

Generations

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Wyoming's Basque voice of the airways

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BUFFALO — For four decades Jeanette Esponda Maxwell's voice beamed over the airways to the people of Johnson County music, news and daily happenings in their community from KBBS Radio in Buffalo. Now retired, Maxwell seems even more petite and her voice may not be quite as strong as it once was, but at 76 Jeanette has a lot in common with the Energizer Bunny — she keeps on going.

Maxwell grew up in a family well known for keeping busy. Her Basque father, John Esponda, migrated to Wyoming a century ago from the Pyrenees Mountains between Spain and France to get a foothold in sheep ranching. After he got his start in his adopted land, Esponda sponsored other Basques wanting to make a new life in America.

John soon earned respect in the ranching business and was given a title of honor, "King of the Basques." Many of those he helped come to Wyoming were relatives or close friends.

The Basques of Johnson County are a close-knit, fun-loving group. Deeply committed to contributing to their new Wyoming community, most still want to retain something of the ethnic color and heritage of their native land.

John Esponda was the kind of "king" who motivated everyone around him to develop a good work ethic, including his children. The eldest Esponda son, Mitchell, died tragically as a child, but Jeanette, her sisters Grayce (Miller) and Noeline (Sun) and brother Art grew up absorbing the parental teachings well.

It's a good thing Jeanette's always been energetic because she gave birth to 12 children, nursed one son throughout his battle with terminal leukemia, had an active role in the lives of — in her own words — "too many grandkids to count" and is now racking up a number of great-grandchildren.

In college Jeanette majored in communication. Before she could fully establish her career she met "Whitey" and the two soon married. When her husband left the military and the couple returned to Buffalo to rear their family, Jeanette learned about a woman in Worland who had become involved in



'All the Basques are noblemen.'

JEANETTE MAXWELL



the radio broadcasting business.

"Her family was in the livestock business and I always had it in the back of my head that if she could do it, so could I," said Jeanette.

And do it she did — a little of everything from selling ads and broadcasting the news to organizing and hosting a weekly Sunday morning program of music and social information to the large numbers of her fellow Basque/Wyomingites who call this area home. She established the very popular "Trading Post" program each weekday morning, where locals could "buy, sell or trade," and in doing so put much of her own personality into the show.

"The radio station was a good place to teach my kids how to work," she says. "Most of them worked there and they, too, learned something about every aspect of the business."

Few Basques are more dedicated to keeping something of the culture of their mountain homeland alive than Maxwell. She taught her children about the country of their forebearers and like many young people of Basque descent the Maxwell youngsters participated in activities of the dancing/singing Big Horn Basque Club.

Now there's a new generation of Basque Club youth who, clad in colorful ethnic dress, still participate in such events as the annual Johnson County

Fair and Rodeo.

Jeanette says she's proud of her heritage and hopes all her countrymen who became Americans will always "keep a little something of the Basque culture within themselves."

In Mark Junge's book, "The Wind Is My Witness" — a biographic album profiling Wyoming people — Jeanette is quoted as saying, "You know all Basques are noble. We're peasant stock, maybe, but still noble ... one time in history when Basques were ruling themselves and they paid a tax to be able to do that, a decree came down from the kings that said, 'We want you to put out this tax for everyone except noblemen.' The answer went back, 'All Basques are noblemen.' And we didn't pay the tax."

Even the call letters of the radio station she and her husband, Vernon "Whitey" Maxwell purchased in 1956 had a Basque significance, according to Jeanette.

"The four letters had to begin with a 'K' because of regulations for radio stations west of the Mississippi River," she chuckles. "Originally, the letters BBS following the 'K' was meant to stand for 'Buffalo Broadcasting System.' Then my cousin, Domingo Martirena jokingly suggested that it really stood for 'Buffalo's Basque Station' and that was the germ idea to implement a program for the ethnic Basque population here."

And so it was that each Sunday morning the Basques of Johnson County could listen to an hour of music in their native tongue. Jeanette, Domingo and others who spoke the language would sometimes translate the words into English when songs were dedicated to individuals who didn't understand Basque. Birthday parties, anniversaries and well wishes for the ill and/or hospitalized residents of the community as well as updates on their conditions have long been part of the Basque program.

When Maxwell sold KBBS to Smokey and Judy Wildeman a few years ago she was pleased to learn that the new owners planned to continue the Basque programming.

"I think it's great they chose to do that," says Maxwell. "It's a service to the Basque people and there are many others who enjoy it as well."