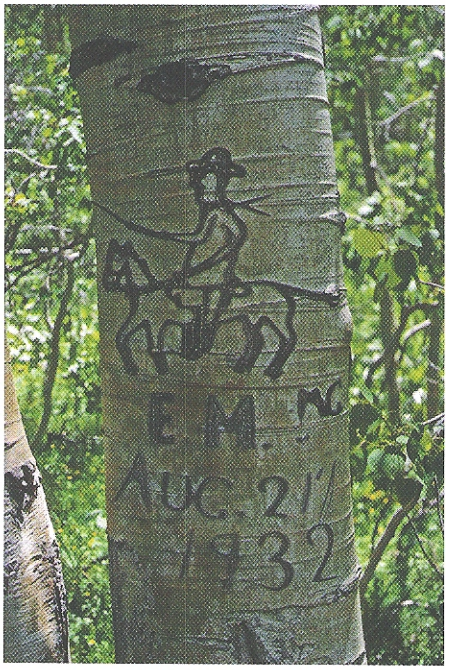
Art in the Aspens

Beautiful Basque tree carvings tell tales of adventure

by Jane Braxton Little, from *High Country News*

JOXE MALLEA-OLAETXE is on his hands and knees examining the trunk of a fallen aspen tree. Between peeling slabs of white bark the size of headstones, he points out a section carved with mysterious shapes and barely legible words. "This could be 'Urepeleko.' This guy must have written the place he is coming from—Urepele, in southwestern France," he concludes, his grin deepening the laugh lines that frame his blue eyes.

Mallea-Olaetxe studies history in trees, recording the engravings left by Basque sheepherders in aspen groves throughout the mountains of the American West. Over more than a century, starting in the mid-1800s, thousands of Basque men left their villages in the Pyrenees mountains of northern Spain and southern France, immigrating to America in search of better lives. Some were driven by adventure; others were the younger sons of large families who had no hope of inheriting the ancestral farm. In the mid-1900s, still others came to escape the harsh rule of Spanish dictator Francisco Franco.



Many of the newcomers ended up working for large companies, tending flocks of sheep. For months on end, they lived in remote aspen groves near the meadows where their charges fattened up. Alone and far from their families, homesick herders carved their names, thoughts, and fantasies on the trees. Some of the images are elaborate, evoking the deep yearnings of lonesome men in a strange new land. Some are crudely pornographic.

The carvings in this copse of aspens, high above the east shore of Lake Tahoe, are part of an array that stretches from Yosemite National Park north to Plumas National Forest in the Sierra Nevada. Mallea-Olaetxe moves to a standing tree with deeply etched outlines of a couple. The woman wears boots and an old-country dress, the man a beret and a fancy belt. They are shaking hands: a wedding, perhaps, Mallea-Olaetxe says. Nearby, on another tree, a donkey nurses a gigantic snake while a foal looks on. "Where this comes from I do not know," he says, flashing a bemused smile.

What Mallea-Olaetxe does know, after recording more than 27,000 carvings over two decades, is that these are not just random scratches. Arborglyphs, as they're called, chronicle a unique and little-known Western way of life. It's a working-class history, "saturated with humanity," written by the people themselves without revision by rulers or powerful employers. "This is not history by some academic in an ivory tower," he says, with a wink at the irony that he, a recently retired college instructor of Basque history and language, is assembling it. "It's as democratic and down-to-earth as history can get."

Old age is claiming the aspen groves, here and throughout the West. Many are not regenerating, a problem scientists blame largely on fire suppression and warming temperatures. Mallea-Olaetxe, 70, now works as fast as he can to catalog the undocumented arborglyphs. With his goatee already flecked with gray, he is realistic about his odds of success. "I'd have to live 200 more years," he says. "We cannot help it. Nature will claim them." UR

Excerpted from *High Country News* (June 7, 2010), the 2010 Utne Independent Press Award winner for environmental coverage. **www.hcn.org**