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1959 Basque Festival

## **1959 Basque Festival: The Woodstock of the Basque-American community in the West**

IKER SAITUA Jul 17, 2018

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A crowd dances in the Virginian Room of the Nugget Casino in Sparks on the first night of the Western Basque Festival.

Jon Bilbao Basque Library, UNR

On June 5, 1959, early in the morning, Pete Itcaina passed away in Elko. He was 79. The Salt Lake Tribune obituary said: “One of the West’s most colorful characters died here early Friday morning.” Itcaina was remembered as a dedicated, hard-working sheepman. “He just made money and kept working,” a Basque immigrant remembered him.

Born in 1880 in Aldudes (northern Basque Country), Itcaina had immigrated to the United States in 1898 to become a shepherd in Nevada. He soon settled in Elko County, where he prospered as the years went on and eventually became a prominent rancher in the American West. Some months before he died, Itcaina had sold his ranches for about \$1 million. Itcaina’s death symbolized the end of an epoch marked by the struggle of the Basques for legitimacy in the West.

On the next day, early Saturday morning, Basques from different corners of the West began arriving at the Reno-Sparks metropolitan area. The reason for such a huge crowd of Basque-Americans was the celebration of the first Western Basque Festival, held in both Reno and its sister city, Sparks, on June 6 and 7.

That morning, the sad news of the death of Pete Itcaina quickly spread among Basque-Americans who expressed their sadness on learning of their countryman’s death. But despite all the sadness, everything was ready for “the first major interstate gathering of Basques, their families, and friends from all parts of the West,” as organizers announced it.

The Western Basque Festival was intended to celebrate Basque-American heritage and culture in the United States. It showed how Basque-Americans had also a proud ethnic background to share. The organizing committee included important personalities of the Basque-American community of western Nevada: Peter Echeverria, Robert Laxalt, John Ascuaga, Martin Esain, Dominic Gascue, John Laxalt, Joe Micheo, Paul Parraguirre, and Peter Supera.

Despite this clearly male-dominated committee, individual women of the Basque community played an important role in making this event possible. Yet since the early 20th century Basque immigrant women had become the mainstay in the development of the Basque-American communities in the West. Just before the 1959 Festival, an anonymous Basque immigrant woman from Idaho claimed: “The Western Basque Festival ... has mentioned nearly every other aspect of Basque life, including sheepherding, food, games, dances, even the mysterious language, but no one has said how much the women have contributed to the survival of this strong group.”

On the afternoon of June 6, the enthusiasm and excitement ran high as hundreds of Basque-Americans began to congregate in downtown Reno. There, most of them began to gather in Reno’s Basque-owned boarding houses and other establishments, catching up with old friends and making new ones. Most of them had already purchased their tickets for the Festival in advance for \$3.50 which entitled holder to get a free Basque coat-of-arms imprinted in full color on parchment paper and enjoy a barbecue picnic, which was scheduled for the next day at 4 p.m. on the outside of the Richard L. “Dick” Graves’ Nugget in Sparks. A fun time was guaranteed for all. A reporter from the Nevada State Journal, writing about the Festival, stressed, “The Basques, men and women alike, know how to work — but when the time comes they can play just as hard. They are coming here to have a high old time.”

The Festival featured traditional Basque music, dance, games, and arts. The Festival officially began Saturday night, at 7:30 p.m., with a testimonial dinner for visiting dignitaries in the Virginian Room of the Nugget Casino in Sparks. After dinner, at 10 p.m., the Virginian Room was enlivened by Jim Jausaro’s orchestra and La Jota dancing group, where now everyone was welcome. The party continued late into the night.

Sunday activities began with the Basque Mass at St. Thomas Aquinas cathedral at 9:30 a.m. followed by memorial services for the late Senator Patrick A. McCarran of Nevada — who had defended Basque immigration — at 11 o’clock at Mountain View cemetery.

Shortly after, at noon, fun sessions started with a sheepdog exhibition east of Sparks off Stanford Way. The Festival grounds adjoining the Nugget was opened at 1 p.m. and one hour later a Mus card game started in Graves’ Casino’s Virginian Room. From 4 p.m. to 7 p.m., a giant barbecue was staged at the festival grounds. Then more people arrived. Thereafter, the music and dancing continued all evening long.

This was the biggest Basque festival and gathering yet, ever done in the United States. Most estimates suggested that more than 6,000 people — Basques and non-Basques — attended the two-day festival. It not only had profitable economic impacts on the local economy, but also had positive effects on Basques’ collective imagery and their integration into a national collectivity.

It was not only an unusual demonstration of traditional Basque games and dancing, but an occasion on which Basques declared themselves a legitimate ethnic group in the West. This unique event symbolized the crystallization of a Basque-American community in the West. To put it another way, and I state, the Western Basque Festival became the Woodstock of the Basque-American community, a moment when the Basque immigrant collectivity crystallized, acquired greater public visibility and further legitimacy in the West.

The following Monday, June 8, around 11 a.m., Pete Itcaina’s body was buried in the Catholic cemetery in Elko. Many members of the local Basque community — most of them still hangover-tired from the previous day’s party — went there to express to the widowed wife Augustine and family their sympathy in their sad bereavement. These Basques commented how proud Itcaina would have been to see all the Basque-Americans together celebrating their heritage and cultural contributions to American society at the Western Basque Festival.

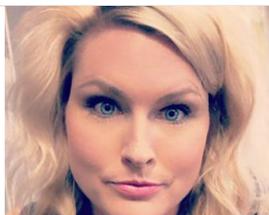
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