

Booker's Dozen

October – Marshall Public Library, Pocatello

November – Idaho Falls Public Library

December – David O. McKay Library, BYU-Idaho, Rexburg

Other Exhibits

November 15 to January 12, 2007 – “James Castle: From Icehouse Unto Early Attic” and “Silver Lining: Pass Mine Artists’ Books,” Missoula Art Museum

January 16 to April 20, 2007 – “James Castle: From Icehouse Unto Early Attic,” Holter Museum of Art, Helena, MT

WHEN A GROVE BECOMES A BOOK

by Dr. John Bieter

LAWRENCE MENDIOLA JULY 19 X 40

the white-barked aspen had carved into it. The next aspen read “1935,” the next “1936,” and then “Lawrence Mendiola 1937” appeared. Following this last aspen was “1938,” below which was carved “1939” – both unusual for they were carved in a fir. I so clearly remembered this man Lorenzo Mendiola when he and his wife would visit my aunt. He would work in the yard, take off his shirt and work in his white cotton “muscle man” t-shirt. I thought he was Superman.

European people. Their language would support this dating, for the Basque word for “stone” is prevalent in the idiom, yet has no known connection with any other Indo-European language. Despite the work of historians, anthropologists, linguists and others the origins of the Basques has not been discovered.

Moreover, relatively little is known about the role of Basques in the world. For example, few would know that Basques whaled along the coast of Newfoundland before Columbus came to America; that many of Columbus’ crew were Basque; that Magellan died during the circumnavigation of the globe and that his Basque crew member Juan de Elcano finished the voyage; that the

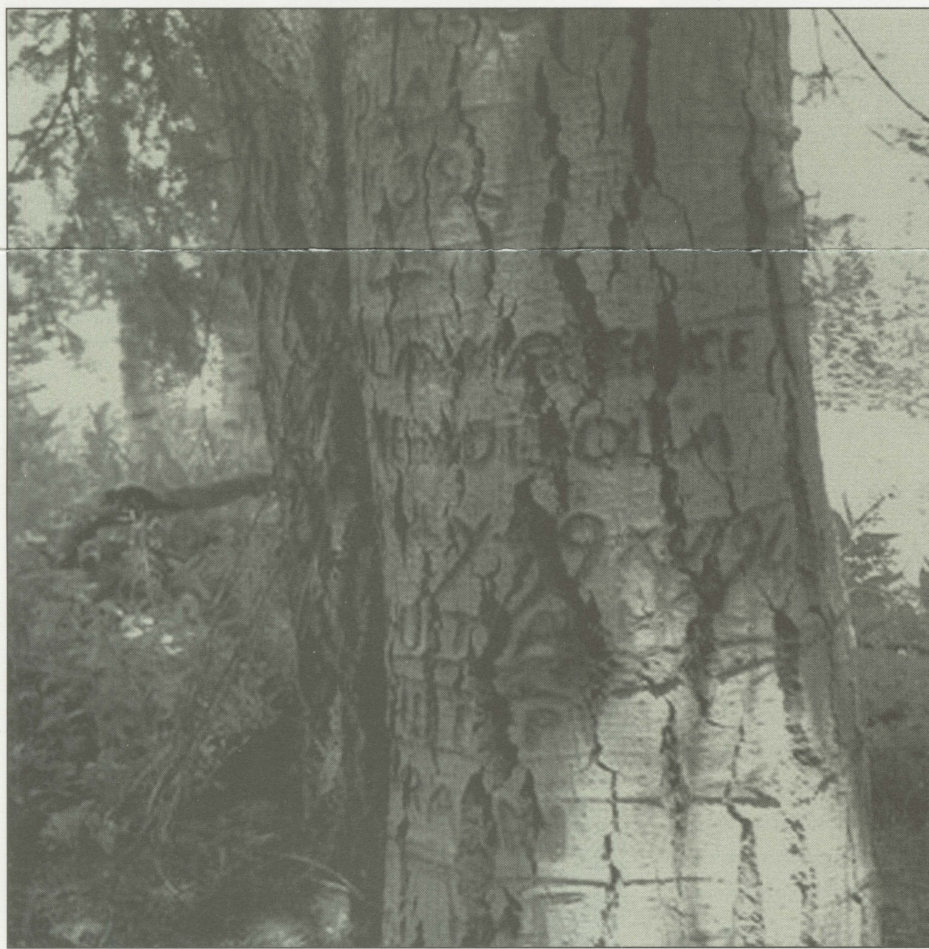
founder of the Jesuit religious order was Basque; that Simon Bolivar’s parents were both Basque immigrants; that Picasso’s painting is from the Basque town of Gernika and on and on. Additionally, few would know that Basques have emigrated throughout the world, that Basque migration to the United States pales numerically to the much larger population in South America and that Basques that became known for shepherding had little or no experience with herding prior to coming to America.

However, come they did. Basque migration to the Americas began with the Gold Rush of 1849 and continued into the 1970s and 1980s. Basques still come today but normally for shorter periods of time and to learn English rather than

helped deliver thousands of lambs and then divided them into bands. They learned how to shear the sheep in March and April and trailed them to the foothills to feed on spring grasses in May. During the summer, herders drove the bands to the mountains, followed the retreating line of snow, steered them from one meadow to another, and descended only to ship the lambs in July. They began to trail down to the valleys in October before the first snowfall, and by December they held the sheep in corrals. Herders then began to prepare for the birth of the first lambs, and the process started again.

It was during these summer months when herders were mostly alone in the hills that they completed their carvings. What did they carve and why did they do it? These, too, are good questions and difficult to answer with certainty. There seems to be something in the human experience that wants to create, to doodle, to let the mind wander and provide evidence that “I exist.” For these reasons and possibly many others herders carved.

Statistically, eight out of ten of the carvings have a herder’s name, the year carved, and possibly his hometown. This trio is most common and seems to fall into the “I exist” category. After so much time alone, some herders went crazy. The intense isolation and loneliness took its toll on many. “I remember when I got my first letter from my mother,” one Basque herder said. “I had to go behind the trees to read it because I was crying like a baby.” For some this extreme isolation became too much to bear and they went insane or became “sheeped” or “sagebrushed” as the herders referred to it. In 1908 the courts tried a Basque herder in Mountain Home, Idaho, to determine his mental health. After hearing the results of his examination by a local doctor, the court declared, “He was so far disordered in mind as to endanger health, person and property” and the court committed him to an institution. In fact, when early Basques immigrants to Idaho formed a health insurance organization in Boise,



Initial portion of inscription reads: “Lawrence Mendiola July 19 X 1940”
[Photographs by the author]

Thirty years later and seventy years since Mendiola had carved the trees a group from the U.S. Forest Service and the Basque Museum and Cultural Center in Boise were documenting Basque tree carvings in Idaho. Why? Basques that emigrated to Idaho at the turn of the century left very little information about their lives. About half were literate and of that half we have very little written documentation. However, we do have thousands of tree carvings left behind that at least provide a glimpse into a segment of their lives.

Who are the Basques? How did they get here and why did they carve into trees? Good questions. Basques originated in the northern region of Spain and southwestern section of France in a country that straddles the Pyrenees and predates the national boundaries of the countries under which they are currently ruled. Evidence points towards human remains in the area since 40,000 B.C. and even the most conservative estimates place the Basques there since 5,000 B.C. making them the oldest

herd sheep. For those earliest immigrants, the American West represented a secondary migration from the pampas of South America. Few made money in gold, but a number had success in complementary industries such as livestock, and the chain migration created communities throughout the American West. The wide-open range provided opportunities for those in the livestock industry and they began to recruit Basques to work. Basques also established themselves as owners and began to hire fellow countrymen.

The shepherding cycle meant the life of a herder followed a regular rhythm. Shepherders immersed themselves in the bloody, messy work of the lambing season from January to mid-March when they



Students participating in the “Passport in Time” US Forest Service program studying the aspen carvings. Participants videotape, sketch, take pictures, and GPS each individual tree.



The meaning of some arborglyphs are more apparent.

part of its coverage included return passage to the Basque Country for any member who suffered from mental illness.

No doubt one remedy for this was to confirm one's existence. Although we surmise that herder's carved for a very limited audience, if any at all, the act itself would affirm identity for that individual herder. Also, one must remember that the carvings were not readily evident, but only became visible after the bark had scarred over from the fine slit of the blade, which meant that no one would see the carving for at least one to two years.

They carve in Spanish, Basque and English and normally use the dating system from Europe with the day, then month, then year. Occasionally, one can observe the

Americanization process unfold; for example, Lorenzo Mendiola begins to call himself Lawrence and the dates are written in the American system. Moreover, a phrase in English may be used rather than writing in their native language.

The remaining carvings cover a spectrum of topics. Not surprisingly, a number depict nude women or make reference to sexual longings, a common theme addressed visually and in writing. However, besides nude women, topics include a wide variety of the human experience: sports, politics, religion, love, work and home. For example, we discovered the most elaborate carving of the crest of Athletic Bilbao, a very well known soccer team in



One of the most unusual arborglyphs discovered. Carvings continue 30-40 feet up the tree. I have no idea how they did this!

the Basque Country that competes with players selected only from the Basque Country. We have found a number of tree carvings with *Gora Euskadi* ("Up with the Basque Country") and *Gora ETA* ("Up with the Basque organization Euskadi ta Askatasuna [the Basque Country and Freedom]"). We have found carvings of crosses and dates that note the festivals of particular saints. We found humorous carvings such as eyes with a phrase that "I'm looking at you" and poorly phrased English like "rain like dirty bastard." We found boats from those who hailed from a fishing village and well-known sayings or verses. We have found short poems about longing to return to the Basque Country. In short, we found carvings that reflect all human emotions and experiences.

It was the most basic of carvings that we found that day that took me back to my youth. Lorenzo "Lawrence" Mendiola came from a small village from the province of Bizkaia, as did over ninety percent of the Basques that came to Idaho. While he spent most of his life here in America, he returned to the Basque Country for his last years. Little could he have imagined that the little boy who thought he was the world's strongest man would go up to the woods and identify the carvings he had left from so many years ago. Then again, he most likely would have never guessed that he and so many others would travel to the American West and produce the volumes that they did.



Letters and images are not evident immediately after carving but slowly become visible months later, after the bark scars over the single sliced cuts.

VARDIS FISHER HONORED BY IDAHO STATE PARKS and RECREATION



Vardis and Opal Holmes Fisher at home in Hagerman. Photo courtesy of Robert Fisher

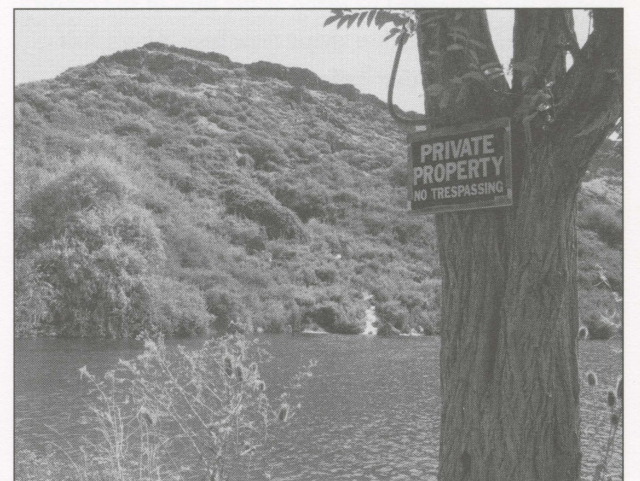
by Jennifer Wernex, Communications Manager
Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation

VARDIS A. FISHER, a native son of Idaho and world-renowned author of regional fiction, left an enduring mark in the world of literature. Now, his name will find an enduring place on the Idaho landscape, in Thousand Springs State Park in the Hagerman Valley. Born in Annis, Idaho in 1895, Fisher grew up on a small ranch in eastern Idaho. He began his literary career in 1927, with the publication of *Sonnets to an Imaginary Madonna*. Fisher went on to write a total of 36 books during his lifetime, notably the critically acclaimed Antelope Hills tetralogy set in eastern Idaho, the first and highly-praised WPA state guide which served as a model for all subsequent state guides, the Harper Prize-winning novel, *Children of God*, as well as *Mountain Man*, which was the basis for the movie *Jeremiah Johnson*. In 1940, Fisher and his wife Opal, moved to the Hagerman Valley, where they lived until his death in July 1968.

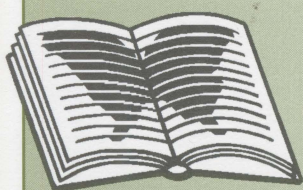
The 23.5-acre Fisher home site was purchased by the Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation, along with an additional 83 acres of adjacent property, in September 2001. On May 18, 2006 the Idaho Park and Recreation Board voted to honor Fisher for his contribution to literature by naming his home site in the Billingsley Creek Unit of Thousand Springs State Park the "Vardis Fisher Day Use Area." Plans for the site in the Draft Thousand Springs State Park Master Plan include restoration of Fisher's home and outbuildings, development of interpretive tours and programming, special events, trails, picnic facilities, fishing and swimming in the 2-acre lake.



Fisher outbuilding interior, today. Photo by Kelly Broich



Fisher's man-made lake at Hagerman. Photo by Rick Just



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