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# **BASQUE CULTURE IN THE WESTERN UNITED STATES**

**ILLUSTRATED LECTURE BY MARIA-CARMEN RA. GAMBLIEL, DIRECTOR  
FOLK AND TRADITIONAL ARTS PROGRAM, IDAHO COMMISSION ON THE ARTS**



*FREE AND OPEN TO THE PUBLIC*

**Friday  
July 16, 2004  
12 NOON - 1:00 PM  
West Dining Room**

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# BASQUE CULTURE IN THE WESTERN UNITED STATES

**Maria-Carmen RA. Gambliel, Director**

**Folk and Traditional Arts Program, Idaho Commission on the Arts**

The Basque people, who call themselves "Euskaldunak," are inhabitants of the frontier region of southwestern France and northeastern Spain where the Pyrenees mountains slope down to the Bay of Biscay. An ancient race with mysterious origins, the Basques are a distinct racial and cultural group and speak a language that is related to none other.

The first Basque pioneers came to the United States in the 1860s to escape the restricted economy and military conscription in the Spanish and French Basque provinces. The early Basque communities in the Americas consisted primarily of single men who found employment herding sheep. The advent of the Basque boarding houses or *ostatuak*, traditionally run by a couple, provided much needed hospitality for the herding off-season, an opportunity for socialization, and job information. As women began to arrive from *Euskal Herria*, the Basque country, families were formed and started the first community dinners and picnics, as well as the annual Shepherd's Ball at the end of the year. Mutual Aid societies and a Basque Center, where people played music, a Basque card game, and held dances and dinners, completed the community social infrastructure.

Records from the Idaho Territory begin to show Basque names after the gold strikes in California in the 1860s. Early Basques were attracted by Idaho's mining, logging, and sheep industries. In the late 1800s, they arrived in large numbers from California and from the Spanish Basque provinces of Bizkaia and Gipuzkoa, and settled where there was work in Boise, Mountain Home, Nampa, Caldwell, and in the Wood River Valley. Learning English and starting a family were important to establishing roots in the United States. The Bizkaian and Gipuzkoan Basque dialects, however, are still spoken by many in Boise and other Idaho communities. Then and now, food, music, and dance, as well as language, are important elements of Basque identity.

After two generations their *Amerikanuak* descendants looked back to *Euskal Herria* and the culture of their extended families to find out what it really meant to be Basque, to live and speak like the Basques, notes Patty Miller, the executive director of the Basque Museum and Cultural Center of Boise. In the summer of 1960, the desire to learn Basque dances, music, and their language, *Euskara*, took a group of young *Amerikanuak* to Donosti, in the province of Gipuzkoa, where they learned centuries-old Basque dances. From the Donosti dancers the *Amerikanuak* also took the name "Oinkari," which means "one with fast feet."

