

HARNEY COUNTY HISTORY PROJECT

AV-Oral History #100 - Side A

Subject: Santos Arguinchona

Place: Burns, Oregon

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Interviewer: Royal G. Jackson

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ROYAL G. JACKSON: First of all, give me your full name. Santos is your first name.

SANTOS ARGUINCHONA: Santos Arguinchona.

ROYAL: When did you first come to the United States?

SANTOS: In 1918.

ROYAL: What province did you come from in Spain?

SANTOS: Vizcaya.

ROYAL: That's where most of the people ---

SANTOS: People around the Winnemucca area, McDermitt, around this way, most of them came from Vizcaya. Of course looks like when the first people came to the United States, they brought relatives and friends. That's the way it looks to me.

ROYAL: They'd write a letter back and say what a good job they have?

SANTOS: And like in Nevada, the Navarros and the French Basques started that way because that's where the first ones came, looks to me like. I think that they used to have big book made with Basco's pictures and Basco stories and stuff.

ROYAL: Really? All the Basques from around here?

SANTOS: Yeah, years ago they made the book probably around when I came, or right after that. Great big book. Lots of Bascos had that. Great big pictures, story, and what kind of business they were in, and their families. When women's were wearing those long skirts. They were in the pictures too.

ROYAL: So you came here in 1918. How old were you then?

SANTOS: 18 years old. I was 18 in April, and came here in June, right in the wartime.

ROYAL: So you were born in 1900 then?

SANTOS: 1900 I was born.

ROYAL: Where did you first come? Did you come to New York?

SANTOS: First we landed in New York, and then in train we came to Winnemucca. Even then some fellows had little cars, you know, those Model-T's, and they drove us from Winnemucca to McDermitt. I came to McDermitt to the Basco family. They owned the big ranch, the Lucky 7 Ranch in McDermitt, Nevada. Between my father and him was all the arrangements made. So I just came like coming to home. I came to the Lucky 7 Ranch.

ROYAL: To work with the sheep?

SANTOS: They got a lot of sheep and cattle too, and I started

working at the ranch first. But then I told myself to one of the guys, "I gotta try that life in the mountains for a month." "Oh yes, I going to take you pretty quick." So they, they take me to the mountains maybe couple or 3 months after I came to this country.

ROYAL: Up to the mountains with the sheep?

SANTOS: Yeah. They put me herding sheep. It was a good company so they put me first with another old shepherd.

ROYAL: Was he Basque?

SANTOS: He was a Basque too. The owner was a Basque too. They put me with him too, so he can teach how to cook for myself. Bake the bread and cook the stuff. So that's the way I started. So I got a good start. I was luckier then some of the guys. After about 15 days, or something like that, they put me alone with the sheep. I was able to cook easy for myself, bread and everything.

ROYAL: So that was in 1918 when you started herding. And how long did you stay there with that band of sheep?

SANTOS: Well with that outfit I stayed there 3 years and a half. And when they sold the land, see we used to trail the lambs. There was no trucks, nothing like that, so we trailed the lambs from McDermitt to Winnemucca, another Basco and myself. He take the camp and the wagon with a team of horses. So when we went to Winnemucca, the other guy didn't have no ... to take over the land for me, see. I was supposed to go back to McDermitt to work for the same guy, but I didn't. We stayed with a new outfit.

Wintertime, sometimes we feed them hay, and sometimes stayed out in the desert. So the first 5 years and 1 month, I work steady with the sheep.

ROYAL: Were you married?

SANTOS: No. It's too late now I guess.

ROYAL: You never did marry?

SANTOS: No, never. After that, I started what they called tending camps. Camp tender moves the camp around and cook for the herders, and help the herders, see. Lots of times you have to help the herders. So I put in 34 years in tending camps.

ROYAL: Thirty-four years taking supplies?

SANTOS: Moving camp, moving camp and things like that.

ROYAL: Was that mostly in Nevada?

SANTOS: No, I put quite a lot of time in Nevada, and then I work for one outfit for 20 years over here. They call it Lasarica and Gray. Lasarica was one man, and the other one was Pedro Garrai. Everybody calls him Pete Gray. They were two partners and they were kind of young. Pete he died very young. But anyway, I started working for Lasarica in 1928, and I work for him until 1948. I was out for a couple of years one time, and then I went back for him again. In 1948 he sold out, and went to Spain.

ROYAL: Was this Lasarica and Gray in Harney County?

SANTOS: Yeah, we herd sheep in the Steens Mountains and around there. They run sheep there all the time, in Harney County land.

ROYAL: That was before the Taylor Grazing Act when they could

move the sheep anywhere?

SANTOS: Yes, before and after. See in 1929, '30, the depression started, 1929 or '30, and lasted until 1936 or something like that. When I started working for them, they got 7,000 head of sheep clear, no debts on them. And things started going down and down. The bad years were dry years, drought too. So the banker, they call him Winfield in Winnemucca, he went broke. Their father went broke first, that was the banker. Then they had a hell of a time. So the outfit I was working for, and lot of the others went broke around 1934, '35. So the fellows I work with, they went broke too. They delivered all their sheep in Crane here. You know where Crane is? That was 1935. And then Brown was the banker here then. So then his son, Al Brown, that's still living here, sold to them 2,500 sheep back again. In that November, they went back on to the sheep business again.

ROYAL: Lasarica and Gray bought sheep again?

SANTOS: Again, in November, old Brown, the baker was here. He made credit to them. He sold the band of sheep to them.

ROYAL: Were you still working for them again now?

SANTOS: Now? No, I retire when I was 62. So they started back again in the sheep business. So Pete Gray, he died, in 1946, and left Lasarica along with the sheep. So between 1935 to 1948, he paid all the shepherders that he owed then, you know, the ones that were broke? So he paid all that, and he made more than \$100,000 in 13 years.

ROYAL: He did pretty well?

SANTOS: Yes, pretty well.

ROYAL: How was life as a shepherd? What did you do? Did you like it?

SANTOS: I did. I like it, the mountain life, because if you do, you do your job good and nobody boss you. Nobody fool you around.

ROYAL: You stayed on the mountain how long at a time before you saw somebody?

SANTOS: Not very long before you see somebody. Summertime the company had two bands in this part of the country. Other parts of the country like Idaho, two men go with the band. But here, wintertime, two men go with the band, camp tender and herder.

ROYAL: How many sheep in one band?

SANTOS: Oh, depends from 1,800 to 2,400, something like that.

ROYAL: One man could take care of that many sheep?

SANTOS: Yeah, one herder and camp tender. Depends on what kind of range they had. If the range was small. The bosses, they were old shepherders themselves, so they know the sheep business good. So they put the smaller band according to the range. If the range was kind of bad, and if it was good, they put a bigger band. But a shepherd had easily taken care of 2,000 or 2,200 or something like that.

ROYAL: Did you have a horse or a dog?

SANTOS: The herder?

ROYAL: Yeah.

SANTOS: Used to be when I came to this country, around McDermitt and them places, the young herders didn't have no horses. Later on the camp tenders had horses, but the older herders had some later. When they used horses, some of them didn't like it. The camp tenders had the horses, brought the supplies in with the horses. They also move the campground. Around this part of the country, they had the tent and all the things they need around here. The camp tender takes care of that. He brings in the supply, if he was a long way from the town. When I started, we went to town to get supplies for the herders. But if you was a little too far, we just went to the town and stayed that night, next day back. I like that life. Lot of people don't like it. You have to be natural born like any other job to be the shepherd and camp tender, and the guy living in the mountains. Some like it, some don't like it. Guys that don't like it, no use they be shepherders.

ROYAL: What did you do when you came to town?

SANTOS: Well we were young fellas and have a little time.

ROYAL: Drink a little, and have a little fun?

SANTOS: No, I mean in the wintertime, we came for two months, three months. We stay in the hotel.

ROYAL: What hotel did you stay in usually?

SANTOS: Well here the Star Hotel. That was the first Basque Hotel here, and she runs that one till 1948, I think.

ROYAL: So when did the Star Hotel become a Basque Hotel?

SANTOS: It started in 1926. There was another one too. And then at that time, there was more than two, but this first one started in '26.

ROYAL: Who operated the hotel in 1926?

SANTOS: Cecilia Urizar, and her husband Felix Urizar.

ROYAL: Started the Star Hotel in 1926. They bought it from Chino Berdugo?

SANTOS: Yeah, and then they kind of remodeled the house. It was a rooming house or something like that.

ROYAL: What year did they remodel it, do you remember?

SANTOS: Before the Star Hotel was a hotel? They remodeled a little bit.

ROYAL: What did Chino Berdugo use it for? Was it a hotel when he had it?

SANTOS: No, no. I think he had it ... that part Cecilia knows better than I do ... he was using it for a rooming house or something like that. It was just a little hotel for the shepherders. They had six, seven rooms upstairs, and another couple downstairs, and stuff like that.

ROYAL: Do you have any idea when the hotel was built?

SANTOS: No, that must have been built a long time ago. But I'm pretty sure they built this little kitchen they got on this end. To find the truth, she knows it the best.

ROYAL: Were there any other Basque hotels?

SANTOS: After that they built another one here. Now an American

fella has it.

ROYAL: Commercial Hotel?

SANTOS: Yes, Commercial Hotel. And then they had another one, but I don't remember what year. And then they got another one there where Avel Diaz got that dry cleaning shop now. The dry cleaners that they have now. And one started building in 1929, Plaza had sign in front.

ROYAL: So you would come to town then, and stay a few months sometime?

SANTOS: Yeah, sometimes two months or maybe longer, and then go out to the sheep camp and work again. When we came to town, we talk to the boss before we came. He put somebody else in your place, and we came to town, and then you would have your job back in springtime for lambing.

ROYAL: Did you bring the sheep in for lambing, or where did that happen?

SANTOS: No, that is another thing, but the sheep business is ... In this part of the country we lamb all the time on the range. Some other places, they lambing what they call lambing sheds, inside. All that work is done on the inside, in the corrals. Altogether different.

ROYAL: So you worked as a camp tender until what year?

SANTOS: 1962, I retired in November.

ROYAL: And you quit working as a sheep man?

SANTOS: I quit altogether in 1962. I retired.

ROYAL: What did you do then?

SANTOS: After I retired, I did nothing. I stayed at Cecilia's ranch, and in the mornings I go fool around and herd some sheep, and in the afternoon I go to town. Time goes easy.

ROYAL: So you live at Cecilia Urizar's Ranch. Now why did you go there when you retired?

SANTOS: It was this way. When they owned this hotel, I stay with them all the time, see. In 1948, when my boss sold the sheep, we came to the same hotel. But there was a fella that bought the hotel from Cecilia Urizar, and she still owned the cabins on the other side. We came here and Tom Zabala and his wife told us that we could have rooms here, but I can't cook. His wife went away from him. So my suitcase was at the ranch. They told me that they had a lot of room there. So I stayed with Cecilia Urizar. They had rooms. They said, "Do you want to come here?" I worked from 1948 to 1962. But then I just went over there and helped them with the cows and sheep. They got a little bunch of sheep.

ROYAL: Was it 1948 when Tom Zabala quit serving meals then, when his wife left?

SANTOS: No. And then they started again serving the meals.

ROYAL: But they stopped in 1948 for a while?

SANTOS: They stopped for a while, but then they started again serving again.

ROYAL: So did other Basques, like yourself, leave in 1948 because there weren't meals served?

SANTOS: Well some of them went to the other hotels and stayed there for a while. He stopped serving meals because he can't cook. I didn't like the idea going out and eat, so that's when I went to the ranch. Just to fool around there.

ROYAL: So you've lived at the Urizar Ranch since 1962?

SANTOS: Yeah, since '62. I went to Argentina because I've got some family there. I went to Argentina again in 1973. I got two brothers there, both married.

ROYAL: Both in Argentina?

SANTOS: Argentina. I stayed there about three months, but I'm used to here. I can't find a place I can spend time like here. We spent time playing Basco card games and things like that. I went to Argentina. I went there in November and came back in March.

ROYAL: You didn't like it there?

SANTOS: Well in part it's a nice country, but they got different ways.

ROYAL: Are there a lot of Basques where your brothers live?

SANTOS: Lot of Spanish people, Basques and Castilians and all kinds. Lot of Italians, and mostly Spanish people. They have a lot of cattle. My brother keep telling me they got a lot of cattle on the ranches. Stay here if you want to stay. If you stay here, it won't cost you anything. Board and room here. I was thinking about Burns. When I told people about this, they think I'm crazy. When I came from Bend to Burns in the bus, I

feel kinda happy as soon as I got by Hines. If I tell that to a lotta people they think I'm crazy.

ROYAL: Are you happy to be back home?

SANTOS: Sure.

ROYAL: What year did you go to Argentina?

SANTOS: '73, November.

ROYAL: Did your brothers leave Spain about the time you did?

SANTOS: No, no. They served in the Army, and they went over there in 1932, I think. One is seven years younger than I am, and the other is ten years younger than I am. They were in the Army, and they went over there in 1932. And all the time I thought that only the United States had the depression. When they told me the same thing was over there. It was worse than here.

ROYAL: What did you think when you arrived in this country, and you didn't speak any English, did you?

SANTOS: Well when I arrived in this country, what I was thinking when we was going from Winnemucca to McDermitt, I was thinking at the dinner time there was a good old lady was there this side of Paradise Hill. Run a little station there. Had a little groceries --- freight teams they call them --- ten, twelve horses. So we stopped there. We went in the car but stopped there for lunch. The little lady put everything out of reach. I couldn't ask her what I wanted. She watch me pretty close. I couldn't take what I wanted. So we got that same day to McDermitt, and pretty quick I wrote a letter to my mother. And I told my mother

in the letter, Mama I don't think I can learn the language. You know how they sound? Like chicken around the fence. Chick, chick, chick, chick, chick, they sound.

ROYAL: That's how English sounded to you?

SANTOS: Yeah. The words are so close together, just like chicken. Chick, chick, chick.

ROYAL: Did you ever go back to Spain?

SANTOS: Yeah. And then my sister wrote to me again and told me not to write like that any more to my mother, because she was crying, and she thought I came to hell over here. But I liked it right from the start in this country. There was a lot of sheep in McDermitt. You can't think what kind of roads they had from McDermitt to Winnemucca. And we haul all this wool from McDermitt to Winnemucca in what they call this freight teams with the horses. Ten, twelve horses and wagon. Model-T Fords had to use the same road the wagons went. You can figure out what kind of road there's going to be when you had three wagons full of wool and maybe 10, 12, 14 head of horses pulling the wagons. Right on that road we came from McDermitt to Winnemucca. I still remember the Model-T Fords having the wooden frame inside, and kind of like a canvas on the outside to cover, and coming on the road, none of us that was coming with me from Spain. It was kind of cold too. One hole the car made a big jump, and hit the wooden frame with a noise and skinned my nose. These young people nowadays that don't have those kind of car with the wooden frame that held the canvas

up. I told this joke in other parts of the country. Since I came to this country the great difference there is. Where I was staying on the ranch, two Indian women would come once a week to do the washing clothes, cause they didn't have no washing machines. From McDermitt to here (Burns) it was only dirt road. From Frenchglen nothing but dirt road. Just livestock country.

ROYAL: Did you ever go the Basque festivals, the parties they used to have where they would dance?

SANTOS: Oh yeah.

ROYAL: Where did you go to those?

SANTOS: Once in awhile. They had one here in Burns. They had one this year.

ROYAL: Did you go to the one that they had a month ago?

SANTOS: Yeah, I went there.

ROYAL: Are those like they used to be, or are they the same?

SANTOS: Well not so many people, but yeah. Same kind of a deal. First it used to be Basques right here in the town. They used to rent a place where the Bennett Hotel is now, and had a dinner and a big dance after that.

ROYAL: A lot of people came?

SANTOS: Oh yeah, quite a lot of people. In the Pine Room the same way.

ROYAL: Do they still have those?

SANTOS: No, not like that.

ROYAL: Why is that?

SANTOS: Well this young people they live different. The Bascos are born in this country. They don't go to them very much. The biggest one around here now is at Elko, Nevada. There were a lot of people there. It is easier for a lot of people to go there to the festival because there are lots of little towns around.

ROYAL: How do the young Basque differ from what they used to be?

SANTOS: They are raised right here differently. In our times, they didn't have any cars.

ROYAL: Life is easier for them you think?

SANTOS: Well life is easier I think, because they like this sawmill. When did it open up? 1929 or '30? There was only the ranches and the livestock.

ROYAL: And gradually the Basques started working at the mill?

SANTOS: Yes, quite a lot of them are here now working at the mill. But it used to be different here and McDermitt. People happier.

ROYAL: The Basques would get together on Sundays?

SANTOS: Yes, in McDermitt.

ROYAL: Do they ever do that in Burns?

SANTOS: Now?

ROYAL: Yeah.

SANTOS: Well a little bit, but not like before. Joaquin Miller Park party wasn't very big, but they got the picture. There was a guy taking pictures. They got a lot of pictures in the newspaper. Sheep business is run different in different parts of the country.

ROYAL: Are there very many sheep left in Harney County now?

SANTOS: No, there is no sheep left in Harney County. I don't think there's any left except little bunches in the ranches, quite a few.

ROYAL: No big bands of 1,000 or 2,000?

SANTOS: No big bands. No more range sheep. The last one was Don Miller.

ROYAL: What was the name of his outfit?

SANTOS: Before Don Miller bought it; he was a cowman.

ROYAL: Where did he run his sheep? On the Steens?

SANTOS: No, back here in the summertime, in the Ochoco Forest. The rest about 10 miles from here.

ROYAL: What was the year of the last big band?

SANTOS: Last spring, Don Miller sold out.

ROYAL: Last spring, and that was the end of it?

SANTOS: That was the end of the range sheep here in Harney County.

ROYAL: Did he have some Basques working for him?

SANTOS: Yeah. Basque and Spanish that come over here are called contracted shearers. Contractor shearers come over here for three years. After that they are free to go and do other work if they have resident card. He had Spanish people working for him. They would come from California Ranch Association. A sheep man would get a couple of herders from this Association, and he was forced to stay with the sheep for three years. Don Miller had

two guys even from Peru.

ROYAL: They weren't Basque?

SANTOS: No, no. They were Peruvians. They speak very good Spanish. I been talking with them.

ROYAL: What do you see in the future? Are there more Basques in Harney County, or fewer?

SANTOS: Well right here in Burns, you can see yourself ten years from now, a lot of Basques mixing with the Americans by marriage. They going to the same schools and raising together.

ROYAL: They are becoming like Americans?

SANTOS: Yes, just like Americans, so they are bound to be mixed by marriages.

ROYAL: Are they losing the language? Can most of the young people speak Basque?

SANTOS: No, these young people in Burns speak pretty good Basque. In a lot of parts in the United States, they kind of losing the language, but not here.

ROYAL: Do you think it's good that the Basque kids are going to school with the Americans, and being just like them?

SANTOS: Sure, it is good. There is no difference. That's why for them, this country is different for them than it was for us, because they are raised right here and they don't know any other, and they mix with the Americans. Just like they were all Americans. Just like the family running this Star Hotel, they got three boys and one girl.

ROYAL: This is the Zabala family? Do the Zabala children speak Basque?

SANTOS: They speak good Basque.

ROYAL: Spanish too?

SANTOS: This ones, I don't think ... oh yeah, one of them does. One of them was born in Spain, George Zabala, the oldest one. Then he went to the community college in Ontario. He speaks three languages.

ROYAL: Are all the Basques together, united here in Burns, do they get along good?

SANTOS: Oh yeah, they got along good.

ROYAL: No problems among them?

SANTOS: No, like them kids at the Plaza, if they have to they speak Spanish good enough to understand. It's good for the kids to speak Spanish.

ROYAL: What do you see for the Basques in the future? Are they going to gradually mix with the Americans and lose their identity?

SANTOS: Sure. I don't know about losing their identity, but they sure are going to mix. Of course any other part of the country is the same thing. I got a nephew in California that came from Spain. His wife is a Basque too, but was born in this county. There's really not any difference. One came from Spain, and one came from the United States. The one that was born in the United States speaks pretty good Basque. They are living in Woodland, California, where there's not many Basques. They have two kids,

but they don't know many Basque cultures and the language. The mother says, "Even if we do speak to them in Basque, they go out and play and speak English."

ROYAL: You think it is good that the children speak Basque?

SANTOS: Well that is all right to learn the folks' language, but to travel in the world, Spanish is better than Basque. I didn't forget. I still can speak the Basque language, 'cause that's what I learned from my father and mother.

ROYAL: Thank you, Mr. Arguinchona.

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