



Basque Sheepman's Dream

Jean Baptiste Uhart's goal was to make it in America.

By Angeline Mary Douglass and Johnny Fred Uhart, daughter and son.

Jean Baptiste Uhart was born in Esterencuby, Basse Navarre, in 1910 in the Pyrenees near Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port in southwestern France. In those days, houses in the Pyrenees had names based on regional geography, not numbers. The Uharts was Mendi-hazlea, which meant Mountain Farm.

Jean's family raised sheep, cattle, hogs and chickens. He was the youngest boy of nine children and when he was 12 he was sent to a relative's farm to live and work—milking cows, herding sheep and performing other outside chores. It was a challenging time as his day often began at four a.m. and continued until after sunset. He often spoke of the bitter temperatures and darkness of those early mornings, but it was accepted as the traditional way of the times.

As the youngest son, there was no opportunity to own a business in the Pyrenees, so at age 19, in 1929, Jean immigrated to the United



ABOVE: This is Jean Uhart's passport picture when he came to the United States in 1929. He was 19 years old. AT TOP: Esterencuby, a little village in the French Pyrenees. INSET: Jean's old home, also known as Mountain Farm.

States with \$20 in his pocket. His uncle also had come to the U.S. at a young age and started a business in California. He raised sheep near Carson City, Nev., and, like many others, went broke—a couple of times. But Jean was not daunted by that fact.

He came on the boat from Biarritz to New York City, "and from there to Reno," he said. "About 15 or 16 of us traveled together and we were four days and nights on the train. It was pretty hard, but we didn't care. We were young and unafraid! I had in my mind that people I knew had come to this country and worked hard, they had made it, and I was going to make it, too. So I had the courage to come. This was my dream."

The uncle met Jean at the Reno train station. After a few days in Carson City, they went up to the mountains and 2,000 sheep. Jean was amazed, because in the Old Country, his family only had a few dozen. In a year

or so, he was handling the sheep and himself quite well, with help from a few canines.

"You had to have dogs," Jean said. "I had two dogs. Without the dogs you couldn't do it. You also had to have a lot of patience. Usually, you got an old dog, and the little one—a young one—learned with the old one. You had to be pretty careful though, not to let the young one go too much with the old one. The little one had to learn by himself, a little bit at a time, from the start. Then, in a little while, with you telling it all the time, every day, it would be trained pretty well in about six months. But you had to show him something every day."

Lambing season was an intense time for the sheep business as thousands of ewes were birthing. This took place on the family's winter ranches at Mound House and Sutro starting in March and generally completed by the end of April. In late May the ewes and lambs were walked to the Northern California summer grazing areas by two shearers with four dogs and camping supplies strapped on a couple of burros. The trip took seven days over the Virginia City mountains to Hwy. 395 North and 70 West eventually reaching

Jean quickly discovered that he loved the shepherd's life. As a young man, he'd heard stories about the hard lives of the first Basques who came to America to work with the sheep. In some places on the desert winter range

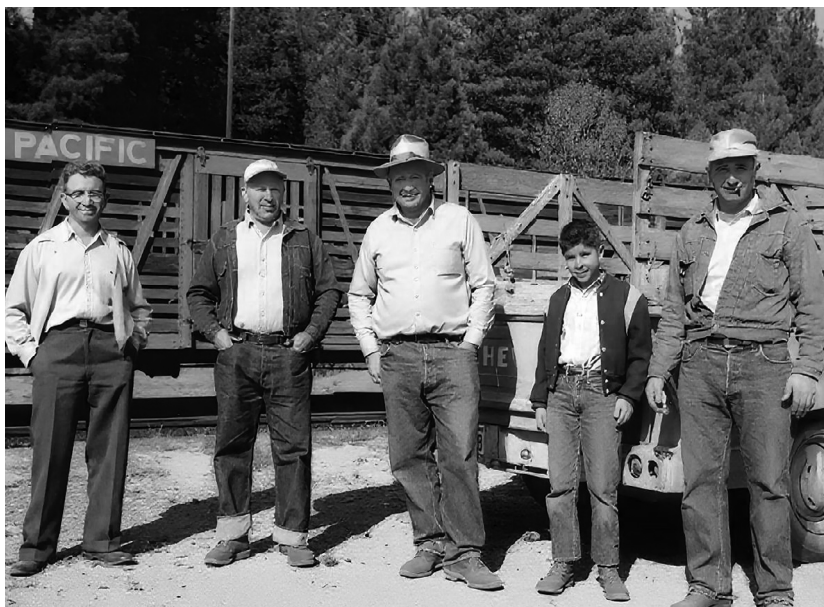


he had chosen to work.

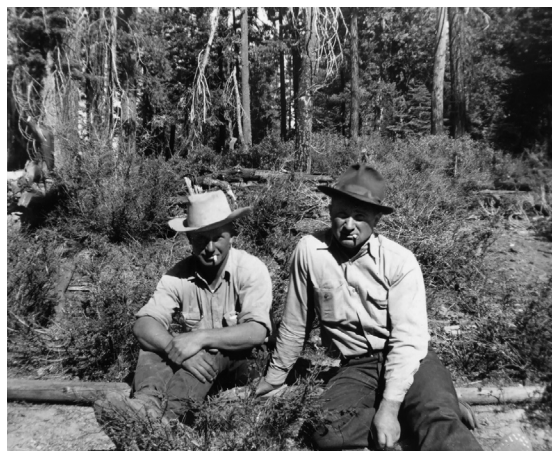
"When it gets dark it's easy to get the sheep together. They know what to do," Jean said. "You have your bed right there, and a tent. The sheep stay close in the night, and you cook supper, and that's it. Next day, same thing...day after day after day after day, so it's a kind of a boring life. You have to like sheep in order to do that, otherwise, you won't do it. I liked it."

Sheepherders are constantly on the move. "You don't want to stay in one place too long, you can't. Maybe you'll stay as long as a week, but then you have to move to another place and in order to move your stuff you need the donkey to pack it. So, you have to like the sheep, the dog and the donkey, otherwise you won't make a good shepherd. You won't be any good if you don't like these things."

In the years right after the Depression hit, pay was lousy everywhere. Some people worked for a dollar a day. Jean earned (and his uncle helped him bank) \$40 a month. Sheep weren't providing much income. In 1940, Jean's aging uncle approached him to buy the business, which had grown to approximately 5,000 head of sheep and two



PHOTOS COURTESY UHART FAMILY



AT TOP: Dad on his horse at our ranch in Plumas County. LEFT: from left to right: Dad's good friend Joe Bidegan, uncle Charles Etcheverry, uncle Pete Etcheverria, Johnny Joe Bidegan and, of course, our father Jean Baptiste Uhart. ABOVE: Dad and his favorite herder, Manice.

Plumas County in California.

The herd enjoyed the summer feed that included buckbrush, sweet corn and grass feed in the meadows.

The terrain was a bit brushy, though, and some sheep got lost. Others were killed by predators and poisonous plants. Lambs were shipped in August, taken by train to Los Angeles, San Francisco, and parts East. The ewes went back to graze in the mountains until October.

there was no wood to make a fire, so they couldn't cook.

The old-timers drove sheep from Bakersfield to the desert mountains around Reno and back to Mono Lake. It was a very long way. Their shoes wore out and they were almost barefoot in the hot weather with no water to drink. Despite those stories, Jean held fast to his American dream. He worked for his uncle for 10 years, during which time he came to prefer the rhythm and sameness of the way

large ranches in Nevada and California totaling about 7,000 acres.

Since Jean still had the first nickel he had ever earned, he was in a solid financial position to purchase the operation. Starting in 1944, he brought over shearers (including a cousin) from the Old Country. Together with other sheep outfit bosses, and through the Wool Growers Association, he brought 75 Basque men to work as herders in western Nevada. Over the years, many thousands of



LEFT: Marking lambs at Dad's ranch in Mound House, Nev. Front row, my cousin Ernest Etcheverria and my father. Back row, my uncle Pete Etcheverria, herder Francisco, my best friend in grammar school Randy Belford and me. CENTER: Me, mother, sister Angeline Mary and Dad. BELOW: Our father and mother Jeannette Uhalde Uhart in the Pyrenees at Dad's house in Esterencuby.



Basque men came to the area.

One shepherd that Jean knew was named McPherrin. They were neighbors on a sheep allotment in the Plumas. McFerrin ran his sheep from the Sacramento Valley to Clio and he had a Basque, John Uhalde, working for him. Jean married that shepherd's sister, Jeannette, who had come from the Arneguy, Basse Navarre, and he made John a partner in the "Uhart-Uhalde" sheep business on Eureka Ridge.

By the mid to late 1960s the sheep business was being challenged by range restrictions, more vehicles on the roads and lack of men who wanted to herd. The herd was cut by 50 percent to around 2,500 and eventually they too were sold.

Jean and Jeannette settled in Carson City and enjoyed visiting the shearers they employed up in the mountains. They had two children, Angeline Mary and Johnny Fred. They stopped running sheep on the Plumas for several reasons, one being that the Forest Service said the range was fed too close and that there wasn't any feed left for the wild animals. They cut his herd by 50 percent and the world around him had changed. A lot.

"My first year in this country, the water was higher all over and there were more streams, even out in the desert," Jean said. "We got heavier winters than we're getting now, with more snow. The country is getting drier. In the desert, there's no water left, all the

springs are drying out. Then the traffic got too heavy to drive the sheep on the roads, so we had to truck them up. That happened in the mid-fifties."

In the 1960s, Jean and Jeannette sold the sheep but retained their ranch land. Their business interests shifted to real estate and life eased into a more gentle and relaxed pace. After more than 58 years of marriage, Jeannette passed away in 2004 and Jean in 2005. Jean said the following in an interview in 1983:

"We still love it up there in the Plumas mountains. I like to go fishing sometimes and enjoy the different climate. We were up there just the other day, camping. We brought home a little wood for the wintertime. We still own the Uhart-Uhalde sheep camp—160 acres on the Plumas. We still go there." ■

Angeline Mary married Patrick Douglass and they own the Shamrock RV Park in Reno, Nev. They have two children, Samuel Evan and Kelsey Kaye. Johnny Fred married Robyn Dressi and they have five children: Ryan Zaro, Olivia Uhart, Jared Zaro, Caitlin Prunty, Monica Prunty and six grandchildren. John and Robyn are licensed real estate agents and John was building manager for RANGE magazine's Carson City office for the last 29 years. Both families still enjoy working and playing on Jean Baptiste's California and Nevada ranches. The Uharts have always been good to and for RANGE.