High Country News

FOR PEOPLE WHO CARE ABOUT THE WEST

New world, new canvas

Ex-priest reconstructs a working-class history from Basque arborglyphs

Jane Braxton-Little | **June 11, 2010** | *From the print edition*

Oldest recorded Basque arborglyph 1870
Estimated number of carvings on the Tahoe National Forest 30,000
Basque regions represented in carvings on Peavine Mountain, Nevada 4
Number of camcorders Mallea-Olaetxe has worn out 6
Number of books Mallea-Olaetxe has written 5 – "or is it 6?"

Joxe Mallea-Olaetxe is on his hands and knees examining the trunk of a fallen aspen tree. Between peeling slabs of white bark the size of headstones, he points out a section carved with mysterious shapes and barely legible words. "This could be '*Urepeleko*.' This guy must have written the place he is coming from -- Urepele, in southwestern France," he concludes, his grin deepening the laugh lines that frame his piercing blue eyes.

Mallea-Olaetxe (his full name is pronounced *HO-shey ma-YEA-a o-la-ET-che*) studies history in trees. Still ruggedly handsome at 70, with a rakish black beret and auburn goatee, he is on a mission to record the engravings left by Basque sheepherders in aspen groves throughout the mountains of the American West. Over more than a century, starting in the mid-1800s, thousands of Basque men left their villages in the Pyrenees Mountains of northern Spain and southern France, immigrating to America in search of better lives. Some were driven by raw adventure; others were the younger sons of large families who had no hope of inheriting the ancestral farm. In the mid-1900s, still others came to escape the harsh rule of Spanish dictator Francisco Franco.

Many of the newcomers ended up working for large companies, tending flocks of sheep. For months on end, they lived in remote aspen groves near the meadows where their charges fattened up -- future high-protein fare for miners and loggers. Alone and

far from their families, homesick herders carved their names, thoughts and fantasies on the trees. Some images are elaborate, evoking the deep yearnings of lonesome men in a strange new land. Some are crudely pornographic.

The carvings in this copse of aspens, high above the east shore of Lake Tahoe, are part of an array that stretches from Yosemite National Park north to Plumas National Forest in the Sierra Nevada. The sweet scent of late summer grasses wafts through the grove as Mallea-Olaetxe rises to his feet, a Clark's nutcracker yakking at him from a towering pine. He moves to a standing tree with deeply etched outlines of a couple. The woman wears boots and an old-country dress, the man a beret and fancy belt. They are shaking hands: A wedding, perhaps, Mallea-Olaetxe says. Nearby, on another tree, a donkey nurses a gigantic snake while a foal looks on. "Where this comes from I do not know," he says, flashing a bemused smile that charms as it apologizes.

What Mallea-Olaetxe does know, after recording more than 27,000 carvings over two decades, is that these are not just random scratches by men with time on their hands. Arborglyphs, as they're called, chronicle a unique and little-known Western way of life. It's a working-class history, "saturated with humanity," written by the people themselves without revision by rulers or powerful employers. "This is not history by some academic in an ivory tower," he says, with a wink at the irony that he, a recently retired college instructor of Basque history and language, is assembling it. "It's as democratic and down-to-earth as history can get."

Like the sheepherders he studies, Mallea-Olaetxe immigrated to America from the Basque country of Spain. Unlike them, he was not under contract to a big sheep company. "My big company was the Catholic Church," he says. Raised on a remote mountain farm, Mallea-Olaetxe was sent to a Catholic boarding school when he was 9 and entered a seminary at 16. There he clashed with the oppressive regime of Franco, who ruled Spain from 1939 until his death in 1975. The schoolboys were forbidden to speak Basque. Every time Mallea-Olaetxe did, the teacher tightened a wire painfully wrapped around his finger. Mallea-Olaetxe's eyes still blaze with fierce Basque pride when he recalls Franco's clumsy attempts to destroy his language. It was an early sign of the activism that would define his life.

In 1964, the Catholic Church sent Mallea-Olaetxe to a monastery in upstate New York to learn English so that he could become a parish priest. After he was mugged over a pizza in front of the church, though, Mallea-Olaetxe left for Elko, Nev., in 1968, where

he began ministering to the Basque herders who lived in the mountains. He saw his first arborglyphs by chance, riding horseback to a sheep camp in a remote region in northeastern Nevada. "You couldn't miss them, really, because the horses took us inches from the aspen trunks." Names, dates and drawings covered the trees from their bases to as high as a man could reach. But it was the extreme loneliness of the landscape that most impressed the newcomer, not the carvings. He mentioned it to the herder, who replied, "Remote, you say? God has yet to arrive here."

Mallea-Olaetxe's tenure as a priest in Elko was cut short in 1970 after he got in trouble with his bishop for officiating at a wedding in a Methodist church. So Mallea-Olaetxe began a decade of wandering -- leaving behind the books of his church-bound childhood to follow the life of a workingman. He tended bar in Winnemucca, kept bees in Arizona, and supported his wife and three children by growing and selling steak tomatoes in a back-to-the-land venture in Arkansas.

Ultimately, though, Mallea-Olaetxe returned to books. His graduate studies culminated in 1988 with a doctoral degree from University of Nevada, Reno, where he specialized in 16th century colonial Latin America and studied the life of Mexico's first Catholic bishop, who was Basque. He rediscovered arborglyphs by accident. During a break from his Ph.D. dissertation, he and his family went hiking among the aspens on Peavine Mountain at the edge of Reno. Mallea-Olaetxe's memory of the day is vivid: "The aspens were blazing gold, the sky was bluer than blue. And these words on trees were leaping out at me -- names and dates and places in Basque. I was staring at a history nobody knew anything about."

That day Mallea-Olaetxe decided to dedicate his academic life to piecing together this history and presenting it to the world. He began inventorying the carvings in hundreds of aspen groves, organizing the arborglyphs by their general message, the carver's place of origin and whether he wrote in Basque, Spanish or French. Names generally identify the carvers as Basques, but they also used a distinctive calligraphy, Mallea-Olaetxe says. He records the carvings with a digital camcorder, circling the tree while translating the words and commenting into a microphone. He has taken thousands of still photographs, which are combined with hundreds of hours of videotape in a carefully catalogued computer database. The work has taken him four-wheeling, backpacking and horseback riding into the mountains of 10 states from California to Montana -- wherever there are sheep camps in aspen groves.

The vast majority of the carvings are names and dates. Others express the pent-up longings of isolated men, often provoking a written dialogue with later herders. One carver wrote, "Wine and women are both good," and a second carver responded, "Yes, but they are hard on your pocket." Other arborglyphs are soliloquies, the intimate, private expressions of men who never expected anyone else to see them. Finding these carvings is like looking into someone's soul, Mallea-Olaetxe says, so he withholds their names when he describes what they wrote. "I cannot tell all. I don't want to betray these men."

He has identified and analyzed consistent themes involving daily life, politics and symbols -- some religious, some from Basque mythology. He has also examined the bread ovens and other artifacts the herders left in their camps, and interviewed hundreds of carvers. What has emerged is a rich account of the sheepherders' experience. Others have researched and recorded Basque carvings but Mallea-Olaetxe has taken the study beyond "folk art" to a comprehensive cultural history. "It's the difference between arrowhead collecting and an archaeological dig," says William Douglass, emeritus coordinator of the Basque studies program at the Reno university.

The sheepherders' cultural chronology is emblematic of the history of the American West, where emigrants flocked from around the world to reinvent themselves. Here, herders from Basque country joined other newcomers as individuals in a self-made society, where they could freely reflect on the lives they had left and the new ones they were creating. Their canvas was the smooth white bark of the quaking aspen. Arborglyphs are the happy coincidence of trees, loneliness and time, says Mallea-Olaetxe: This could not have happened in Europe.

These days, Peruvian, Chilean and Mexican immigrants tend to herd sheep in the high lonely country. Those Basques still in the business are often camptenders who have access to trucks and road systems that help them avoid the solitude. The last Basque arborglyphs Mallea-Olaetxe knows of were carved in the 1980s.

In the aspen stand above Lake Tahoe, he scrambles from one tree to another in search of a priest and a naked lady he saw carved on a tree here 10 years ago. He stops at a carving of a man smoking a cigar. As he translates the words, an off-color joke about masturbation, the former priest blushes and mutters something about American Puritanism. Then he is back on hands and knees, crawling over a jumble of downed trunks in hopes that the elusive priest and lady may be among them. They are gone, he

sighs. Old age is claiming the aspen groves, here and throughout the West. Many are not regenerating, a problem scientists largely blame on fire suppression and warming temperatures. Mallea-Olaetxe now works as fast as he can to catalogue the undocumented arborglyphs before their trees succumb. With his goatee already flecked with gray, he is realistic about his odds of success. "I'd have to live 200 more years," he says. "We cannot help it. Nature will claim them."

Then, with a rueful shrug and a smile, he picks up his camcorder, focuses the lens on a carving of a man on a horse, and launches into an explanation for the historical record.

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