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Horse Meadows and Bohler Canyon Arborglyphs: History Recorded on the Trees
Nancy Hadlock¹ and Richard Potashin²

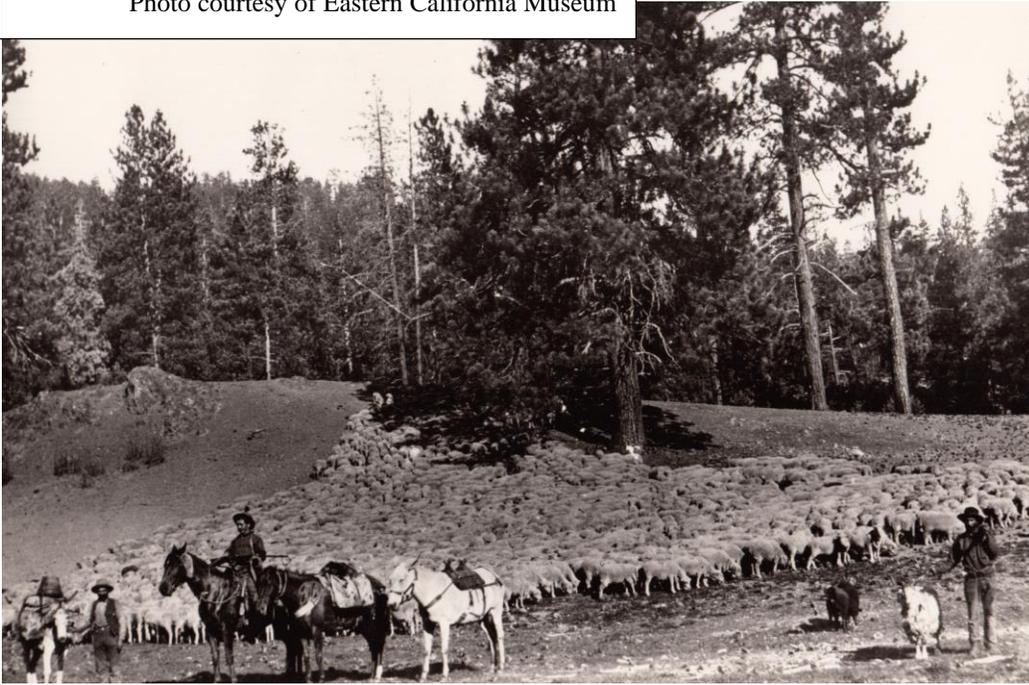
Sheep grazing in the Mono Basin is characterized by four distinct periods. The first period coincided with the mining boom at Bodie and other camps in the 1870s and 1880s, stimulating the demand for lamb, mutton and wool. Fred Fulstone, member of a pioneer Nevada ranching family, is convinced that the early miners could not have endured the harsh working conditions in the mines without the high quality protein of mutton. Many of the pioneer families, the Filosenas, Sylvesters, Mathieus, Conways and DeChambeau's, who accompanied this boom were ranchers, bringing with them herds of sheep that remained in the Mono Basin year-round.

The second and most intense period occurred at the turn of the century and lasted until 1934. Large bands of sheep were driven into the basin from Fresno and Kern Counties every summer by landless, alien Basques, referred to as itinerant or tramp herders, who took advantage of the open range conditions. The sheep followed either a sheep driveway from Bakersfield and Mojave up along the west side of the Owens Valley and into the Mono Basin or over steep, challenging Sierra Nevada passes (such as Sonora). There they grazed in the lush meadows of the high sierra. This seasonal migration of sheep from lowland areas to high mountain meadows over great distances is referred to as transhumance.

¹ Nancy Hadlock is of Basque heritage and has been researching arborglyphs with her husband Richard for over 18 years.

² Richard Potashin is an amateur historian and has conducted hundreds of oral histories related to the Eastern Sierra's past.

“Pouring Sheep”, Giraud Brothers 1897
Photo courtesy of Eastern California Museum



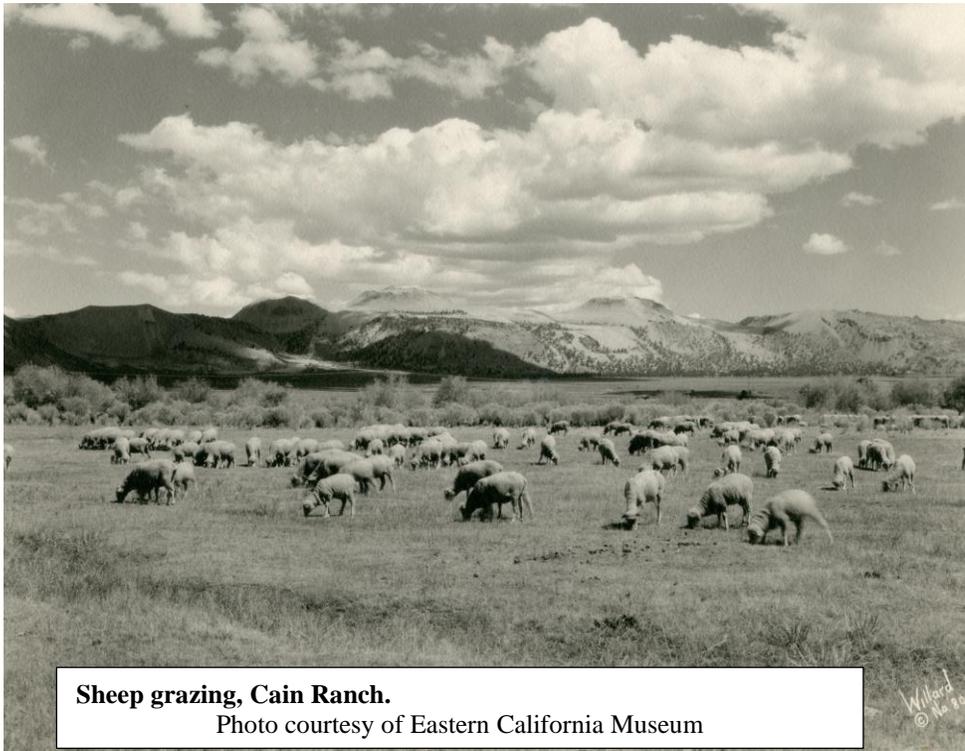
The
total
influx
every
year

approached 200,000 sheep, causing considerable competition for forage and range degradation. Migratory and domestic sheep bands on public lands were placed under some grazing controls in 1905 when much of the southern half of Mono Basin became part of the Sierra Forest Reserve. More management came with the establishment of National Forests. However, Forest supervisors were hampered by a lack of funds and boots on the ground, in the form of ranger, to effectively enforce grazing restrictions. Trespass violations continued to be a vexing issue and grazing remained relatively uncontrolled until the passage of the Taylor Grazing Act in 1934. The act ushered in the age of regulation and management by creating grazing allotments favoring established, landowning ranchers and effectively abolished the tramp herder who went to work for these ranchers. The period from the 1960s to the present has seen a major decline in open range sheep operations and the industry in general owing to the increasing pressures of environmental regulations, water restrictions, land use conflicts, recreation and protection of the Sierra Bighorn Sheep. In conducting research on Horse Meadows and Bohler Canyon, the two locations where arborglyph documentation projects occurred, these historical patterns held true.

After grazing by itinerant sheep operators, Horse Meadows, in 1908, became part of Mono National Forest and subject to federal management. Inyo National Forest grazing records place the earliest sheep grazing on this section of the Mono N.F. back as far as 1918. That year Blackwell out of Smith Valley, Nevada (NV) as well as Minaberry and Salz out of Benton, California (CA) summered their flocks on this location. Gonder from Smith Valley, NV was issued a permit to graze Upper and Lower Horse Meadows in 1919 followed by Pedro Hualde from Benton, CA in 1921. When former Mono National Forest lands were transferred to the Inyo National Forest (INF) in 1945, the meadows fell

into the Horse Meadows Allotment managed by the Mono Lake Ranger District. Later grazing permits for this allotment were issued to a number of open range sheep outfits based out of Bakersfield and Bishop: Leornard Bidart (1930s out of Bishop, CA), Mendiburu and Rudnick Sheep Company (M&R), (1940s-1960s out of Oildale, CA), Inyo Sheep Company (1960s-80s), Mendiburu out of Round Valley, CA) and Pedro Ermeta (early 1990s out of Bakersfield, CA). A small number of arborglyphs, with dates as far back as 1909, reflect the earliest days of the Mono National Forest. Many of the remaining carvings documented in Upper Horse Meadow could be attributed to shepherders working for M&R and Inyo Sheep Companies.

Dovetailing with these historic grazing patterns was the Los Angeles Department of Water Power (LADWP), which as early 1919, began acquiring land and water rights in the Mono Basin in preparation for constructing their Mono Basin extension project in the 1930s. During this same period, LADWP implemented a policy of leasing out Mono Basin lands for sheep grazing under heavy regulation. Two prominent sheepmen, Joe Mendiburu and Fred Fulstone, rise to the forefront of sheep operations in the Mono Basin. They hired the shepherders who carved the trees and some context on their operations is in order.



Sheep grazing, Cain Ranch.
Photo courtesy of Eastern California Museum

Cain Ranch, base of LADWP's Mono Basin Operations, also served as a base for Mendiburu and Rudnick's sheep operations in the Eastern Sierra. They leased LADWP land, the meadows west of Cain Ranch for their sheep and also held grazing leases on the Inyo National Forest for Alger Lake, Lee Vining and June Lake allotments, as well as Bureau of Land Management (BLM) leases for Mono Mills area and other private leases. Overall companies owned by the Mendiburu family were permitted to graze in the Mono Basin from 1941 to 1999.

Mendiburu's Mono Basin summer ranges were a significant part of a larger ranching empire that stretched across vast portions of California, Arizona and Texas. Established in 1938 by Basque Gregorio Mendiburu, in partnership with Oscar Rudnick, a Jewish businessman, M&R Sheep Company grew steadily through the years and later was managed as the Inyo Sheep Company by Gregorio's son, Joe Mendiburu. A 1965 INF grazing report indicated Mendiburu owned 30,000 sheep, 8,000 cattle, 150,000 acres of ranch property in Cantil, Brawley and Bakersfield; 10,000 acres of that in pasture and hay. The Mendiburu's Leased 40,000 acres of summer range, 100,000 acres of spring and fall range, as well as a feed mill and feed yard. According to the Mono Basin Environmental Impact Report, 1993, the typical rotation was as follows:

In winter and spring M&R grazed their sheep in the lower San Joaquin Valley and Mojave Desert east of Cantil. As the season progressed, bands were trailed, (later trucked) northward to summer ranges in the Mono Basin. Once there, the bands were split and placed on LADWP, BLM, and USFS, lands which included Upper Horse Meadow and Bohler Canyon. In the fall, the sheep would be trucked back to the Cantil ranch, east of Mojave. This rotation incorporated forage produced by private properties in the San Joaquin Valley." The report continues that historically, "these operations represent the first established grazing use of the desert and were the first to be managed under the Taylor Grazing Act. Most of the operators are Basque descendants of the early grazers. The sheep industry is the mainstay of the Basque subculture in Bakersfield, Reno, and throughout the western states. The flocks of sheep are usually herded by hired herders, and the owners live in Bakersfield. Typically, the herders, though not necessarily Basques, are not fluent in English and have very limited employment opportunities outside of the sheep industry.

The other site where arboglyph documentation took place was Bohler Canyon. It was also originally part of the Mono Basin National Forest but became part of the Bloody Canyon grazing allotment after the Inyo National Forest expanded in 1945. Arboglyphs dates here, like Horse Meadows, document grazing as far back as the early 1900s. However, the earliest INF grazing records document grazing use beginning in the 1940s and place Fred Fulstone Jr., a prominent rancher from Smith Valley, NV, as the chief leasee, permitted to run sheep from 1944 to 1999. The Fulstone family has run sheep and cattle in eastern California and Nevada since the 1860s. They own substantial amounts of land and property rights in Mono County, California and Lyon County, Nevada as well as BLM grazing leases in Bodie, CA, the Wellington Hills of Nevada and Conway Ranch, CA. Several of Fulstone's allotments, including Bloody Canyon, were retired in 1999 due to concern over disease transmission from domestic sheep to bighorn sheep. Many of the carvings documented in Bohler Canyon might be attributed to Fulstone's herders, though there may be considerably overlap between Mendiburu and Fulstone's movements through the area.

The sheepherders who worked for these two companies and left records of their presence in the Eastern Sierra on aspen trees are the real focus of our research. The majority of carvings documented in Upper Horse Meadow and Bohler Canyon can be attributed to

Basque shepherders. The Basque are an indigenous ethnic group who primarily inhabit an area traditionally known as the Basque Country (Basque: Euskal Herria), a region that is located around the western end of the Pyrenees on the coast of the Bay of Biscay. They are considered the original Europeans and have a unique language whose origins cannot be traced. This ethnographic group was suited to shepherding due to their loyalty and ability to accept the hardships and isolation of shepherding in the Sierra. They were recruited by sheep ranchers and organizations, like the Western Range Association, and immigrated to the United States on three-year contracts from the early 1900s to the 1970s. They were given a band of sheep (usually 1,500 to 2,000), a burro, a tent, two dogs, a rifle and sent into the mountains with an occasional visit from the camp tender to replenish supplies as their only company. Shepherders saved their salaries and improved their lot by becoming owners and ranchers, who then hired other Basque herders from their hometowns or regions.

Although there is no presence of their carvings in the Upper Horse Meadow/Bohler Canyon arborglyph sites, several Native American herders carved trees in other Eastern Sierra locals. Later, roughly around the 1960s, Basque and Anglo sheep owners like Mendiburu and Fulstone hired Peruvians, Chileans and Mexicans to herd their flocks in the Eastern Sierra. These herders continued the carving traditions begun by the Basques.

Why did they carve? Joxe Mallea in his article, “Carving Out History,” offers his explanation:

With the exception of drought years, pasture in the high country was plentiful and the sheep grazed until 10 A.M. and after 5 P.M. They laid down in the shade the rest of the day. The herder could do the same, unless predators were present. He selected a campsite in the cool aspen forest, preferably near a creek, and most days he could daydream, take a long siesta, do some cooking or laundry, or go fishing to spice up his diet of beans, potatoes, bread, mutton, and wine.

In this life in Eden there was an important detail missing: Adam had no Eve; he was all alone and the isolation could be crushing. Therefore, the happy coincidence of three components—leisure time, loneliness, and trees—made the arborglyphic phenomenon possible.³

³ Joxe Mallea-Olaetxe, “Carving Out History: The Basque Aspens,” *Forest History Today*, Spring/Fall 2001, 45.



Antonio Villanueva
Viva Navarra

Knives were the primary tool herders used to carve aspens. With soft, thin bark that easily scratched, a nail, obsidian or even a fingernail left an incision. Then the tree took over, the thin incision eventually becoming a scar that expanded as the tree grew and could remain legible for a century. Who could resist the contrast of dark letters imposed on a ghostly, white canvas?

In recording their history on the trees, sheepherders covered a variety of themes in their carvings - women, loneliness, patriotism, range conditions, religion and even on occasion, world events. First, though, you recorded your name and your presence at a specific geographic location on a given day, month and year.

Despite a widespread geographic distribution throughout the West, land managers, archeologists and the public have begun to acknowledge the significant historic and ethnographic value Basque arborglyphs represent. Aspens are short-lived and so are the carvings. To address this situation, Aspenluv, our informal company, has been documenting arborglyph sites up and down the Eastern Sierra since 2007.

In the summer of 2015, with the support of Inyo National Forest, arborglyphs in Upper Horse Meadows and Bohler Canyon were formally documented for the first time. We will never know how much we lost. At this time we would like to share some of what we found in these groves. Upper Horse Meadows served as a sheep camp and grazing location for 600-1000 sheep per season for at least nine decades. It functioned as a “temporary” grazing location when sheep were moved between allotments. The historic carvings reflect this economic activity, as the aspens in the meadow essentially became a bulletin board for herders and an unofficial record of immigration from the Basque Country.

A total of six discrete arborglyph sites were identified in Upper Horse Meadows consisting of 57 scribed trees located on the far northwest edge of the meadow. Most of the trees in this site are carved with names and dates. The dates cover a wide span of



Cadet
Irigoin
1935

time; from the 1900-1910 to the 1990s. Most of the carvings range between 1910 and the 1960s when sheepherding in the Eastern Sierra area was at its peak. A majority of the names found on the trees are Basque with a few Mexican and Peruvian surnames. A couple of Anglo names were also encountered. It was not uncommon to find initials rather than full names carved on trees. There are several pictures of women, a common theme found in sheepherder arborglyphs, as well as other messages occurring in this site. Messages such as *Viva Ni* (Long live me!) and *Goodbye amigos mucha suerte* (goodbye friends much luck). A handful of herders, including

Antonio Villanueva, Alex Yrastorza and *Cadet Irigoin*, carved several trees in this site. There are references to towns, provinces and countries that these men hailed from. Most

common on the trees are Navarra, a province in the Spanish Basque country and Espana (Spain). Francisco Aguirre carved his village name followed by tarra which means person from that village. Carvings in this site display a diversity of styles from block letters with flourished capitals to flowing cursive and are carved vertically, horizontally and diagonally on the trees.

One very special carving expresses connections to events unique to the Basque culture which these men left behind when they came to America to herd sheep. The carving pictures a man being chased by a bull with the words *San Fermin*, a direct reference to the Festival of San Fermin and the famous

“running of the bulls.” Expressions of pride and loyalty for a sheepherder’s country, province or village such as the *Viva Espana* show up in this site and may be the result of homesickness for the Old Country and the extremely unfamiliar landscape that the Great Basin herders found themselves in. One herder, Antonio Villanueva, expressed support for both his native country (*Viva Espana*) and his adopted country (*Viva America*). Judging from the surnames left on the trees, both Spanish Basques (Villanueva, Yrastorza, Mascotema) and French Basques (Yrigaray, Irigoin) frequented the meadows with the majority being from the Spanish Basque country. As herders then and now would tell you, “*We are not French or Spanish, first and foremost we are Basques.*” Carvings of women, a common theme for young

sheepherders alone for months at a time, are found in this site but not in concentrations that appear at other sites in the Eastern Sierra. From the carvings we noted the presence of other ethnic groups such as Peruvians and Mexicans in this site. One carving references *Hyo-Peru 1998* with a backdrop of mountains, which may be the Sierra Nevada or perhaps the Andes where the herder hailed from. It is difficult to generalize when discussing this topic since names that sound distinctly Mexican may have Basque origins. The presence of Peruvian and Mexican carvings reflects a distinct socio economic shift in the sheepherder labor pool. It reflects the emergence of Basques in the West as sheep owners and the improving economic climate in the Basque Country.



In recording Bohler Canyon, we found out first hand how urgent and critical our work preserving history on the trees was; a history that can go up in flames in an instant. We began documenting the upper part of Bohler Canyon in early July. In August, while on another project in the Bodie Hills, we watched in horror as the Walker Fire erupted and raced down the Bohler Canyon drainage consuming aspens in our project area. It was nearly a month before we were allowed back into Bohler Canyon to salvage what arborglyphs were left. Many carvings were blackened, some survived and thanks in part to our familiarity with names, carving styles we documented about 85% of what had burned.



Numerous arborglyph concentrations were documented along a four-mile stretch of Bohler canyon with 113 scribed trees being recorded. Despite being in different allotments, similar shepherd names and dates recorded in Upper Horse Meadow cropped up in Bohler Canyon, which formed a significant connection between the two areas. Some of the names found in both locations included; Antonio Villanueva, Alex Yrastorza, Julian Garate, Cadet Irigoien and Abigael Ruiz. Every one of these men carved multiple trees in Bohler Canyon.

In addition to names and dates, there were references to hometowns and provinces, specifically Valle de Baztan, a valley in the province of Navarra in the Basque Country where a number of herders hailed from. Carvings done by French Basques were also recorded in Bohler. Dates range from 1904 to the 1990s.



Bernardo Redin

Every herder has his own individual style, but Bohler Canyon served as an excellent example of how herders can be influenced by the styles of others. In 1953, *Bernardo Redin* carved his name, date and village with the stems of his letters bent inward. Jose Maria Mendiburu came along in 1954 and used a similar style to express himself on the numerous trees he carved. Another unique style emerged in Bohler, what can only be described as “Aspen Pointillism” after the impressionist style of painting made popular at the turn of the twentieth century. Jose Maria Mendiburu, possibly used the point of a jackknife or nail to create his name as a series of points. In 1963, Jose Ugalde came along and copycatted that style just below Mendiburu’s carving.

Several graphics included male and female genitals and a cowboy style self-portrait. By far the most poignant graphic documented was a carving of Jesus on the cross touching on the strongly Catholic background of most Basque herders.



From our documentation of Upper Horse Meadow and Bohler Canyon, we were able to draw the following conclusions and identify areas for follow-up research. Although historians, who have studied shepherding in the American West, have Basques dominating the shepherder ranks until the 1960s when they drop out of the picture. In certain areas that generalization does not hold wool. Our documentation efforts established the presence of Basque shepherders well past the 1960s. But while open-range sheep operations vanished from many areas in the western states, grazing in the Mono Basin, as referenced by arborglyph dates, remained steady until 1999, when the bighorn vs. domestic sheep controversy reared its horns, retiring allotments, sheep, and shepherds.⁴

As far as follow-up, the clock is ticking on aspens in Upper Horse Meadow and Bohler Canyon. There is an urgency to identify critically important carvings at risk of being lost to the elements and removing the bark in order to preserve the carvings. An example would be the unique “running of the bulls” arborglyph in Upper Horse Meadow and “Pointillism” style of Jose Maria Mendiburu in Bohler Canyon.

In addition to online genealogical research, interviewing key figures in the sheep industry in the Mono Basin such as former herders like Jose Maria Mendiburu, Julio Gorriz and longtime sheep rancher Fred Fulstone are essential to flushing out the personal stories behind an industry once a dominant economic force in the Eastern Sierra. Where are folks like R. Martin Potes today? Who went back to the Basque country? Who stayed here? What were their individual shepherding experiences?

The burning of Bohler Canyon in the summer of 2015 and the ultimate loss of arborglyphs there makes the compelling case for why documentation efforts must continue. There are numerous arborglyph sites throughout the region similarly threatened. Preserving the history of Basque presence in the Mono Basin, written on the trunks of trees, must be given the support of land managers, archeologists, historians and the general public in the Eastern Sierra. We welcome any and all with an interest in volunteering for future arborglyph documentation projects to contact us and encourage folks to financially support Eastern Sierra Interpretive Association’s continuing commitment to underwriting these valuable arborglyph projects.



⁴ Inyo National Forest Grazing Archives.

Sources:



Julian Garrate 1940
JG
1942

Mono Basin EIR, [www.monobasin](http://www.monobasin.org) clearinghouse.org

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Inyo National Forest Grazing Archives, INF Headquarters, Bishop, CA.

Unless otherwise credited, photos are from the authors collection.