

HARNEY COUNTY BASQUES
Oral History Project

JOE ZABALA
September 24, 1976
Burns, Oregon

Interviewers:
Royal G. Jackson
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[001] {R} Okay, Joe, your name is Joe Zabala. How do you spell your last name?

Zabala.

{R} Okay, and you're how old?

Thirty.

{R} Thirty. You've lived in Harney County all your life?

Well, except for, I went to college for four years.

{R} Um-hm, where was that?

Two years at TVC Ontario and two years at the U of O.

{R} Uh-huh, and studying what?

Business administration.

{R} I see. Your parents then would be, you're first generation, you're second generation, your parents were born in Spain right?

Right.

{R} But when did they come over here, do you know?

Uh, we came over in fifty-seven. I was ten years old when I came over.

{R} What were your parents doing in Spain prior to nineteen-fifty-seven?

Well, my mom was helping out on a farm. Like her sister, her sister-in-law, owned a farm and she was pretty ill, and so she was helping out the brother-in-law and the family on the farm. And the dad, her father was here herding sheep.

[010] {R} Oh, I see. How long have they been married?

Well, thirty-one.

{R} They got married in thirty-one.

I guess, maybe they had to get married, I don't know. No, thirty-one I'm...
(speaks in Basque to woman in background)

(woman replies in Basque)

Yeah, thirty-one.

{R} Nineteen thirty-one?

Well, they were (indiscernible)

{R} Your dad was herding sheep on the Steens or where?

No, I think he started out in Wyoming, then moved to Idaho, then he finally ended up in Harney County. And then from there he got into the mill, the federal mines. They had a plant down there in Seneca and he started working Seneca for them, worked there for three or four years and then eventually moved to Burns.

[020] {R} Uh-huh, do you know roughly what year that was that he came to Burns?

Oh, fifty-five, fifty-six.

{R} Oh, uh-huh, did he take over this, was this called Star Hotel when he took it?

Yeah.

{R} And he bought it from Cecelia Risor?

No, uh, my Uncle, Tom. His name is Tom. He lives in Winamucca, he's the one that had that before us, and we, my folks bought it off of him.

{R} So this has kind of been the Basque Hotel in town in recent years hasn't it?

Yeah, uh-huh.

{R} Uh, I understand that Chino Burdugo owned it first, and he sold it to Cecelia Risor in nineteen twenty-six? Does that sound right?

Yeah.

{R} And the Basques as early as nineteen twenty-six were coming here to this hotel.

Um-hmm.

{R} And it was a rooming house. Do I got my facts straight on that?

Um-hmm.

[030] {R} Now, do you have any recollection? How old were you, how old were you when it was used as a hotel?

Well, I was ten.

{R} So you can remember the Basque shepherders coming in and staying here?

Yeah.

{R} Or were there regular renters?

No, we started out with, uh, we'd have shepherders coming in and staying with us, and then we had two or three regulars that were kind of old, you know, retired. And they were there with us and, well, we have five rooms upstairs, and a lot of times there were, people would, they'd come from sheep camp and they'd be doubled up. You know, because they didn't want to go to another hotel or whatever.

{R} Is this the only hotel where they went?

Well, there was, uh, the Plaza Hotel, but this was like, kind of like the Basque center I guess you'd call it.

[040] {R} What kinds of things do you remember about the shepherders coming here? Did they come to town and really have a good time after being out on the range all that time, or what do you remember as a kid?

Well, I remember a lot of parties, I mean, they were out to have a good time, you know?

{R} The Basques know how to enjoy themselves, don't they?

Yeah, really.

{R} They like to drink wine and like to play cards.

Well, we used to have a real long table here, and well they, every night, on weekdays, it was always full of wine and whisky and beer, whatever, you know it was just one big party. Of course, they only did this, maybe you know, two or three weeks out of the year.

{R} Yeah, so it was really a big time when they came to town. When did you stop having quarters here at the Star, or, when did it stop being called the Star Hotel?

Well, we quit calling it the Star Hotel (speaks to woman in background) what, three years ago?

(woman in background) Yeah.

Yeah three years ago.

{R} And it became just a private dwelling?

Yeah. We still have a lot of people, I mean that, uh, they stayed with us. I mean a lot of them quit the sheep camp. See the Basques come over here and come on a contract. You know the quarter system is smaller than England or other nations in Europe, you know and the only way they can come over here is by contract. They go to a sheep camp for two years. And after that you have to go back. Then they come back for another two years and the second time around the boss, the sheep man, he can say, 'Well, he's done a good work' or you know, and he tells the immigration service, you know and it makes them a permanent resident. And the last few years, well the last maybe eight or nine, that's all we had mostly is guys that came out, came out of the sheep camp and went to work out here at the mill.

{R} Now, gradually, the sheep have all left Harney County haven't they.

Yeah.

[060] {R} What reason is that, do you know?

Well, I don't, I think what the deal is that, the younger, younger people over there don't want to come over here any more to herd sheep.

{R} Maybe the economic conditions are better there?

Well, I don't think so. I don't think they are, but it's just that, I don't know, it's just like here, the younger generation is changing too, you know and it's, this umm, he's a friend of the family and he was over there last year, over in Spain.

{R} Corbett?

No, no his name is Bicente Bidaburu, he works with my dad. And he was telling us that, uh, they went to a bar you know? And they recognized them that they were Americans, you know Basque Americans, and they were banned, banned like sheep, you know, making fun of them. So I got, I kind of got the impression that, you know they're, they kind of look down on that job.

{R} They look down on sheep herding now.

Yeah.

{R} Whereas in the old day that's what they all did, huh?

Well, it was a living, I mean, in the earlier days I imagine, like you said economics, you know, were a little bit different, it was hard to make a living then.

{R} Did you learn Basque at home? Do your parents speak Basque with each other?

Yeah.

{R} Then where did you learn Spanish?

Well, I started going to school there when I was four years old, his uh, Aunt, was a teacher, and she lived, we lived in her, they had an apartment house you know? And a bar downstairs and a kind of like a restaurant.

[080] {R} And where is this you're talking about? Here in Burns?

No. It's Munitvar, in Spain, and I started, she started teaching me Spanish, and then I started going to school there when I was six, and I already knew Spanish by then. And school there, that's all you can learn, uh, you can speak is Spanish, that's all they teach you. See Basque is kind of like an outlawed language in a way.

{R} Oh, is that right? They wouldn't let people at your school speak Basque?

No, huh-uh.

{R} What year would that have been?

Well, that was fifty, fifty-one.

{R} Nineteen fifty. Franco didn't allow it. He really really repressed the Basques didn't he?

Yeah. Well it got so bad eventually that in the last few years that you couldn't just take your child to baptism, you know, Catholic. You know the Basques are strong Catholics, and for that matter so is Spain, but you'd take a child to get it baptized and it was getting so bad that you know, you couldn't hardly put a Basque name on a child.

{R} Is that right?

And then, well when my dad came over, he came over in fifty-five I think it was, or fifty-six, and he sent me to a private school. And it was run by Jesuit Priests.

{R} Where was that now?

Puerto Vallette, it's about fifteen miles from (indiscernible) we stayed there a year.

{R} So that's where you learned your Spanish and you learned your Basque at home, and you heard it as a kid. All your friends have been Basques? When you were growing up here in Burns did you have any sensation of being different from other kids?

Oh, yeah, I think it's, well, kind of built in because ten years of it you know, I was a Basque from a different ethnic group I guess you'd call it, and then at home we all spoke Basque, there was no English spoken at all. And it was kind of hard to make a transition. I mean, you know three languages, and now I think in English, but it used to be that I used to think in Basque and interpret it over into English. Took me about six or seven years to do it.

[100] {R} To make the conversion. I would think that you would be kind of mixed up, you know you're operating three cultures too, because the Basque culture wouldn't you say is different from American culture, or is it? What do you see there?

Well, I think a Basque is a, I think they look at certain things, like well a guy goes to work and he's there to work, you know and he's a hard worker. And he gets that money and he knows that he worked for it so he's a little bit tighter with it. You know, he doesn't throw it away and he kind of saves it and I think families are a little bit closer together, you know close ties.

{R} Uh-huh, when you were growing up as a kid were most of your friends Basque, or were they mixed?

No, there weren't any Basques my age here and I was just running around with the Americans.

{R} Um-hm, but you didn't feel any sense of discrimination against you?

No. Never have.

{R} There's no bad name for Basques like there is for all the other ethnic groups?

Well, there is one it's a Black Basque. That's worse.

{R} What does that imply?

Well, it just implies that some Bascos are darker complexioned than others.

{R} Is that important among the Basques?

Not really.

[120] {R} If you call someone a Black Basque is it a bad thing to do?

Well, it used to be, I never got that name called but uh, but I heard about this that Gilbert, he got into a fight at school, when he was going to school someone called him a Black Basque and they got into a fight over it and he got kicked out of school. Well, his mom went back to the school and explained what had happened and they let him back into the school and the other kid stayed out. I don't know, it's not a bad insult really.

{R} The Basques in your opinion have always been pretty well respected in Burns and Harney County?

I don't think so, the Basques is pretty well respected from what I've seen of them. I mean at work, like we go to a break room and take breaks together and everything and I've always seen Americans treat everybody right.

{R} Tell me about that now, in Heinz are there quite a few Basques working there now?

Well, in the plywood I imagine there are probably over twenty, twenty-five and that's quite a quantity for around here.

{R} Oh. Do they do anything particular, any particular kind of job? Do they end up in plywood instead of something else?

No, they get different jobs I mean, in the plywood and well they're scattered all over around the mill, you know. And most of them get jobs and after so many years you've got your seniority built up, we go by the seniority system, they've been on jobs and do different jobs.

[140] {R} But you said that during the breaks they usually all go off together and,

No, they all go together, the Americans and the Basques all go together.

{R} Mixed.

They're mixed, yeah.

{R} You guys speak Basques when you're at work?

Yeah, yeah.

{R} Does that cause any hard feelings among the other workers that say I wonder if that guy is talking about me or something?

No. Everybody gets along pretty good out there.

{R} What's the influences of the family as far as dating or all that? Is there any pressure for you to go out with Basque women, or, are you married?

No, huh-uh.

{R} Have you been married?

No.

{R} Is there any pressure for you to go out with Basque girls?

Not really, there can't be too much pressure anyway, there aren't any Basque girls around here.

{R} There aren't any your age around?

No.

{R} Are there any much younger? Say, a thirteen, fourteen year old?

Well, yeah there's a few around fourteen or fifteen, I think there's three or four.
Well, my sister is the oldest one.

{R} How old is she?

Eighteen.

{R} She's the athlete. The high jumper.

Yeah, number one.

{R} Is she?

Yeah, pretty good.

{R} She competed against Joni Huntly.

Yeah, she got second that one year, sophomore year. She took state champion her junior year and she was ill quite a while her senior year and she didn't do too good.

[160] {R} Do you see any tendency for Basques to be more athletic than other people? It seems like there's a stress on that kind of thing. And I know that traditional games they have involve strength and does that carry over into your life?

Yeah, well I think Basques are more athletically inclined you know it's just physical fitness. They emphasize strength and that's a major point.

{R} Is that important in the Basque culture, to be strong?

I think it is.

{R} One of the things that I've noticed about all the men that I've interviewed is that they all seem to be very physically developed.

Well that's one of the main points. Like you said, lifting rocks and everything we have these contests and rope pulling, carrying weights. And that's as far as the Basco goes, you know, it's mostly strength.

{R} If you had a choice, would it be important for you to marry a Basque woman?

Not really.

{R} You're not concerned about perpetuating the Basque culture or anything?

Hm-mm.

{R} How about if you had children. Would you care whether they spoke Basque or not?

Well, I would like to have them speak Basque, but it really wouldn't matter that much to me.

{R} You don't really care if they carry that on.

Well, I'd kind of like to see it go on, but I think it's kind of a lost cause. Well I can see it, I've got two brothers and I've got a sister and they're losing now.

[180] {R} Do you talk with them in English or in Basque?

English.

{R} So already the next generation is dropping Basque as a regular means of communication and going to English.

Mm-hm.

{R} Does that bother you at all?

Well, no not really it doesn't. Maybe it should, but.

{R} Have you gone to any of these festivals they have like in Boise or in Elco?

Well I've never been to one in Elco. I went to one in, there was a dance in Ontario. I been there two years I went there and then Boise, I went to the dance there two years. But I've never been to one of the festivals.

{R} Did you ever learn all those traditional dances like the Lahota and some of the,

Well I knew the Hota when I came over here.

{R} Is that the same as most traditional dance or are there others that are, that's the one I hear most about is the Hota.

Yeah the Hota's the most and then there's one (speaking to someone in Basque) Oh, it's called the dance of the swords and it's uh, you play the flute and the drum. That's a traditional Basque music.

[200] {R} You know here in Burns you probably don't have people that know the traditional dances as much as other places or,

Well, we do but it's fallen apart among the Basques. We used to have a festival here a few years back and then it was kind of dropping out among the people.

{R} How long ago was that?

I don't know (speaking to someone in Basque) Nine years ago.

{R} What kind of a gathering was that?

Well everybody got together and had a good time and it was like a picnic. It was just like a big family going out and having a picnic and they had the contests with the weights and everybody was invited. I don't know, I kind of hated to see that end, but

{R} Why did it end?

Well, there was, it had to do with something political.

{R} Is this the situation where they used the money to pay some issue in Spain on some political refugees and some people didn't like it?

Yeah.

[220] {R} You think that's the event that split the Basque community? That single thing more than anything else?

Mm-hm. I think it's the main thing really. And I don't know how you heard the story but what happened was, this money was sitting there in the bank and they made this through the festival. I don't know it was four hundred and some dollars. Well, my dad was wondering he decided it would be a good deal to help these, they were political prisoners that supposedly belonged to the ETA.

{R} What was the ETA?

The ETA stands for life, liberty and the Basque way. It's a seperatist group. Anyway, they decided, we'll take that money and send the money to the families. 'Cause they know that from their own life that these families would be kind of hurting for money, you know, going through all their lawyer fees and stuff and anyway they decided to do it and they asked (someone speaking to him in Basque) it was twenty some, twenty six I think said yes and it was a majority. I think there was forty something in the group, in this, we called it a society, the Basque society. And they took the money out and sent it and it went through (indiscernible name) Secretary of the State of Idaho. And these guys took him to court over it and what happened it just ended and the money stayed there, but (indiscernible name) said well I'll pay for the, give you back the money. That was the end of it and I think that kind of did the works on us.

[240] {R} And that caused everybody to take sides.

Yeah, I think it split us up mostly that's, there were other low things you know, a lot of little quirks I mean just like you get in a hassle with somebody and just an argument and it kind of split them apart, but this is the thing that did it completely.

{R} The Basques argue among themselves a lot?

Oh, yeah. That's one of the past times.

{R} Well it seems to me being in a place like this where there aren't so many of them it would be a very close well knit group, but it seems to be kind of divided. They seem to argue among themselves so much and I don't really understand that. Several people mentioned that they are jealous of one another and I don't really understand that. Can you tell me any about that?

Well, there's, I see it. I mean there is jealousy among us, and one of the main things is, I think it's got to do with monetary value. One guy's got more money than the other and that creates problems. You know, one guy's jealous of the other and one guy says something about the other guy and it just builds up.

{R} That goes on a lot does it?

Oh, yeah. Most times until they die. If the Basques become enemies it's usually for life. That's what I've seen.

[260] {R} They don't change their minds, huh?

Huh-uh.

{R} Do you think the division is that deep here in Burns that people will not reconcile?

Well, I don't know. The thing is that the people who got into the hassle were the older generation. I mean there's quite a few of us in my age group, say between twenty-eight to thirty-six, there's probably about fifteen of us, and the older generation there's probably about maybe double, but half of it is on one faction and the younger generation kind of wants to stay out of the hassle. You know, let them settle it.

{R} They're still friendly.

Yeah, we all get along together in the younger generation. It's just up there in the older group.

{R} Does this society still exist, this Basque Society?

Well, there a group that has a party and I don't know if they have a dance anymore. I don't think they had one this year, it's just like have a supper, a feast you know and that's it.

[280] {R} What do you see for the future of the Basques in Harney County? Are they going to continue to be a viable separate ethnic group or are they going to gradually kind of become Americanized and lose the language go that direction or what do you see?

Well, I what I see is that if new people don't start coming in I think eventually the Bascos here are just going to be Basque in name only. Just the family name and that's all. The language is going to go out and the culture is going to go out. It's just going to be the family name and that's it.

{R} Are there new ones coming in? You know they don't sheep herd any more.

No, no they quit. I don't know what the reason is, but there's been a few Bascos come out here to the mill and try to get a job you know, and they haven't hired them and I think their reason is because they can't, they haven't mastered the English language and well to work in a place like that you have to know a little bit

you know. And I think the foreman out there is kind of leery of them anymore, cause they don't understand English.

[300] {R} Yet they're known as good workers from what everybody tells me. They're dependable, hardworking,

Yeah, they're fantastic workers. Well this, there was this, his name was George Weiss, he just resigned from there and I think he's in Grants Pass or Medford, three months ago. And he came here as, he was eventually manager of the plywood plant, but he came in as a superintendent, and he was one of the guys who was working cleanup and (indiscernible name) saw him working and he told a head man, the manager, I've never seen people like that that work like that and they deserve a raise. And they gave him a raise. I don't know how much, how much was it (speaks in Basque) I think twelve cents an hour raise and this was (speaks in Basque) that was nine years ago and twelve cents an hour then you know that was pretty good. But anyway what happened was he was all for it, he was amazed he had never seen anybody work like that, he gave him a raise and the union got ticked off about it and made the company take the raise away from him. They said if you give him a raise you've got to give everybody else a raise.

[325] {R} Did this create any ill feeling towards the Basques?

No. I don't think so, I've never noticed it nobody's ever said anything in front of me.

{R} What are your plans Joe, are you going to go on and continue at the mill or will you go back to school or what do you think you'll do?

Well, I don't know. I'd like to, I've been thinking about maybe working a couple more years and Boise State's got this program in Spain, they bought a college. This is where Ross Corbett was, but this last year they didn't have it. If they get enough students they're gonna start it back up again. I'd kind of like to get into that. I know three languages. I went into a bad field at college, business administration there's just nothing here, you know all you do is just learn basic things you know it's just, I might go back it's just, of course I don't mind the mill either. Physical labor is just something to do.

[340] {R} Why don't we stop here. (turns tape off)