

Three Generations of Basque Shepherders in Buffalo, Wyoming

Buffalo, Wyoming has been called the “Basque Web” because of the many interconnected family relationships that started in 1902 when the Esponda brothers first arrived there. This is the story of three generations from the house of Martinea in Les Aldudes, France with many interfamily relationships with three other nearby homes. Although their stay in Buffalo was short, it demonstrates the complexity of the family relationships that came to Buffalo and captures the tradition of Basque shepherd immigration to America.

Jean Esponda was born in the house of Artzainchuria in Baigorry, France in 1860. This home would also send multiple generations to Buffalo who remained there as longtime residents. His father had previously worked in South America, so the idea of immigrating and working in another country was not strange to his family. Jean was first married to Marie Uhalt from the house of Martinea in Les Aldudes, France and they had two daughters Catherine and Jeanne. After his wife’s death, Jean left his young daughters to be raised by a relative and went to California to herd sheep. In 1902, after a visit to his family in France, he was returning to California on a train heading west, when he met Patsy Healy, an owner of the Healy-Patterson Sheep Company in Buffalo, Wyoming. The man offered him a job as a shepherd in Buffalo and Jean changed his plans. According to this family’s oral history and supported by passenger records at Ellis Island, NY, Jean Esponda was the first Basque in Johnson County. Soon after arriving in Buffalo, his brother John B. Esponda joined him as well as two cousins, Pete and Simon Harriet. Jean only stayed in Buffalo a few years unlike his brother who remained there until death and is credited as being the early leader of the Basques in Buffalo. Jean would make two more trips to France to bring over each of his older daughters to marry each of the Harriet brothers in Buffalo. Jean finally sold his interest in the sheep business, then returned to France permanently in 1909 and married Catherine Iriart from the neighboring farmstead of Miguelenea. They had one daughter Marianne who was born in 1910 at Martinea. Jean became mayor of the village and died there in 1917.

In another neighboring home, Chilonea, the family of Baptiste and Maider Gariador had 9 children and became related to the Espondas through the marriage of two of their daughters to two of Catherine Esponda’s brothers from Miguelenea. This relationship possibly influenced two of the Gariador sons to head to Wyoming as shepherders. One son, Jean “Manech”, born in 1882, arrived in Buffalo in 1905 and worked for the Healy-Patterson Sheep Company like the other early arrivals. He remained a resident of Buffalo until his death many years later and was a well-known member of the Basque community that called him “Chilo”. The youngest child, Jean Martin, born in 1898, followed him and arrived in 1921. He remained there as a herder for a few years but he had promised to return to his homeland and arrived back in Les Aldudes in 1927. In that year he married Marianne Esponda, the daughter of Jean & Catherine Esponda. Martin and Marianne farmed and ran a corn mill at Martinea while raising their six children. He died there in 1971 but he would never forget his short stay in Buffalo.

Martin and Marianne Gariador’s 2nd child, Jean Baptiste, born in 1930 also desired to venture to Wyoming to work like his father and grandfather. At 14, his aunt Catherine Harriet offered to pay for an education in France but he declined. After spending two years as a paratrooper in the French army, Jean Baptiste headed to Buffalo in 1952 to work for the Marton sheep operation. Catherine Marton was from Artzainchuria and his mother’s first cousin. He worked in Buffalo for the Marton’s alongside his second cousins, John & Charles Marton and Domingo Martiarena, also from Artzainchuria. However after three years and especially three harsh winters, he dreamed of going to California and instead of returning to France, he headed to Los Angeles. Thus ended the immigration tradition of the family as he chose to continue his life in America rather than returning to France to marry. He initially worked in construction and later began cooking that became his profession. He always claimed to have learned his cooking profession in the sheep camps of Buffalo. He married Grace Biscay, a first generation American-born Basque from Lemoore, CA. They would ultimately reside in Chino, CA where they raised their three children and where he died in 1982.