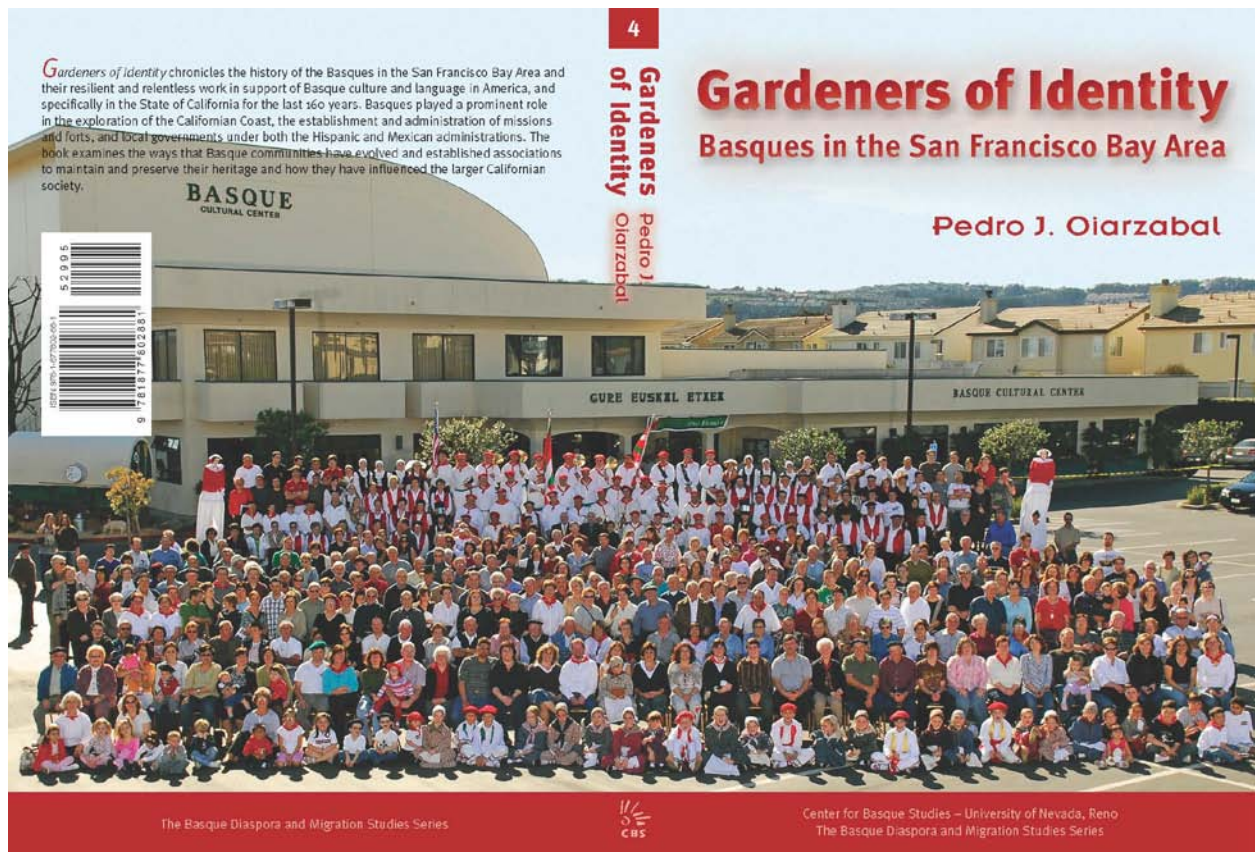


Proudly announces the publication of

***Gardeners of Identity:
Basques in the San Francisco Bay Area***
by Pedro J. Oiarzabal



For many out-of-town visitors, San Franciscans, and Basques throughout the American West the book will bring back fond memories of many of the Basque inns, restaurants, bars and cafés that for the most have vanished from today's city landscape. However, these fine establishments have not entirely disappeared from their memories and pages of history as illustrated in this book. For others, the book will open a colorful window into the history of some of the most singular and oldest inhabitants of San Francisco. It depicts the Bay Area Basque cultural, linguistic, and religious traditions in a superb manner.





Please enjoy this excerpt from

Gardeners of Identity:
Basques in the San Francisco Bay Area

by

Pedro J. Oiarzabal

ISBN 978-1-877802-88-1

\$29.95

Euskal Hiria:
of San

(03)

In the Streets Francisco

115

No history can fully account for human experience, nor can this one fully explain why the *ostatuak* [Basque boardinghouses] have been so dear to the *Amerikanuak* [Basque Americans]. Cherishing a thing of the past, feeling nostalgic for “times gone by;” and recalling those who have gone before us perhaps heightens our fondness for things that will not come again. Beyond the longing for the past also lies the truth of Basque-American history: generation after generation of Basques who have come to the hotels to discover themselves, relying upon an institution that has been embedded in their culture.

(Echeverria, Jeronima, *Home Away from Home: A History of Basque Boardinghouses*. Reno, Nevada: University of Nevada Press, 1999, 246.)

BOARDINGHOUSES — *OSTATUAK* — AND RESTAURANTS

Homes Away from Home and the *Hotelerak*

The centennial Fairmount Hotel on Nob Hill, now a historic landmark, was under construction when on April 18, 1906 an earthquake (magnitude 8.3 on the Richter scale) shook the city. The hotel not only survived the earthquake, but also escaped unharmed from the subsequent fires that devoured the city for four days. It finally

opened in 1907.²⁰¹ Such tremendously good luck was not shared by everyone in the city, and downtown was completely devastated. It is estimated that nearly half of the population of San Francisco was left homeless as approximately 23,000 buildings were destroyed, and over 3,000 people died. The first San Francisco “Basque Town” or *Euskal Hiria* was erased from the face of earth, and many early Basque private residences; boardinghouses, inns or *ostatuak*; restaurants, bars and other establishments perished. The 1906 earthquake was a turning point for San Francisco and its diverse communities, including the Basques. Many residents moved to adjacent towns such as Oakland or San José, or to the neighboring state of Nevada.

In response to the increasing and continuous flow of Basque immigrants into the country, boardinghouses and hotels were privately established by Basques for a clientele composed exclusively of their countrymen beginning in the 1860s wherever Basques were found in substantial numbers and needed a place to stay. For example, the Winnemucca Hotel (Winnemucca, Nevada) was built in 1863, one year before Nevada became a State. In California one of the earliest recorded precursors of a Basque hotel was Julian Ursua’s Plaza Hotel, which was established in the 1850s in San Juan Bautista.²⁰² However, those Basque hotels were not unique to the U.S. Similar types of hotels were also found in Argentina, where Basques had migrated to the tens of thousands.²⁰³

116

Douglass and Bilbao and Echeverria considered the Basque hotel the oldest and most important ethnic and social institution of the Basques of the American West.²⁰⁴ The *ostatuak* constituted a network of businesses spread throughout the open-range sheep districts’ main towns, all of which had a railroad station from which sheep would be transported. In fact, most of the hotels were in close proximity to the train station. That is, there was a parallel development of hotels in areas of Basque settlement, which in turn reflected the development of both the sheep industry and the railway system. Basque-American boardinghouses reached their zenith between the 1890s and the 1930s.

201 Just to have an idea of the scale of The Great 1906 Earthquake, the October 17, 1989 earthquake had a magnitude of 7.1. The Fairmount Hotel was popularized in the Basque homeland and around the world by the 1980s ABC television series, “Hotel,” under the fictitious name “St. Gregory Hotel.” Currently, it serves as the United States President’s official residence during his visits to the city. See Sandoval-Strausz A. K., *Hotel: An American History* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2007).

202 Jeronima Echeverria, “California-ko Ostatuak: A History of California’s Basque Hotels” (PhD Dissertation, North Texas State University 1988), ———, *Home Away from Home: A History of Basque Boardinghouses* (Reno, Nevada: University of Nevada Press, 1999), ———, “The Basque Hotelera: Implications for Broader Study,” in *The Basque Diaspora/La Diáspora Vasca*, ed. William A. Douglass, et al. (Reno, Nevada: University of Nevada Press, 1999), ———, “Expansion and Eclipse of the Basque Boardinghouse in the American West,” *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly* 43, no. 2 (2000).

203 See Marcelino Iriani Zalakain, “*Hacer América.*” *Los Vascos en la Pampa Húmeda, Argentina (1840–1920)* (Vitoria-Gasteiz: Servicio Editorial de la Universidad del País Vasco, 2000).

204 William A. Douglass and Jon Bilbao, *Amerikanuak: Basques in the New World* (Reno, Nevada: University of Nevada Press, 1975), 370, Jeronima Echeverria, “California-ko Ostatuak: A History of California’s Basque Hotels” (PhD Dissertation, North Texas State University 1988), 2.

Basque boarders, all from Ortaize, at the Pyrenees Hotel (1959-1962).

Standing (from left to right): Jean Acheritogaray, Louis Marticorena, Andre Arduain, Raymond Trounday, Marie Idiart, Michel Duhalde and Michel Marticorena. Sitting (from left to right): Michel Arduain and Albert Dutaret. Photograph courtesy of San Francisco Urazandi Collection.



The hotels functioned as “home[s] away from home” or surrogate home/families as well as cultural brokers to ease the transition from the Old World to the New World for recently arrived Basque immigrants—the majority in their teens and early twenties who knew very little English. Basque hotel operators became interpreters, bankers, lawyers, and doctors for newly arrived immigrants.²⁰⁵ Within the context of this “home away from home” Grinberg and Grinberg described the immigrants’ quest for family and new friends in the following terms: “Friendships were kept up in the desire to reconstruct a family of brothers and sisters in the new country. People sought out other co-nationals to share with them all the things they have known and lost; with them, one could build a bridge to the future. Finding friends is related to the unconscious fantasy of being born again and needing to depend on the support (“holding”) of new surroundings and new “parents” who receive the subject and accept him.”²⁰⁶

Thus, the role of the Basque hotel keeper, usually female, regains new meaning in the eyes of many young immigrants, who have become separated from their

205 Jeronima Echeverria, *Home Away from Home: A History of Basque Boardinghouses* (Reno, Nevada: University of Nevada Press, 1999).

206 Leon Grinberg and Rebecca Grinberg, *Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Migration and Exile* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 200–01.

parents for first time. The *hotelerak* or female hotel managers and/or owners (i.e., the *etxeko andre*, the lady of the house or housewife) are regarded by many former boarders as their surrogate mothers, their “American mothers.” Somehow, the social status that these Basque women achieved through their involvement in private businesses and in their Basque-American communities counterbalances the protagonism of the shepherd in Basque America.

These hotels also provided work for young single Basque women who soon married Basque men. Consequently, there was a constant demand for female helpers as serving girls and housekeepers. Mari Jeanne Urrutia, born in Aldude, came to the U.S. in 1959. After a short stay in Stockton, she moved to San Francisco where she worked at Hotel de España for two and a half years. She also lived at the hotel until she married Jean Pierre Pagadoy, who had been in the country since 1955. She stopped working at the hotel when she was expecting her first daughter, Bernadette, in 1961. Mari Jeanne had replaced Elena Elizalde who had also worked at Hotel de España until she left to get married.²⁰⁷ Despite the *hoteleras*’ prominent role in the boardinghouses throughout the American West and within their respective Basque communities, many Basque women living in isolated rural areas remained at home. These women often found it extremely difficult to function in society because they lacked language and driving skills, as well as knowledge of banking or health systems.²⁰⁸

118

Former San Francisco *hotelerak*—Marthe Bigue, Begoña Bilbao, Marie Elu, and Yvonne Vizcay—recalled the important fact that, in addition to running a business (and making it profitable) in a highly competitive area such as Broadway where there were many diverse Basque inns, they also raised their own children, their own families, and did everything at once.²⁰⁹ “Family always came first,” they said. They remembered that in their boardinghouses (Hotel de España, Hotel du Midi, and Basque Hotel) there was a wonderful atmosphere in which they always felt like a big family particularly with longtime boarders, always willing to help each other.²¹⁰ Marie (Esnarro) Elu, born in 1923 in Westwood, California—her father was from Abadiño, Bizkaia and her mother from Mutriku, Gipuzkoa—elaborated on their attitudes about helping one another:

Do you remember when people used to come [and said] they were on their way home to Europe? [. . .] “Well, we have our tickets, and we’re leaving tomorrow on such and such a flight.” And I’d say, “Yes. But do you have a tax clearance?” “A what? I

207 Marie Jeanne Pagadoy, interview by Marie Laxague Rosecrans, San Francisco, California, January 6, 2007.

208 Jeronima Echeverria, “The Basque Hoteleras: Implications for Broader Study,” in *The Basque Diaspora/La Diáspora Vasca*, ed. William A. Douglass, et al. (Reno, Nevada: University of Nevada Press, 1999).

209 Begoña Bilbao et al., focus group interview on *Boardinghouses-Hotelerak*, facilitated by Valerie Arrechea and Marisa Espinal, South San Francisco, California, March 11, 2007.

210 At one point José Mari Echamendi and Marthe Bigue owned Hotel du Midi, and they leased it to Begoña Bilbao. Later on, Bigue bought a building where she established the Basque Hotel. Yvonne Vizcay worked as a cook at the du Midi for Echamendi for a year, while Marie Elu owned Hotel de España. Later on Bigue sold Hotel du Midi to Marie. (Yvonne was born in Uruguay from Basque parents. Her mother was a founder of the Centro Euskaro Español, one of the Basque clubs in Montevideo). See below for further information about those inns.

don't know what that is." "Well, before you leave the country you must have what they call a tax clearance." "Oh, well my boss never told me that." "OK, so then you have to start from scratch, call the boss, and then they have to give you all these details about who paid how much tax and what." And sometimes these fellas that were supposed to go tomorrow morning were there a whole week because the boss had to get all this paperwork and send it down to San Francisco, and then we had to process it and take it down here on McAllister Street. One time the guy [who dealt with the paperwork at the tax office]—a great big tall Jewish man—asked me, "How much do you get paid for this?" And I said, "I don't get paid anything. These people have been working in a sheep camp, and they've been saving every penny that they have just to go back home for a visit." Boy, he never asked me anymore. I mean, they think that you're going to charge all of these people? How? They were making a paltry sum, saving every penny they could just so that they could go back to see their families. (Begoña Bilbao, Martha Bigue, Marie Elu, and Yvonne Vizcay, focus group interview on *Boardinghouses-Hotelerak*, facilitated by Valerie Arrechea and Marisa Espinal, South San Francisco, California, March 11, 2007).



Pierre and Marthe Bigue, c. 2008. Photograph courtesy of San Francisco Urazandi Collection.



Begoña Bilbao at her home in Belmont, California, 2008.

Photograph courtesy of San Francisco Urazandi Collection.

“But the fact is by helping one [boarder] you helped the other boarder who saw you helping somebody [else],” Marthe Bigue added. Marthe Daniel Bigue was born in Dordogne region, France, and began working at the Centro Vasco Hotel in Chino, California. After a year or so she moved to San Francisco.²¹¹

However, not all the hotelerek held only fond memories about their years in the hospitality industry. For example, Begoña (Laita) Bilbao commented, “I still dream about the du Midi, I dream about it all the time. I was in the kitchen day and night [. . .] I’ve never lived happy in the du Midi, never [. . .] I was like invisible, I thought that I was invisible. I really did. I never had a day off, and I lived frustrated. When I used to go out and get a haircut [for example] was the only time I saw the sun for three or four months at a time.” Begoña used to do everything but shopping, which was her husband’s job. Her great helper was Marie Elu’s mother, *amama* Tomasa. “Amama, she was [like] my mother. She used to help me a lot. She was so clean, so neat, so perfect,” Begoña emphasized.²¹²

211 Bilbao et al., facilitated by Valerie Arrechea and Marisa Espinal, South San Francisco, California, March 11, 2007.

212 Bilbao et al., facilitated by Valerie Arrechea and Marisa Espinal, South San Francisco, California, March 11, 2007.



Yvonne Vizcay, 2008.
Photograph courtesy of
San Francisco Urazandi
Collection.

Johnny Etchevers, son of Juanita and John Etchevers, former operators of the Cosmopolitan Hotel and the Hotel de France, recalled the deep affective impact of the hotelera—“The Women of Broadway Street” as he called them—during his childhood growing up in North Beach:

They were some tough, strong women. I mean Katixa [Bordalampe], Madam Sorhondo— Amelie—Marie Elu . . . Those were tough women that were running businesses and were raising kids and families and dealing with everybody’s problems, and they all did it. They were really remarkable women in my eyes. They’re a part of history that many of us can still remember. It’s kind of sad that generations from now won’t experience that [. . .] Growing up I never saw weak women. I always saw very strong women, and so when people are talking about women being downtrodden and all that, that was kind of foreign to me because the women I saw that I grew up with and that were disciplining me were always very tough, strong women [. . .] Marie Elu and my mother they were both Vizcaínas [Bizkaians], and we [. . .] used to hang around Hotel de España upstairs for a multitude of reasons. And we always used to get in trouble, but the rule was Marie Elu could discipline me like she was my mother [. . .] like I was her kid. That would be unheard of today that somebody else’s mother has the ability, without calling the other mother, to just simply spank some kid. But it was great. (Johnny Etchevers, interview by Nicole Sorhondo, San Francisco, California, May 5, 2007).

To order

**Visit our Web site:
<http://basque.unr.edu>**

**Or contact Daniel Montero
Publications Coordinator
(775) 682-5587
dmontero@unr.edu**