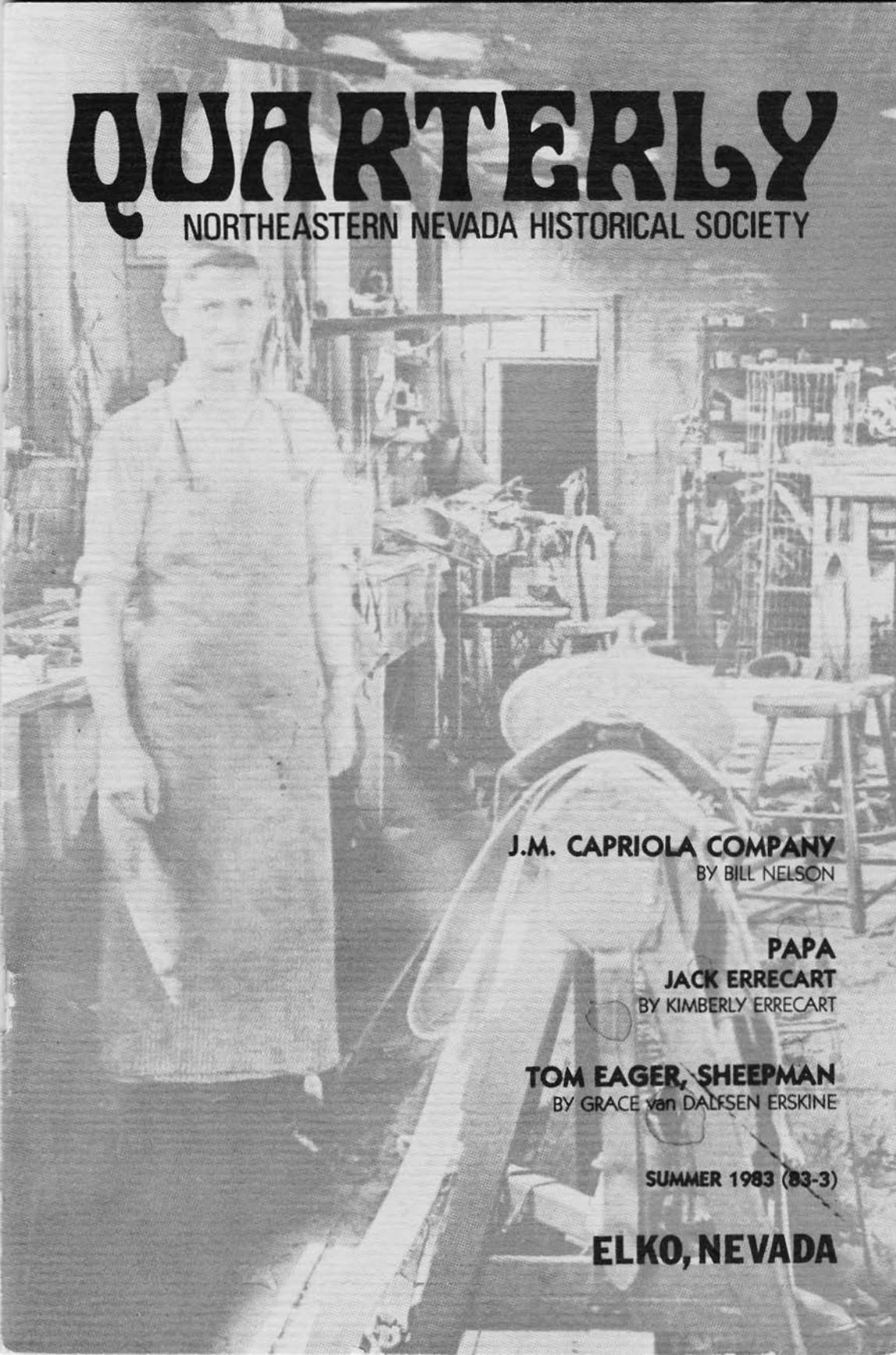


QUARTERLY

NORTHEASTERN NEVADA HISTORICAL SOCIETY



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PAPA
JACK ERRECART
BY KIMBERLY ERRECART

TOM EAGER, SHEEPMAN
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ELKO, NEVADA



Jack Errecart at age 25.

PAPA
JACK ERRECART
 BY KIMBERLY ERRECART

"This time, fifty-three years ago, I get off the train, front to the Commercial Hotel." Essentially a man of few words, Papa had said very little regarding his early life until he came out with this at the dinner table on February 22, 1983. Papa is Jack Errecart.

I knew that Papa had immigrated to America from France. I knew that he had been a shepherder from some of the comments he'd made: "Bah! I don't work in the sheepcamp fifteen years to eat on the ground and pee in the bushes now!" I also knew Papa had worked at the Telescope Hotel in Elko for some time before I was born. I knew little else and decided it was time I learned more about this man, my 75-year-old father.

Papa was born on September 16, 1907, in Bussunaritz, France, to Bridgette Gachen and Sauveur Errecart. The family farm where Papa grew up is called **Eskansuval**. "In Basque society, all houses are named and the house-name provides each of its occupants with his or her social identity."¹ When he was 12-years-old, Papa was sent to St. Jean-Pied-dePort to work at the Samuel Hotel. Since the farms tended to be small and barely capable of supporting a family, the practice of "lending" children was common.² Papa lived and worked at the hotel two years or so, earning board and keep, before returning to **Eskansuval**.³

Formal education among the Basque peasant farmers was minimal. Papa said he went to school about three years, and missed many days because he had to work. He was fortunate that his mother was able to teach him to read and write. Later in the sheepcamp, he taught himself from books and newspapers.

When Papa was 19, he was inducted into the army. In the frontier villages of the Pyrenees, there is a long-standing tradition of refusing to do military service. Most youths opted to escape the draft by crossing the border, usually emigrating to a New World destination.⁴ This often caused problems when the draftee wished to return to his home. Papa did want to return, so he spent two years with the ground troop artillery forces in Germany. He was discharged January 19, 1930.

Papa returned to France, but not for long. He'd made the decision to emigrate. At that time, many Basques emigrated to South American countries. In 1945 it was estimated that there were "more than one million Basques in South America."⁵ Papa didn't want to go there. "I have a chance to go to South America. My mother's brother, he was there. They want to take me there. I never like it, though. That's all I have all time my mind, to come to the United States."⁶ "Before I got here, I heard all time it was really good."⁷ "Few Basque villages lacked at least one fabulous success story of a native son in the New World."⁸

Less than a month after his discharge from the service, Papa boarded a boat at Le Havre, France. Six days later, the boat docked at Ellis Island, February 18, 1930. Papa recalls, "I have



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Jack Errecart at age 50.

Jack Errecart, age 75, tending his bar in the Clifton Hotel and Bar.



COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

it chance to come down. I have one friend in the United States and I ask him money to come. He send me right away that money, and I make it papers and come down."⁹ His one friend, Jean-Baptiste Iribarren, also lined up a job with the McBride-Heguy sheep outfit in Elko County, Nevada. After one day in New York, Papa boarded a train and arrived at the Commercial Hotel on February 22, 1930. The next day he went to work for McBride.

A constant stream of Basque immigrants had arrived between 1903 and 1910. They were welcomed by ranchers and sheep owners "who found the new immigrants to be a dependable, hard-working group."¹⁰ The Basques soon proved their worth in the sheep industry.¹¹ Because the first wave of immigrants "had succeeded with sheep, those who followed herded sheep."¹² Although most had not been in the sheep business in the Pyrenees, Basques were ideal herders. They were "highly regarded for their honesty, loyalty, and propensity for hard physical work."¹³ High wages were paid to them and soon sheep companies began paying passage for Basques. That is how it was in 1930 when Papa came to this country.

"Despite the cutback in wages following the war, sheepherders in Nevada were soon again paid quite well. Salaries in 1926 were approximately \$100 per month. This was \$10 to \$40 more than wages in other sheep range states."¹⁴ When Papa came to Nevada, he made \$100 a month. Then the Depression hit. "Elko County salaries dropped to around \$75 by early 1931."¹⁵ By late spring of 1931, wages were down to \$45 a month. Even at this rate, sheepowners could not afford to pay their herders' wages. "Nobody pay nothing. They can't afford it to pay anybody. Lucky to buy groceries."¹⁶

Papa continued to work for McBride and Heguy until 1934. During this time McBride sent money to Papa's mother, but paid no wages to Papa. In 1935 the sheep business started picking up, but it wasn't until 1939 that Papa received his back wages. "Anyway, old man McBride - I quit in 1934 - in 1939 he pay me last penny, everything he owe. It don't was very much because I pay my trip to (from) old country and everything, and I send some money to home. That time the (wages) was \$45 (a month for) one and a half years. Something like that. They take it clothes every month, and you need it pair of shoes, too. Sometimes two. Look how much is left. Anyway I don't remember how much it was, I tell you true."¹⁷ In 1939, the day after he had paid all his debts, McBride killed himself.¹⁸

The Depression also left many sheepherders with broken dreams. "To the capable Basques, the wages always seem ample to put some aside, to buy herds, to send home for brides, or perhaps to return to the homeland for family or sweethearts or to establish homes."¹⁹ After the Depression this was no longer true, and many plans were put on hold. Papa was the same. "I have idea, maybe five years, I make one round to old country, but everything go a little bit rough, you know. Wages went really down, and I lost my idea to go. I have it idea, yes, but I quit that idea."²⁰ In 1978 Papa finally did make his "one round" to the old country.

Papa's luck didn't improve after 1931. "The winter of 1932 was terrible. First it was dry and cold. Then on January 22 it started snowing and didn't stop for forty-eight hours straight. When it was over there were two feet of snow on the level. Then it turned cold and windy. The weather stayed like that for forty days."²¹ Papa was still working for McBride and Heguy at Duck Water between Ely and Eureka. They had four bands of sheep on the flats there. For such a bad winter, he and the other herders at Duck Water came out pretty good. "We don't lose much sheep that year. Maybe they have around nine thousand sheep time we go south that fall. Maybe one thousand we lost."²² Others were not so lucky. At Currie, "Itcaina and those fellows, they lost lot of sheep, thousands and thousands maybe. Ellison, he lost two bands of sheep, seven thousand sheep right there."²³

If the winter of 1932 was bad, the winter of 1935 was worse. By then Papa was working

for Andres Tourreuil at Charleston. "That one, he was bad. We lost a lot of sheep. Andres Tourreuil, he lost a lot of sheep at Currie. Everybody they lost a lot of animals."²⁴ To emphasize this point he told me about a ranch just outside of Currie that belonged to a Mrs. Riley. "Maybe she have around seventy-five, eight cows. All outside winter time. And you see lot of those cows, stand up, froze in the big ditches, you know. Right there, they die, froze, standing up. I know one night I was cold, too. That time we got a teepee tent with one little stove inside. Everybody we got cold, and my gosh, I got up in (from) the bed and I make fire in the little stove. If I don't, I never get up in the bed - too cold!"²⁵

The solitary life led by many herders was worse for some than the bad winters. "In his near total isolation the herder had to struggle to maintain his sanity. More than one Basque



Clifton Hotel and Bar before its facelift. It is located at 516 Commercial Street in Elko.

herder was committed and the 'Crazy Basco' herder was a stereotypic figure in sheep districts."²⁶ When I asked Papa about the crazy sheepherder his comment was, "Well sure, crazy sheepherder. That's crazy sheepherder to stay up there in the mountain like that, but if you want to do something you gotta stay."

Papa was one of those sheepherders that "seemed to have an indomitably cheerful philosophy which sustained them in such solitary lives. They understood and enjoyed their work."²⁷ Papa was prepared for this life. "I know I gonna be alone time I go to the hill herding. One week day you got camptender there to make your camp, every week in summer time. And winter time, you got three men in the camp, two herders and camptender cooking, and move it camp and everything like that."²⁸

The longest time Papa stayed alone was fifteen days. He didn't think he would go crazy. He explained, "If you keep it in your mind you gonna go crazy like that, you don't do nothing EXCEPT go crazy. Must be, before he (the crazy herder) got herding sheep, he got crazy, too."

Papa worked fifteen years in the sheep camps - herding, camptending, and driving truck for a number of outfits - but never had his own sheep. Since that was the dream of many Basque immigrants, I asked him why he hadn't. He answered, "I have chance, one time, to buy, but I figure if I got very much sheep, I gotta work worse than I did before, so I don't. I come to town and start working Telescope Hotel."²⁹ He never went back to work as a herder, but maintained close ties with several sheep outfits in Elko and White Pine Counties. He often went out in the fall to help with docking and shipping lambs, sharing a familiar dinner prepared by the camptender at the end of a long and hard, but satisfying day.

Papa stayed at the Telescope for twelve years. At that time the Basque hotels were the most important ethnic institution for the Basques, providing a mailing address, a place to stay and store his possessions, and a source of job information. Papa and others like him also served as interpreters and unofficial bankers, extending credit and cashing checks for the herders, while for his part, the sheepherder might well turn over his savings to the hotelkeeper to hold and/or invest for him.³⁰ Explaining how things had changed, Papa said, "Oh, they were important, find it work (for) people like that. We took a lot of orders, ranchers, sheepmen, everything. Now they got to go to employment office. They don't call my place like that anymore to ask me if I got jobs someplace."³¹

Having saved enough money to go into business for himself, Papa bought first the Palace Bar, and later the Silver Dollar, both on Commercial Street in Elko. He built each business up and sold it at a profit. While at the Silver Dollar, he met and married Barbara Roylance. In 1960 Papa and his wife bought the Clifton Hotel and Bar. To this day, he opens the Clifton at six-thirty in the morning to serve coffee royals to a select group of his "regulars."

The fifty-three years Papa has been in America have been filled with hard work, but he found contentment in this land of opportunity. His first years as a sheepherder did not discourage him. Jean-Baptiste Iribarren and almost all of his friends from those early years are gone now. "Everyone they die now. Martin (Inda), he die. Simon (Bengoechea), he die. Joe (Madariaga), even Benny (Arrascada, much younger), everyone of them they die now."³² With his wealth of good memories, Papa still thinks America is the best place to be and has never regretted his decision to come here. "I come from old country, I don't know nothing, so I find out time I get here. To make one dollar, I think, man he got to suffer little bit. That's all I did."³³



Jack Errecart once owned the Silver Dollar Club at 400 Commercial Street in Elko. This photograph was taken in the early 1950's.

FOOTNOTES: _

- ¹ William A. Douglass, ed., **Beltran: Basque Sheepman of the American West** (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1979), p. 1.
- ² **Ibid.**, p. 2.
- ³ Jack Errecart, author's father, interview in Elko, April 7, 1983, concerning Jack's life in France and America.
- ⁴ Douglass, ed., p. 1.
- ⁵ Quoted by Sister Flavia M. McCullough, **The Basques of the Northwest** (San Francisco: R and E Research Associates, 1974), p. 20.
- ⁶ Errecart, April 7, 1983.
- ⁷ Jack Errecart, Author's father, interview in Elko, March 2, 1983, concerning Jack's emigration and his life in America.
- ⁸ William A. Douglass and Jon Bilbao, **Amerikanuak: Basques in the New World** (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1975), p. 135.
- ⁹ Errecart, March 2, 1983.
- ¹⁰ Quoted by Henry C. Bland, **The Basques** (San Francisco: R and E Research Associates, 1974), p. 74.
- ¹¹ Bland, p. 74.
- ¹² McCullough, p. 26.
- ¹³ Douglass, ed., p. 38.
- ¹⁴ Richard Harris Lane, **The Cultural Ecology of Sheep Nomadism: Northeastern Nevada. 1870-1972** (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Xerox University Microfilms, 1975), p. 274.

- 15 **Ibid.**
- 16 Errecart, March 2, 1983.
- 17 Errecart, April 7, 1983.
- 18 Barbara Errecart, author's mother, comment made while reviewing author's research notes, April 2, 1983.
- 19 McCullough, p. 26.
- 20 Errecart, April 7, 1983.
- 21 Beltran Paris, Beltran: **Basque Sheepman of the American West** (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1979), p. 124.
- 22 Errecart, April 7, 1983.
- 23 **Ibid.**
- 24 Errecart, March 2, 1983.
- 25 **Ibid.**
- 26 Douglass, ed., p. 32.
- 27 McCullough, p. 25.
- 28 Errecart, April 7, 1983.
- 29 **Ibid.**
- 30 Douglass, ed., p. 38.
- 31 Errecart, April 7, 1983.
- 32 Errecart, March 2, 1983
- 33 **Ibid.**

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- Bilbao, Jon, and William A. Douglass. **Amerikanuak: Basques in the New World**. Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1975.
- Blaud, Henry C. **The Basques**. San Francisco: R and E Research Associates, 1974.
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- Paris, Beltran, as told to William A. Douglass. **Beltran: Basque Sheepman of the American West**. Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1979.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: KIMBERLY ERRECART

Kimberly Errecart was born and raised in Elko. A graduate of Elko High School, she studied psychology at State University of New York at Stonybrook from 1976 to 1979. In 1983 she graduated from Northern Nevada Community College in Elko.

The monograph about her father is her first published work.

Her hobbies include hiking, camping, nature photography, reading and gourmet cooking.