

WRITE AND WRONG

There was a time, in the early 1900s, when it was considered OK to carve your name – and nudes and opinions and random designs – into unsuspecting aspens. That’s how Basque shepherders made it through months of isolation. Today, it’s not OK.

It’s detrimental to the trees and frowned upon by forest rangers.

However, some of those old Basque carvings are being used by archaeologists to learn more about an interesting chapter in Arizona history.

BY TERRY GREENE STERLING



ABOVE: Basque shepherders brand sheep at Frank Auza's ranch near Flagstaff in 1936. Auza was one of many Basques to operate ranches in the Flagstaff area. *Arizona Historical Society*

OPPOSITE PAGE: A shepherd named Maximine Ortega carved his name and some buildings into this aspen at Hart Prairie northwest of Flagstaff. *Pat Gorraiz*

It's January, late afternoon, sun's going down. I should return to my hotel before the Flagstaff roads ice up. But here I am, gobsmacked, sitting in the warren-like office of the Flagstaff Ranger District of the Coconino National Forest, staring at a stick-figure pencil drawing of a man holding a gun to his eye.

The drawing is actually a crude depiction of a 1927 carving on an aspen tree, presumably made by a Basque shepherd tending to a flock of 1,500 or so sheep. It would have been summer when the shepherd carved the man holding a gun to his eye into the aspen's flesh.

The national forest has many aspens, and likely thousands of carvings. Hundreds were documented in an ongoing project that began about 15 years ago, back in the days before affordable GPS devices. In the early days of the project, volunteers combed the highlands around Flagstaff and recorded the carvings with photos and their own pencil drawings, noting locations as best they could. Now, their work is recorded in 22 binders that sit on a shelf in the district office, near a sign that reads: "Save a Cow: Eat a Vegetarian."

The documentation of carvings I've seen in these binders bears witness to what the writer Joxe Mallea-Olaetxe calls a "vast and secret living-forest museum." The trees gave voice to those who had no voice — hundreds of immigrant shepherds who, over the course of a century or so, tended hundreds of thousands of sheep that summered in Arizona's highlands and wintered in the warm deserts. Those shepherds were predominantly Basques. Most hailed from the Basque homeland in the Pyrenees, in the Spain-France borderlands. Much later, shepherds came from Mexico and South America. But it's the Basque carvings that dominate the aspens in Arizona, largely because 95 percent of all Basque shepherds (according to Mallea-Olaetxe) were tree carvers.

I'm learning all this and more as I thumb through the glossy white binders in the district office, staring at photos and pencil drawings of aspen carvings. There's this one shepherd who carved a likeness of the same woman over and over again on different trees. Others carved smiling and ample-hipped nudes, people having sex, houses, random designs, political points of view, sheep, dogs, horses, shepherd names and the dates they passed through the forest. And then there's the carving of the guy holding a gun to his eye.

The aspen carvings document the stories of marginalized immigrants who carved to vent, to stave off boredom, to fantasize, to joke about the months of isolation and suffering so they could get through it and not go mad.

But the aspens, and the unique historical record they document in Arizona, are disappearing. According to the U.S. Forest Service, an aspen might live for 150 years; outliers can live for 200 years. In Arizona forests, aspens can die young. They're stressed by competition for water and nutrients caused by tree overpopulation, natural fire deprivation, climate change, timbering, development and vandals. Once an aspen dies, it rots fairly quickly. The tree carvings, says Jeanne Shofer, an archaeologist with the national forest, are naturally vanishing artifacts.





carvings, which Haines calls “dendroglyphs.” These particular carvings were documented in the 1990s by volunteers who did not have GPS devices. Haines navigates with a crude map drawn by the volunteers.

We can’t seem to find the carvings listed on the map, though. We zigzag here and there. Clusters of aspens, Haines explains, are rooted together underground. The aspen groves are surrounded by ponderosa pine and fir trees whose lower branches droop with snow.

Of course, when the carving shepherds passed through here, it was summer. The heyday of the sheep industry was at the beginning of the 20th century, and Flagstaff was the state’s Basque headquarters.

In their native language, the immigrants called themselves *Amerikanuak*. Pat Stein, of the Arizona State Historic Preserva-

LEFT: Sheep are driven across the Verde River Sheep Bridge in 1941. Basque and other shepherders built the bridge. *Arizona Historical Society*
BELOW: Before the bridge was built, sheep had to struggle across the Verde River, as shown in this 1901 photo. Strays often were lost to the river’s current. *Northern Arizona University Cline Library*
OPPOSITE PAGE: Various Basque carvings adorn aspens in the Coconino National Forest northwest of Flagstaff. *Tom Bean*



The disappearing voices of the dead are louder in the quiet of winter, when bluish-black shadows paint the snow and leafless, arthritic aspen branches yearn for sun.

My guide in the forest this morning is Jeremy Haines, an archaeologist with the Flagstaff Ranger District. He’s strapped his wife’s pink snowshoes onto my boots and instructed me to follow in his tracks because the snow is about 3 feet deep. We’re not far from civilization — we’ve parked just off the road leading to the Arizona Snowbowl ski resort — but the mixed conifer forest we enter is lonely and quiet.

Haines is 43 years old and very fit. He has kind eyes masked, at the moment, by wraparound shades. He has a dark beard going gray. He’s wearing a tattered baseball cap covered with a wool ski hat, a dark parka, snow pants and a backpack containing one of those white binders holding records of the aspen

tion Office, writes that the shepherds were often recruited by other “employer-patron” Basques who had come to Arizona earlier and established their own flocks.

The new shepherds were young and tended sheep in relative isolation for many months. Some took ewes as payment for their work and developed their own flocks. Cattle ranchers, who disliked sheep and their herders, called these “tramp operations,” Stein writes. In 1934, the Taylor Grazing Act ended such operations, Stein continues, “by denying access to public lands” to those in the sheep industry who “did not own deeded private property,” such as ranches.

But since some Basques in Arizona had already bought “deeded private property,” they still got grazing allotments on public lands and continued to recruit young immigrants to herd their sheep. Arizonans still discriminated against them, though, relying on a state law. The Arizona law, unconstitu-

tional on its face, said anyone not eligible for citizenship could have his or her land confiscated.

Some Basque landowners were denied citizenship because they’d refused to fight in World War I, Stein writes. To get around Arizona’s discriminatory law, citizen Basques went into business with non-citizen Basques.

The immigrants thrived because they were tough and smart and worked hard, and because they added humor to their storytelling. The tree carvings we’re looking for, the ones documented 15 years ago by GPS-less volunteers, will surely bear witness to this. Haines says the carvings we’re seeking date from the 1930s to the 1970s, when sheep were no longer allowed to graze in this area.

Sometimes, you find just a name and a date. A lot of aspen carvings, Haines says, happen because you want to let someone know you exist. You want to speak to somebody. You don’t know who will be listening, but you want to say: *This is who I am. I was here, and I am somebody.*

It’s very likely, Haines tells me, that the aspens we seek have died. (It’s only later that he figures out the directions were problematic — the pre-GPS volunteers might have been mistaken about the exact location of the carvings.)

We schlep around a bit longer, and we see a lot of modern carvings. Like one that reads: “Jeff Loves Babs, 1986.” (The Forest Service discourages contemporary aspen carvings, which can be hard on the trees.) I halfheartedly scrape snow off fallen aspens with my ski pole in search of voices. No luck.

Then, on the way back to our parking spot, Haines finds a carving that hasn’t been documented. The carver’s name was Pedro Azneraz, and he carved his name into the aspen in 1922. This tree must be at least 100 years old, and probably older. Haines pulls a GPS from a holster on his belt and carefully logs the location of the tree on the white notebook. He photographs it. Until the aspen dies, anyone can go to the district office and get the coordinates and find Azneraz’s name. And even after the tree dies and rots, there will be a photo of it.

Later, Haines looks up Azneraz on Google. It seems he was born in Spain in 1895, and after his sheepherding years, he

settled in Merced, California, where he registered for the draft during World War II even though he was 49 years old. Thanks to the aspen carving, we know Azneraz tended sheep in Arizona during the heyday of Basque discrimination. I wonder what Azneraz was thinking when he got his draft card — whether he recalled the discriminatory Arizona law that prevented those not eligible for citizenship from owning land. I wonder, in short, if he still felt the sting of it all.

I can’t get Azneraz out of my mind, so I decide to stop by Tourist Home Urban Market in Flagstaff on my way home to Phoenix. It’s a restaurant now, and it serves a killer chocolate bourbon pecan pie, which I down with hot coffee. But back when Flagstaff was the center of Arizona’s sheepherding industry and a central hub for Basque immigrants in Arizona, this bungalow at 52 S. San Francisco Street was a meeting place and hotel for Basque immigrants and shepherds. The owners even built a ball court in the back so homesick Basques could play a jai-alai-like handball game wildly popular in their homeland.

The aspen tree bears witness to the fact that Azneraz herded sheep in the San Francisco Peaks in 1922. The Tourist Home was built in 1926. The ball court was built after that. Since shepherds signed contracts that lasted for several years, I wonder if Azneraz ever stayed in the Tourist Home and played ball with his friends.

The ruins of the ball court are starkly beautiful. The tall walls, constructed of red rocks mortared together and slathered with beige stucco, still stand. Summers, you can sit outside at picnic tables and drink wine in the shadow of this ruin, which is lighted at night and protected by a chain-link fence masked by darkness. Someone’s set up a scaffold near one wall, and there’s an orange bucket on it. I’d sit here and ponder all if I could, but the picnic tables and chairs are swaddled in snow.

On my way back to Phoenix, I recall something Mallea-Olaetxe wrote back in 2001 about the fate of the aspen carvings, which he calls “arborglyphs,” that gave voice to people like Azneraz.

The fate of the aspen carvings, Mallea-Olaetxe writes, is similar to the fate of the Basques in American history. “They say that one has to die in order to become famous and recognized and the same seems to be true about the arborglyphs,” he writes. “Only now that most of them have disappeared have we become concerned about their recording.”

I never do figure out why the shepherd carved a guy holding a gun to his eye. **AH**