

Catherine and John Etchart at the time of their wedding, September 1912.



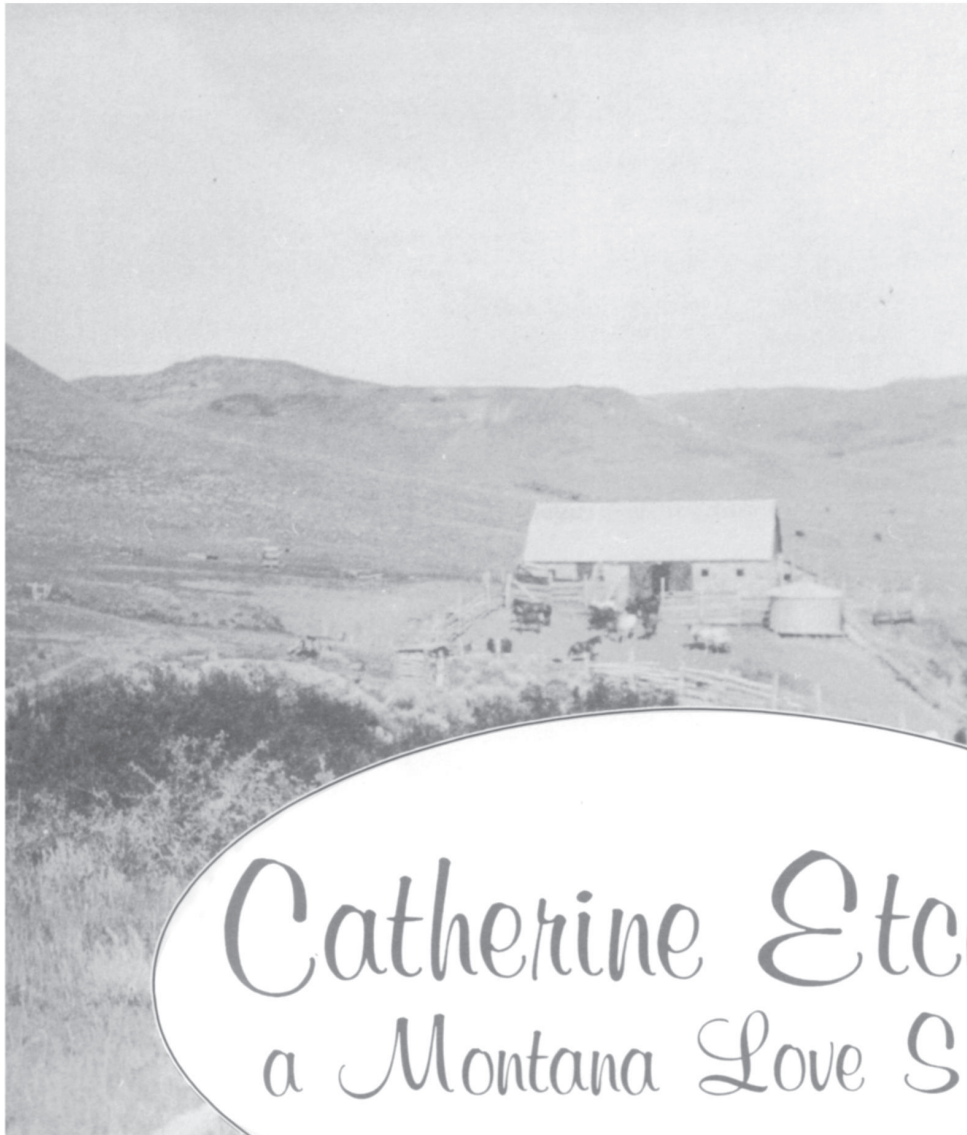
All photos in this article courtesy of the Etchart family

by Monique Urza

Her body is condensed. Her withered frame of seventy pounds is made of decades of this country's history. Into it are compacted her experiences on the expansive plains of northeastern Montana, its erratic summers and devastating winters. Her tiny body is made strong by the countless hours of work as a ranch wife, as a mother to cowboys and to her own family. It is made graceful by the remembrance of the gentle Basque country that was her birthplace, and held straight by

a lifelong determination not to regret leaving that country. It is kept young by a girl-like love for a husband thirty-five years gone, by a strange, enthusiastic impatience for death, in order that she might find him again. It is made weak by a mother's weakness, an immovable belief in her own children, to whom she has entrusted her newfound land. All this in a body as small as a child's, to which ninety years of life have given an iron strength.

Three years ago, if you had been a native of Glasgow, Montana, and had made a return visit to your hometown, or if you had been a

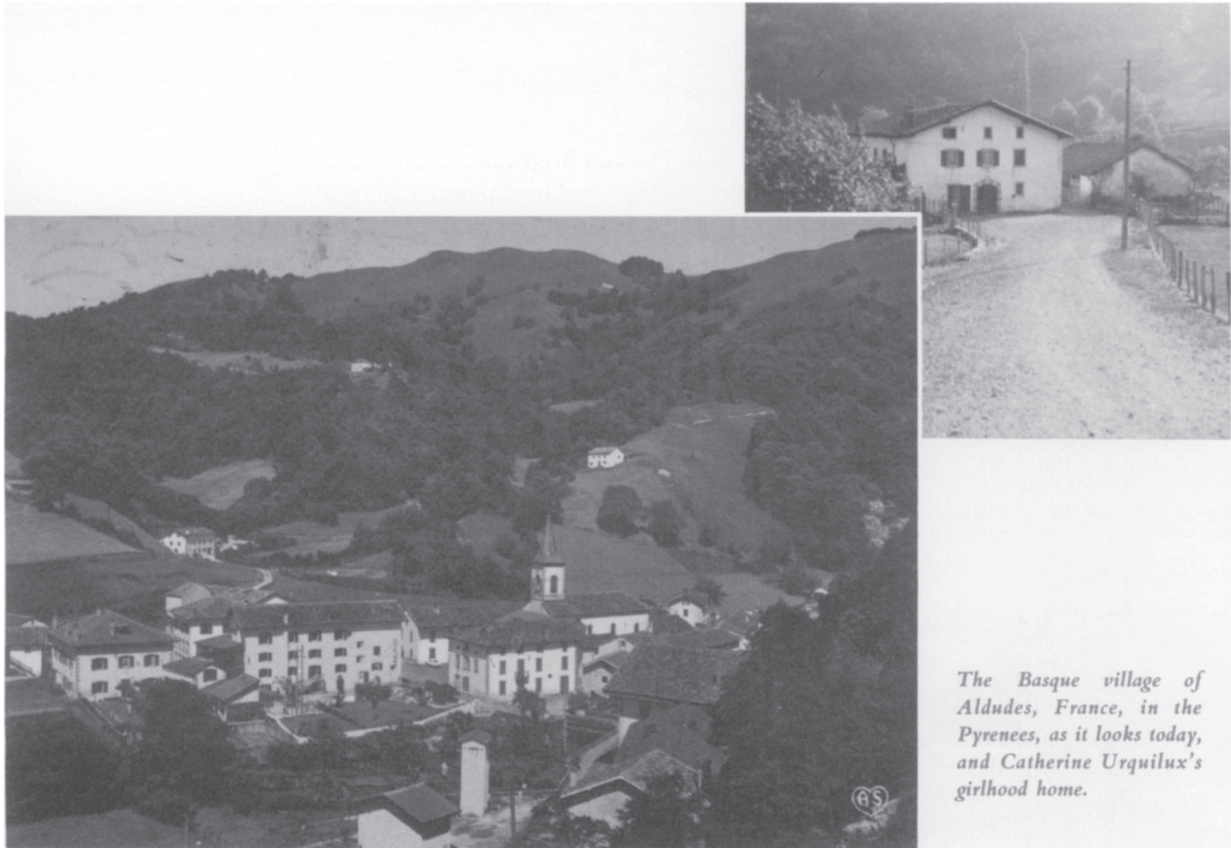


*Stone House Ranch,
about 1920.*

Catherine Etchart a Montana Love Story

guest in that northeastern Montana community, your trip would not have been complete until you paid a visit to Catherine Etchart, the quiet, gentle lady of ninety years who resided at her modern ranch at Tampico, twelve miles west of Glasgow along the Milk River. As she greeted you at the front door, you would be charmed by her French accent. You would be surprised by the simplicity of her lifestyle—her homemade shirtwaist dress, the old furniture that decorated her home, the meal of homemade wine and French pudding she served you, the long table at which she still

served a crew of ranch hands three times a day. For the truth is that she lived quite below her means. It was a way of life to which she had accustomed herself as a young immigrant to northeastern Montana faced with raising five children and helping her husband John in the operation of a ranch. It was a way of life that she had refused to abandon as her husband's first small ranch grew eventually to include three ranching complexes, and after he had died leaving her an inheritance of thousands of acres of farm and grazing land and several thousands of cattle.



The Basque village of Aldudes, France, in the Pyrenees, as it looks today, and Catherine Urquilux's girlhood home.

THE STORY begins with two children who grew up in the French-Basque village of Aldudes, high in the Pyrenees Mountains between France and Spain. The boy, Jean Etchart, was one of five children, and the girl, Catherine Urquilux, was the eldest of three daughters and a son. They lived in typical white stucco, red-trimmed Basque farmhouses, which lay along the same road leading out of Aldudes. The boy Jean was older than the Urquilux girl. By his mid-teens, when he had completed the schooling offered in Aldudes and had returned to work his father's farm, he took a fancy for the little schoolgirl Catherine Urquilux as she passed his house twice a day.

Actually the story began before the time of these two children, in the youth of each of their fathers. Jean Etchart grew up knowing the family story of his father, Ferdinand Etchart, who in 1848 had reportedly made the journey from Argentina to the goldfields of California on horseback, establishing himself as a founding father of the Basques in the American West, later returning to his native town of Aldudes to marry

and to raise a family. Jean Urquilux, Catherine's father, had spent twenty-two years in California before returning to the Basque country to raise his family.¹

By 1900, the year in which eighteen-year-old Jean Etchart set out for the American West, many a young Basque dreamed of spending a few years as a shepherd in America and returning home with savings that multiplied several times when exchanged into French currency. Then he could marry, have children, and live comfortably for the rest of his years. But some young Basques saw America as the land of infinite promise, a place where a man could begin with nothing and rise to the position of landowner and patriarch. That was the vision young Jean Etchart followed as he joined his brother Michel in the foothills of Santa Monica, California, where he began work as a shepherd.

Etchart spent his first year working to pay back the cost of his voyage, which his employer had advanced to him. His salary was twenty dollars a month. Young Jean, called John once he was in the United States, would always remember the

manner in which his brother greeted him at the train station in Los Angeles in September of 1900. "You have to wash your own clothes now," his brother said, handing him a chunk of soap. "You don't have a mother to take care of you here."²

Before John's departure to America he had visited his aunt, who was Mother Superior at a girl's boarding school in the seaport of Ciboure, on the Atlantic coast of the French-Basque country. There he found the schoolgirl from his own village, Catherine Urquilux, by then a girl in her early teens. Among the village girls of Aldudes, Catherine was a rarity, for few ever received schooling past the level offered in the village. As John Etchart later told his wife, he asked his aunt, "Please save that one for me."³ But the remark could not have been taken too seriously; before leaving Aldudes, John had set his eye on a girl closer to his own age.

The next years were formative ones for Catherine Urquilux. In the convent school in Ciboure she gained a refinement that would stand out in any part of the world, especially on the plains of northeastern Montana, where fifty years later people would speak of her as the gracious lady at Tampico. Although her strong-willed mother discouraged Catherine's girlhood desire to become a nun, she gained a deep religious faith that stayed with her until the end of her ninety years.

These years were just as crucial for John Etchart. He adapted easily to his new life, and wasted little time in pursuing opportunity. After spending the first year herding sheep in the hills now graced by the mansions of Beverly Hills, John, his brother Michel, and their cousin Martin Chabagno formed a partnership with an Elko, Nevada, banker.⁴ For the next nine years they managed the kind of nomadic sheep operation that was typical of that day. They divided the herd, which consisted of up to ten thousand sheep, into bands of fifteen hundred. Operating from Elko as a home base, the partners put their sheep year-round on the range that was free and open to the first to claim it. In summer they took their sheep north to the Bruneau Mountains of Idaho, and in winter, as far south as Arizona. Twice each year they brought their sheep to Elko, once in spring as they headed north, at which time the

1. Catherine Etchart to John Etchart (grandson), April 4, 1977.

2. Interview with Gene Etchart, May 1979.

lambs were born, the ewes clipped and the wool shipped by rail, and once again in late autumn, when they sorted lambs for shipment to market and bred the ewes for the following spring.

The Etchart men did not have administrative offices; their place was with the sheep, just as it had been during their first year in California. Each worked as a herder or camp tender, traveling by horseback with his band of sheep. They returned to civilization only a few times during the year, as they passed through such Nevada towns as Carson City, Tonapah, and Elko.

It was the open range of those early days that made it possible for John Etchart and his partners to thrive in Nevada. Except for one small parcel that served as a pasture for horses, the Etchart operation owned no land. Expenses were limited to the cost of the original band of sheep, wages for the herders and camp tenders, and assorted supplies, from groceries and pack saddles to bed tarpaulins and lanterns. Two main threats to success in sheep raising kept the Etcharts vigilant: weather and predators. Since the nomadic bands were without shelter or enough protection, freezing temperatures and coyotes sometimes took their toll in sheep. The sheep business was challenging, as John's son Gene notes: "It was a very simple and efficient system. There was no limit to what might be achieved, other than one's willingness to assume risks and to work hard."

IN 1910 the Etchart operation in Nevada ceased. It came about as the outcome of a simple mishap while John, by then a man of twenty-eight, was out herding on the Nevada range. A young unbroken horse threw Etchart, resulting in a severely broken leg. His camp tender, a fellow Basque, strapped him to a travois and hauled him through deep snow to the town of Elko. The camp tender answered John's delirious pleas to be put out of his misery with profanity. It was a serious injury, and John spent several months in the hospital, during which time his banker-partner refused to share John's medical expenses and continue his salary. The young

3. Catherine Etchart to John Etchart (grandson), April 4, 1977.

4. This change from herder to owner was typical among Basques in the American West. As E.N. Wentworth describes the process in his book, *America's Sheep Trails* (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State College Press, 1948), p. 404, "A herder would run his flock for a year or two and take all pay above his bare necessities in ewes, which he ran with his employer's bands. After one year's increase, he usually combined with another small owner."

man's response was anything but submissive. Etchart dissolved the partnership and emerged with a fortune of \$28,000.

Intent on later returning to Nevada to set up another sheep operation, John now took time to visit his homeland. Perhaps he saw himself as having reached the age to marry and sought, like so many of his fellow Basque sheepmen, a wife of his own origin and upbringing—he had not forgotten the girl he had left behind. But the girl's patience was not so great as his own; she had long since pledged herself to a more available husband. John was not long disappointed. His attention soon turned to the schoolgirl Catherine Urquix, who had completed secondary school, returned to her father's farm in Aldudes, and was now a dark-haired, fair-skinned beauty. A courtship began, and before long the two were engaged.

It was John's plan to return to America with his new wife, but Catherine's parents, who had educated her to be a source of pride for them, objected to the idea of seeing their daughter disappear to the other side of the Atlantic. According to Basque custom, it was Catherine, as eldest child, who should inherit the family farm. The fiances agreed that John would return to America to set up a new operation, and after two years, during which Catherine would reconcile her parents to the idea of losing her, John would return to claim his bride.

Oral tradition holds that during John's visit to the Basque country in 1910, he encountered a Basque named Pierre Sagarduluz, who had operated sheep in the country southwest of Glasgow, Montana.⁵ At length, Sagarduluz described the wide open grazing lands that lay along the Missouri River breaks country. He urged John to at least make a pass through that country as he considered locations for his new operation. Although John still intended to return to Nevada, he knew

that with the recent creation of the Forest Reserve System, which excluded sheepmen from many of the Nevada forests and high summer range, opportunity was diminishing in that state.⁶ He followed Sagarduluz's advice.

After crossing the ocean once again, he took the train as far as the little town of Saco, fifty miles west of Glasgow. There on the wooden railroad platform, standing in the dust and feeling the spring wind, he looked out over a country that seemed to offer little to men, livestock, or crops. With no commitment elsewhere, Etchart decided to take some time and look over this foreboding country. He rented a horse and set out over the "badlands," a vast expanse of thick, black, gumbo-like soil. The second day brought him within sight of an endless spread of pale green hills. Years later he would say to his sons, "It was love at first sight. I had never seen such good grasslands in all my life." For a man who had grown up in the fertile green hills of the Basque country, and who had known the thick Nevada forests, it was quite a statement to make.

John spent that night in a two-room log cabin family home on a small ranch established in 1900 by a Basque named Gracian Oronos. At breakfast he learned that the spread was up for sale, and before they finished eating, John had negotiated the purchase of his new home. He must already have been wondering how his young bride would respond to her new home in the American West.

Early in that summer of 1911, John traveled to Deer Lodge, Montana. Here, with the help of a sheepman and banker named Ted Larabie he set up the beginnings of a ranching operation that would expand to many times its original size.⁷ Etchart purchased two bands of sheep from Larabie and herded them along the Continental Divide in the area north of MacDonald Pass during the summer months, aided only by one of the younger Larabies who worked as camp tender. That autumn they shipped the bands from the Helena Valley east to Saco, and herded them south across the "badlands" to the Larb Hills that surrounded the new Etchart ranch.

5. Although the author has been unable to verify the presence of Sagarduluz in northeastern Montana, the story was passed on from John Etchart to his family. It is corroborated by long-time residents of the Glasgow area, including Tony Bengochea.

6. The General Revision Act of 1891 gave the President the power to "set aside as public reservations any timbered section of the public domain." Administrative power over the new forest reserves lay in the Secretary of Interior from 1897 to 1905, when jurisdiction was transferred to the Bureau of Forestry (renamed Forest Service) of the Department of Agriculture. In 1906 concessions for grazing within the forest reserves were allotted by local woolgrowers associations, which set up rules requiring that an applicant either be a citizen or own improved ranch property to obtain grazing permits. The intended and ultimate effect was to exclude Basque itinerant operators from the much-needed summer range. William Douglass and Jon Bilboa, *Amerikanoak: Basques in the New World* (Reno, Nevada: University of Nevada Press, 1975), pp. 283-287.

7. Larabie Bros. Bankers, Inc. (originally Larrabee Bros.), established in Deer Lodge in 1879, is noted in Wentworth's *America's Sheep Trails* (p. 436) for its reputation in the sheep financing business. The system had a banking firm providing herders with "money with which to buy flocks, obtain leases, and operate their camps with clothing, food and supplies." Large tracts of land were leased by the firm and subleased to the sheepmen. The firm also acted as agent in the sale of the herder's wool, wethers and lambs.

Catherine Urquilux (left), shortly before her marriage, with a younger sister and two youths in Aldudes.



John Etchart developed his new sheep operation along the lines that were familiar to him. In the state of Montana he found much the same legal situation that he had encountered in Nevada ten years earlier. Because Valley County was still untouched by the provisions of the Forest Reserve Act, its public domain was open and free to all comers. But the land was richer than the desert hills of Nevada, and the sheep could spend the entire year on the open range of the “south country,” surrounding the home ranch. The herd of five thousand sheep wintered in the rough breaks country along the Missouri River, which was partly wooded and offered some protection from winter. In the spring the bands moved north over a distance of twenty-five miles to the Etchart Home Ranch, and lambed in the surrounding hills. In early summer Etchart took his sheep thirty-five miles north to the shearing plant at Hinsdale, had the ewes clipped and sent the wool to market by rail. Then he trailed his sheep back over the “badlands” north of the ranch for the summer months, and in the fall he worked them back up to the railroad, where he shipped the lambs to market. Etchart conducted the entire operation within a thirty-mile radius of the home ranch.

John Etchart arrived in Montana at a time when opportunity in the sheep business was at its peak. The largest number of sheep in the state has been estimated at 5,736,000 in the year 1903, and by 1910, Montana’s sheep population was still the highest in the West.⁸ The key to Montana’s suc-

cess in the sheep industry was its vast amount of open range. Ranchers needed only to acquire the financing to buy their livestock, the feed and labor to take care of them, and then they had free access to as much rangeland as they could use. Etchart and other ranchers who came to Montana at that time were fortunate, for soon the open range began to disappear. Beginning with the liberalization of the homestead laws in 1900, and especially as the Fort Peck Indian Reservation lands were opened for settlement in 1913, Valley County became a homesteader’s utopia. It is estimated that between 1911 and 1916, over twenty-nine million acres of public and Indian lands were settled. The invasion was so intense that by 1925 the land office in Glasgow was forced to close its doors, for lack of available land.⁹

Because of the almost unlimited supply of grassland, early-day ranchers did little to supplement the grazing of the herd during winter. They were extremely low-cost operations, involving only minor expenses for labor, supplies, and minimal taxes on the sheep. But there were risks. Because they did not use supplemental feed, ranchers were defenseless in the face of severe Montana winters. Following the disastrous winter of 1916, which reduced the Etchart herd from 16,000 to 8,000 head, John Etchart began purchasing feed from the hay-producing ranchers along the Missouri River and bringing his sheep to the purchased haystacks during the dead of winter. Sheltered by trees and brush along the river, they remained there through the winter season.

8. Wentworth, *America's Sheep Trails*, p. 307.

9. *Glasgow Courier*, May 1, 1925.

DURING THE YEARS 1910 to 1912, Catherine Urquilux succeeded in acquiring her parents' half-hearted consent to her marriage and departure for America. John Etchart assured them that it was just an experiment. As Catherine related many years later, "We were to go back in a couple of years if I found myself unhappy in Montana. We were alone, away from relatives, I sensed that was what John wanted. We had each other, that was enough for me."¹⁰

John returned to Aldudes in September of 1912, and the couple were married in the village church they had attended since childhood. They were a glamorous couple, a young man already successful in the American West and a striking young woman refined by several years of convent school, who were to make their own life together in another land. The legend of their "grand amour" is retained in Aldudes until this very day.¹¹

They followed their September marriage with a honeymoon in Paris, where John made certain that Catherine was comfortable in her first visit to a major city. The first thing he bought her was a fur coat. In Paris it was an object of fashion; in Montana, a thing of great practicality. After the honeymoon the couple planned to return to Aldudes to say goodbye to the family, but, as Catherine would tell her children and grandchildren, "I never wanted to say goodbye to anyone."¹² Instead, they left directly from Paris, boarding the steamer *Ile de France*. Since John had obtained his American citizenship during his years in Nevada, Catherine arrived as an American citizen, although she could barely understand a word of English.

Before reaching their ranch in northeastern Montana, the newlyweds made stops in New York, Chicago, and Deer Lodge, Montana, where John proudly introduced his new wife to his friends and business acquaintances. Once at Saco, as Catherine would later tell it, "John bought me a pair of overshoes. I didn't know if I should put them over my shoes or take my regular shoes off first!"¹³ In a custom-made carriage led by two gentle horses, which John had purchased

10. Catherine Etchart to John Etchart (grandson), April 4, 1977.

11. Marie Saldubehere to Urza, June 1979.

12. Catherine Etchart to John Etchart (grandson), April 4, 1977.

13. *Ibid.*

in order to show off his new wife, the couple rode out toward the home ranch. For the first time the thought came to Catherine's mind, "What have I got myself into?"

As the story goes, John Etchart teased his friend and neighboring rancher Fred Collins about having to go as far as Florida to find a bride. "Oh, that's nothing," Fred Collins replied. "I hear tell of some people who have to cross the Atlantic Ocean!"

For two years Catherine made her life in that remote country southwest of Glasgow, inside the log cabin that was her new home. John hired a girl to cook for the ranch hands and to care for the house. But in the face of his determination to spoil her, Catherine resisted, working long hours at the stove alongside the hired girl. She served meals to countless travelers, trappers, and herders who happened to pass by the ranch. It is in this role that old-timer Ed Gerspacher, who now resides at Saco, remembers her: "She was very young when I first met her out at the ranch. . . . I was working for one of those horse outfits, and whenever we'd come in, we'd stop at the Etchart house, that was the custom of the day. Mrs. Etchart was like a mother to us."¹⁴

Usually the Etcharts traveled to Glasgow only twice a year, taking two days for the fifty-mile journey by carriage and stopping midway at the Fred Collins ranch on Willow Creek. But in spite of the isolated environment in which they found themselves, their life did not lack excitement. Mr. Gerspacher remembers: "They used to have some community doin's out there. For the Fourth of July a bunch of men would play ball, or a rancher would bring a spoiled bucking horse he wanted somebody to ride. One time they got John Etchart to get on one of those spoiled horses. John was a good sport, and I'll be damned if he didn't do a good job. Later John Etchart would come out with watermelons. They always had music and a dance afterwards."¹⁵ John Etchart later told his family that these were the happiest years of his life.

After the trial two years, there was no talk of going home to the Basque country. Instead there were plans for the construction of a new house, to be built alongside the original log cabin. John served as his own contractor and architect.

14. Interview with Ed Gerspacher, May 1979.

15. *Ibid.*

He realized that the best building material available lay within the hills surrounding the ranch—a thick, grey sandrock that would make any home stand up against the Montana winters. He hired two German stonemasons to cut and haul the stone, and to build a house and barn from it. In 1914 the Etcharts moved into their two-story stone house, soon and always to be called the Stone House Ranch.

Today the Stone House stands as a landmark in Valley County. It is an oddity in that part of the country, where ranch houses and barns are made of wood. But there is one aspect to the Stone House that might escape the ordinary eye. The view of the stone house and barn, set in a little valley of gentle green hills, in the midst of a vast expanse of rough grazing lands, reminds one of a typical Pyrenean setting reproduced on American soil. For the Etcharts it must have meant a haven in the remote, open country of northeastern Montana and, in some way, a remembrance of home.

With the new house came the first children: a daughter Ferne, in 1915, and a son Gene, the following year. In 1919, when Ferne came of school age, the family moved into a frame house in Glasgow. Two more sons, Mitchel and Mark, quickly followed, and Catherine found herself caring for a large and growing family, in addition to her other duties. Following the birth of Mark she was taken ill with an infection that kept her bedridden for two years. It was as if her tiny frame were not made for so many years of childbearing.

DURING THE TEN years after John Etchart arrived in Montana, his operation remained confined to the country fifty miles southwest of Glasgow. The Stone House Ranch was the first acquisition, and, over the next years, John purchased a number of small ranches directly south of the Stone House property. These acquisitions brought a permanency to his operation. With each purchase, he acquired the livestock that were part of the prop-

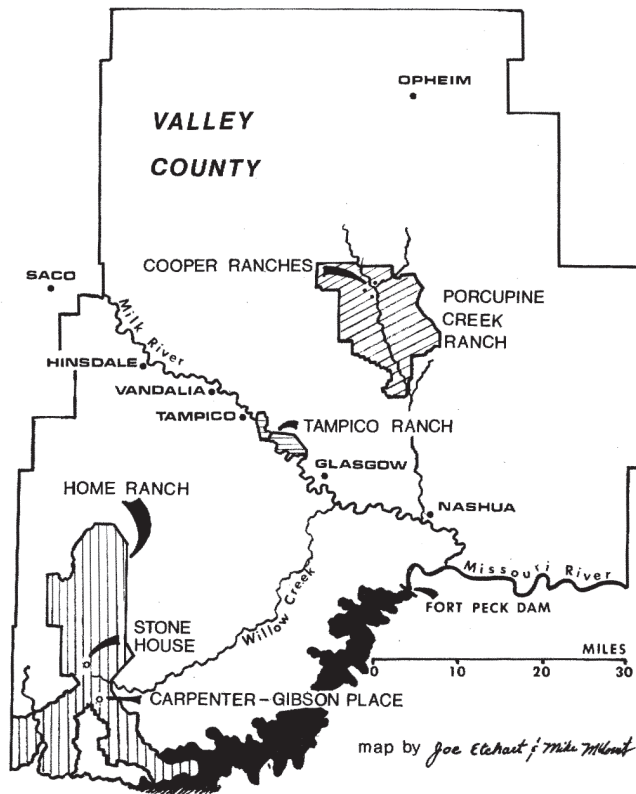
erty, gradually increasing the size of his own herd, while gaining a greater portion of the available open range surrounding the Stone House Ranch. In this manner he purchased the Aldabe ranch along the Missouri River, the Adam Blank place, which involved John Etchart's first acquisition of cattle, and the lands owned by local ranchers Frank Taylor and Gracian Ocofrain. But the most important of these acquisitions were the Carpenter and Gibson lands. These two bachelors had arrived in Valley County during the early 1880s as buffalo hunters. As the buffalo herds began to disappear from the Montana plains, Henry Carpenter and Lemuel W. Gibson entered into the livestock business. Using the NP Railroad Scrip and the Forest Lieu Selection process,¹⁶ they acquired most of the natural waterholes in the area southwest of Glasgow. In a country with little rainfall, these waterholes were key possessions. At the time John Etchart set up his operation, the Carpenter and Gibson lands were intermingled with his own. John first leased them from Carpenter and Gibson, old men by that time, and, upon their deaths, purchased them from the estate.

After the move to Glasgow in 1919, John began to think of extending his operation beyond the limits of the "south country," where there was now a limited opportunity for expansion. The logical direction seemed to be to the north of the Milk River, where grazing lands were available along Porcupine Creek, twenty to thirty miles northeast of Glasgow. Much as with the expansion of the South Ranch, John began to buy up established ranches in the north country. These included the three ranches owned by Charles, Frank and Francis Cooper, the Hovey place, the Hugh Calderwood place, the Martin Kaminski place, and the Andrew Lavenduski ranch. In addition, he leased grazing lands from the Fort Peck Indian Reservation and purchased land from individual Indians on the reservation.¹⁷

By 1921, the South Ranch had increased its herd of sheep from 5,000 to 16,000 head and acquired a significant herd of cattle. The stock in the south country continued to spend the entire year in the hills surrounding the Stone House

16. Since technically the railroads owned land in a checkerboard pattern on each side of the railroad, it is probable that Carpenter and Gibson arranged for a trade between the Northern Pacific Railroad and the U.S. Government, which owned land as far north as the Missouri River. Carpenter and Gibson would then have purchased the northern lands from the NP. The Forest Lieu Selection Act of 1897 allowed patented land-owners in national forest reserves to exchange their land for lieu selection rights on other public lands, which became a form of negotiable scrip.

17. Porcupine Creek forms the western border of the vast Fort Peck Indian Reservation. In the early part of this century the Reservation controlled large areas of rangeland, which were leased to local ranchers for a minimal fee. As competition for grazing land increased, the Indian lands were leased on a bid basis, involving an increasingly high floor price. Some Indians sold their parcels to local ranchers.



A map of Valley County in northeastern Montana, showing the Etchart family ranch properties along Porcupine Creek, the Milk River, Willow Creek, and the Missouri River. Outlined ranch areas on the map include deeded and leased lands. The Porcupine Creek ranch was sold by the Etchart family in 1978.

Ranch, feeding at the haystacks along the Missouri River during the dead of winter. But for the herds centered on the North Ranch, winter feeding posed a serious problem. Here the country was much more bleak, offering less available grazing and protection than the south hills.

In purchasing the Tom Dignan farm at Tampico in 1921,¹⁸ the Etcharts solved their problem. This was an irrigated farm, capable of producing large amounts of winter feed. As winter approached, the Etcharts brought their cattle from the North Ranch down to Tampico and fed them hay for the winter months. They also trailed the sheep that had summered on the North Ranch down to Tampico in late autumn, where they weaned the lambs and shipped them out by rail. From Tampico the bands continued south to the Missouri River breaks country, where they wintered with the herds from the South Ranch. In the spring the Etcharts moved these sheep up again

18. The farm was developed by Jim Hill, founder of the Great Northern Railway, to demonstrate an experimental irrigation system. This was the first irrigated farm in the Milk River Valley. Interview with Gene Etchart, May 1979.

through Tampico to the North Ranch for lambing and shearing. The extremities of the Etchart outfit now lay some ninety miles apart, with Tampico lying in almost direct alignment between the North and South ranches.

From 1920 to 1930, Montana ranchers such as John Etchart found it necessary to expand the size of their operations in order to keep unit costs down. As the cost of production rose significantly through increasingly high property taxes, as well as higher labor costs, the only way for a ranch to maintain itself was to increase its level of production. Etchart's purchase of the Tampico farm represented just such a calculated expansion. In addition to acquiring the means to produce more feed, Etchart developed a sugar beet crop at Tampico, which represented a source of cash, and acted as a soil builder when rotated with other crops.

In 1922 John decided to move his family to the Tampico property. He had the existing log cabin transported half a mile to a new site and built a two-story frame house around it and added a machine shop alongside the barn. At the time, it must have seemed to Catherine that Tampico was just another in the succession of places in which she would raise her family. But this one was to be different. It would be her home for the remaining fifty-five years of her life. Her children and grandchildren would know it well.

The house was divided into separate quarters, the family and the cook occupying the main floor, the ranch hands taking the large bunkhouse upstairs. Both family and "hands" took their meals in the huge basement kitchen. Catherine quickly established herself as mistress of the house. Rising at early hours, she supervised the cook in the preparation of each meal. She kept a huge garden of fruits and vegetables for canning. Her own business instincts became apparent as she entered into several successful ventures, such as raising silver foxes and turkeys, at one point even investigating the possibility of a mushroom farm at Tampico. She raised chickens in a railroad car behind the house, and kept five or six milk cows after John had abandoned the earlier thirty-cow dairy operation at Tampico. And there is a story about those cows. One day John decided that the time for keeping milk cows was past. As he made the arrangements to sell them, Catherine

19. Interview with Gene Etchart, May 1979.

protested that a farm could not exist without at least one milk cow; no farm in the Basque country ever went without one. John allowed her to keep her token cow, but one day decided to sell it as well. Catherine didn't argue with him, she simply went out and bought herself another one!¹⁹

The birth of Leonard in 1928 raised the number of Etchart children to five. At Tampico the children were free to tag along with the herders and ranch hands, to go swimming in the Milk River, and to play at the pool table inside the house. They attended school at a one-room schoolhouse in Tampico, crossing the distance of one mile on foot or on horseback. Always respectful of education, Catherine took the children's schooling seriously. When the family first moved into Glasgow from the Stone House Ranch, neither Ferne nor Gene spoke English, since Basque was the family's language of intimacy. One day Gene came home from school with a note addressed to his mother. The schoolteacher warned of the dangers of speaking Basque in the home, and advised Catherine to begin speaking English to her children. Within a year's time the Etchart children spoke English as well as any others and were forgetting Basque. As for Catherine, she began to wear down the pages of her Webster's Dictionary.

Although in the raising of her children Catherine had become an American, her methods of discipline remained typically Basque. A disapproving glance in the direction of a misbehaving child was more effective than any spanking. And there was one old-country custom that Catherine would not dismiss. It was a rare Sunday when the Etcharts did not get into their automobile and drive to St. Raphael's Catholic Church in Glasgow.

DURING THE FORMATIVE years of the Etchart ranching operation the family occupied a key position within the small but budding Basque colony of northeastern Montana. Besides John Etchart of Tampico and John Etchepare of Nashua, who had arrived prior to 1910, these included the three Tihista brothers and Fred Granada whose ranch lay east of Glasgow and just north of the Missouri River. John Espiel ranched also along the Missouri River. Fermin Ojuel had a ranch fifty miles

north of Glasgow, and Martin Capdeville ran a sheep ranch northwest of Glasgow. Pete Itcaina and Mike Arambide were partners in a ranch south of Glasgow, and later moved their operation to the south of Malta. John Amestoy was a farmer and rancher near Hinsdale. And Mitch Oxarart, who was an early partner in the Etchart cattle operation, set up his own cattle ranch south of Malta. It was not the type of Basque community found in Nevada, California, or Idaho. The Basques in northeastern Montana did not organize picnics, clubs or social centers: their numbers were too few for that. They did not teach their children the traditional dances, and they did not even speak to them much about the old country. For most of them, the Basque country represented a land to which they had said a final goodbye.

They often recruited herders and other ranch hands from among friends and relatives in the Basque country, so that each ranch became its own microcosm of Basque life. Ferdinand Urriarriet, John Etchart's nephew from Aldudes, worked as a herder and stockhand for six years until he drowned in the Milk River. John's cousins Pete and Joe Etchart eventually assisted in supervising the operation of the ranch. Jean-Baptiste Urquilux, Catherine's younger brother, joined John Etchart in the first years in Montana, and worked there for several years before leaving for California.

The Etcharts treated non-relatives as practically members of the family. Among these were Tony and Concepcion Bengochea. As a youth in the Basque country, Tony had worked for John Etchart's sister in Aldudes who, in 1920, secured a herder's job for him on the Etchart ranch in Montana. Ten years later Tony returned home to find himself a bride. He married Concepcion, a young Basque woman who had cooked for Spanish royalty. He brought her back to Tampico, where she spent much of the next twenty years as a cook for the family and ranch hands. In 1948, almost thirty years after Tony had arrived in Montana, the Bengocheas took their savings and bought their own ranch in the country north of Nashua.

Upon Tony Bengochea's arrival at the Etchart home in Glasgow in 1920, he acquired a special fondness for Catherine. "During the train ride from New York I felt so sick I couldn't take a bite of food," Tony remembers. "When the

bunch of us got to the Etchart house the first night, Mrs. Etchart saw that I was feeling sick. She put me to bed, right there in her home, and I stayed there for three days. She brought me food all during the day, just like I was her own son. She was a real lady, Mrs. Etchart, you'll never see another one like her."²⁰

Pete Handia, a Basque sheepherder who first worked at the John Etchepare ranch, later became a fixture in the Etchart operation. He was most known for his inability to grasp the English language, even after many years in America. It is said that if a person were giving him instructions in English, Pete would inevitably nod his head, but would often proceed to do the opposite thing. He became good friends with Catherine Etchart, who could chat with him in his native Basque tongue. Years later, after the Etcharts had converted to cattle, one band of sheep was retained for Pete Handia; he was a sheepherder, and a sheepherder could not work without sheep.

Although the ranching life did not leave much time for socializing, the Etcharts had a number of close friends. There was the Caricaburu family of seven children, headed by Mary, a Basque immigrant who had lost her husband at an early age. There were also the John Etchepare family and the Thomas Dignan family. Each year the Etcharts, the Etchepares and the Dignans gathered to celebrate the three holidays: Thanksgiving at the Etcharts, Christmas at the Etchepares, and New Year at the Dignans. It was a way of making up for the extended families that had been left behind in the Pyrenees.

DURING THE LATE thirties, the Etchart outfit began to convert from sheep to cattle. New immigration laws made it increasingly difficult to obtain herders from the Basque country,²¹ and American youths were more drawn by the image of the cowboy than that of the sheepherder. Furthermore, the Etcharts found that cattle were less threatened by predators than were sheep. By 1943 the outfit ran an equal proportion of sheep and cattle,²² and ultimately they completely phased out the sheep. Catherine Etchart's reaction to the change in livestock is remembered by Ed Gerspacher, a German immigrant who worked for the Etcharts as a young man. "Mrs. Etchart nearly

cried when they sold the sheep. She always said it was the sheep that made this ranch."²³

During the 1920s and 1930s ranch life changed in other ways as well. Pickup trucks replaced the teams and wagons that had been used for hauling feed. Machinery facilitated the chores of plowing, sowing, harvesting, threshing of the grain and the baling and stacking of hay. The effect was to reduce drastically the need for ranch hands. In the late twenties and early thirties, seventy-five horses were brought to Tampico from the Etchart North Ranch during summer to put up the hay. A crew of fourteen men operated fourteen horse-drawn mowers, each mower pulled by a team of two horses; they used approximately twenty-four pieces of horse-drawn haying machinery, each requiring a driver. With the advent of farm implements such as the swather, which combined the tasks of mowing and raking, they replaced seventeen men and seventeen teams by one man operating one machine with time usually left over for irrigating.

Over the years the Etchart operation did not escape its share of difficulties. Severe winters took their toll in numbers of sheep lost; during the winter of 1916, John Etchart rode over the top of his snow-buried corrals to reach the Stone House barn. The winter of 1936, when the Etchart herd was reduced from 15,500 to 10,000 head, is vividly remembered by son Gene: "We were forced to turn loose a couple of bands to fend for themselves. There was nothing else we could do, we couldn't herd them and we couldn't haul in feed."²⁴

The long period of drought in the early 1930s, combined with the onset of the American Depression, brought disaster to many local ranchers. Indeed, it was by a slim margin that John Etchart along with most other ranchers survived the year 1933. Following the nationwide "bank holiday" John went to the Larabie Brothers bank in Deer Lodge to withdraw his money, only to find that the firm had closed its doors indefinitely. He then went to a banker in Glasgow to ask for five hundred dollars to pay his

21. The shortage of herders in the U.S. first developed during WWI and became acute with the passing of the National Origins Act in 1924, which set restrictive quotas on immigrants to the U.S. from southern and eastern European nations.

22. On a feed requirement basis, one Animal Unit Month (A.U.M.) equals one cow or five sheep. An equal proportion of sheep and cattle, therefore, represents five times as many sheep as cattle.

23. Interview with Ed Gerspacher, May 1979.

20. Interview with Tony Bengochea, May 1979.



The marriage of two young Basques, Pete and Mary Caricaburu, was the setting for this picture, taken near Glasgow on September 22, 1922. Back row, left to right: Jack Dun, Jim Weaver, John Etchart, Thomas Dignan, Sr., and Carl Hammerness. Second row, left to right: Father John Finucane, Charley Etchepare, Martin Capdeville, unidentified woman, Mary Smith, Mary Eleanor Dignan, Mrs. John Barth, Mike Tihista, and Joe Askarbara. Third row, left to right: Catherine Etchart, Nora Ebersole, unidentified woman, Gabrielle Hammerness, Mrs. Jim Weaver, and Mrs. Horace Gamas holding infant son. Seated, left to right: Thomas Dignan, Jr., Ralph Etchepare, John Etchepare, Pete and Mary Caricaburu, Mrs. John Etchepare, Angela Etchepare, Marie Smith, and Margaret Dignan.

workers, but was granted only half that sum. The passage of the Farm Credit Act of 1933, which provided emergency capital and operating loans for agriculture, assisted his operation.²⁵

The construction of Fork Peck Dam from 1933 to 1937 had a significant effect on local ranchers. For a minimal sum the government purchased a large stretch of the Etchart South Ranch along the Missouri River to be inundated by the dam.²⁶

John's outlook was little affected by the crises of ranch business. As his son Gene remembers, "My father always said that his personal philosophy was to put your troubles aside at the end of the day, to have an enjoyable evening and a good night's rest, and to take up your problems in the morning with a fresh mind. And once you've made a decision, stick to it, don't look back. That won't do you any good."²⁷ Such a philosophy must have played no small part in John Etchart's success.

24. Interview with Gene Etchart, May 1979.

25. Wentworth, *America's Sheep Trails*, p. 445: "One of the chief causes of failure among the early livestock loan companies was lack of reserves. When the Farm Credit Act was passed, it was specified that a production credit association must maintain at least one dollar of liquid capital for each five dollars loaned."

26. Bunky Sullivan and Bob Saindon, "Taming the Missouri and Treating the Depression: Fort Peck Dam," *Montana the Magazine of Western History*, 27 (Summer 1977), p. 41.

Passage of the Taylor Grazing Act in 1934 made life somewhat easier for established ranchers. All of the grazing land that remained on the public domain was divided up into districts, to be held under permit by qualified ranchers.²⁸ The amount of grazing granted to a rancher depended upon the number of livestock he qualified for under the new law. Since only those who owned their own winter hay ranches and paid taxes on the land and livestock were eligible for leases and grazing permits, the Taylor Act eliminated the transients with whom the ranchers had competed for grazing lands.

BY 1935, John and Catherine Etchart were reaching a turning point in their lives. They had established their ranch and accepted Montana as their permanent home. Their children were becoming adults. In December of that year, John was hospitalized for minor surgery in Rochester, Minnesota. His letters home to Catherine, written in French, show him beginning to look back on his life in America. His love for his bride had not lessened

27. Interview with Gene Etchart, May 1979.

28. The amount of grazing land a rancher qualified for was determined by (a) *priority*: the number of stock he had paid taxes on in past years, and (b) *commensurability*: the number of stock he could feed and care for on his own land during winter.

during twenty-three years of marriage. A letter dated December 26, 1935 reads:

I have a lot of time to think about the past as well as the future. We can be satisfied with our past, we have accumulated a ranch and livestock which will keep us and our family from the poor house if we just give them the chance. As for the future, there are many things which we do, that bring us nothing but work, and I plan to eliminate several of these chores, such as butchering, washing, etc.—which make a slave of you! When I return, I plan to be the Boss, and I plan to pay more attention to my dear Catherine. I will write you as soon as I get up again. In the meantime, don't kill yourself with work. You can't do everything, anyway.

Your devoted,
John Etchart

John was indeed a successful man, prominent in the community in several capacities. He served as a member of many local boards, and, on a larger scale, he became a director of the Montana Production Credit Association, Montana director of the National Wool Marketing Corporation, director and vice-president of the Montana Wool Growers Association, and chairman of the Montana State Grass Conservation Commission. Although he bid unsuccessfully for the state legislature, he passed on an enthusiasm for politics to his son Mark, who would later become a state senator from Valley County.

Although such titles may evoke the image of a “white-collar” rancher, John Etchart continued to take part in the physical labor of the ranch. At Tampico he dressed in work clothes like anyone else. One hand who worked at Tampico as a young man remembers: “Oh, John worked right along with us. He was so easy-going and friendly, just like you or me. He was like a father to me.”²⁹

It could in fact be said that John had a reputation as a practical joker. One typical stunt was played on Hugh Calderwood, an old-timer who was often at the ranch, and Madeleine Barth Etchart, young wife of John's cousin Joe Etchart. This pair had entered a contest in which the contestants were to supply a name for a copper scrub-

29. Interview with Ed Gerspacher, May 1979.

30. Interview with Gene Etchart, May 1979.

ber. For a grand prize of \$25,000 they had entered the name “Scullery Maid,” and waited impatiently for a response from the sponsor. On April First John Etchart went to the telegraph office in town, got a blank telegram and typed out, “Congratulations! You are the first-place winners in our contest. Check will follow.” It was only after the jubilant couple had spent a long evening celebrating with the other workers on the ranch that John advised them of his own hand in the matter. Afterwards it was rumored that he was looking for a new address.³⁰

Saturday, April 17, 1943, marked the beginning of a new period in Catherine Etchart's life, a period of thirty-five years which she would spend without her husband. On that evening, she and John had planned to honor their habitual Saturday evening ritual. Usually, John would spend the day at business meetings in Glasgow, and on his return they would sit in front of an electric heater and snack on cheese and wine together. On this particular evening Catherine brought out the cheese and wine and sat down to await him. An hour passed, and then two hours, and John did not appear. By then she knew that something had gone wrong. Late that night Catherine and her youngest son, Leonard, learned that John had been struck with a fatal heart attack.

Catherine never cried. It was a quality that some people might misunderstand if they did not know her well. She was able to accept her husband's death because it meant only a temporary separation. For several days his table setting remained untouched at the head of the table. She refused to wash the smudge of dirt from the shirt he had worn that last day. These were her only signs of mourning. Years later she would reflect the same unwavering faith, upon the loss of her teenage granddaughter to a progressive disease, saying, without tears, “She is happier now than any of us.”

She would spend the next thirty-five years of her life without her husband. She would sleep on her own side of the bed, never disturbing the covers on his. She would tell people that John was taking care of her still, for didn't his life insurance checks arrive each month? And as John had predicted, his ranch and his livestock kept her family from the poor house.

At the time of John's death in 1943, the Etchart children, with the exception of fifteen-year-

Catherine and John Etchart's family in 1941, two years before his death. The children, left to right, are: Leonard, Mitchel, Ferne, Gene, Mark.



old Leonard, had all moved away from the ranch. In Glasgow the Etchart boys had taken a passion for aviation, begging lessons from the pilots of small planes that landed there. Eventually, the three older boys had obtained their pilot's licenses. Now, Gene and Mitchel were serving as military flight instructors in California during the war years, Mark was instructing and assisting in the management of a flying school owned by his brother Gene and O. E. Markle in Miles City, and Ferne was working at the Air Force base in Oxnard, California. As eldest son, Gene now returned home to assume management of his father's operation. When his brothers Mark and Mitchel returned home in 1949, management of the Etchart ranch was redistributed among the family. Leonard, who later pursued a career in medicine, sold his share to Mark and Mitchel. Choosing to enter into business on his own, Gene sold out to Mark and Mitchel and purchased the pioneer Frank Jones ranch northeast of Hinsdale, including irrigated lands on the Milk River west of Hinsdale, and later the Fermin Ojuel and Carl Anderson ranches fifty miles north of Glasgow.

CATHERINE ETCHART refused to fade into the background. After her husband's death, she took over the books for the ranching operation, and continued to help manage them until her death at the age of ninety. Her life style remained the same. She was always the ranch wife, rising at five-thirty to have the ranch hands' breakfast on the table by six-thirty, spending the morning hours at housework, helping the cook in the preparation of the noon and evening meals, tending her garden, canning her fruits and making her wine. As so many women of

the day, she claimed that recreation was a foolish waste of time. In the evenings she took long walks in the country, alone or with a little ranch dog, refusing to disclose her destination. Her quiet pattern of life was broken only once, during the mid-fifties, when her son Leonard made a special request of her, that she set up housekeeping for him during one of his years of medical school in Washington, D.C. The tiny Basque matriarch willingly transferred her life style to a Georgetown apartment, surprisingly undisturbed by the change. Visitors from Glasgow were welcomed there with caramel pudding and wine, just as they always were on the Etchart ranch.

She grew increasingly small. It is said that over the last fifteen years she lost one pound per year, until the age of ninety she weighed a mere seventy pounds. She ate less and less, and during her last years it could almost be said that she lived on air, taking a glass of warm water for breakfast and only a few bites of food at lunch and dinner. But her body seemed not to need food; she continued to work long hours without rest, and rarely complained of an ache or pain.

She lived alone with a cook and the ranch hands at the Tampico ranch, always refusing to move to Glasgow, where she might be nearer to three of her sons and their families. Even during the severe flood of 1952 she remained marooned in her house at Tampico, surrounded by dikes and sand bags. She went to town only twice a week. Each Friday she made a trip to the hairdresser, where she insisted on being taken to the most remote and private room; and on her way home made a stop for the week's groceries. On Sunday morning one of her sons would drive out to Tampico to bring her to church in Glasgow. There she had the self-appointed task of cleaning the church after Mass, gathering scattered missals and scraps

of paper from the pews. She took the noon meal in the house of one of her sons, and in mid-afternoon asked to be driven home.

Mid-morning was a special time for her. After breakfast had been served and the dishes done, she would quietly excuse herself to the privacy of her room to say her prayers. It was a ritual that she never dismissed, even if there were guests that seemed to demand her company.

Shopping trips were rare. She made her housedresses at home on her old Singer machine and purchased her shoes and accessories from the Sears and Roebuck catalogue, as in the early years. Among her few shopping trips, one is especially worth noting. In Helena with her family in 1976, she selected a red coat and a print dress for herself in a local department store. As she arranged payment for the clothes, she discovered that she had never bothered to check their prices. When she was told that the little dress had a price tag of ninety dollars, she went into a panic. Never had she heard of such a price for a dress. Since the clothes were already being adjusted to her tiny size, she went ahead with the purchase. But during the seven-hour drive home to Tampico, she continually shook her head, exclaiming, "Oh! Ninety dollars for a dress!"

She was ingenious when it came to saving money. It was a point of great pride to her that

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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during the last ten years of her life, from 1968 to 1978, as the price of food doubled, the grocery bill for the Tampico ranch did not increase by proportionately one cent. Refusing to throw away a scrap of food, Catherine had a talent for turning left-overs into a hearty meal. When one of her friends published a recipe for French pudding in the *Glasgow Courier*, she took it upon herself to call her friend to offer her a secret tip for improving her recipe. "You don't need to use six eggs," Catherine told her. "With my recipe you can get by with three!"

But in other ways she was extremely generous. She made innumerable donations to the Church, which almost always remained confidential. She sponsored the education of several young seminary students, and sent regular checks to countless Catholic institutions throughout the country. A sample bank statement, for the month of November 1961, lists checks to the Christmas Seal Committee, the Reverend Father Walsh, St. Raphael's Parish, Jesuit Missions, St. Columbus Foreign Mission Society, and Father Flanagan's Boys' Home. Toward the end of her life she began to ask that instead of giving her birthday and Christmas presents, her family make donations to the Church.

The Tampico home was on every possible mail solicitation list in the country, for Catherine Etchart was the ideal consumer. She found it impossible to believe that computerized letters were not written to her personally, no matter how many times her family pointed out to her that the body of the letter was printed in different type than the "Dear Mrs. Etchart." She defended her many purchases through the mail by explaining to her family that she was a "privileged customer." One typical afternoon she spent listening to a door-to-door insurance salesman, and ended the session by purchasing policies for her nineteen grandchildren.

It was her family's dream to take her home to the Basque country. Although Catherine's brother had died long ago, her two sisters were still living and longed to see their sister Catherine before the end of their lives. The Etchart family imagined that throughout her life in America, Catherine must have harbored the dream of returning home, of seeing her family and friends again. They were quite wrong. In January of 1964, Catherine finally explained her feelings in a

beautifully worded letter to her son Gene:

Dear Gene,

I am sorry to disappoint you and the young people on this trip to France.

I am perfectly satisfied where I am, all I ask is to live my remaining days in Tampico. Funny thing, isn't it?

No matter where we are we require transportation, meals, lodging at the end of the day. I have all this here.

Adventure is for the young, Gene. It took courage and decision to come over. I don't even want to think of it.

Make the necessary arrangements, fulfill your dream, take your family and enjoy yourselves without the worry of having an old sick lady on hand. You will have to have your raincoats, it rains there every day.

One time Catherine finally did agree to a return visit to France. "If you really insist, I'll go," she said to her children. "But let me tell you one thing. When I left home, I didn't want to say goodbye. And if I go back, I won't say goodbye again, I'll stay for good." This was the last mention her family made of the subject.

In the eyes of the nineteen Etchart grandchildren, John Etchart was only a legend. He died just before the birth of the first granddaughter in 1943. The grandchildren would know him only in pictures, as the handsome man who immigrated to Montana and established the Etchart ranching operation. But with Catherine it was different, for she lived to see her grandchildren grow from infants to adults. Tampico was a weekend home for the fifteen Etchart grandchildren who lived in Glasgow, and a gathering place for many a Thanksgiving dinner. It gave to the young ones their own special memories of childhood, memories of a simple and healthy life, of the small, gentle, reserved woman who was their grandmother. They would remember hearing her about the house in the early hours of the morning, as they lay half awake. They would remember her taking them into the bathroom where it was warm, to say their nightly rosary. They would

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remember that her idea of entertaining them was to have them work alongside her as she prepared the meals, cleaned the house, tended to her chickens and to her garden. The girls would keep the special note written to each of them at the time of their weddings, offering the best advice their grandmother could give:

Love has no boundaries. You delight in doing things for each other, being kind.

I crossed the ocean confident in my beloved. I never regretted it.

Catherine was ninety when her family lost her. In many ways, she may as well have been twenty, for her days still began at sunup, her craving for work was still strong. One day in April of 1978, she felt a severe pain in her stomach. She proceeded to give her home a thorough cleaning, defrosting the refrigerator, mopping the floors. It was as if she knew she would not be back again. Then she asked to be taken to the doctor. As she lay in the hospital for the brief period of nearly three weeks, she seemed impatient. When her family came to visit her, she asked a favor of them. "You pray for me, now," she said. "And don't you pray that I live. You pray that I go, and that I go soon." With a girl-like smile she pointed upward, saying, "I'm waiting for the angels to come and take me. I'm going to see John." It was only another voyage. She had made the first one for the sake of being with her husband. She was not afraid to make the second.



Catherine Etchart in 1955