

## **The Basque Towns and *Ostatuak* of Bakersfield and Tehachapi, California**

By

Steve Bass and George Ansolabehere

The southern San Joaquin Valley of California was one of the later areas of the state to be populated. German-born Christian Bohna made the first settlement of what would become Bakersfield in 1860. That crude settlement was swept away by the flooding Kern River in 1862. In 1863 Thomas Baker moved to the banks of the river and his surrounding land became known to travelers and early settlers as Baker's Field. By 1870, with a small population of 600, the settlement was becoming the focal point of the inhabitants of the area. In 1873, Bakersfield became an incorporated city and, one year later, it became the county seat.

The year 1873 also seems to be the year that the first Basque settlers of the area arrived. Among those settlers were Jean Burubeltz, from Lasse, Basse-Pyrenees; Domingo Oyharzabal, who had first gone to Chile in 1863; Marianne Laxague from Aldudes and Jean Etcheverry, also from Aldudes. Laxague married Pablo Galtes, who owned a store in Bakersfield and the others were in the sheep business.

In the late 1870's and the six decades that followed, Basques came to Kern County in increasing numbers to satisfy the need for shepherders in the area. They soon provided a strong foundation for the sheep, cattle and agricultural industries in Kern County. Others of importance to this story took jobs as miners, lumberjacks, hotel and restaurant owners, maids and bakers.

The Basque towns of Bakersfield and Tehachapi both grew up around their respective train depots, as was the case in most Basque urban areas in the West. The railroad route between Bakersfield and Tehachapi is considered an engineering marvel as it curls its way up and out of the San Joaquin Valley and crosses the Tehachapi Mountains. At times, as the trains gain altitude, they actually cross over themselves as they spiral out of Bakersfield, heading east. Special locomotives were built to go cab-first into all the tunnels along the line to Tehachapi as well as throughout the Sierra Nevada.

Bakersfield's Basque center preceded Tehachapi's by a few years and, at first, it was not located in Bakersfield proper. Because of a feud with the city, the Southern Pacific Railroad by-passed Bakersfield by four miles to place a station at a settlement called Sumner. Sumner then became Kern and Kern became East Bakersfield. However, the area is now part of the larger city of Bakersfield. The first manifestation of a serious Basque community was the construction of the Iberia Hotel, just one block from the Southern Pacific depot.

Partners Faustino Mier Noriega and Fernando Etcheverry built the Iberia in 1893. Mier was from Santander, Spain and came to California to work for his uncle, Vincente Noriega in Tulare. In 1879 he became a herder for Haggin and Tevis (Kern County Land Company) and in 1882 he was hired as foreman of the Miller and Lux sheep operations and work in that capacity until 1883. In that same year he Faustino adopted his uncle's

surname of Noriega as his own and married Basque Louise Inda who had arrived in Kern in 1880. Fernando Etcheverry, like many Basques in Bakersfield, was from Aldudes. Fernando would marry Mathilda Etcheverry, also from Aldudes, in 1902. In 1892 Noriega and Etcheverry became partners and obtained a loan of \$3,500 and began building the Iberia Hotel at 525 Sumner Street. The hotel opened in 1893 and soon became the destination of Basques arriving in Bakersfield; then and for many years to follow. It served as a social center, information clearing house and, in effect, a symbol of the Basque community that was to grow up around it. In 1906, while still in partnership with Etcheverry, Noriega changed the name of the Iberia to the Noriega Hotel.

On the hotel's south side, an enclosed wooden pelota court was built as a sporting center for the young males. Along its west side was the Kern City Livery and Feed Store also owned by the partners. The hotel remained almost untouched until 1940 when a bar and dining area were built, located where the livery stable once stood. Along the west side of this new addition, a larger enclosed concrete handball court was built. Noriega's continues under Basque ownership through the Elizalde family and, according to Jeronima Etcheverria, it is the oldest Basque hotel in the U.S. still taking in male boarders and serving family-style meals at one setting.

Faustino and Louise Noriega had five children: Marcellena, Julia Christina Frank and Albert and lived in a large house they had built on Baker Street a few blocks north of Sumner. The house, elegant and well kept, is not in the family any longer but it is still known as "The Noriega House." Faustino was one of the organizers of the First Bank of Kern. His son Frank became the first of several Basque judges in the county.

Around 1900, Noriega and Etcheverry built the brick Pyrenees Hotel building just a few doors east of the Iberia at 601 Sumner Street. Apparently, it was quickly renamed the Sacramento Exchange and then Fanucchi's. Between that early date and 1935, little is known of the tenants of the edifice. However, in 1935 Inocencio "Jack" Juarena, who had come to Bakersfield in 1919 as a sheepherder for Gregorio Mendiburu, and Jeanne "Jenny" Iribarne Dunns opened the Pyrenees Café in the old building. For years, Bonifacia "Bonnie" Erdozain Larrainzar was the cook. Her family lived next door on the east side of the building. Bonifacia was married to sheepman Andres Larrainzar and their daughters, Josephine and Helen, became the first teachers of Basque descent in Bakersfield. In 1973 Juarena sold the Pyrenees to Ruth Lewis. In 1975 Juarena passed away but members of his family ran the business until 2006. It has gone through multiple incarnations in the years since. Now, the Pyrenees is still leased as a Basque restaurant and bar but it is not Basque owned. Upstairs, there are still tenants living in a few of the rooms but it is not a boarding house nor Basque owned.

Other Basque owned and/or operated hotels (*ostatuak* in the Basque language) in the same four to five block area were the East Side Commercial, Amestoy's, the Metropole and the Europa. Closer to downtown Bakersfield was the Occidental.

The Metropol Hotel was located on the southwest corner of Baker and Sumner streets. It was opened in 1895 by Jean Estribou and known as the Metropol Market and Hotel.

Jacque and Grace Iriart purchased it in 1928. The building still stands but has not been Basque owned for many decades.

Jean Burubeltz, mentioned earlier, had relocated to Los Angeles and owned and operated the Ballade House Hotel from 1891 to 1901. In 1901 he relocated to Bakersfield with his wife, Jeanne Erreca Burubeltz, to operate the Iberia. In 1906 they moved to the Europa (also known as the Hotel d' Europe) located at 619 Sumner Street between the Metropole and Pyrenees hotels. When Jean died in 1911, Jeanne continued to operate the hotel until she purchased it from Pierre Roux in 1915. She ran the hotel until 1921 when she retired and the hotel was sold. The building is no longer standing.

Another Basque hotel that has ceased to exist was the East Side Commercial hotel located at 713 ½ Sumner Street. Jean and Grace Laporte Elizalde operated it in the 1920's before taking over the Noriega in 1931. The address is now a vacant lot.

Frank Amestoy came to Kern sometime shortly before 1920. He met Anselma Ballaz while she was working as a maid at Noriega's. After they were married, they began operating the Noriega in 1920. In 1927 the Amestoy's purchased the Cesmat Hotel, a block away on East 21<sup>st</sup> Street (Then known as Humboldt Street) but continued to run Noriega's. In 1931 they moved to the Cesmat and changed the name to the Amestoy Hotel. Amestoy's was another focal point of the Basque community and remained so until the family sold it in the 1970's. The name was changed to Narducci's and is still operating as a restaurant but not a hotel.

Closer to downtown Bakersfield at 19<sup>th</sup> and M Streets, the City Directory of 1917 lists the Occidental Hotel and Bar as being located on the second floor above Bakersfield Feed and Seed. The feed store was once a saloon operated by Basque Michel Martinez and Frenchman Auguste Bonnet. Jean Pierre Martinto operated the hotel. When Prohibition was enacted in 1920, the saloon became a feed store. The hotel was short-lived.

Other Basque establishments in close proximity to the hotel area were built to support the numerous Basque immigrants and their new families. These included Uhalt's blacksmith shop on the corner of East 19<sup>th</sup> and Kern Streets; Blanc's hardware store at the corner of Sumner and Kern; the first incarnation of the Wool Growers Restaurant on Sumner Street between the Pyrenees and the Metropol; the Basque Café across from Amestoy's at 631 East 21<sup>st</sup> Street, the Ville de Basque Restaurant at 630 East 19<sup>th</sup> Street, owned by J.B. Maitia (Now the location of the Wool Growers and still owned by Mayie Maitia and her family), the Pyrenees Bakery at 717 East 21<sup>st</sup> Street and the Ardizzi and Olcese General Merchandise on Sumner west of Noriega's. Of the businesses listed here, only the Wool Growers Restaurant, the Pyrenees Bakery and Noriega's, remain in Basque hands.

Closely tied to the Bakersfield Basque community was the Basque settlement in Tehachapi, forty miles southeast of Bakersfield. The city of Tehachapi is located in the Tehachapi Mountains at an elevation of 4,000 feet (1,220 meters) above sea level and was established in 1860. Tehachapi was not only a staging point for Basque sheepmen but also offered employment for Basque miners and lumberjacks. The sheep could be

driven into the San Joaquin Valley or into the Mojave Desert. The city became a Basque center in the 1890's until its gradual decline into 1950.

Tehachapi had its share of Basque owned or operated hotels including the Piute/Basse-Pyrenees, the Martinto, the Basko/Franco-American, the Cesmat, the Tehachapi and the Juanita. The earliest hotel, the Piute, was built in 1893 and operated by Austin Young and his wife, the former Marianne Goyehen. It burned to the ground in 1895.

Jean Pierre Martinto came to America in 1888 and worked as a sheepherder in Fresno and Kern Counties. His sister, Marie, lived in Tehachapi and in 1894 Martinto and his brother Jean Fermin purchased six plots of land on Main Street in the city and built the largest hotel in town, the Basse-Pyrenees. The hotel also featured a handball court. (This is the same Jean Pierre Martinto who later operated the Commercial Hotel in Bakersfield.) In 1908 Jean Pierre changed the name of the Basse-Pyrenees to the Martinto Hotel and leased it to Vincente Iriarte.

In 1896 George Esponda built the Basko Hotel. He had married the widow of Jean Borda, Marie Alzuet Borda. After some financial difficulties, the Esponda's sold the Basko to Jacque and Grace Iriart in 1904. In 1914 the Iriart's took on a French Béarnaise partner named Escoulie and the Basko was renamed the Franco-American. By 1916 the Iriart's were the sole owners and the Franco-American became one of the most popular meeting places in town.

In 1922 Jacque and his son, Sampson, built the Iriart Building. It had a pool hall, two bars, a drugstore, a barbershop, a beauty shop and two restaurants on the ground floor and a hotel on the second floor called the Juanita. This was directly across the street from the Franco-American hotel. Sampson continued in the sheep, hotel, cattle and other businesses.

The Cesmat hotel was built in the late 1890's. Jean "John" Iribarne and his wife, the former Mary Goyehen, sister of Marianne, owned the hotel from 1900 to 1903. According to a Tehachapi newspaper of the time, the hotel offered meals for twenty-five cents and a regular French dinner for fifty cents.

Pierre "Pete" Errecart came to Kern County from Anhaux, France in 1916 and was first employed as a sheepherder. He married Marie Irouleguy, from Urepel and in the 1920's they ran another mountain hotel, the Tehachapi.

In 1930 Pierre Heguy and Hortense Anchordoquy Heguy took over the Borderre French Hotel in Santa Barbara. When Pierre died, Hortense married Francisco Ciaurriz and they moved to Tehachapi taking over the Tehachapi Hotel from Marie Errecart. Later, after Francisco died, she ran the hotel with one of her brothers, Peyo Anchordoquy. Her daughters Marie and Jenny also helped.

On July 21, 1952 the Tehachapi Earthquake, measuring 7.7 on the Richter scale, destroyed the Iriart Building, along with most of Tehachapi. The last Basque hotels were



destroyed and never rebuilt. However, a remaining vestige of the Basque settlement is the Errea House built in 1870. The house has been preserved as it was seventy years ago when José Errea and his family inhabited it. Errea was a woodsman for a local limekiln. The Tehachapi Heritage League now owns the property and in 1997 the Errea House was officially placed on the National Register of Historic Places. At the same time, the house was also placed on the California Register of Historical Resources.

On the west side of Kern County in the small, dusty town of McKittrick another Basque hotel remains standing. Known originally as the Old Headquarters Saloon and owned by Italian Armando Bandattini, it was built in 1898 when the town was a growing oil tar and sheep center. When the hotel burned down in 1903 Bandattini rebuilt it in the center of town. Jean Iribarne (A different Jean Iribarne than the one in Tehachapi) ran the hotel until the 1930's. The hotel was the center of the now prospering oil and sheep industries. The hotel offered rooms, equipment, livery supplies, dry goods, food and drink to early oilmen and ranchers. The McKittrick advertised "Imported and Domestic Wines, Liquors and Cigars, Feed and Livery Stable and Furnished Rooms." In the hotel's register of 1913, Basque sheepmen Martin and Pedro Etcheverry, Pascal Eyherabide, Gracien Etcheverry, Domingo Gastambide, Miguel Iturry, M. Inda, and Jean Urricaret had accounts at the hotel with Iribarne. The McKittrick is still in operation today by non-Basque owners and it is only a café and bar. It does, however, remain a social center for the area's oilfield workers and is noted for its back room, which is entirely covered with pennies: Floor, ceiling, walls, doors and bar.

The Basque community in Kern County is still vibrant and thriving with its famous restaurants, including Noriega's and Wool Growers, plus Benji's, Chalet Basque and the newly refurbished Pyrenees. Its Basque Club features a large clubhouse, pilota court and a two-acre picnic ground. It is home to the annual Memorial Day Picnic, the largest annual Basque celebration in the U.S., and also the Sheepman's Picnic in July. While there are no longer any Basques immigrating to the U.S., the Basque population in Kern County remains strong and vibrant and its population ranks among the largest outside of Latin America.

Railroad depot at Sumner and Baker, Bakersfield (Photo: Steve Bass)





Opening day in 1906 when the Iberia was re-named the Noriega Hotel. The sign on the front of the building is, "Noriega Hotel, F.M. Noriega Proprietor." (Both Photos Courtesy of Noriega Hotel)

Photo below shows the hotel on left, the bar and restaurant entrance in the middle and the pelota court on the west side. Very few changes have ben made the past 55 years.



**Noriega Hotel, circa 1960.**



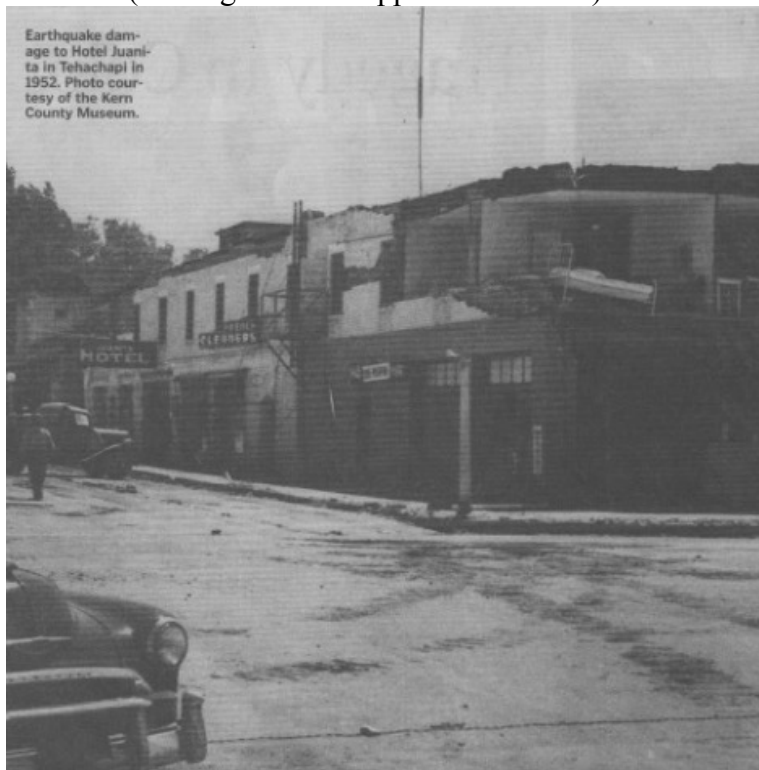
Locations Past and Present of important Basque businesses of East Bakersfield  
(Map by George Ansolabehere)

(Both photos Public Domain)

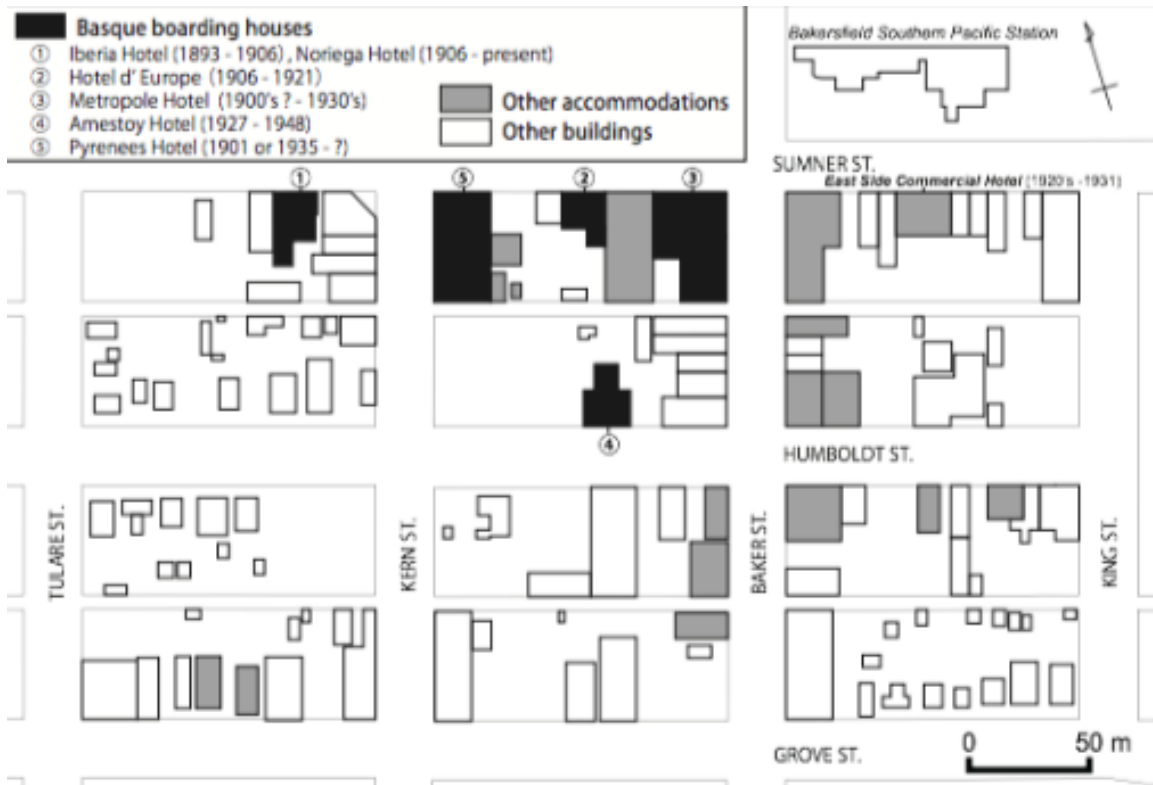


**Juanita Hotel located at Tehachapi, circa 1930.**

The Juanita Hotel (looking from the opposite direction) after the 1952 earthquake.







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A Southern Pacific cab-forward steam locomotive leaving Bakersfield and headed toward Tehachapic and the steep grades and tunnels along the way. Circa 1950.



Above, the French Hotel Des Alpes building (now part of Pyrenees Bakery) and the Pyrenees Bakery outlet store on the right. (Both Photos: Steve Bass)

Below, steel ring for tying up horses, still in place in front of the Pyrenees Bakery

