-paintings at Lascaux and Altamira (Thernstrom *et al.*, 1980). Although there is still uncertainty regarding the

origins of the Basques, most theories place the Basques *in situ* before the invasions of the Indo-European tribes during the second millennium B.C. (Douglass and Bilbao, 1975).

The one feature that contributes more to the enigma of the Basques than any other feature is the Basque language, *Euskera*. For over five centuries, linguists and philologists have attempted to establish a connection between *Euskera* and any other known language. Similarly, the uniqueness of the language has produced a variety of interesting notions. As an example, Gallop (1930) recounted a few popular legends that argue *Euskera* was the language used in the Garden of Eden and was the language spoken before the Tower of Babel. In addition to the uniqueness, *Euskera* has endured through numerous occupations of the Basque homeland including the Romans, Franks, Visigoths and Arabs; as well as the suppression policies of Generalissimo Franco (Clark, 1979). The importance of *Euskera* to Basques is evident in the way that Basques refer to themselves as *Euskaldunak* “speakers of the Basque language” (Thernstrom *et al.*, 1980).

The Basque homeland *Euskal Herria* lies along the coast of the Bay of Biscay in the western Pyrenees. Bordered in the north by the lower waters of the river Adour and in the south by the upper waters of the river Ebro, the homeland consists of seven provinces that transverse Spain and France (see Map 3.1). The four provinces of Navarra, Vizcaya, Alava, and Guipuzcoa are in Spain, and the three provinces of Labourd, Soule, and Basse Navarre are in France. Douglass and Bilbao (1975) describe the three ecological zones of the homeland as northern, central, and southern. The northern zone lies along the Atlantic slope of the Pyrenees and has a

# Basque Homeland



Map 3.1

maritime climate. The central zone is the high mountain and plateau regions interspersed between the Pyrenees and Cantabrians chains and has a harsh continental climate. The southern zone is on the leeward side of the Cantabrians and consists of a rolling foothills and plains topography and an arid, Mediterranean-like climate. Recent population statistics estimate the population in the Basque homeland to be approximately three million inhabitants, but Douglass (1992) suggests that only about 700,000 persons in the homeland speak *Euskera*, which culturally defines the Basques.

- **Basque Migration to the United States**

During the nineteenth century, the Basques experienced a number of events which created a situation favorable for emigration *en masse*. Demographically, new advances in medical technology in the eighteenth century, notably in the area of vaccinations, created a sharp decline in mortality rates that resulted in rapid population growth. In the late 1840s, the Basque homeland experienced further demographic pressure as a series of crop failures and famines yielded little food for a rapidly growing population (Decroos, 1980). Economically, the Industrial Revolution modernized tasks traditionally performed by rural and urban artisans which resulted in the displacement of those workers. Also, an ancient custom dictated that the entire farmstead had to be inherited by a single heir to prevent the fragmentation of arable land. Migration, then, was a viable alternative for other siblings to earn enough money to support themselves. Politically, the principal of local autonomy historically had been guaranteed under the *fors* and *fueros*<sup>1</sup>, contrasted with the centralist philosophies of the post-revolutionary French

and the liberal Spanish governments. Eventually, both governments abolished the *fors* and *fueros* which resulted in the Basques losing their historical rights, especially their exemption from military conscription. Thus, the demographic, economic, and political events were the push factors to create a situation favorable for emigration *en masse*.

The initial impetus for Basque migration to the United States was the discovery of gold in southern California during the late 1840s. Many of the first Basques to California migrated from Latin American countries including Argentina and Chile, but Basques came over from the homeland and down from French Canada as well (Eagle, 1979). During the early nineteenth century, the growing Latin American cattle and sheep industries attracted many Basque immigrants by offering profitable economic opportunities and the possibility for social mobility. However, the social and economic conditions in many of these nations changed by the mid-nineteenth century and limited the socio-economic opportunities for Basque immigrants. The discovery of gold in southern California not only pulled Basque immigrants away from Latin American destinations, but also encouraged Basques in Latin America to migrate to California (Douglass and Bilbao, 1975). Thus, Basque immigration patterns changed during the mid-nineteenth century as the conditions in the homeland and Latin America pushed while the potential wealth from gold pulled Basques to California.

Although the potential wealth of gold was a major pull factor encouraging Basques from around the world to migrate to southern California, most Basques were unsuccessful in discovering gold and soon left the mines in favor of other occupations, especially sheep herding.

During this time period, a number of factors contributed to the decision by many Basques to become sheep herders. For example, the landscape of southern California was familiar to many Latin American Basques who had prior experience tending the large-scale sheep bands on the *pampas* of Argentina in Latin America (Eutlain, 1974). Another factor was the success of the sheep industry in southern California. According to Thernstrom *et al.* (1980), this success partially was due to the setbacks suffered by the cattle industry in southern California during the 1850s and 1860s. The *dons*, who owned enormous cattle ranches, were reluctant to raise sheep and unwilling to up-grade the livestock strains. The cattle industry, then, was ill prepared to handle a series of floods, droughts, and epidemics that drastically reduced the cattle numbers during this time period. On the other hand, the sheep industry in southern California experienced tremendous growth. The sheep industry benefited not only from the demand for meat and animal products left by the demise of the cattle industry, but also from a number of factors such as the ability of sheep to survive in the semi-arid pasture of southern California, an open grazing policy on the public domain lands, a ready-made market for wool, and the accessibility of inexpensive land (Echeverria, 1983). Since the sheep industry was familiar to many Latin American Basques and offered an opportunity for tremendous economic gains, many Basques left the gold mines and became sheep herders.

By the late 1850s, the Basques had established themselves in southern California as the premier sheep herders in the area. The Basques practiced a distinctive pattern of sheep husbandry, transhumance, which was ideally suited to the semi-arid conditions of southern

California. Transhumance sheep husbandry was the seasonal movement of sheep bands in search of pasturage. During the winter, the Basques often leased or purchased range lands in southern California and the San Joaquin Valley to graze their sheep and then drove the sheep to the public lands of the high Sierra Nevada mountains in the summer (Thernstrom *et al.*, 1980). This pattern of sheep husbandry quickly netted large gains in terms of sheep and money for the Basques. As the operations of the Basque herders grew, these Basques started a chain migration process eventually repeated throughout the American West. The Basque herders summoned others in the Basque homeland, usually relatives or neighbors, to emigrate to the United States to serve as sheep tenders. If the new immigrants worked well with the sheep, they often received a small band of ewes as wage compensation. In a few years, these immigrants generally had enough sheep to establish their own operations and continue the chain migration network (Eutlain, 1974). Thus, the majority of Basques who migrated through this chain migration process during the nineteenth century came to the United States specifically to become sheep herders.

Sheep herding provided a unique opportunity for Basque immigrants, the majority of whom were semi-literate single males from the rural regions of Vizcaya, Basse Navarre, and Navarra, to earn money. Since an ancient inheritance custom in the homeland dictated that the entire farm must be passed to a single heir, the remaining siblings had to find other endeavors to earn enough money to support themselves. Migration, then, became a viable alternative for many of these Basques and migrating to the United States to become sheep herders offered a number of advantages. As an example, the transhumant pattern of sheep husbandry practiced by many

Basque herders was truly nomadic and only required Basque immigrants to invest in a tent, a bed roll, and a dog (Douglass, 1992). The isolation of this pattern of sheep husbandry also provided the Basque immigrants with several occupational benefits. For instance, the limited knowledge of English of the Basque immigrants did not handicap their job performance. The Basques also had job security since few non-Basques were interested in competing for sheep herding jobs (Thernstrom *et al.*, 1980). One of the advantages of sheep herding was the ability to start, quickly, an independent sheep herding operation and to sell out after a few years with enough money to return home and establish a farm or business (Echeverria, 1983). Even though many Basques remained in the United States, most Basque immigrants returned to the Basque homeland as soon as they had enough money to support themselves.

As the sheep ranges in southern California became overcrowded with thousands of independent sheep bands by the late 1860s, the Basques began to migrate in search of new range land (Thernstrom *et al.*, 1980). By the early 1870s, the Basques ventured eastward into Arizona and New Mexico and northward into northern California. During the 1870s, the Basques entered the Great Basin region of southeastern Oregon, northern Nevada, and southern Idaho with the completion of a transcontinental railroad across the northern part of the United States, which enabled sheep herders in this area to reach the eastern markets (Echeverria, 1983). By the last decade of the nineteenth century, the Basques in this area extended into parts of Washington, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, and Utah. In addition to the western expansion during this time

period, a Basque colony developed in New York City to assist Basque immigrants to reach their western destinations (Douglass and Bilbao, 1975).

The extensive involvement of the Basques in sheep herding at the beginning of the twentieth century earned the Basques the reputation of being, “the irreplaceable backbone of the open range transhumant sheep outfits of the American West” (Douglass and Bilbao, 1975).

Basque immigration peaked during this time as both Basque and non-Basque sheep outfits began to recruit herders from the homeland. Despite the high turnover in the herder labor pool, the intense recruitment of Basques generated a surplus of herders in the United States. Available work for the herders then became based on the law of supply and demand. During the late winter months and into early spring, sheep outfits in the Great Basin region required additional help for lambing season. On the other hand, the lambing season in California occurred during the autumn months. Many herders, then, migrated between the two regions to find work. Despite this surplus of herders, Basques continued to migrate *en masse* to the United States until the 1920s.

Basque migration *en masse* to the United States suffered a setback in the 1920s as the United States passed a series of immigration laws, particularly the Immigration Act of 1920 and the Quota Act of 1924, to limit the immigration of certain ethnic groups. These laws implemented an annual quota system based on national origin, and the Basques were included in the French and Spanish quotas which greatly affected Basque migration to the United States (Echeverria, 1983). Although the Spanish quota was set at 912 persons per year in 1921, the quota dropped in three years to only 131 persons per year. On the other hand, the French quota

remained high. However, the immigration of French-Basques was insufficient to replenish the herder labor pool. While the American sheep industry did not immediately feel the impact in the reduction of Basque herders, the situation became more critical as the older herders began to retire, die, or return to Europe since there were few younger herders available to take their place (Douglass and Bilbao, 1975).

Despite an excellent reputation for hard work and dedication to thrift, the Basques experienced discrimination in the early twentieth century arising from tensions between the settled ranchers and transhumant Basque herders. Theoretically, public domain lands were available on a first-come, first-serve basis, but settled cattle and sheep ranchers commonly regarded the public domain lands contiguous to their personal lands as part of their private holdings. The presence of transhumant Basque herders within the area then threatened the control of the ranchers over the public domain lands (Thernstrom *et al.*, 1980). Often, the ranchers responded to this threat by pressuring their representatives at the local, state, and federal levels to pass legislation to hinder the operations of Basque herders. For instance, many local and state governments passed laws banning sheep within specified distances of private property to discourage Basque herders from using the public domain lands in their jurisdictions (Douglass, 1992). Although most of these laws were eventually declared un-constitutional, the federal government passed several acts which had a tremendous impact on Basque herders. The Taylor Grazing Act of 1934, for example, excluded both landless and alien sheep herders from grazing on federal lands, thus effectively ending transhumant sheep husbandry in the United

States (Decroos, 1980). The ending of transhumant sheep husbandry in the early twentieth century also marked an end to the unique opportunity for the Basques as transhumant sheep herders in the United States.

Although the Basques lost the ability to practice transhumant sheep husbandry, the migration of Basques to the United States continued due largely to the shortage of herders in the American West during the Second World War. The labor shortage became so acute that representatives from several western states introduced a series of bills, aptly called the Shepherder Laws, which granted permanent residency to those Basques who had entered the country illegally to become sheep herders. Despite the Shepherder Laws remaining in effect after World War II, the shortage of herders continued which prompted a number of American sheep organizations, such as the Western Range Association and the California Woolgrowers Association, to pressure the federal government for relief. The response of the federal government was the passage of the McCarren-Walter Act to allow these sheep organizations to recruit foreign herders, exempted from the immigration quotas, for three-year contracts (Douglass, 1980). While the McCarren-Walter Act, specifically, did not cite the Basques as the only ethnic group eligible for this program, the principal applicants were Basques. Nearly 5,500 Basques applied to the program between 1957 and 1970 (Echeverria, 1983).

Few Basques have participated in the herder recruitment program since the 1970s as rising wages and changing political situations in the Basque homeland have reduced the incentive to emigrate. Currently, the contract herders are more likely to come from Latin American

countries such as Peru and Mexico. After more than 125 years, as Thernstrom *et al* (1980) argues, Basque immigration *en masse* to the western United States most likely has ended.

- **Characteristics of the American Basque Community**

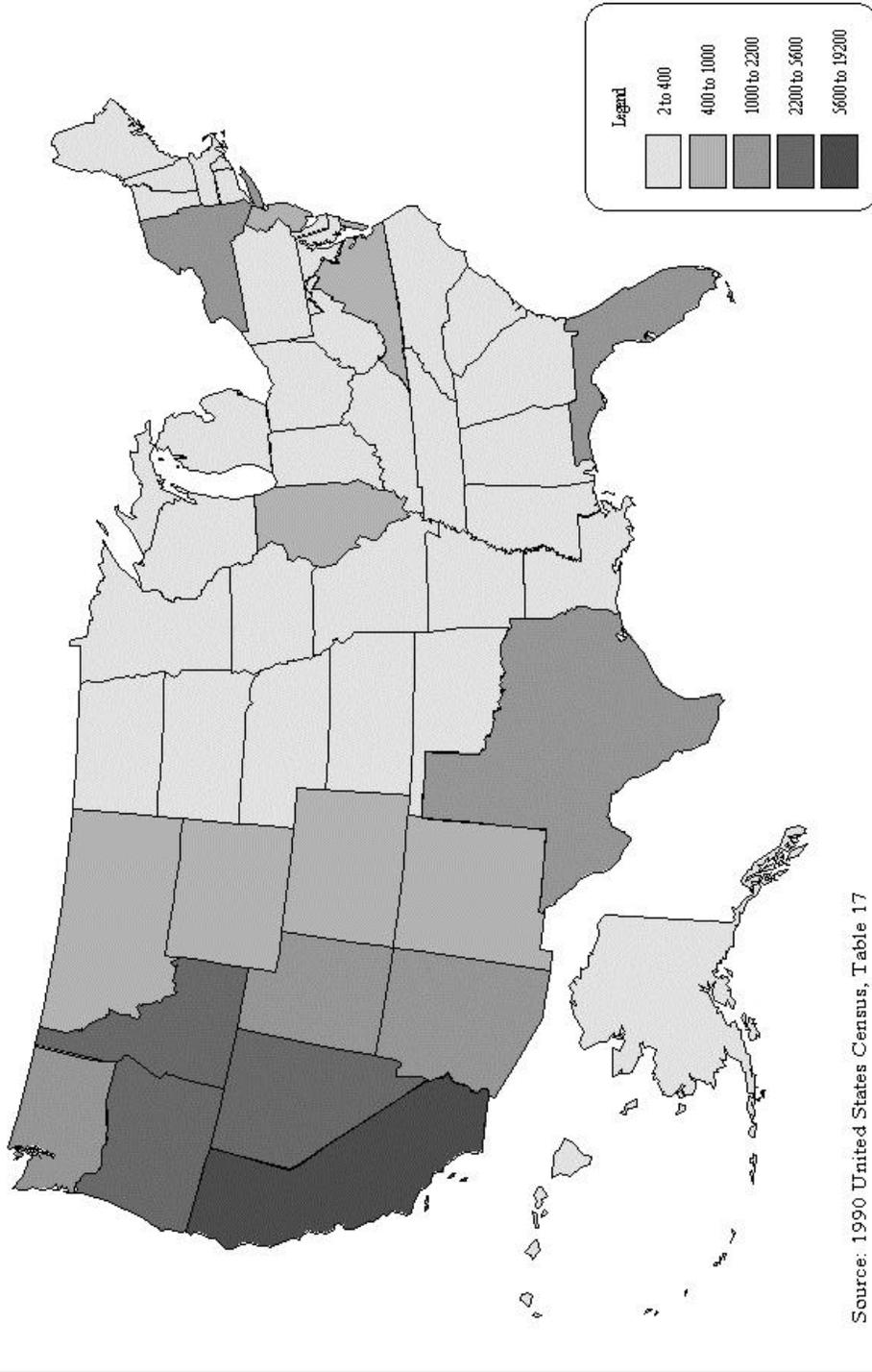
Despite over a century of immigration *en masse* to the United States, there is only a minimal amount of statistical information on Basques within American society. Basques traditionally have been included with the Spanish, French, or Hispanic ethnic groups since the Basque nation *Euzkadi* historically has not been recognized as an independent political state (Castelli, 1970). Although historical information on Basque migration to the United States is generally non-existent, there has been a question since the 1980 Census regarding ancestry that has allowed Basques to identify themselves as a separate ethnic group. This question, also, has given Basques the option to indicate whether they consider themselves as French-Basques or Spanish-Basques. As Table 3.1 illustrates, there are just fewer than 48,000 Basques in the United States as of 1990. Over twelve percent consider themselves French-Basques and nearly sixteen percent identify themselves as Spanish-Basques. Most Basques in the United States reside in the western states with the largest concentrations in California, Idaho, Nevada, and Oregon (see Map 3.2)<sup>2</sup>.

This reporting of French and Spanish distinction in the census reflects the tripartite distinction within the American Basque community of French-Basques, Spanish-Basques, and Basques (Douglass, 1985). As Decroos (1980) explains, those persons who consider themselves either to be French-Basques or Spanish-Basques perceive differences between themselves and the

**Table 3.1 - Basque Population in the United States**

| <i>State</i>   | <i>1980 U.S. Census</i> |                |                           |               | <i>1990 U.S. Census</i> |                |               |               |
|----------------|-------------------------|----------------|---------------------------|---------------|-------------------------|----------------|---------------|---------------|
|                | <i>French</i>           | <i>Spanish</i> | <i>n.e.c.<sup>3</sup></i> | <i>Total</i>  | <i>French</i>           | <i>Spanish</i> | <i>n.e.c.</i> | <i>Total</i>  |
| Alabama        | 36                      | 0              | 46                        | 82            | 24                      | 44             | 14            | 82            |
| Alaska         | 10                      | 33             | 62                        | 105           | 37                      | 38             | 170           | 245           |
| Arizona        | 152                     | 199            | 749                       | 1,100         | 53                      | 298            | 965           | 1,316         |
| Arkansas       | 34                      | 0              | 39                        | 73            | 20                      | 21             | 63            | 104           |
| California     | 3,619                   | 3,813          | 8,098                     | 15,530        | 3,387                   | 3,508          | 12,227        | 19,122        |
| Colorado       | 341                     | 168            | 446                       | 955           | 148                     | 110            | 679           | 937           |
| Connecticut    | 36                      | 64             | 120                       | 220           | 22                      | 64             | 233           | 319           |
| Delaware       | 18                      | 0              | 3                         | 21            | 0                       | 7              | 6             | 13            |
| D.C.           | 22                      | 12             | 29                        | 63            | 0                       | 16             | 21            | 37            |
| Florida        | 201                     | 315            | 343                       | 859           | 117                     | 334            | 738           | 1,189         |
| Georgia        | 87                      | 59             | 77                        | 223           | 11                      | 27             | 90            | 128           |
| Hawaii         | 10                      | 4              | 55                        | 69            | 19                      | 29             | 121           | 169           |
| Idaho          | 221                     | 600            | 3,511                     | 4,332         | 166                     | 353            | 5,068         | 5,587         |
| Illinois       | 422                     | 66             | 165                       | 654           | 49                      | 75             | 321           | 445           |
| Indiana        | 94                      | 48             | 18                        | 160           | 55                      | 0              | 135           | 190           |
| Iowa           | 260                     | 24             | 40                        | 324           | 20                      | 8              | 31            | 59            |
| Kansas         | 92                      | 18             | 50                        | 160           | 10                      | 26             | 36            | 70            |
| Kentucky       | 81                      | 15             | 36                        | 132           | 11                      | 15             | 68            | 94            |
| Louisiana      | 133                     | 57             | 65                        | 255           | 73                      | 38             | 115           | 226           |
| Maine          | 22                      | 0              | 28                        | 50            | 2                       | 21             | 13            | 36            |
| Maryland       | 51                      | 48             | 148                       | 247           | 60                      | 45             | 163           | 268           |
| Massachusetts  | 34                      | 80             | 187                       | 301           | 37                      | 73             | 227           | 337           |
| Michigan       | 145                     | 28             | 158                       | 331           | 7                       | 47             | 182           | 236           |
| Minnesota      | 110                     | 8              | 102                       | 220           | 24                      | 15             | 91            | 130           |
| Mississippi    | 7                       | 2              | 20                        | 29            | 4                       | 0              | 24            | 28            |
| Missouri       | 164                     | 18             | 61                        | 243           | 27                      | 10             | 114           | 151           |
| Montana        | 116                     | 6              | 268                       | 390           | 66                      | 46             | 357           | 469           |
| Nebraska       | 2,707                   | 6              | 41                        | 2,754         | 0                       | 0              | 45            | 45            |
| Nevada         | 371                     | 915            | 2,092                     | 3,378         | 472                     | 776            | 3,592         | 4,840         |
| New Hampshire  | 3                       | 0              | 29                        | 32            | 0                       | 0              | 53            | 53            |
| New Jersey     | 98                      | 134            | 265                       | 497           | 72                      | 143            | 319           | 534           |
| New Mexico     | 87                      | 83             | 291                       | 461           | 63                      | 61             | 378           | 502           |
| New York       | 202                     | 508            | 716                       | 1,426         | 131                     | 242            | 927           | 1,300         |
| North Carolina | 57                      | 48             | 31                        | 136           | 16                      | 6              | 97            | 119           |
| North Dakota   | 25                      | 0              | 0                         | 25            | 0                       | 0              | 11            | 11            |
| Ohio           | 207                     | 31             | 85                        | 323           | 33                      | 15             | 155           | 203           |
| Oklahoma       | 21                      | 5              | 84                        | 110           | 0                       | 23             | 82            | 105           |
| Oregon         | 369                     | 224            | 1,660                     | 2,253         | 172                     | 298            | 1,787         | 2,257         |
| Pennsylvania   | 138                     | 14             | 68                        | 220           | 23                      | 13             | 214           | 250           |
| Rhode Island   | 5                       | 44             | 40                        | 89            | 0                       | 0              | 24            | 24            |
| South Carolina | 25                      | 31             | 14                        | 70            | 4                       | 14             | 30            | 48            |
| South Dakota   | 50                      | 7              | 5                         | 62            | 0                       | 8              | 22            | 30            |
| Tennessee      | 34                      | 4              | 16                        | 54            | 2                       | 14             | 75            | 91            |
| Texas          | 159                     | 170            | 558                       | 887           | 98                      | 238            | 912           | 1,248         |
| Utah           | 129                     | 134            | 610                       | 873           | 148                     | 261            | 1,013         | 1,422         |
| Vermont        | 0                       | 0              | 28                        | 28            | 0                       | 0              | 2             | 2             |
| Virginia       | 168                     | 72             | 112                       | 352           | 19                      | 59             | 325           | 403           |
| Washington     | 124                     | 306            | 704                       | 1,134         | 145                     | 154            | 1,471         | 1,770         |
| West Virginia  | 78                      | 5              | 23                        | 106           | 0                       | 0              | 9             | 9             |
| Wisconsin      | 189                     | 5              | 49                        | 243           | 8                       | 8              | 85            | 101           |
| Wyoming        | 155                     | 103            | 241                       | 499           | 146                     | 21             | 435           | 602           |
| <b>Total</b>   | <b>11,919</b>           | <b>8,534</b>   | <b>22,686</b>             | <b>43,140</b> | <b>6,001</b>            | <b>7,622</b>   | <b>34,335</b> | <b>47,956</b> |

# Basque Population of the United States 1990



Map 3.2

other distinctions based on details such as cultural styles, mannerisms, and language dialects. For example, the French-Basques regard Spanish-Basques as being extroverted and haughty, and Spanish-Basques believe French-Basques are explosive and severe. On the other hand, those persons who identify themselves to be Basques tend to focus on common details in the ethnic group, for instance *Euskera* rather than a specific French or Spanish dialect. This tripartite distinction, traditionally, has been apparent in the settlement patterns of Basques in the western United States. Generally, Spanish-Basques from Navarra and French-Basques from Basse-Navarre have colonized California, western Nevada, Arizona, Montana, and Wyoming. Spanish-Basques from Vizcaya have settled in Idaho, Oregon, and northern Nevada (Douglass and Bilbao, 1975). Thus, Basques in the United States scarcely have been aware of each other's existence until recently.

The criteria defining membership in the American Basque community is as much a state of mind as a genealogical fact due to the high rates of intermarriage (Thernstrom *et al.*, 1980). Since the majority of Basque immigrants to the United States have been single males, many Basques have been marrying partners from other ethnic groups, in particular Catholic ethnic groups such as Italians or Irish (Douglass, 1992). Marriage involves more than just the two marriage partners, but also includes the members of both families which has made marriage an indicator of cultural assimilation. Ancestry often is perceived as the criterion for membership within an ethnic group. Individuals, then, with a mixed ancestry belong to at least two ethnic groups which tends to reduce the strength of their affiliation to any one group (Stevens, 1985).

Despite the high rates of intermarriage, the American Basque community commonly maintains contact with the extended family through means such as frequent visits with parents, siblings, and relatives. Furthermore, Basque children with a mixed ancestry are reared generally to identify with their Basque heritage (Decroos, 1980).

The Basque language *Euskera* is the most defining characteristic of the Basques as an ethnic group (Decroos, 1980). Ethnic language serves as a social divider that separates those who speak or understand the ethnic language from those who do neither. Language retention in American society, then, has become an indicator of cultural assimilation since ethnic language tends to reinforce the ethnic boundary that separates an ethnic group from other groups (Stevens, 1985). Furthermore, ethnic languages serve as major repositories of cultural knowledge since the cultures of ethnic groups are deeply embedded within their languages (Alba, 1990). Knowledge about an ethnic language in American society often is strongest in the first generation of the ethnic group. The second generation ordinarily has the ability to speak and understand both the ethnic language and English, but the third and later generations commonly have little knowledge of the ethnic language beyond a few key words and phrases (Veltman, 1983). The American Basque community, similar to many other ethnic groups, has followed this pattern of generational knowledge as many second generation American Basques speak or at least understand *Euskera*, but few in the third generation are able to do either.

The development of Basque social clubs has been a relatively recent phenomenon among the Basques in the United States. A few Basque social clubs such as the Southern

California Eskualdun Club and Euzkaldunak, Inc. in Boise, Idaho, have been around since the late 1940s, but the majority of Basque social clubs have been founded since the First National Basque Festival in 1959. These social clubs typically emphasize association and recreation rather than education, unlike other ethnic social clubs which normally sponsor language classes, libraries, and publications. Basque social clubs, however, frequently are involved with the local community at large and make donations or hold special events for charity. According to Douglass and Bilbao (1975, 396), membership in these social clubs is reserved for "all persons of Basque extraction or part Basque extraction and spouses whether of Basque extraction or not." Participation with an ethnic social club has become a strong indicator of cultural assimilation since ethnic group members that favor American social clubs over ethnic social clubs are often disengaged from the ethnic group (Decroos, 1980). Although the second generation of American Basques has been working with the immigrant generation to form the social clubs, the third generation generally has not been involved actively in the leadership roles of these social clubs.

No other ethnic group in American society has become as closely identified with a single occupation as the Basques with sheep herding (Thernstrom *et al.*, 1980). Although the Basques have been stereotyped as sheep herders, the involvement of the Basques with the sheep industry has been based more on opportunity rather than preference. In general, most Basques have never viewed sheep herding with vocational zeal and have moved into other similar occupations at the first possible opportunity. As an example, Basques in Los Angeles have become known as the best milkers in the dairy industry (Eagle, 1979). This type of movement represents horizontal

occupational mobility, which Douglass and Bilbao (1975) define as the movement from one type of lower-skill job to another. On the other hand, vertical occupational mobility is the movement into professional jobs, for example a doctor or lawyer, that correlate with higher educational levels. Occupational mobility and higher educational levels are two key indicators of structural assimilation. Unlike the first generation, the second and particularly third generations of American Basques have had a greater opportunity to attend at least one year of college. As a result, more Basques have entered into occupations commensurate with their educational skills.

The extensive involvement of the Basques with rural occupations such as sheep herding has influenced greatly the spatial distribution of the Basques in the United States. Historically, Basque immigration *en masse* to the United States has been linked to sheep herding. Since most Basque immigrants have come to the United States via a chain migration process, Basques have migrated directly into the sheep districts of the American West instead of settling in American cities. In by-passing urban areas, Basque immigrants have avoided the cultural shock and alienation of being within a different society that other ethnic groups have encountered (Echeverria, 1983). Another factor influencing the spatial distribution of the Basques has been the transhumant sheep husbandry practiced by many Basque herders which has further contributed to the scattering of Basques throughout the American West. Yancey *et al.* (1976) has written that the channeling of an ethnic group into a specific occupation often results in an ethnic concentration, the involvement of the Basques with sheep herding and other rural occupations, in general, has prevented a concentration of Basques. As a result, the American Basque community

generally has not developed a wide range of ethnic institutions to form a distinct ethnic landscape within the American cultural landscape, but rather has relied on one ethnic institution -- the Basque hotel.

The network of Basque hotels across the United States, according to Douglass and Bilbao (1975), traditionally has been the oldest and most important ethnic institution of the American Basque community. A Basque hotel typically is a two-story structure consisting of small dormitories and private rooms on the top level and a dining room and bar on the lower level. Historically, these hotels have offered a number of services to Basque herders including boarding house, employment agency, recreational center, and hospital. Many Basque herders, for example, would use the hotels as places to relax, store their personal belongings, receive mail, find out about jobs in other areas, recover from injuries or illness, and socialize with other Basques. In addition, hotel owners have acted as the liaisons and interpreters when a herder has needed to sign a contract, ask for a loan, or see a doctor (Eagle, 1979). Although the primary focus of the hotels has been on the herders, the hotels have served the rest of the Basque community as well. For instance, the hotels have been places for elderly Basque bachelors to retire, for Basque women to stay during the late stages of pregnancy, and for Basque children to board throughout the school year (Echeverria, 1983). However, the role of the Basque hotel has changed significantly over the past several decades. Many Basque hotels have closed since the early 1960s as fewer Basques have immigrated to the western United States to become sheep herders and as later generations of American Basques have entered other occupations. Most of

the remaining hotels, Douglass (1992) writes, have become Basque-style restaurants which are popular among Basques and non-Basques alike.

- **Basques of Boise**

Basques first appeared *en masse* in southern Idaho during the late 1890s as herders from the Jordan Valley colony in Oregon ventured into the Treasure Valley<sup>4</sup> to graze their sheep. By the early twentieth century, the massive immigration of Basques to Boise made the Boise colony the major center of support for Basques in southern Idaho (Douglass and Bilbao, 1975). Similar to most Basque colonies in the western United States, many of the Basque immigrants who came to Boise became sheep herders. However, the Boise colony differed from the other Basque colonies in a number of ways. For example, most Basques who migrated to Boise were Spanish Vizcayan, instead of French Navarrese, Basques. A second difference was that a large number of the Basque immigrants found work in other occupations including construction workers on the nearby Arrowrock Dam as well as in the mining and logging industries just outside Boise. One of the greatest differences was the development of an ethnic landscape in downtown Boise.

During the early twentieth century, a Basque landscape formed in downtown Boise as numerous Basque boarding houses opened to serve the multitude of Basque immigrants coming to the Treasure Valley region (Douglass, 1992). The first Basque boarding house, the Star Rooming House, appeared in the 1903 Boise city directory. For the next seventy-five years, Basque boarding houses lined Grove, Idaho, Seventh, and Ninth streets to form “Basque town” (Echeverria, draft). During the peak years of the 1920s, there were twelve Basque boarding

houses in Boise's Basque town. Two of these boarding houses, Anduiza and Ysursa, even boasted *fronton* courts for *pelota*<sup>5</sup> games. Even though many operators only managed a particular boarding house for several years, most Basque boarding houses remained in business for a number of decades. The Basque landscape in downtown Boise, therefore, was one of the few Basque landscapes in the United States.

The Basques of Boise, in addition to developing one of the few Basque landscapes within the United States, were among the first Basque colonies to establish a social club in the United States. During the 1940s, a Boise Basque, Jay Uberuaga Aldrich, was teaching the traditional Basque dances to a small group of local Basques at various locations around Boise. After the first few lessons, several students decided to build a place of their own to learn these dances. This small group started going to local sheep herding outfits to recruit members and began having fundraisers including dances and boxed lunch auctions to raise money for the building. In 1948, this group (now called Euzkaldunak, Inc.) purchased the lot on the corner of Sixth and Grove streets from the Uberuaga boarding house and began construction on the building. Construction finished a year later and another structure, the Basque Center, became part of the Basque landscape (Jaialdi '95, 1995).

The traditional Basque landscape, however, began to change during the late 1960s when many of the Basque boarding houses started closing as fewer Basques emigrated to the United States. The era of Basque Town came to an end in 1978 when the last Basque boarding house, Uberuaga, closed. As a result, the traditional landscape of Basque town, except for the Basque

Center, fell into decay. The Basques of Boise, however, decided to reassert their territorial claim by converting the decaying landscape of a section of Basque town along the six-hundredth block of Grove Street into an extraordinary landscape. For example, the prominent Boise Basque, Adelia Garro Simplot, purchased the old Uberuaga boarding house in 1983 and formed the non-profit group, the Basque Museum & Cultural Center, to preserve this historic house. A few years later, this group bought and expanded into the two buildings next door. In 1989, the Boise Basque businessman, Dan Ansotegui, renovated the building on the corner of Capitol Boulevard and Grove Street and opened a Basque-style restaurant, Bar Gernika. Finally, two Boise Basques gained ownership over the last building on this block, the Briggs building, in 1992. Since the Briggs building was once the old Anduiza boarding house, the bottom level of this building was one of the two *fronton* courts from the Basque Town era (see Figures 3.1 - 3.5). In addition to acquiring ownership over the buildings, the Basques embellished the block with ethnic symbols. As an example, the Basques decorated the Basque Center with a traditional red tile roof and natural wood beams reminiscent of buildings in the homeland. Also, the Basques lined the street with flags and the red, green, and white colors of the homeland. Thus, the Basques asserted their claim over a section of their ethnic zone by transforming the landscape into an extraordinary landscape called the Basque block.



**Figure 3.1 - Bar Gernika**



**Figure 3.2 - Briggs Building**



**Figure 3.3 - Basque Museum and Cultural Center**



**Figure 3.4 - Cyrus Jacobs-Uberuaga Boarding House**



**Figure 3.5 - Basque Center**

- **Summary**

Basques historically have been one of the most distinct ethnic groups in the United States due primarily to their extensive involvement with the American sheep industry. No other ethnic group has become as closely identified with a single occupation specialization as the Basques with sheep herding (Thernstrom *et al.*, 1980). This extensive involvement of the Basques with the American sheep industry dates back to the mid-nineteenth century when many Basques, who initially came to the United States in search of gold, entered the California sheep industry as herders. Sheep herding historically has provided a number of advantages for the Basques. The predominant pattern of sheep husbandry among Basque herders, transhumance, and the chain migration network have allowed Basques quickly to net large gains in terms of sheep and money. This ability to earn money quickly has been the predominant factor pulling Basque males, who could not inherit the family farm in the homeland, to the United States. Although the era of the transhumant Basque herders has ended as legislative efforts placed constraints on the ability to practice transhumant sheep husbandry, this pattern of sheep husbandry has influenced greatly the development of the American Basque community. For example, the American Basque community in general has high rates of intermarriage and has not developed a wide range of ethnic institutions. As a result, the Boise colony of Basques is one of the few Basque colonies in the United States to develop an ethnic landscape.

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<sup>1</sup> *Fors* (French) and *fueros* (Spanish) were the traditional codes of the Basque provinces which foreign invaders such as the Visigoths, Franks, and Arabs traditionally negotiated and respected.

<sup>2</sup> According to Douglass (1985), the significant concentration of Basques in the eastern half of the United States reside primarily in the suburbs of the major cities. For example, Basques in New Jersey live around New York City, Basques in Virginia are close to Washington D.C., and Basques of Illinois are clustered around Chicago. The large number of Basques in Florida are part of a Basque colony near Miami, which is comprised mostly of *jai alai* players and Cuban refugees.

<sup>3</sup> The U.S. Census Bureau defines “n.e.c” as “not elsewhere classified”.

<sup>4</sup> The Treasure Valley is comprised of two counties, Ada and Owyhee, and the city of Boise.

<sup>5</sup> *Pelota* is a traditional Basque handball game played on a *fronton* court. There are many variations on the game, but the most widely known and popular in the United States is *jai alai*.