

# A Hundred Years Herding

*They come from Bascoland in the Pyrennees to the Great Basin in the American West and continue to tell their tales.*

*Words by Carolyn Dufurrena. Photos by Linda Dufurrena.*

**T**he men came one by one from the Basque country, green and hilly and with towns scattered closely. Over half a century, they traveled by train, by airplane, each to their individual jobs in the vast empty land of the West. They started alone, but as time went on they would gather in the camps, cook and sing and tell stories. Most went on to other professions, and many are gone now, but sometimes in the Nevada desert they gather, to work the sheep in the dusty spring and under the trees of summer. They remember their youths and their adventures, and those of the men who came before them. Their stories are still told in the dusk under the aspens, one tale blending into the next.

## **Martin Monaut:**

### **The Golconda Poker Game**

It is March 15, 1914. Martin Monaut is 20 years old, newly arrived from Navarra in the Spanish Basque country. He gets off the train in Golconda, a chill pale yellow morning, full of dust and racket. Horses and carts, freighters, soldiers gathering to board the next eastbound train. Casks of flour and dry goods rumble off the train to stand in ranks on the platform.

There will be a poker game in all this bustle, and Martin is almost out of money. He sets off down the dusty street, tamped with dew this spring morning. He looks for the canvas tent that will hold the coming night's





game, or perhaps the last night's game will still be rolling. The tents stand silent in the brightening day, flaps tied shut, walls covered with frost melting to droplets in the morning sun. He walks and walks, taking in this new town, this new land, this new life.

Martin will find his poker game, and by all accounts be raking in the chips when he realizes, just in time, that the angry voices outside the front flap are meant for him. He gathers his winnings, and with his sharp knife, slits the back wall and slithers out into the dark, to hop another train going west.

He herds everywhere, they say. Perhaps Wellington, Nev., is where he picks up the flock of turkeys—yes, turkeys—to herd them over the Sierra to Sacramento. The turkeys are difficult, but not as bad as the goats that he takes later. The goats are terrible, clambering up every rock.

Always the opportunist, when Prohibition comes, Martin goes into business with a partner and a Packard automobile. He keeps his moonshine in a planter in front of the Mapes Hotel, right there in downtown Reno.

Once, the cops hot after him and that road from Reno to Lovelock all dirt back then, they are going 100 miles an hour in the Packard and losing ground. The partner, who is driving, will not go over 100, so they switch drivers on the fly! Martin drives on toward Lovelock, and they lie low the rest of that winter in a sheep camp out there on the desert someplace.

He winters in a sheep camp with Dominique Laxalt, the year that all the sheep froze on the Smoke Creek Desert. There were thousands of sheep out there, frozen solid. And the sheepherders stayed in the bunkhouse playing poker. Martin was a good poker player and he won a lot of money that winter. Won all one guy's money, and then he won his wages for the coming season, and the season after that.

The sheepherders went back and forth between ranches, working at one place till they got laid off, maybe up by Denio, and then down to Gerlach. They would work there for a while, go to Soldier Meadows, then go to another place.

By the time the war was over, Martin is at Leonard Creek Ranch on the Black Rock Desert. The ranch is starting to buy cows now that the war has made everyone a little wealthier, but Martin is there with the sheep. For the next 35 years, he works by turns at ranches in Humboldt County, living with the lambs and the leppie calves at Leonard Creek, then at Quinn River in an old house by him-

self. Those calves are his territory. You do not even go into those pens out there in the calving barn. He might say, "This one calf right here needs a shot," but there is no wandering through the rest of them. He feeds them all day, just a little bit now and then. It is his job.

In the evening, the ranch manager, Buster Dufurrena, takes his son Tim over to Martin's house for a visit. Martin makes Tang highballs, mixed all together right in the glass. When you go to Martin's house, that's what you get, a Tang highball. He is a perfect gentleman then, a gracious host, offering a drink to his boss and his boss' son, in the quiet of the evening.

When Martin gets ready to leave the job—and he does not settle in any one place for long—he does not quit. Instead he makes his boss so angry that he gets fired. Then he can move along to the next place.

After one such time at Leonard Creek, Martin, in his mid-80s by then, comes out to live with Buster. Somebody brings him and his little camp trailer out from town, and the men are all there in the shop chatting in their coveralls when that old white pickup of Martin's shows up, blowing smoke and rattling. He pulls up to the shop and the tie rod falls off the pickup right there.

He lives in that little trailer out by the shop with his old cat. He always has a cat. He traps that winter, although the sheriff has taken his .22 away. Undeterred, he runs his traplines with a shovel, and in Deep Creek he catches a

bobcat. It gets him by the pant leg, and that scares him. Buster loans him a .22 after that.

He has a terrible temper, or maybe the old man is getting ready to move one more time. There is an argument about something and Martin is mad for a while. They are butchering a lamb in the shop and Buster knows that Martin will want the head. He always wants the head. Buster puts the sheep's head on the front step of Martin's trailer, and after that things get better between them.



**Pete Salla:**

**A Stringer of Trout, a Song in the Trees**

The summer afternoon is warm, a breeze just beginning to stir the leaves of the aspen trees. A clear baritone floats up the draw that climbs into sheep camp, singing a Basque folk song.

Soon a dark, curly head appears above a



ABOVE: Hank Dufurrena follows ewes and lambs into the sagebrush. This photo was taken about two weeks after shearing photo at left. TOP: Pete Salla at sheep camp. OPPOSITE TOP: Martin Monaut. OPPOSITE BOTTOM: This good dog, Rambo, holds the sheep after shearing so herders can guide them out of the corral and into the foothills shortly before lambing in the spring.



*ABOVE: A phalanx of Bascos holding tarps and sticks push sheep into progressively smaller corrals toward the marking pen. Weekend sheepherders include retired plumbers, businessmen and cowboys. RIGHT: Herder in Spain carries an umbrella, seldom seen on a herder's back in the Great Basin, along with his crook.*

blue work shirt, identifying the singer. It is Pete Salla, striding up from an afternoon's fishing in the creek far below, singing his way up through the steep crags and the warm dust hanging in the still air. He carries a load of shining trout over his shoulder.

Pete was born in France in 1934. His father was a sheepman from Lecumberry, a village near Saint Jean Pied de Port. He grew up working for his father, gathering sheep from the neighboring farms to herd in the high country for the summer. "At one time," he says, "we gathered sheep from all the surrounding places and put them together with our own. I remember getting 1,300 and some put together to take to the mountains."

A bit of a rogue as a schoolboy, he excelled while driving his teachers crazy and graduated at age 14.

Pete grew up speaking Basque, then French, Spanish, and picked up German in the Army when he was stationed in Berlin. After his stint in the service, Pete went to work as a plumber in Paris.

He spent time at the Sorbonne: "Yeah, Jacqueline Bouvier and I were at the Sorbonne at the same time," he jokes. "Except, she was going to school there and I was cleaning chimneys." Pete hated Paris, though. "It was too crowded for me."

He comes to America in 1958, to visit family in Winnemucca. "When I saw this



open country," he says, "there was no more Paris for me."

It is four in the morning, just after Pete arrives in Winnemucca, time to separate the ewes from the lambs at Lovely Valley Sheep Camp. "What do you want me to do?" Pete asks Etchart (also Pete). "I can stay back and push them." Etchart says no. "He put me on one chute where the lambs were going to one side and the mothers another. When we were through, I told him we had two lambs that went wrong. So we look for them and we find them and put them back where they belong. He tells me, 'You got the job next year too.'"

Pete meets Buster that day. "Well, I was new," he says, "and Buster was good to me. And we were friends ever since."

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many years when it was time to separate the sheep, the old Bascos would gather, and when the work of the morning was done, the breakfast devoured, and the rest of them had gone off for a siesta under the trees, Pete would slip off with a fishing line wrapped around a cork tucked carefully in his shirt pocket. He would

hike down the steep canyons to the creek and spend the afternoon catching trout. He would climb back up in the shank of the afternoon, singing in his clear baritone, ready to make his contribution to the supper that would soon be making in the kitchen.

There is another generation running the sheep now, the herders mostly from Mexico and South America. The work, though, is the same, and the stories still flow at dusk around the fire. You can almost hear that clear baritone, floating up the canyon through the aspens. ■

*Carolyn Dufurrena has spent a lot of time listening to sheepherders' stories at Lovely Valley Sheep Camp. Her husband, Tim, however, has yet to make her a Tang highball.*