

## INTRODUCTION

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### *OROITZAPEN DEN GERORA: BEYOND MEMORY*

In 1957 Robert Laxalt, a first generation Basque-American, authored *Sweet Promised Land*, which became a highly acclaimed literary work in the American West, as it portrayed, through Basque lenses, a paradigmatic tale of the life of an immigrant in the United States. Within the context of claiming Basque heritage throughout America, in June of 1959, the first-ever Basque regional festival in the United States took place in Sparks, Nevada, attracting thousands of Basques from all over the American West. At the time, it was the single largest public demonstration of Basque identity and culture that Nevada had witnessed.

Seven years later, a Basque club, named Zazpiak Bat (“Seven are One”—seven provinces as one province) was established in Reno, in an effort to unite all Basques from the seven different administrative Basque regions within Spain and France, and to promote and maintain Basque traditions. The institutionalization of the Basque presence in Reno opened a new chapter in the long, and sometimes not so visible, relationship between the Basques and other Nevadans.

Meanwhile, the Desert Research Institute (DRI), established by the Nevada legislature in 1959 as a research division of the University of Nevada, began, in the early 1960s, to discuss the possibility of establishing a Basque studies program that would focus on the Basques of the Great Basin. At roughly the same

time, Robert Laxalt was founding the University of Nevada Press, which would soon have a Basque Book Series. He had been instrumental in raising awareness about Basque culture through his involvement in organizing the Sparks festival, and he was an influential early advocate for the Basque Studies Program (BSP), which would become today's Center for Basque Studies.

William A. Douglass, a social anthropologist from Reno, was hired by DRI in June of 1967 to be the first coordinator of the Basque Studies Program, a function that he carried out for thirty-two years with the help and support of individuals and institutions ranging from the local to the international. In 1968, Basque bibliographer Jon Bilbao joined the program. Among them, Laxalt, Douglass, and Bilbao built the program's foundation.

Under General Francisco Franco's dictatorial regime (1939-1975), Basque culture was brutally repressed, and the language was forbidden. During that time, Basque emigrant diaspora communities, scattered throughout the Americas, not only financially supported the Basque government-in-exile and its different political and cultural initiatives, but they took on the task of maintaining the culture, the language, and artistic and folkloric expressions that were banned in the Basque provinces of Spain. As a result of the outcome of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) the majority of the Spanish and Basque intelligentsia fled into exile and found shelter in America. Basque publishing houses, such as Ekin, and studies programs, such as the American Institute of Basque Studies, established in Buenos Aires in the 1940s and 1950s respectively, mushroomed during this period.

The Basque Studies Program in Reno was not only highly influenced by prominent Basque-Americans, such as Laxalt, and by academics, such as Douglass and Joseba Zulaika (the program's second director), but also by Basque political exiles, such as Bilbao and Basque scholar Eloy Placer. Bilbao and Placer understood that political commitment to the Basque cause and advocacy for the culture and language were inseparable. In varying degrees, this view was shared by others, including Yon Oñatibia, instructor in the Basque Studies Program Summer Sessions Abroad, and first Basque Studies PhD graduates, Gorka Aulestia and Joxe Mallea-Olaetxe.

Both Bilbao and Placer were former Basque Army officers who fought against Franco's rebel army in the early stages of the

war. In 1945, Bilbao was made a Knight of the Order of the Belgian Crown for his services during World War II in favor of the liberation of Belgium. When Placer was buried in 1974 in Lafayette, Louisiana, it was with military honors, and his coffin was draped with the *Ikurriña* or Basque flag. This gives us an idea of the human quality and stature of some of the early contributors to the program.

The year 2007 marks the fortieth anniversary of Basque Studies at the University of Nevada, Reno (UNR), a true accomplishment for everyone who has been directly or indirectly involved with the program. It also marks the fiftieth anniversary of the first edition of *Sweet Promised Land* and the twenty-fifth anniversary of the University Studies Abroad Consortium (USAC), another remarkable institution within UNR, whose origins can be traced to the first summer studies abroad programs that were organized by Basque Studies during the 1970s. USAC, a consortium of thirty-three U.S. universities, is currently one of the largest programs of its kind in the country, with a presence in twenty-five countries. Carmelo Urza has directed USAC since its creation, and Sandra Ott was the first field director in Europe. Without much doubt one can say that 2007 is the year of the Basques at UNR.

The life of Basque Studies is linked to over a third of UNR's history. For the last forty years, Basque Studies has grown alongside UNR, reflecting changes that have taken place on campus and in Nevada society overall. In the words of Jill Berner and Linda White, it has transformed itself from "a tiny, little operation in a closet" to a "supernova." White worked at Basque Studies for twenty-five years and was for a decade its assistant coordinator, while Berner managed the daily operations of the program for much of the last three decades. Kate Camino has been the office manager for the last nine years.

The Center for Basque Studies has become the leading national and international research and educational institute of Basque culture outside the Basque Country. Its library, holding over 45,000 titles, is the main informational reference for the English-speaking world, thanks to the efforts of librarians, such as Marcelino Ugalde. It is also one of the central educational and cultural referents within the globe-spanning Basque diaspora. Basque Studies has published a biannual newsletter since 1968 and over thirty books in the last few years, while the University

of Nevada Press Basque Book Series has published a total of fifty-five books since 1969.

As William Douglass stated on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of Basque Studies, "The BSP is nothing more than the sum total of the efforts of many persons too numerous to name individually... many scholars, students and laymen in both the Old and New Worlds [and] thousands of people who have provided their moral and financial support."<sup>1</sup> In this regard *A Candle in the Night: Basque Studies at the University of Nevada, 1967-2007* chronicles the history of those faculty, staff, student workers, visiting students and scholars, and volunteers who have contributed to the development of the longest-lived academic program dedicated to the study of the Basques in the history of the United States. Combined, their stories are a narrative not only of the history of Basque Studies, but also of its offspring: the Basque Studies Library, the Basque Book Series, and the University Studies Abroad Consortium.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> William A. Douglass. "The Basque Studies Program (1982-1987)." *Basque Studies Program Newsletter*, Issue 36, 1987.