

HARNEY COUNTY HISTORY PROJECT

AV-Oral History #107 - Side A

Subject: Marguerite Stephen

Place: Denio, Nevada

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Interviewers: Royal G. Jackson & Jennifer A. Lee

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ROYAL G. JACKSON: Okay, Mrs. Stephen, your name is Marguerite Stephen, and your Basque name was Dufurrena? Could you tell me a little bit about your father, and when he came to this country, and why he came, and what you remember as a child? What was his name?

MARGUERITE STEPHEN: Tom was his name, and he came in --- it must have been around 1908, and bought in partners with Scott.

ROYAL: Where did he come from? From what Province?

MARGUERITE: I can't really think of it on the top of my head. Most of them came from the same provinces.

ROYAL: Navarra?

MARGUERITE: Yes, I think it could have been that.

ROYAL: Vizcaya is one that a lot of them come from in Harney County.

MARGUERITE: It may have been. It was one of the two, I really don't know. It was one of the first two you mentioned.

ROYAL: Did you say he went to Mexico first?

MARGUERITE: Yes, he landed, he snuck on the ship, stowed away on the ship, and landed in Mexico, and worked his way up into California herding sheep.

ROYAL: He came into this country illegally then?

MARGUERITE: Well, yes. After being in California for a while, some way he worked his way up here, and then he and my mother were married and they built the house Bill Moser lives in. And they had sheep and ran out of there. Then in 1918, I think it was, they sold here and he bought what is now the Sheldon Refuge and moved up there. And then in 1937, he sold that to the government and moved to Kings River. And he had up there cattle and horses, but there was also four Basques there who had most of the range leased and they ran sheep.

ROYAL: Where did he meet your mother, was she Basque as well?

MARGUERITE: No, well he met her here, I guess, in Denio. And they were married and lived, well, from about 1910 to about 1918 and they moved here in 1918.

ROYAL: Did he continue herding sheep then for how long?

MARGUERITE: Well after he bought in with Scott, he didn't herd anymore, but they had herders and sheep tenders hired.

ROYAL: Scott was the person who had a lot of sheep already?

MARGUERITE: I don't know what he had, although they went in together, and I think they ran around 40,000 head of sheep out of here.

ROYAL: 40,000 head in the Denio area?

MARGUERITE: Yes, but there was no BLM or anything then, either.

ROYAL: Approximately what year would that have been when they had the most sheep?

MARGUERITE: I would say 1909 and '10.

ROYAL: Did he continue his sheep then until he died, or ---

MARGUERITE: No, after we sold up here, the people that had the range leased for their sheep, they broke up. And he just had cattle then, cattle and horses.

ROYAL: Did he hire mostly Basques when he had sheep?

MARGUERITE: Uh, yes.

ROYAL: Do you remember any stories or much about that when you were a little girl?

MARGUERITE: No, I really don't. When I was growing up, he didn't have any sheep himself; he just had cattle and horses. But the range, he had part of it leased to sheep men. And I think those men who had the place leased had around 20,000.

ROYAL: Did any of the Basque men have wives, or were they always by themselves?

MARGUERITE: Oh, they married after they came here, but the herders were always single.

ROYAL: Did most of them stay three years; didn't they usually have to have a contract?

MARGUERITE: No, no, not at that time.

ROYAL: Did someone sponsor them to come over here?

MARGUERITE: No.

ROYAL: So they weren't in debt to anyone, they could leave anytime they wanted to?

MARGUERITE: Oh, yes.

ROYAL: It was a very lonely life, wasn't it? They stayed up in the hills.

MARGUERITE: Ah, well I guess it was, but I guess it wasn't really to them because they didn't know any different. Now it would be entirely different, but at that time they didn't think anything of it.

ROYAL: Are there many Basques around here now?

MARGUERITE: Oh yeah, lots of Basques.

ROYAL: In this general area?

MARGUERITE: Oh right in here? Well, quite a few, yeah.

ROYAL: Murra is half Basque and he owns the Diamond Bar. And are you the only other one in Denio as far as you know?

MARGUERITE: Well Howard has a sister over here at this ranch over here, and at the maintenance station down here, there is another. Albiso is his name, he and his wife are Basque, they live there. Oh yeah, they are all over.

ROYAL: Are there any Basque holidays or celebrations in this

general area? Do they get together?

MARGUERITE: Oh yes, in Winnemucca they have and Elko, and Boise. And Winnemucca is very, very active, as far as the Basques are ... oh lots of Basques live there.

ROYAL: What kinds of things do they do?

MARGUERITE: Oh they have their dances in Elko; they have wood chopping contest and strength contests.

ROYAL: La Jota?

MARGUERITE: Oh yeah, all kinds of fast dances. I have never been to one but they really have quite a celebration. I don't know what time of year it is. They just finished having one in Winnemucca. The paper is full of pictures of them. They have a lot of youngsters coming up who are learning the Basque dance. A lot of these are in danger of being lost. And there is a few women in Winnemucca who have really worked to teach these youngsters the dances. And finding players, accordion players especially is getting very difficult.

ROYAL: Accordions are the traditional instruments played at these celebrations?

MARGUERITE: Right. And finding young people to carry on with their type of music is a little hard.

ROYAL: And yet there is a tremendous amount of interest in Nevada in that sort of thing, compared to other places, isn't there?

MARGUERITE: Yes, I would say there is. Oh, Boise is quite active. But Nevada has so many Basques.

ROYAL: Did your father, while you were growing up, did he make any effort to teach you Basque? I mean, was he concerned that you should grow up a Basque, or did he care?

MARGUERITE: No, he didn't care.

ROYAL: You didn't care if you learned or not?

MARGUERITE: No.

ROYAL: Did you learn some Basque?

MARGUERITE: Oh yeah, but I've forgotten it. Living, when I was real young, living all around them I knew what they were saying. I knew quite a bit of it, but I really forgot it.

ROYAL: Do you identify yourself at all as a Basque? Is that important? If I were to ask you, "Who are you," would being a Basque be a very important part of a description of yourself?

MARGUERITE: I don't know. I never thought of it. I don't know.

ROYAL: You don't have a chance now to interact much with the Basques, so you are not very aware of it then?

MARGUERITE: Oh yeah, I am around them all the time. I mean, but I never think about it.

ROYAL: You don't think of yourself as being any different as far as that goes?

MARGUERITE: No.

ROYAL: Do you have children?

MARGUERITE: We have one son.

ROYAL: Does he speak any Basque?

MARGUERITE: No.

ROYAL: Is he at all interested in it?

MARGUERITE: I don't know. I never asked him. I really don't know. I still say if you grow up with something, you don't pay any attention to it, you know.

ROYAL: You sort of take it for granted.

MARGUERITE: Yeah.

ROYAL: Did you grow up knowing any of the Basque dances?

MARGUERITE: Oh yeah, I guess. I wouldn't know them now.

ROYAL: You used to go to parties and you did dance?

MARGUERITE: Oh yeah. The house we had was a great big, big house and the main dining room was cleared out at Christmas and New Years, and people came from miles and miles. Somebody was always there playing the accordion or something.

ROYAL: Did you eat special kinds of Basque foods then?

MARGUERITE: Oh, a lot of it was. Yeah.

ROYAL: What would have been the kind of food you ate that would have been considered as Basque food?

MARGUERITE: Well codfish was fixed a certain way. I don't know, we had sourdough bread that really isn't though.

ROYAL: What about garbanzo beans?

MARGUERITE: Oh yes, we always had those.

ROYAL: Codfish, garbanzo beans. Anything else that you remember as being traditional?

MARGUERITE: Ah, blood sausage, and tripe. I don't know really.

JENNIFER LEE: Do you know how to dance the La Jota?

MARGUERITE: No, I forgot. I did a little.

JENNIFER: Have you ever been to Spain?

MARGUERITE: No.

ROYAL: Did you have any interest in going?

MARGUERITE: No, I don't think so.

JENNIFER: You don't have relatives over there in the old country?

MARGUERITE: Oh yeah, the place is full of them.

JENNIFER: You don't keep in contact with them at all.

MARGUERITE: No. In fact, I think --- my dad's home is still in Spain. It is still occupied by Dufurrenas as far as I know.

ROYAL: None of them have come over and contacted you?

MARGUERITE: Ah, there was a niece was over and I saw her once, I think, when she was here. I guess everybody just kinda goes their own way.

ROYAL: There isn't that much Basque community right here in Denio, so you really don't associate with the Basques in that way anymore? Or do you see them coming out of the mountains. Do they get together in Denio for any reason at all?

MARGUERITE: No, everybody gets together and there will be Basques among them, but not just the Basques.

ROYAL: I understand that the Irishmen were very active in herding.

MARGUERITE: Oh yeah, a lot of them.

ROYAL: I never understand that. Why did they do a lot of herding?

MARGUERITE: I don't know.

ROYAL: Is that a traditional thing they did in Ireland?

MARGUERITE: Well I don't know. I never thought of that. There were just a lot of them. Lakeview still has a lot of them. But if you are doing a study on the Irish, that is where you should go.

ROYAL: What about the Scotch? I heard they made good herders too.

MARGUERITE: Well really, the Scotch, I understand from what I read in history were the very first shepherders to come to America. And I don't know why the Irish. Maybe they liked it, I don't know. I know the Basques all had sheep in the old country.

ROYAL: Was it a known occupation in Spain? Most of them that we talked to came from rural backgrounds; they grew up on farms.

MARGUERITE: Yes, I think so, yes.

ROYAL: Your father had grown up on a farm in Spain?

MARGUERITE: Yes, uh huh.

ROYAL: When did he die?

MARGUERITE: In 1939.

ROYAL: And your mother?

MARGUERITE: 1963 or 1962.

ROYAL: So what year were you born?

MARGUERITE: 1920.

ROYAL: Did you have any other brothers or sisters?

MARGUERITE: Yes, I have one brother four years older, and one

brother eight years older.

ROYAL: Did they continue at all the Basque tradition, or were they interested?

MARGUERITE: No, about like I am.

ROYAL: Are they in this area?

MARGUERITE: Oh is, he lives at Orevada which is between McDermitt and Winnemucca. Little tiny place, about like this. But then my older brother, I don't know where he is. Somewhere in California.

ROYAL: Did they marry Basques?

MARGUERITE: Yes, the brother in Orevada did.

ROYAL: Is he active at all in Basque culture? Does he speak Basque?

MARGUERITE: No, I don't think so. He understands it but doesn't speak it.

ROYAL: Does he have children?

MARGUERITE: Yeah, they have three daughters.

ROYAL: To your knowledge are they at all interested in their Basque heritage?

MARGUERITE: I don't know, they never said. I don't think so.

ROYAL: It's not something that comes up very often?

MARGUERITE: No.

ROYAL: Okay, thanks a lot.

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