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Domingo Martirena, 1924-2012

A passion for life, a man to remember

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With a smile on his face and a glint in his eye, Domingo Martirena was a man to remember. He had a passion for family and a fondness for his friends. Those who knew him say he will forever be missed - but never forgotten.

Martirena, 88, of Buffalo, Wyo., passed away peacefully at his home on April 11, 2012. A vigil service, rosary and sharing of remembrances are set for 7 p.m. on Thursday, April 19 at St. John the Baptist Catholic Church in Buffalo. A Mass of resurrection will be celebrated at 10 a.m. Friday at St. John the Baptist with Rev. Peter Johnson officiating. Visitation is set from 10 a.m.-5 p.m. on April 19 at Adams Funeral Home. Burial will be at Willow Grove Cemetery.

Martirena was born on April 8, 1924, in St. Etienne de Baigorry, France, to Felipe and Catherine Martirena. He was raised at Arzainchuria, the house of his Basque generational family, until he was 12. At that time, he was sent to college boarding school, St. Joseph at Hesperren, France.

In 1940 at the age of 16, he graduated from college and taught school for six years.

"The educational system was much different than here," said Ann Brown, one of Martirena's three daughters. "If you worked hard, you went to high school and college. They started school at 3 or 4 and if they excelled, they pushed them. He was very passionate about education."

During his teaching career, Martirena was required to serve in the French Army during World War II. His college education was noticed by his superiors and lent itself to administrative duties while in the service. His administrative skills also would serve him and his fellow countryman later in life, when fellow Basques needed assistance with financial and personal matters.

In 1946, Martirena was urged by his aunt and uncle, Bernard and Catherine Marton, to come to the United States to work for the Harriet-Marton sheep outfit. He quit teaching and spent a full year preparing all the necessary immigration papers.

"He'd never been on an airplane before his trip," Brown said. "He told us once how when he was flying to Paris, one of the engines quit. He said, 'What could you do?' But he got to Paris."

His plane ride consisted of a flight from Paris to New York, with two refueling stops in Iceland and Newfoundland. Martirena arrived in New York City on July 3, 1947, and was processed at Ellis Island. He then traveled from New York to Sheridan via Denver, where his aunt was there to meet him. Martirena said he recognized her from pictures he had seen.

"Dad came to visit my family and I when we lived in Washington, DC a couple of different times," Brown said. "We went to the National Air and Space Museum and suspended from the ceiling is a DC 3 airplane. We walked and my dad said, 'That is the airplane I flew over in.'"

Martirena traveled to Wyoming and worked for Harriet-Marton for 10 years before returning to Baigorry in 1957 to visit his family.

"He was just like another brother to me," said Bernadette Arno, Martirena's cousin. "He was always at our house."

When Martirena came to the U.S., he couldn't speak English, but Arno said he gave it his all.

"It didn't take him long to learn," she said.

Upon his return to the U.S., Martirena began to realize his dream of becoming a successful sheepman by purchasing the Bill Bailey ranch south of Kaycee, Wyo. Martirena and Mike Iriberry formed a partnership and ran sheep together on the ranch and on Martirena's mountain camp during the summer.

In 1957, Martirena met Cecile Stahlecker, a North Dakota native who was working as an X-ray/lab technician at Johnson County Memorial Hospital. The couple was married on Oct. 24, 1959.

In 1965, Martirena fulfilled his sheep outfit dream by purchasing Iriberry's share of the partnership. The couple raised their three daughters on the ranch and at their home in Buffalo, Wyo.

In 1975, the couple leased their ranch to help others realize their dreams.

There are so many people that he helped," Brown said. "I've had people tell me that Dad meant so much to them."



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Martirena continued working by tending bar, tending sheep and also served as a Wyoming Brand inspector for eight years.

Martirena was a member of St. John the Baptist Catholic Church and the Knights of Columbus. He served as a supervisor for the Powder River Conservation District. He was an active participant in Living History Days at the Jim Gatchell Museum.

Martirena was one of the original founders of the Basque Program on KBBS Radio. He had the unique distinction of commentating steadily for 40-plus years.

Martirena, along with eight others, were inducted into the Basque Hall of Fame in 1997 to honor the Buffalo Basque Program for its contribution to Basque identity and culture.

Martirena loved his faith, family and friends. Some of his greatest joys were evidenced by the pride he showed for his wife, daughters and his grandchildren. Those who knew him knew an extremely loyal man, with a warm personality and a wonderful sense of humor.

"He liked to tease a lot, and he liked to joke," Brown said. "And his Catholic faith was so important to him."

Martirena loved spending time in the mountains, fishing and entertaining all who stopped. He enjoyed sharing his Basque heritage with those who appreciated its history. He unselfishly helped an endless number people in a many different ways during his lifetime. He had gifts of service and wisdom, which he shared with everyone.

"When Basque sheepherders died here in the states, he arranged to get with the French to get the bodies back," said Cindy Holom, Martirena's daughter. "He worked with the lawyers. He really helped others. He was such an honest man."

Survivors include his wife of 53 years, Cecile; three daughters, Ann Marie Brown (David) of Sheridan, Cindy Holom (Tye) of Pasco, Wash., and Rogene Martirena of Portland, Ore.; four grandchildren, Stephanie and Michelle Brown of Sheridan, Wyo., and Michael and Katie Holom of Pasco, Wash.; a sister, Marie Marc of St. Etienne de Baigorry, France; cousins Bernadette (Marton) Arno and Mary (Irigaray) Lawrence; and numerous nieces, nephews, relatives and many Basque friends.

Donations in Martirena's memory may be made to Susan Bowling Lawrence Hospice or the Jim Gatchell Museum, in care of Adams Funeral Home, 351 N. Adams, Buffalo.


"He had a dog named Terrible, and of course that was the smartest dog in the world," Arno said. "It was hysterical. He was laughing all the time. He was a great man. And he just loved life."

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