

ESCAPE FROM FEAR

Marie Jeanne Legarto spent her youth under Nazi occupation in the Basque country of southern France. She was saved by a Nevada rancher. By C.J. Hadley

Marie Jeanne Legarto was babysitting at age 12. It was 1936. “I was responsible,” she says with a smile and a thick, French accent. “I learned how to work.”

The second of nine children, “Mary Jean” says she didn’t have a childhood. World War II came, and it wasn’t long before the Germans occupied her part of France. “We never could play outside. Always a curfew. They would come and take over our houses, asking, ‘How many rooms do you have? How many people live here?’ We were allowed to stay in a small part of the house and we didn’t have to cook for the Nazis, but we had to tolerate their constant presence and their big boots. One time we had 21 soldiers in our house.”

The Germans took everything. “In a month, all the food was gone in occupied France. Even when it was rationed, you couldn’t get it.”

Her parents were farmers in Armendaritz. This was French Basque country on the north side of the Pyrenees. They were close to St. Jean de Luz, a pretty town on the west coast, just south of the major port of Bordeaux. Before the war, it was a vacation spot for Brits and other northerners who were sick of damp and drear and were looking for something they seldom saw—the sun.

The Atlantic stretched all the way to opportunity, but Mary Jean was unaware of that, even though her brother Jean was working for Beltran Paris and his sons over in the New World, tending sheep in the high dry country of eastern Nevada. It was hard for Mary Jean to understand. France was depressed. “It was chaos. There were rations and permits for everything. No one could travel across the occupied line without German permission.”

During the occupation, she says she was petrified. She aged quickly.

“Young boys and men were sent into forced labor. They worked on farms and factories for Germans. Many of our boys didn’t come back.”

The Germans were from Stalingrad, Wiesbaden and the Russian Front. “They were coming here for a rest. They didn’t want to stay in the main part of any town because they were afraid they would be bombed by the allies. Nazis were smart. By sharing French homes, they thought they were protected. We had nothing. There was no fabric. We didn’t have no paper. When I came to this country, I saved every piece of paper and cloth and food, because I didn’t want to run out.”

At 15, she was working in administration at a sanitarium, where kids

who had lung problems would come from cities. “We would be allowed a little bread and one potato a week.” During the air raids on Bordeaux, the children were taken to camouflaged sheds.

“We had 500 children with 12 nuns and I don’t know how many workers. We had to hide the children.”

She was a child herself when her aunt, a nun, found out she was working there. It was dangerous, and her aunt was furious and encouraged Mary Jean to leave. She didn’t. “After that, another girl and I, and the boss of the sanitarium, helped clean a hotel that had been requisitioned by the Germans. It was

being used as a hospital for critically injured French soldiers. It was terrible. Some of the beds were full of blood,” she says. “One officer put a swastika in the dust of the hotel. The SS officers all wore black and they drank too much. But I say I don’t care what they do, how badly they take France, they are never going to take my insides.” Mary Jean erased the symbol in front of the Nazi.

A safer job was taking care of two old people, but it, too, was a lot of work. “I cleaned. I cooked. I kept the house going and the garden. But I enjoyed it.”

Towards the end of the war, she helped the resistance and when the war ended on May 8, 1945, she says, “We didn’t know what to do. No money. Nowhere to go. The worst part of occupation for us, the civilians, is the look on the face of the people. Some French worked with the Germans. They did it for money. Maybe it was your brother, or your dad, or your friend. And you didn’t agree and you hate them and you can’t forgive them easily. We didn’t even know about the camps of concentration in Germany. I didn’t know about the Jews until afterwards. We didn’t know



HISTORIC PHOTOS COURTESY PARIS FAMILY



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Mary Jean in 1948. ▶The Legarto family says goodbye to Mary Jean (front row, second from right) in 1949. ▶Lourds, 1942, from right: Mary Jean, sister Tereza, mother Marie Louise and two cousins. ▶Trying to ski in Megeve, in the French Alps, after the war. Mary Jean helped open up a chalet in 1947-48, was cook and maid and worked for tips. “We only got two clients. No snow. No tips. No nothing, except travel to and from St. Jean de Luz.” ▶Her parents, Jean and Marie Louise, married in 1920. %oBrother Jean Pierre, 1946. He was ordered to forced labor but escaped to Spain in 1942.

nothing. And we couldn't even help ourselves."

She was 21 years old when the war ended. In St. Jean de Luz, she worked in a hotel, for tips, and her first summer season was hard. "Nobody gave me any tips because nobody was there. No clients. Summer was lousy." She got room and board. "I was alone. I had nothing. I was just trying to make a living." She helped the owners with cleaning and cooking. She had bought some shoes from Americans and got blisters all over her feet. "They didn't fit." She went to Paris and cooked and cleaned for a White Russian for a year. She got pneumonia in Paris. "It was hard to breathe. So damp. The cold is awful."

She returned to the Basque country and, once again, worked as a cook, maid, "everything. We didn't have no car. Whatever they didn't have no money for, that's what I did."

Mary Jean was 25 when she got her papers to America. Her brother Jean was already there. On May 24, 1949, she sailed from Le Havre to New York, was processed through Ellis Island, then took a plane to Nevada. "Somebody in America paid for my ticket. My brother or the ranchers he worked for. I don't know who sent it to me, but they did.

That plane to Nevada stopped in towns all across the country. It took one day and one night. I had a piece of paper saying where I was going because I couldn't speak a word of English."

She was picked up in Elko by Bert Paris, brother to Pete, and son of Basque sheepman Beltran Paris. Beltran had come to America in 1912 from the Basque country to Gillette, Wyo. "My father said the winter was terrible," Pete says, "all flat, awful snow and wind. He said, 'There have got to be better places than this in United States' so he jumped on a train and came to Elko. He built a ranch in eastern Nevada."

Mary Jean went first to The Star, a hotel, restaurant and bar where many Basque sheepherders stayed on their rare trips to town. "I could talk to them," she says, "but I was out of place."

Bert drove her to the ranch in Butte Valley. "It was on the other side of the mountains. That's where Beltran's headquarters were. That's where my brother Jean was and where Bert and Pete were born."

The Paris brothers could speak Basque and she was happy to see her own brother. But she went to live in Reno and there was no job, so she asked to return to the ranch. "I didn't want to be in Reno."

Bertrand's daughter became ill and Mary Jean came back to take over her work. Pete was pleased. "We never monkeyed with girls. You don't meet women out there, at the ranch, unless one comes to your door. I was tickled to death to meet Mary Jean! She was a blessing."

A year later, Pete and Mary Jean were married. Mary Jean glows: "I was very happy to marry Pete," she says. "When I came to America I

was sure about the country, but I wasn't sure about the people. I was afraid of the future. What am I going to do? I am a woman. For a long time I thought I was a lost sheep. But when I fell in love with Pete, he was wonderful. He is gentle and kind, a wonderful father and husband. The first time I was not afraid in my life was after I married Pete."

They had five children—Pete Jr. ("Little Pete"), Mickey, David, Mark and Grace Mary. Grace Mary died of leukemia at age two. Mickey was 24 when he was killed in a ranch accident, backing up a Caterpillar on a rain-drenched slope. Mark is a CPA, Little Peter and David are ranchers.

Beltran had 6,000 sheep. He used Basque herders then, later, Mexicans and Peruvians. When Beltran Paris died in 1982, the ranches went to Bert and Pete. Bert took the sheep outfit, Pete got the cows, and they helped each other. "Our families were close," Mary Jean says. "Cows don't have as much work so Pete also did all the farming. He plowed and planted because he had more time. Our Little Pete had been working with Grandpa Beltran and worked with Bert, with the sheep."

The family had the Butte Valley Ranch, Snow Creek Ranch and

then the Stratton Ranch. Nothing was easy. "We began improving the ranch," Mary Jean says. "We got running water, sewer, and a generator for electricity. We developed the fields and began improvements on the range by developing waters at various springs throughout our allotment with water troughs and pipelines." They have suffered through droughts, severe winters, fires, and bad prices for meat and wool. Beltran Paris also suffered through the Great Depression.

"Mary Jean fed everybody—whoever came in the house," Pete says. "Nobody would ever leave hungry."

Mary Jean likes people and appreciates history. She understands unrelenting hard work. "The people before us came from Missouri and Virginia, and this I am lucky to know. Nora Tucker died when she was 90. She was well educated, a very good woman. We bought her ranch. Her parents, the Strattons, were English, came from Missouri on their way to California in 1888. They got to Clover Valley and it started snowing in November and they had lots of trouble on the road. They had heard about the Donner Party and stayed in Nevada. They were in Elko County and she had one baby and two other children, including six-year-old Nora. They decided to take the valley south. They knew not to go over the Sierra. He needed a job so they took the Butte Valley back road and stopped at the first ranch. They ended up with a ranch 30 miles south. He cut timber and dragged it five miles from the mountain and built a house. He worked for the mine. I don't know how they done it. It's amazing what they done in them days.



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Nora’s brother was a cowboy who was courting a teacher in Eureka. “Nora told me he rode a horse all the way from our ranch clear to Eureka to date that girl,” Mary Jean laughs. “It was 80 or 90 miles and over two or three ridges of mountains. They say he rode over there, courted her, and eventually married her and brought her back to Butte Valley.”

In 1964 her sister-in-law Mary had heart surgery. They were great friends. “She was a nurse from back East and she loved the ranch. After the surgery, she had a stroke and they didn’t recognize it for five days. She couldn’t talk, lost the use of her right hand. Bert blamed the doctors, and it broke his heart. We tried to get a nurse to help Mary but she only wanted me. I helped raise her two children with mine. She lived seven more years. I try to take care of all the people...all of them.”

Mary Jean took hers and Mary’s kids to school in Ely, 75 miles each way, including 20 miles of dirt. They had a house in town and came home to the ranch for the weekend. “It was for 17 years, back and forth, back and forth.” Pete was living in a sheep wagon at cow camp in winter. “We had to pump water for the livestock,” Pete says, “break ice, watch them, doctor them.”

One time she was coming back from Ely alone, after having a pig butchered. “It was wintertime, and it was bad.” Pete was at cow camp but Little Pete (by this time 23 years old) was at the ranch with the working men. It was three in the afternoon and it stormed. “I had a heck of a time and almost made it to the summit. It was slush and slippery but I did not have four wheel drive.” She left the pig in the car and started walking. It got colder.

“She was close to 60 and probably walked nine miles,” Pete says.

When she got to the ranch, it was dark. “I read someplace not to go to sleep and not to stop when it’s that cold. The wind was against me and I was a little bit sweaty, you know, but I had the telephone pole there and that’s what I could see—the pole—so I said I am going to make it one pole at a time.”

Nobody knew she was struggling in the snow. Nobody was looking for her. They presumed she had stayed in Ely because of the storm. “When I got close to the ranch, the road was plowed and the snowbanks were like this on both sides,” she gestures above her head. “I couldn’t find the road. I didn’t know where I was. I was dead tired, in sight of the house, but I thought, ‘I’m going to die right here.’ I am never going to forget that feeling.”

She could see a light in the house and the dogs were barking but they didn’t come to her. “I don’t know why. I holler and holler and nobody heard me. The wind was loud. It was well below freezing. Anyhow, I made it. Poor Little Pete, I never going to forget. I fell down in

the kitchen and he picked me up and put me to bed.”

None of that discouraged her. “It was life, our life out here and I wouldn’t want to change it for nothing. Nevada teaches you to be strong, best thing, to survive the winter and the loneliness. But I never got lonely even though I left my family in France. I had plenty to do. I had my kids, the ranch, the workers. I was happy. I didn’t care how much work. I had my family. Pete’s dad Beltran was very gentle. He was to me like a mother, not man. He understood the woman like no other man I saw. He was beautiful man. He put together good place from nothing, as a sheepherder. Pete’s mother died at 53 years old in 1946. She had cancer of the female. I never knew her.”

Paris Ranches are a business. “We raised beef and 6,000 lambs and it’s not for us. We are growing something for somebody. When you take the food away, you are done.”

Pete and Mary Jean sold the ranch in Butte Valley in 1997 but they haven’t quit agriculture completely. Alfalfa fields surround their house in Ely and Pete still has some cattle. Mary Jean takes care of home and Pete and she makes quilts. “It’s a refuge for me to sew,” she says, “for future, so I keep my mind occupied, something constructive. My quilt is sewn with love, and I think somebody might enjoy them. I am not rich but I don’t sell any. I give them away. And I try to teach the young kids how to do it.”

Mary Jean has taught many children how to cook, paint, sew. “I saved every piece of cloth. I tell them, you know, be careful what you are taking, don’t take more than you have to because for every

bite you waste, you will be hungry for it. I’ve been hungry.

“I think many times I fail with things but, thank goodness, I have something to thank God for. Our kids are all productive and help in the society.”

Mary Jean wishes Americans would know more of what the Europeans went through during the war. “I used to be silent,” she says. “When the BLM started changing the rules, that’s when I started waking up and saying things. I tell BLM man how little we had at the ranch, how hard we worked to improve it: the water, for the sheep, the cattle and the wildlife, and this and that. I thought America was wonderful and now they are hurting us.”

The Paris families have the same problems as other ranchers. “We had hundreds of mustangs in the wintertime at Hunter Flats where we had a 600-cow permit,” Pete says. “We finally reported it and a BLM man came out and said, ‘It looks terrible because the cows have



FROM TOP: Mary Jean and Pete in Butte Valley, 1950. ▶David, right, and friend, Holy Communion, 1960. ▶Mickey, Little Pete, Mark (in Pete’s lap) and David. ▶Little Pete. ▶Mickey, Mark, Pete, cousin Donna in lap, and David. ▶Mary Jean and Beltran, ca. 1950.



Pete's off to check the cattle, with lunch. BELOW: Mary Jean with some of her quilts. "I save every little piece of cloth," she says. "You must waste nothing."

destroyed it. I asked him to show me a cow turd and he found one, but it was two or three years old. Cows didn't destroy that range, but they took a lot of our grazing rights away from us. The wild horses got all of our AUMs. I'm not bragging, but we took good care of that land. When feed got low, we would move the cows. They never do that with mustangs."

Mary Jean spoke at a meeting in Ely, "shaking like a leaf." Pete was working, but people begged her to speak. "The arrogance of the Germans is the same as some of the federal employees. I recognized them. I could see the Nazis, the same thing."

She read from her notes: "The reason I am here today is because I believe the backbone to my adopted country is agriculture. I learned this during the occupation in France. The first thing that Hitler did was take away the food and later the food source. Because of [Federal] 'reforms,' we will be forced to cease operations along with so many other ranchers. Therefore, like Hitler, weakening the food source of our country."

Mary Jean learned how to live with Hitler. "He come to France a bigshot, took all our food, and you know what happened to him. But what are you doing to us? If you take the ranch, our life is done."

Does she think she converted anybody? "No. I'm an old pot. I'm nothing. I am uneducated but I have learned a lot and have more common sense than they do. If they realize about history, they start thinking about what is behind all this. Common sense is what's wrong with people today—they lost it."



Mary Jean, at 85, continues to help others. Kind, gentle, patient, bright, beautiful, gifted, she takes care of Pete—and anyone else who shows up—with great affection. Her house is perfect. The alfalfa field in front and back is irrigated, tended by Pete. Their little farm is in the middle of a housing development a few miles out of town. In the backyard is a sheep wagon, the one Pete used during the winters out on the range.

No longer in her beloved Butte Valley, Mary Jean continues to work, quilt, and dream. "I had nothing in France, but I wanted to do something with my life and I really, really suffered because I couldn't go to school. I was good in school and I liked it. But now I don't suffer. Maybe it would have been different, but I wouldn't have had my good person Pete if I would have went to school."

When she speaks about the war, she says: "I am really sad inside. I got stronger but there's a piece of my heart that is broken and I can never forget." And she still worries and continues to question. "When you take the food away, you are done. I remember the war and it will be the same here. America will be hungry. How can you be hungry in America?" ■



C.J. Hadley, publisher of RANGE, was born in Birmingham, England, during WWII, and her family's rented semi-detached was bombed by the Nazis in 1942. The small incendiary set the house on fire. The next morning, her father tied the bomb on his bicycle and rode five miles on cobblestone streets to show his mates at the steel works. His boss said, "You bloody idiot, Bert, that things's still live!" CJ spent two days with Mary Jean in Ely last fall, often talking about the War. When she left, Mary Jean gave her a hand-made quilt. "My purple and green quilt is an absolute treat," CJ says. "Mary Jean gave me a piece of her beautiful heart."