



Volunteer Effort Preserves Eastern Sierra History

In August, a dedicated group of 14 volunteers from throughout California and Nevada spent three days in the Carson Ranger District of the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest documenting the past lives of shepherders. Using aspen trees as their canvas and ten-penny nails, fingernails and small pocketknives to carve, the herders left a record (arborglyphs) of their experiences trailing sheep in the Sierra Nevada Mountains for over a century.

The project was a collaborative effort between Eastern Sierra Interpretive Association (ESIA) and the United States Forest Service (USFS). Kalie Crews, District Archeologist and Big Pine residents Nancy Hadlock and Richard Potashin (Aspenluv) coordinated the project. This marked the 4th year ESIA has sponsored an arborglyph documentation project. The crew included archeological technicians, history buffs, site stewards and individuals who worked on previous arborglyph efforts. Four groups of volunteers fought through dense underbrush and dodged thunderstorms to record 125 trees scribed with over 223 individual carvings. A number of carvings were disfigured by time or by more recent carvings left by hunters, lovers and recreationists.

Thirty five French and Spanish Basque shepherders, working primarily for sheep outfits in the Minden-Gardnerville area, left names and dates on aspens in the project area. The dates spanned a period of grazing activity from 1904 to 1992. The grove contained healthy trees with some carvings well over 100 years old that remain legible. However, as the aspens grow and expand, the trees can add dramatic effects to the original carving.

Volunteers discovered a wealth of drawings on the trees covering -- women, prostitutes, stars and herder self-portraits as well as extraordinary examples of cursive lettering and flourished capital letters. The grove

featured many carving styles, giving volunteers a chance to ponder the intent of what the herder was trying to express. Another unique feature of this grove were carvings of boxers highlighting Joe Lewis and the Basque heavyweight fighter, Paulino Uzkadun, who fought Max Baer in an historic twenty round bout in Reno that drew over 20,000 spectators. Many Basques, from all over Nevada, including many sheepherders, came to view and bet on the fight.

The weekend furnished archaeologists and volunteers with a veritable immigration record of who came to America to better their lives and where they hailed from in the Basque country. The Borda Brothers, Ramon (*Eramon*), Batita (*Baptista*) and Guillien (*Guilen*) came from Bidarray, a village in the French Basque country, to herd sheep in Nevada and California. Their magnificent carvings (including Bidarray, and Biba France) date as far back as 1911 and 1915. One hundred and three years later, a grandson of Ramon, Ted Borda, still grazes sheep in the Eastern Sierra.

The group was honored to have Marie Louise Lekumberry join Sunday's documentation effort. Marie Louise and her brother Robert, French Basques, own the famous J.T. Basque restaurant in Gardnerville, Nevada. Their father, Jean Lekumberry herded sheep in the Bridgeport and Twin Lakes area before entering the restaurant business. Marie is well acquainted with many of the Basques that reside in northern Nevada and recognized some of the herder's names. Being fluent in Basque, she was able to provide added assistance translating names, words and phrases carved in this mysterious language.

Why would anyone want to wonder around aspen groves straining their eyes, bodies and brains to record old sheepherder carvings, especially on the eclipse weekend? The answer lies in the fact that this history will soon be lost. Aspens are short-lived and so are the carvings. Many trees are already dead and shedding bark or cracked through the middle making interpretations challenging or in some cases impossible. It is essential to preserve the history of a once vibrant sheep ranching industry that, like many of the trees in this grove, is dying out. The carvings offer a window into this activity once a driving force in the economy of the Eastern Sierra.

Furthermore, this documentation preserves the legacy of a distinct and unique cultural group, Basques, often missing from historical treatises on the American West. They wrote their own history, often fraught with loneliness, hope, and despair on the trunks of aspens. As shepherders, they received little respect or admiration and were not portrayed as heroes settling this country. How many times did John Wayne play a shepherd? These carvings, and efforts to document them, provide an educational opportunity for many and spark further research into the shepherding history of a particular area. They also make recruiting willing volunteers an effortless task. These folks know once the trees are gone, this history is lost to us all.

These volunteers worked hard and were required to record trees in accordance with a time-consuming USFS archaeological protocol that includes descriptions, photos, GPS locations, illustrations and measurements of each carving. Their reward is being treated to a Basque-American soup/stew shepherders might have enjoyed during their stay in the same sheep range a hundred years ago. Basque music and shepherd stories shared under a canopy of stars complete the evening.

A dramatic illustration of how vulnerable these carvings are to destruction by natural forces came when a wildland fire erupted and advanced within a hundred yards of the grove, threatening many undocumented aspen carvings. Fortunately, not a single tree was touched... this time! Although fire is an important factor in the reproduction of aspen trees, it can eliminate the history they harbor in an instant.

Arborglyphs continue to be threatened by the behaviors of uneducated campers and hunters who also wish to “leave their mark” in the forest. The Carson Ranger District reminds the public not to carve on trees because pathogens that can kill the tree may be introduced. It remains illegal to damage trees with or without arborglyphs or saw off arborglyphs and haul them away. This history needs to remain where it is for everyone to learn from.

Preserving history is an enduring reward for the long hours these volunteers log. Arborglyphs reveal intimate details of sheepherders lives on the open range and this project, and the cultural and historical information it gathered, will remain accessible to the public long after these trees have died away.

Authors: Richard Potashin & Nancy Hadlock

How you can help with this effort in the future? This year ESIA received a donation that assisted in funding the 2017 project. You too can donate to ensure continuation of this historical preservation effort. Contact Jeff Gabriel, ESIA Director at: jeff@esiaonline.org or visit the website at: www.esiaonline.org and indicate you are interested in donating to the **Arborglyph Project**. If you would like to be one of the privileged few who actually volunteer their valuable time, you can contact Nancy Hadlock and Richard Potashin at aspenluv1@gmail.com. Please include your interest in the heading!