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# Migration, bankers, and social capital. The rise of a Basque “industrial cowboy” in the American West: John Etchart, 1900-1943

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## ABSTRACT

This article contributes to the general topics of migration, banking and social capital. It analyzes the business career of John Etchart in the American West from 1900 to 1943; from being a wage-earning sheepherder to becoming one of the most prosperous stockmen in Montana. The biography-centered approach is patterned after the work of other scholars who have studied ranching businesses with emphasis on the dynamic individuals behind the companies. The biography of John Etchart offers a window into important issues for the study of Basque immigration and sheep industry in the West. Etchart’s story exemplifies the Basque immigrant’s climb up the agricultural ladder, that involved the emergence of partnerships within the Basque community. Etchart is also tied to the creation and development of cooperative initiatives among woolgrowers beyond the Basque community. Finally, the Etchart story enhances our understanding of the various business practices undertaken by livestock outfits in Montana in the 1920s and 1930s.

KEYWORDS: Basque immigration, agricultural ladder, sheep industry, American West.

JEL CODES: N52, Q12, Q13, L26.

## 1. Introduction

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the range sheep industry of the American West became an immigrant lure for the Basques. Many late 19th-century Basque immigrants worked in the lower ranks of the sheep industry. Of course, the Basque had to sell their labor for a period in order to build up capital. Most of these new immigrants saw sheepherding as a way to earn and save money, and then return wealthier to their homeland. But after some time in the United States, some of them saw sheep work as a temporary stepping-stone to attaining their own small businesses. Some of those companies created new jobs to later either go out of business or grow in size and com-

*Received: 3 January 2022 – Fecha de recepción: 3 de enero de 2022*

*Accepted: 10 October 2022 – Fecha de aceptación: 10 de octubre de 2022*

*Revista de Historia Industrial – Industrial History Review. Vol. XXXII, no. 87, March 2023. 45-80*  
ISSN: 1132-7200. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1344/rhihr.37987>

plexity. At the turn of the century, this industry became increasingly Basque as more immigrants poured their capital into it, creating new businesses.

For a long time, these Basque immigrant entrepreneurs were largely seen as workers or, rather, sheepherders—oftentimes interchangeably called “sheepmen”. Certainly, during the initial phase of these companies, the sheep owner grazed his own sheep. But this was intended to be temporary. Many sheep businesses started with one sheepherder or two as partners, but smooth operation required more than one person and a division of work. By the early 20th century, some of these entrepreneurs grew relatively large, and then continued to create new jobs for more Basque newcomers. Some of those entrepreneurs included Frank Yparraguirre in Nevada, John B. Archabal in Idaho, Jose Navarro in Oregon, and John Etchart, first in Nevada and later in Montana.<sup>1</sup>

This article analyzes the ranching career of John Etchart in the American West from 1900 to 1943, from California to Nevada and on to Montana, from his beginnings as a wage-earning sheepherder to his legacy as one of the most prosperous stockmen in the northern Great Plains. It is based on research of using a wide range of primary sources, including the reminiscences of Etchart, company records, public records, and newspapers. The biography-centered approach is patterned after the work of other scholars who have studied ranching businesses in their corporate form, with an emphasis on the dynamic individuals behind the companies (Pearce 1964; Skaggs 1973; Murrah 1981; McGregor 1982; Remley 1993; Iglar 2001; Woods 2001; 2006; 2010; Gracy II 2019; Miller 2020). It also echoes the work of some economic historians—notably Valdalisso (2002) and Moreno Lázaro (2013)—who have studied the development of entrepreneurship and social capital among different Basque and Spanish communities in the Americas.

Etchart’s livestock operations in northeastern Montana were one of the largest. He was a knowledgeable rancher and warmly esteemed by most members of the local business community in Montana’s Valley County. For more than four decades, sometimes with and sometimes without partners, Etchart operated sheep (and later cattle too) in more than three states. Since his arrival in California in 1900, he had built a fortune in the sheep industry. He first started working as a sheepherder in southern California; then became a partner in a successful sheep outfit in northeastern Nevada and, ultimately, built his own livestock company in northeastern Montana.

The biography of John Etchart offers a window into important issues for the study of Basque immigration and ranching in the West. While not all

1. The original Basque names are presented as they appear in the official documents in the United States, despite evident misspellings. It should be noted that Basque immigrants, on their arrival in the United States, typically anglicized their names and sometimes adopted a new one in their American integration process.

Basque immigrants succeeded in entrepreneurial pursuits, Etchart's biography illuminates an exceptional figure in the western sheep business. His story offers a picture of the multidimensional and dynamic phenomenon of Basque immigration, labor, and entrepreneurship in the sheep industry. It exemplifies the Basque immigrant's climb up the agricultural ladder, which involved the emergence of partnerships within and outside the Basque American community as a dominant form of doing business (particularly in the early stages of the companies) in the range sheep industry. Etchart is also tied to the creation and development of cooperative initiatives among woolgrowers beyond the Basque community in Montana. Finally, Etchart's history enhances our understanding of the various resilient business practices undertaken by livestock outfits in the West that sought to turn a profit.

## 2. Industrial shepherders in the American West

In 1900, John (né Jean) Etchart arrived in the United States as an immigrant from Aldudes, in the Basque Country of southwestern France. Aldudes was a rural town with a population of about 1,000, containing small plots with various combinations of crops and livestock largely for household consumption (Institut National de la Statistique et des Etudes Economiques 1959, p. 24; Gómez-Ibáñez 1975, pp. 8, 10, 50-1). Jean was born on 2 August 1882, on his parents' farmstead, called *Mielartzaina* (from Basque, meaning "Michael the shepherd"). It seemed he was destined to be a shepherd. His mother, Marie Chabagno (1841–1916), had inherited the property from her parents in 1868, and with her marriage to Ferdinand Etchart (1826–1905), it became the house where they raised six children.

Jean was the youngest of four sons and two daughters: the first child, Pierre (1869–1937), entered religious life, becoming a priest in Saint-Étienne-de-Baïgorry; Marianne (1871–1942), the second child, became the heiress of the family house; Marie (1873–1968), the second daughter, married Jean Urricariet and lived in the latter's family house *Alastaenia*; Michel (1876–1878), the fourth child, died before the age of two; the fifth child, also named Michel (1880–1915), emigrated to America; and the last child, Jean, would follow the path of his brother Michel.<sup>2</sup>

Jean Etchart was caught up in a general emigration from the Basque Country. His father had already spent 20 years in America, first in Argentina and later in California, before returning to the Basque Country to settle down

2. Albert Chabagno, *Descendance de Martin Chabagno (1806–1891) et Jeanne Inda (1815–1895). Maîtres de 'Miguelartzaina' Les Aldudes*, 1992, 5, Etchart Family Archives, Glasgow, Montana.

and marry.<sup>3</sup> As such, he was born into an emigrating family and society. Other family members in the house in which he was born had already departed for America. His mother, Marie, had become the chosen heir of this farmstead after her two older brothers refused to inherit it when they earlier chose to make their way to America. By the 1880s, emigration to America had become an established part of life, not only in Aldudes and nearby towns but throughout the entire Basque Country, regardless of the border between France and Spain. This Basque migration was a cross-border phenomenon.

We can say approximately that the number of Basque immigrants in the Western regions of the United States in 1900 was about 1000, and in 1910 increased to about 8500.<sup>4</sup> While an increasing number of young people were leaving the Basque Country, some voices spoke against the departure of the young (Douglass and Bilbao 1975, pp. 400-1).<sup>5</sup> Official opposition to emigration did little to discourage Jean and many others from leaving their homeland. As he reached adulthood, Jean decided to join his older brother Michel in southern California. Just like his brother and so many hopeful others, he intended to head to America to make money and then return after a few years.

Change in the social and economic life of the late-19th-century Basque Country set in motion forces that pushed young people to find their fortunes in emigration adventures. This change related directly to the forces of global capitalism that wrought hardship on the rural economies of the Basque Country. It was this kind of world into which Jean (hereafter referred to as John) and others had been born (Saitua 2016, p. 65).<sup>6</sup>

In the late 19th century, global capitalism brought cheaper food supplies to rural economies throughout the Basque Country and elsewhere in Europe. Grains and meat came from the Americas, forcing small-scale peasant-family based economies to become more competitive and consolidated. Across the Basque Country and in rural places like Aldudes, profound change occurred. The adjustments brought hardship to many farmsteads as they struggled to

3. Ferdinand Etchart had migrated to Argentina in the 1840s and in the early 1850s moved to California. The California Gold Rush ignited a “voluntary” small Basque migration from South America, amongst whom was Ferdinand. Ferdinand was chosen to lead a legendary “military-like” group of Basques that traveled on horseback for eighteen months from Argentina to California to try their luck in global capitalism gold mining. Instead, these early Basques, including Ferdinand, prospered in the ranching business and established the basis for a chain migration of their close kin and neighbors in their hometowns. After twenty years, Ferdinand returned home with a small fortune made in the ranching business. Gene Etchart, interview by John Etchart, 25 January 2013, recording, Etchart Family Archives; Gachitéguy 1955, pp. 8-9.

4. These estimates are based on the work of Arrizabalaga (1986). There is so far no reliable official statistical data on the number and distribution of Basques in the United States. All available data are based on a few scholars’ estimates. Accurately estimating the numbers of Basque immigrants has long been difficult since Basques were not listed separately in the censuses, but instead grouped with French and Spanish immigrants.

5. Chabagno, *Descendance*.

6. Gene Etchart, interview, January 2013; see “global capitalism” in Frieden 2006.

compete under the conditions and, indeed, oppressions of a more intense market-oriented capitalism. All the while, forms of community cooperation and reciprocity that had traditionally dominated the rural Basque society, where neighbors relied on one another for economic survival and support, struggled to continue. The uncertainties of this transitional period, and with its poverty, propelled an outward-bound emigration from rural towns. While John Etchart chose emigration to the United States for its economic opportunities, he took many of the roots of community-based and traditional, peasant economic survival tactics and organization with him to America (Chevet and Saint-Amour 1992; Valdaliso 2002, pp. 171-96).

Of course, there were other major push factors in the Basque-emigration equation. On the one hand, economic-political consequences in the transition from the old regime to a liberal state were at play, while on the other, Basque family traditions and laws were spurring emigration, particularly the prevailing practice and law of primogeniture, whereby inheritance of any entire property went to the eldest child to the exclusion of all the younger siblings. In the French Basque Country, even though the French Revolution had abolished the prerogatives that secured the heir's power and rights over the family house, primogeniture remained as an informal succession institution. During the 19th century, Basque families found different strategies to choose a single heir as a means to guarantee continuity to the house and lineage of the family (Arrizabalaga 2005, pp. 280-1).

The most significant period of Basque immigration to the United States occurred between 1890 and 1920. These early newcomers emigrated as part of the great wave of southern and eastern European immigrants in the United States, often called the New Immigration. American industrial and agricultural expansion benefitted not only from the inflow of immigrant labor to factories and farms, but also from access to international markets and the influx of foreign capital (Appleyard 1989, pp. 486-99; Fernández de Pinedo 1993; Douglass 1971, pp. 1100-13; Goldin 1994, p. 228; see also: Douglass and Bilbao 1975; Pildain Salazar 1984).

In the late 19th century, the sheep industry attracted Basque immigration as American industrial and agricultural capitalism expanded into the American West. In the 1850s, some Basque immigrants settled in California during the gold rush. Some already living in South America struck out for California. Many, including John Etchart's father, started business ventures in livestock ranching to serve a growing market and an expanding population in that state.

By the early 1870s, competition for grazing land in California pushed Basque stock operators eastward to marginal grazing lands in Nevada, Idaho and beyond. Increasingly, the transcontinental railroads, with their feeder lines, connected the interior West to major markets. Having access to free and open range in western states and territories, as well as opportunity to pur-

chase lands, Basque stock operators built up thriving sheep operations. These new enterprises created a need for additional workers or shepherders. Basque owners often turned to their homeland for recruitment. Then, Basque emigration can be cast as a cross-border phenomenon driven by labor demand in the range sheep industry of the West. The new arrivals hoped to make money in the sheep rush of the late 19th century and then return home after years of work with a fortune. They were but “birds of passage”; many returned and many stayed (Douglass and Bilbao 1975, pp. 203-54).<sup>7</sup>

At the turn of the century, just as Basque immigrants became more settled and dispersed throughout the American West, Basque communities began to develop around many rural western towns and struggled to gain legitimacy in the host society. This led to the creation of relatively homogeneous Basque immigrant communities throughout the West, from the high plains of Wyoming to the southwestern part of the San Joaquin Valley in California. Basque immigrants developed similar attachments to places and sub-regions within the larger, diverse, and complex American West. Generally, Basques settled in the West as they had in Spain and France, according to their town or province of origin. While Biscayan Basques settled in portions of northern Nevada, southern Idaho and southeastern Oregon, there was a predominance of Navarrese and French Basque in California, Wyoming and Montana (Bieter 1957, pp. 10-15; Inkster 1959, pp. 133-136; Douglass 2013, p. 5).

John Etchart stayed on. On 3 December 1900, after ten days at sea, he arrived at Ellis Island in New York, with his railroad journey set to take him to Los Angeles. He was 18 years old.<sup>8</sup> His brother had arranged employment for him to work as a “sheep worker” in the Santa Monica mountains, and before the year ended, he was tending a band of about 2,000 sheep.<sup>9</sup> Everything was entirely different and new for him, starting with sheep work.

The shepherd’s work, considered the lowest-ranking occupation in the sheep industry, consisted of caring for and overseeing the fattening of range sheep to be marketed for wool and meat.<sup>10</sup> Handling sheep on the western

7. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the expression “birds of passage” was coined to refer to the immigrants who intended to return to their homeland after a short period of wage earning. Roberts 1913, p. 13.

8. List or Manifest of Alien Immigrants for the Commissioner, 3 December 1900, New York, microfilm serial T715, *Passenger Lists of Vessels Arriving at New York, New York, 1897-1957*, microfilm roll no. 0162, line no. 11, 91, Records of the U.S. Customs Service, Record Group 36, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland.

9. I use the term “sheep workers” to refer to shepherders. The “sheep worker” is not my term. In the 1930s and 1940s, woolgrowers or shepherders oftentimes used this concept to refer to this agricultural labor. This term recognizes shepherders as workers who produced an important commodity as part of the capitalist agricultural industry and also rejects the romanticized image of the lonely shepherd. Anonymous 1942, p. 5.

10. It is important to distinguish *shepherd* from *shepherd*. While the shepherd is in charge of a small flock (consisting of 150 to 200 head of sheep), the shepherder takes care of



rangelands required grazing bands of nearly 2,000-3,000 head over great distances, constantly moving from one pasture to another with the seasons. Besides trailing and controlling large herds of sheep on open ranges, hired sheepherders also performed a wide range of functions in the home ranch, such as maintenance work of the ranch buildings (Beveridge Kennedy and Bradford Doten 1901, pp. 19-20).

Sheepherders—either Basques or non-Basques—were a part of an industrial enterprise that responded to both national and international markets. Historian David Iglar has introduced the concept of “industrial cowboys” as a part of a commercial livestock ranching enterprise organized around land investments, profit-making, and food production. The industry, Iglar notes, “thrived by engineering natural landscapes and mobilizing large labor forces”. The concept contradicts the traditional mythic symbol of the free-spirited cowboy (Iglar 2001, p. 7). In the same vein, Basque immigrant workers can be seen as *industrial sheepherders*. The application of the word “industrial” divorces them from much of the romanticized interpretations created by popular sources, which emphasize their devotion to the flocks and their heroic survival as lonely wilderness workers.

Like most of the Basques who migrated to the American West for the same purpose, Etchart had no prior experience as a sheepherder or, more to the point, as a range sheep worker.<sup>11</sup> Contrary to the popular idea, Basque immigrants were not experienced sheepherders, nor boasted experiences which could help them adapt to sheep grazing in the American West. Although some may have worked with a small flock of sheep in the Basque Country, none had worked as open-range sheepherders before they immigrated to the United States (Douglass 1970, pp. 19-20; Saitua 2016, pp. 65-66). Beyond the novelty and the challenge of the experience, he was now on the first rung of the “agricultural ladder” in the sheep industry. The *agricultural ladder* thesis has long been used to explain the life cycle pattern of upward occupational mobility in agriculture, first as farm laborers, then as tenants, and finally as owner-operators (Spillman 1919; Lee 1947; Harris 1950; Long 1950). Like many other Basque immigrants and non-Basque sheepmen, Etchart had worked his way up the agricultural ladder from a hired-wage sheep laborer to a tenant rancher and eventual ranch owner.

Climbing the ladder required hard work, discipline, and patience. And not all chose to stay the course. As a herder, a young Basque immigrant might accumulate enough capital and experience to become an autonomous sheep grazer or owner of stock. An aspiring worker often accepted his wages in lambs

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a large band numbering about 2,000-3,000 sheep. Besides that, the shepherd is a stationary farmer, the sheepherder is a nomad who roams from pasture to pasture. Gilfillan 1929, pp. 7-8.

11. Etchart, interview, January 2013.

as the initial move upward on the sheep industry’s agricultural ladder; under this system, the herder would come to graze mixed bands consisting of both his own and the employer’s sheep. Sharing some of the organizational structure of the *Partido System*.

The *Partido System* was an institution developed in New Mexico during the 18th century and extended to other parts of the Southwest. Under this system, a *patron* (or owner) leased part of his flock to one or more landless sheep operators (or “partidarios”). Usually, the contract required the sheepherder to pay the owner 20 percent of the original head count. This setup operated as a win-win situation: for the owner, it secured the hard work of the herder when he committed to protect and move the sheep and remain for the season. For the herder, it was in his interest because he was protecting and increasing his own stock all the while looking forward to receiving his wages at the end of the season in additional sheep (Upchurch 1942; Charles 1940).

Under favorable conditions, the system worked for both parties. Favorable conditions meant when the sheep reproduced well and there were no significant losses from weather, disease, or predator attacks. With his accumulated stock, the herder could move on to become a semi-autonomous sheep grazier, sometimes forming small partnerships with two to four partners. He could also invest in the operations by purchasing land and equipment, making him, on occasion, a ranch owner. Another route was tenancy before land ownership. The goal in either case was to own a home ranch; probably no more than 320 acres, that would give him access to the public range, some of which was free and open and some of which required permits and fees for use within the newly established forest reserves, which became national forests after 1905. Often the process required assuming a mortgage on the home ranch that could be paid off without too much difficulty—if times were good. Ultimately, the sheep rancher could retire and bequeath the property to his heirs (Gray 1968, p. 242; Young and Sparks 1985, pp. 97-98; Saitua 2016, pp. 68-69). Of course, exceptions can always be found to this pattern.

For the first job as sheep worker John Etchart received \$25 monthly, considerably less than the average wage—\$40 per month—paid to sheep labor at that time. In the spring of 1901, looking for a better-paying job, John started working for another sheep ranch, this one north of Burbank, California, in the San Fernando Valley. In less than a year, Jean and Michel Etchart decided to move to northeastern Nevada, seeking opportunities to become independent landowners and build a sheep business of their own. Compared to California, where rangelands were increasingly crowded, Nevada offered better opportunities for open-range stock grazing, largely because of the still abundant free range. So the Etchart brothers headed to Elko County (Starrs 1998, pp. 168; Etchart 1992, pp. 33-34; Anonymous 1902, p. 21; Anonymous 1905, p. 9; Clawson 1938, pp. 4-6).



**FIGURE 1** - Map showing the three most important places in the life and career of John Etchart: San Fernando Valley in southern California, Elko in northeastern Nevada, and Glasgow in northeastern Montana



Source: Author's own work.

### 3. Sheep business in northeastern Nevada and Etchart Bros. Company

By the time they arrived in Elko, northeastern Nevada was the center of a thriving sheep business, along with cattle. After its establishment as a railroad town in 1868, Elko quickly became an important trade and distribution center for ranching and mining interests in the Intermountain West, situated as it was on transcontinental railroad midway between Ogden, Utah, and

Reno. By the late 1880s, as large cattle outfits appeared to be consolidating their monopolies over the open and free range of northeast Nevada, a weather event of huge proportions occurred in the Great Basin: the disastrous winter of 1889-90.

What became known as the "White Winter" in Nevada wreaked havoc and death upon the state's free-range cattle industry. The summer drought and following severe winter emptied northern Nevada's ranges of freely roaming cattle herds, bankrupting many large cattle outfits that had prospered from free grazing lands. The depletion of cattle herds meant, as range scientist James A. Young writes, "freedom for the range sheep industry to expand without competition". The vacant ranges were open invitations for out-of-state sheep owners and corporations to send bands of their animals onto Nevada's open ranges. Between the late 1890s and early 1900s, the number of sheep outfits increased at the expense of a retreating cattle business in northern Nevada, at least in terms of the presence of large cattle companies monopolizing vast acreage on the public domain. Smaller cattle operations also enjoyed opportunities with the collapse of large operators, but only to come into conflict with the increasing sheep numbers and their owners (Elliott 1973, pp. 114, 173; Young and Sparks 1985, pp. 132-136; Wentworth, 1948, pp. 218-220; Census Division 1896, p. 106; North 1904, p. 243).

Under these stresses, competition for foraging on the public ranges increased between cattle and sheep. As newer, bushier vegetation communities emerged on the depleted ranges after the White Winter, sheep with their ability to both browse and graze proved to be efficient herbivores on the deteriorating ranges. The economics of sheep ranching fared better during the national depression from 1893 to 1897 and enjoyed the off-and-on benefits of a protective tariff. Between the late 1880s and well into the late 1920s, unregulated livestock grazing on the public-domain rangelands outside of the U.S. Forest Service's national forests saw constant tension between absentee owners of vast itinerant herds of sheep. Small, struggling local cattle ranchers competed against the influx of woolie herbivores for both range forage and water. The competition sometimes flared into violence, with livestock destroyed and rival stockmen killed. The struggle in Nevada was not without its instances of violence. In April 1900, for example, cattlemen John and Adam Schell were charged with attempting to murder a Basque sheepherder in Humboldt County (Anonymous 1900, p. 3). The unstable and competitive conditions of range use, however, did not discourage the Etcharts and others like them from entering the sheep business in Elko County (Patterson, Ulph and Goodwin 1969, pp. 278-287; Hays 1959, pp. 49-51; White 1991, p. 225; Peffer 1951, p. 26; Anderson and Hill 2004, pp. 166-167; Anderson and Lueck 1992).

By the early 20th century, Elko's sheep business centered around the bank, courthouse, wool warehouse, and railroad. Most small-scale sheepmen, at

least in the initial stages of their companies, did not think the ownership of a home ranch was necessary. They traveled long distances on a seasonal basis with their herds in search of pasture, largely grazing their flocks or bands on the free and open ranges of the public domain. Survival and success often depended upon access not only to free rangelands, and sometimes to rented irrigated pastures, but also access to water on the open range. Generally, they overnights in tents outdoors and sometimes stayed in boardinghouses in towns along the way. The seminomadic sheepmen deposited their cash at the local banks. In Elko, this meant either Elko First National Bank or the Henderson Banking Company. Later they leveraged their patronage of the banks to obtain mortgages to buy a home ranch. At the Elko County Courthouse, they found private-land parcels to purchase that often came with long-standing grazing permits in the national forests. They secured water rights by asserting prior-right use or by filing of riparian claims based on their ownership of the land adjacent to water. At the courthouse, if they were citizens or declared their intention of becoming a citizen, they could file to buy government land (often school lands ceded to the state by the federal government to sell) and free land under the various national homestead laws (Wren 1904, pp. 409-410; Young and Sparks 1985, p. 99; Townley 1978, p. 70; Hochmuth, Franklin and Clawson 1942, pp. 6-9, 16-42; Cooper 1933, pp. 10-14; Anonymous 1909a, p. 1; Clawson 1938).

After the annual spring shearing, sheepmen without storage facilities stored their wool clip (total amount of wool shorn from a particular flock) at the Elko Wool Warehouse Company for a fee. It was then sold and shipped by rail to woolen mills on the East Coast and even Europe. The railroad also sent lambs and sheep to packers for slaughter. From Elko County, stock trains took around ten days or more to reach midwestern stockyards. By the 1900s, railroads, private stockyards, and commission houses charged about \$200 to ship a car of sheep from the Intermountain West to the Midwest. The slow speed of the stock trains meant days of travel during which sheep and lambs lost weight. Since the animals were sold by weight at terminal markets, this factor reduced profits earned from selling them for slaughter. Still, the sheep industry enjoyed two sources of income from the animals: the wool clip and the lamb and mutton meat products (Wentworth 1948, pp. 222-223; US Senate 1911, pp. 3936-3938).

By the early 20th century, many start-up sheep ranches in Elko County were owned and managed by Basque immigrants who came from the ranks of sheep laborers. Although Basque-owned sheep partnerships were small-scale outfits, some early companies developed into big operations, like the Spanish Ranch or YP Ranch. By that time, an established Basque population in Elko attracted the immigration of more of their countrymen, and not just as laborers but as aspiring individuals, many of whom formed sheep companies or partnerships.

These firms were typically organized as general partnerships between siblings, relatives, old neighbors, or fellow countrymen (Lane 1977, p. 35; Holbert 1975, pp. 13-14; Hatfield 2009, pp. 296-297; Gulliford 2018). Like other communities, Basque immigrant entrepreneurs, including the Etchart brothers, had access to the resources and the social capital of that community.

Basques also drew social capital from family, kin, and community networks in financial, emotional, and cultural forms (Choldin 1973, pp. 163-176; Munshi 2016, pp. 630-648; see also Luebke 1998; Embry and Cannon 2015). Basque immigrants forged networks of information, credit, and business contacts. The helping hand of an established Basque rancher was important for start-up sheep operations. This included access to capital, business connections, and market tips relevant to the success of a new business. It often meant access to profitable market outlets for their wool and stock on the hoof for slaughter. The social capital required an underpinning of cultural and ethnic identity that provided a medium of information exchange, relationships, and networks (Light, Bhachu and Karageorgis 1993, pp. 37-39; Lin, Ensel and Vaughn 1981, pp. 393-405).

The Basque-owned boardinghouses as a source of social capital offered places for labor recruitment and distribution of information. In Elko, Basque-owned boardinghouses included the Overland Hotel, Telescope Hotel and The Star Hotel. A Basque boardinghouse was perhaps the major welcoming social institution for the new Basque immigrants. They were the first separate establishments owned by the Basques to cater to the needs of their community, especially shepherders. The hotels were a refuge or safe zone where those immigrants could make plans for their new lives in America. And while they were secure social centers, they soon became much more by the early 20th century, turning into places where major transactions occurred in the sheep business (Echeverria 1999; 1997).

The “sheep houses”, or hotels, became *de facto* headquarters for sheepmen. In 1911, for example, the Overland Hotel advertised itself in the Elko newspaper as the “Headquarters and Information Bureau for Sheepmen and Shepherders” (Anonymous 1911, p. 4). Sheep ranchers generally went to Basque-owned boardinghouses to recruit labor and undertake other business-related activities. They served as information centers for grazing and sheep marketing, sales transactions, and as a meeting place for woolgrowers’ associations. Furthermore, they were places where hearty ranch food, mutton or lamb in various forms, was served in family-style dining rooms (Saitua 2020). The Etchart brothers joined others in these Basque boarding houses or hotels as they established themselves and worked their way up in eastern Nevada’s Basque sheep business.

In Elko, the Etcharts formed a partnership to produce wool and raise mutton on the hoof. Their cousin Martin Chabagno joined them in the partner-

ship. In the very beginning, the trio owned no land and had no expenses associated with landownership. They could begin business with a small investment, but expanding the business required access to investment capital. The Etcharts and Chabagno found a fourth risk partner, a local banker, who invested money in their efforts (or, in mining terms, “grub-staked” them) (Etchart 1992, pp. 33-34).<sup>12</sup>

**FIGURE 2** • *John Etchart sitting down with his cousin Martin Chabagno standing next to him, ca. 1908. Elko, Nevada*



Source: Etchart Family Collection, Glasgow, Montana.

12. I have not been able to find the fourth risk partner's name. Etchart, interview, January 2013.

Like most industries, banks played a key role in the development of the sheep industry in the American West. Local banks became risk partners of sheep firms and looked after the business. Before starting a venture, of course, banks made sure that these partnerships had a market for their produce. Bankers also offered in-kind credit to ranchers for inputs (such as more sheep or supplemental feed) that were paid directly to retailers. This situation minimized the problem of loan diversion. Perhaps more important for these small companies was that cashless payment through bank transfers reduced many risks in the still turbulent Far West (Doti and Schweikart 1991; Schweikart 1982). This allowed Basque immigrant entrepreneurs to expand their operations and reach long-run desired ranch size.

This company summered their sheep in the Bruneau Mountains of southern Idaho and wintered in northern Arizona, but Elko was the headquarters for their operations. It was a nomadic sheep operation that quickly succeeded (Etchart 1992, p. 34). By 1909, the company was well known around town as the Etchart Bros. and was large by Elko County standards in terms of its business scale. In less than a decade, the partnership grew from about 6,000 head of sheep to 20,000 grazing mostly on public land. Another indicator of the company's scale was the number of sheep workers employed in their operation. Between 1907 and 1909, they hired around 20 workers, paying them \$45 per month. The shepherding crew was composed mostly of Basque immigrant workers originated from both France and Spain. Some of those immigrants were Ben Iribarne, Gaston Uhalde, John Inchauspe, Cadet Anxo, August Etcheverry, and Joe Elordieta.<sup>13</sup>

Both in Nevada and later in Montana, the Etcharts always prioritized the recruitment of their kinsmen and fellow countrymen. John oftentimes sent letters home encouraging relatives and neighbors to emigrate to America and work for him (Etchart 1992, pp. 42-43). His efforts, like many other Basque sheepmen at that time, strengthened social networks (based on kinship, village associations, or just social identity) within the Basque community (Bieter and Bieter 2000, pp. 40-43). However, John also employed non-Basque workers. In Elko County, where Basque immigrants had become an available labor force, John employed several non-Basques, including two workers named Thomas Jackson and Fred Lancaster.<sup>14</sup>

By late 1905, as their business began to prosper (and perhaps contrary to his earlier plans) John started to think about staying on in Nevada. On May 18, 1906, he declared his intention to become an American citizen at the Elko

13. Etchart Bros., Notebook, 1907; Etchart Bros., Notebook, 1908; Etchart Bros., Notebook, 1909; Paycheck, John Inchauspe, 1909; Paycheck, Cadet Anxo, 1909; Paycheck, August Etcheverry, 1909, Etchart Family Archives, Montana.

14. John Etchart to Marie Urricariet, 27 October 1919; Etchart Bros., Notebook, 1907; Etchart Bros., Notebook, 1908; Etchart Bros., Notebook, 1909, Etchart Family Archives.



County Courthouse.<sup>15</sup> In July 1907, he acquired a grazing permit in Independence National Forest near the Nevada-Idaho state line based on his filing a forest homestead claim. The previous year Congress passed the Forest Homestead Act of 11 June 1906, allowing a homestead claim of up to 160 acres in a national forest if it could be demonstrated that the land and permitted pasturage within the forest could support an agricultural enterprise, most often a stock-ranch operation (Anonymous 1907, p. 2).<sup>16</sup>

By 1908, John Etchart's firm had many reliable business contacts and a good reputation for producing high-quality wool. In business, then as now, a company's good reputation is one of its most valuable assets (Kobrak 2013, pp. 763-786; Jackson 2004). Etchart was considered a dependable and honest sheepman who had acquired the confidence and respect of even non-Basque ranchers and businessmen, despite his status as a very recent immigrant. In this regard, Basques, like other recent immigrant groups from southern and eastern Europe, often experienced rejection and discrimination. While Basques did find success in the Nevada sheep industry, they were also met with anti-immigrant hostility and prejudice (Lane 1977, pp. 35-38). But by 1909, John Etchart could be seen traveling in good company in Nevada and staying at the finest hotels. On August 6, 1909, the *Nevada State Journal* noted that he, Charles E. Kaiser, and John Balan, both prominent Elko sheepmen, arrived in Reno for business purposes and stayed at the Riverside Hotel (Anonymous 1909b, p. 3).

But just as Etchart started enjoying success and recognition, he had an accident. In the early fall of 1909, he was riding a fine but unbroken horse over a rough piece of country while herding a band of sheep in northern Elko County. As the story goes, his horse, suddenly frightened, threw him to the ground, leaving him with a broken leg. Etchart's accompanying foreman made a travois for him, and they proceeded as fast as possible to the doctor in Elko. The journey over the rocky hills was unpleasant and painful. Etchart's foreman had not tied the broken leg properly, and during the rough trip it was damaged even further. It swelled considerably, going dark. His pain was so intense that at one point he asked the foreman to "finish it". But the plea was ignored, and they did finally arrive in Elko. It took Etchart several months to recover from the accident and left him with a noticeable limp for the rest of his life.

One contentious aspect of the accident were the medical bills (something that still has a surprisingly modern ring). Etchart expected the partnership to cover these, as he regarded it a work-related accident. However, the banker

15. John Etchart, Declaration of Intention, 18 May 1906, Fourth Judicial District, Elko County Courthouse, Elko, Nevada.

16. On 11 June 1906, Congress had passed the Forest Homestead Act, which authorized homesteading within National Forest boundaries. Rowley 1985, pp. 63, 81-82.

**FIGURE 3** • John Etchart with crutches and other Basque immigrants leaning against the bar of the Basque-owned Overland Hotel in Elko (Nevada) in the fall of 1909



Source: Etchart Family Archives.

partner, whose name does not appear in the records, argued that Etchart should pay his own medical bills. And Etchart could find no recourse under the law; Nevada did not have state industrial insurance until 1913, but even this law did not extend coverage to agricultural or ranch work (Malone 1980, p. 170).<sup>17</sup> Before the year ended, the Etchart brothers decided to dissolve the partnership. Their decision to liquidate the company was probably based also on other factors.<sup>18</sup>

John’s respective share was \$28,000, a small fortune at the time. Taking their money, the siblings decided to return to the Basque Country for a short visit, but with the idea of returning to Elko County. The preceding Nevada years were crucial to Etchart’s business career. He not only became a knowledgeable rancher but also soon accumulated enough capital to form a new firm (Etchart 1992, p. 34).<sup>19</sup>

17. “Persons Excluded”, *Nevada Revised Statutes* 617.08.

18. I have not been able to identify other factors, others than the accident.

19. Etchart, interview, January 2013.

#### 4. A new start: John Etchart's company in Montana

The trip to the Basque Country turned out to be something of a turning point for John Etchart. He became engaged to his future wife, Catherine Urquilux (1888–1978), although they would not marry until 1912, after John had settled on a new ranch, not in Nevada but in Montana (Urza 1981, pp. 2-17). A coincidental meeting in Aldudes would lead him to return and settle in Montana: in Aldudes, he met Pierre Sagarduluz, who had run a sheep operation south of Glasgow, Montana, in the area known today as Harper's Ridge. When Etchart told Sagarduluz of his intentions to return to Nevada, Sagarduluz advised John to go first to Montana's Missouri River Basin and "take a look" at its grazing potential before returning to Elko (Etchart 1992, p. 34).<sup>20</sup>

On 11 March 1910, John Etchart was back in the United States.<sup>21</sup> He was twenty-seven years old, alone, engaged but not yet married, and without his brother, who had to remain in France—unlike John, Michel had not acquired American citizenship while in Nevada and was conscripted into the French army. Before John's departure, the brothers decided that John would go back to the United States by himself and Michel, after finishing his service, would join him in whatever new livestock operation John had put together during that time. It never happened. Michel stayed in Aldudes and lost his life in 1915 while serving in the French army during World War I.

Upon arriving back in the United States, Etchart told customs officials in New York that his destination was Elko, but first he planned a visit to Saco, Montana, northeast of Great Falls near the Canadian border. Once in Saco, John rented a horse and rode south. After crossing about 30 miles of marginal lands, he reached the grassy hills of Willow Creek in southern Valley County. The grasslands were rich. Etchart would later admit that he had never seen finer rangelands in his life. On the day of his arrival, he over-nighted in an old cabin ranch house. The next morning, he made a verbal agreement to purchase a plot of land, although he did not formalize this purchase until the end of that year (Etchart 1992, pp. 34-45).<sup>22</sup>

Records show that on 24 October 1911, he formalized the purchase of the property, consisting of 120 acres from Alfred Bruzel and his wife, Agnes, for \$3,500. This tract of land was located about 50 miles south of Hillsdale and about 45 miles west of Glasgow. The transaction included a water-right permit for an area situated a quarter-mile southwest of this property, which al-

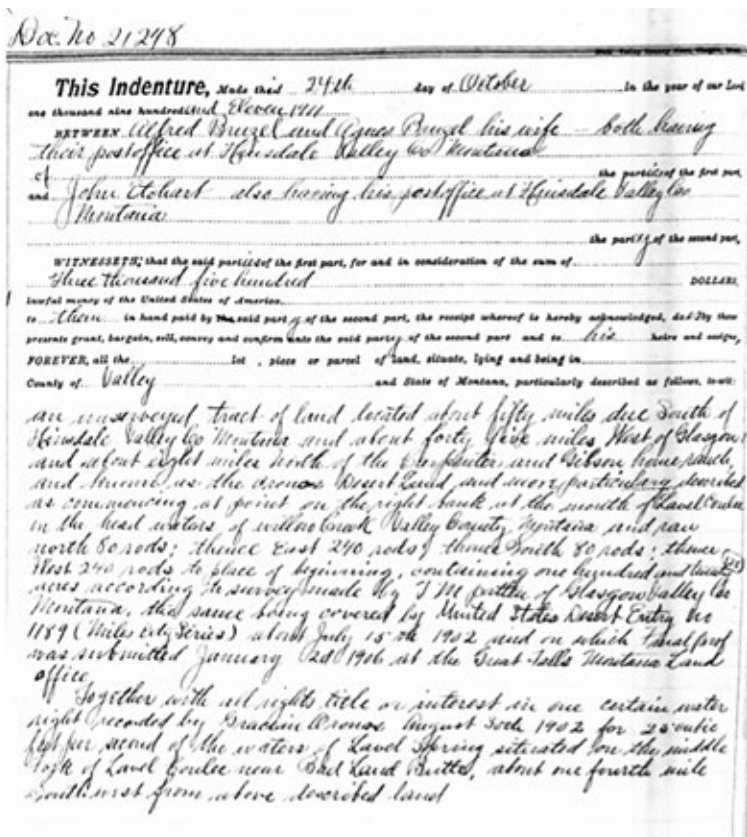
20. Etchart, interview, January 2013.

21. List or Manifest of Alien Passengers for the United States, 5 March 1910, New York, microfilm serial T715, *Passenger Lists of Vessels Arriving at New York, New York, 1897-1957*, microfilm roll no. 1424, line no. 6, page no. 168, Record Group 36, National Archives and Records Administration, New York.

22. List or Manifest, 5 March 1910; Etchart, interview, January 2013.

lowed John to withdraw 25 cubic feet per second from Lavel Spring. The water right was first recorded on 3 August 1902 by Gracian Oronos, probably the first Basque immigrant to settle in Valley County. This was the beginning stage of Etchart's home ranch in Montana, later called Stone House (History Committee of the Pioneer Museum 1991, p. 275).<sup>23</sup>

**FIGURE 4 •** Indenture between John Etchart and Alfred Bruzel and his wife, Agnes. The indenture was registered on 24 October 1911, in Valley County, Montana



Source: Office of the County Recorder, Valley County, Montana.

After the verbal agreement to purchase, Etchart traveled westward to Deer Lodge, Montana, to acquire two bands of sheep, numbering nearly 6,000 head, from the Larabie Brothers, prominent sheepmen and bankers in Montana. At this point John expected his brother to join him in this Mon-

23. Alfred and Agnes Bruzel to John Etchart, 24 October 1911, Deed Book 6, page 292, Doc. no. 21248, Office of the County Recorder, Valley County, Montana.

tana enterprise, but that was not to occur. With some hired help, Etchart trailed the newly acquired sheep eastward over the Continental Divide country north of McDonald Pass. His banker, Ted Larabie, acted as camp tender, providing him with food and other supplies. He remembered that summer fondly. First, Etchart started trying to get to know people involved in the sheep business in this area of Montana. Second, he became familiar with these rangelands, the natural resources, and the wildlife. And third, this was one of the most fulfilling, inspiring, and perhaps fun summers that Etchart ever enjoyed as a sheepman, because he took time to fish and explore local rivers and pasturelands (Etchart 1992, p. 45).<sup>24</sup>

John Etchart's beginnings in Montana were extraordinary. His name and reputation soon became well-known in Montana sheep circles. In June 1912, after the shearing season, William Walker, a wool buyer representing a Boston firm, purchased his whole wool-clip, consisting of about 50,000 pounds, at 20 cents per pound—a sum of \$10,000. The *Saco Independent* considered Etchart's "one of the best clips" of the year in Valley County (Anonymous 1912, p. 2). In late August 1912, after his successful start, John returned to the Basque Country to marry Catherine and bring her back to Montana. On 24 September 1912, the newlyweds arrived in New York from Le Havre, France, aboard the ship *La Touraine*. En route to Montana, they made a stop at Chicago for "business purposes", probably to find buyers from meat-packing companies. Once in Montana, the couple made plans to build a stone house on their ranch in 1915 that resembled the traditional *baserri* farmhouses found in the Basque Country (Etchart 1992, p. 5).<sup>25</sup>

On 5 September 1914, Etchart acquired 165.11 additional acres from William B. Long at a cost of \$2,220. In 1916, he ran 11,355 stock sheep and 2,700 yearling sheep.<sup>26</sup> In that year's shearing season, his clip brought the highest price in Valley County—30½ cents a pound. In the spring of 1916, one million pounds of wool were warehoused in Glasgow and shipped to market, bringing returns of \$300,000. Moreover, Etchart was instrumental in upgrading the quality of range sheep and later cattle in Valley County. Beginning in 1916, he began marking out yearlings to other sheep ranchers and feedlots. Within a very short time, Etchart's Rambouillet crossbred bucks had gained

24. Etchart, interview, January 2013.

25. Jean Etchart and Catherine Urkiluz, Marriage Certificate, 1 September 1912, Parish of Aldudes Archives, Aldudes, France; Gene Etchart, interview by John Etchart, 2 August 2013, recording, Etchart Family Archives; Passenger List of United States Citizens, 24 September 1912, New York, microfilm serial T715, *Passenger Lists of Vessels Arriving at New York, New York, 1897-1957*, microfilm roll no. 1941, line no. 4, page no. 111, Record Group 36; Catherine Etchart, interview by Gene Etchart, 22 March 1970, recording, Etchart Family Archives.

26. William B. Long to John Etchart, 5 September 1914, Deed Book 27, page 239, Doc. no. 56818, Office of the County Recorder, Valley County.



a good reputation for their wool and lamb production.<sup>27</sup> In 1919, he marketed yearlings and two-year-olds for \$30 per head. In the early 1920s, he was marketing Rambouillet rams and yearlings for about \$20 per head (Anonymous 1919, p. 5; Anonymous 1921c, p. 10; Anonymous 1920a, pp. 1, 8). John Etchart, as his son Gene later recalled, “selected his ewes so that they would have clean open faces not prone to becoming wool blind which could be hazardous to them in storm conditions... he sought to develop ideal range sheep well suited to this part of the country” (Etchart 1992, p. 49).

Sheep ranching remained highly susceptible to market and weather disturbances, which caused setbacks. The winter of 1916-17 was particularly severe in northeastern Montana (in fact all of western North America). In January 1917, deep snow covered most of the grazing areas along the Missouri River about 60 miles south of Hinsdale, and temperatures of 50 degrees below zero occurred nightly. The month of January saw colder averages for the entire state than any other month on record. Herd losses by that spring soared to over 90 percent. Like most ranchers, Etchart ran out of hay for his sheep and suffered heavy losses. But it would take him only a year to recover. After the winter of 1917, he acquired additional irrigated land north of Milk River as a buffer—or “insurance policy”, as he usually said—against the risks from both the weather and uncertain market conditions (Anonymous 1917a, p. 2; Anonymous 1917b, p. 1).<sup>28</sup>

In the ranching business, labor continued to play an important role in determining the success of an operation. The company became a true family enterprise. Though he continued to prioritize the recruitment of relatives and fellow countrymen, Basque immigrant workers were not easily available in Montana. On 27 October 1919, for example, John sent a letter to his sister Marie in the Basque Country asking her to recruit three or four workers from their families and home town by next spring.<sup>29</sup> His efforts to bring workers from his homeland resulted only in a small influx of Basques to Montana. Some stayed and went into business for themselves, but most returned home. Among those immigrants who worked for Etchart were Mitch Oxarart, Tony Bengochea, Pete Handia, Pete Mocho, and Fred Urricarriet. Other Basque ranchers in Montana recruited fellow countrymen, including John Etchepare, Pete Caricaburu, Pete Itcaina, Mike Arrambide, Fred Granada, Fermin

27. In fall 1921, significantly, John Etchart was awarded for his sheep and horses at the Valley County Fair with the following prizes: first prize for the Best ewe; first prize for the Best pen Rambouillet ram; first prize for the Best pen Rambouillet ewe; second place for the Best Rambouillet ram; first place for the Best Purebred Percheron stallion; first and second place for the Best Colt. Anonymous 1921b, pp. 1, 8.

28. Gene Etchart, interview, August 2013; Gene Etchart, interview by John Etchart, 22 February 2013, recording, Etchart Family Archives.

29. John Etchart to Marie Urricarriet, 27 October 1919, Etchart Family Archives.



Ojuel, and the Tihista Brothers.<sup>30</sup> John and his wife Catherine generally communicated with their Basque employees in Basque, but oftentimes in a hybrid variety of English and Basque. However, John and Catherine did not speak Basque to their children and were acculturated to American ways to avoid prejudice and discrimination (Urza 1981, p. 11).

By 1920, Etchart's was considered Valley County's "largest sheep ranch" and he continued to expand buying more land (Anonymous 1920b, p. 1). During the decade of the 1920s, he acquired 18,470.72 acres of private land and claimed 240 acres of public-grazing land in Valley County.<sup>31</sup> In March 1926, he also purchased 310.41 acres of public land, which included a Native American allotment in the Fort Peck Indian Reservation.<sup>32</sup> The new land acquisitions formed familiar oblong land configurations, located strategically like three ribbons of land along stream banks or surrounding springs, water holes, or various water sources. While emphasizing water sources, Etchart's land-pur-

**FIGURE 5** • *John Etchart's home ranch—the so-called Stone House—at the head of Willow Creek in south Valley County (Montana), ca. 1920*



Source: Etchart Family Archives.

Note: This property later became the South Ranch in the company of Etchart.

30. John Etchart to Marie Urricariet, 27 October 1919; John Etchart Notebook, 1918; John Etchart Notebook, 1919; John Etchart Notebook, 1920; John Etchart Notebook, 1921; John Etchart Notebook, 1922; John Etchart Notebook, 1923; John Etchart Notebook, 1924, Etchart Family Archives.

31. Warranty Deed Books, General Land Office Records, County Recorder, Valley County, Montana.

32. John Etchart, 10 March 1926, Patent no. 975720, General Land Office, Courthouse of Valley County.

chase strategy was to own various ranches with just enough distance between them to graze his herds, moving them from one ranch to another in a south-westerly direction (Etchart 1992, pp. 6, 13-15). The expansion of the Etchart ranch continued well into the early 1930s.

### **5. Cooperative efforts as a means of fostering regional economic cooperation**

John Etchart contributed to bonding social capital in Montana's livestock industry as a member and in some cases leader of some farmer associations that created strong in-group ties. Along with his expanded holdings, Etchart began taking an active role in promoting the growth of Valley County's sheep industry through his participation in the development of several institutions. In January 1921, he was added to the directorate of the Milk River Valley Bank of Glasgow and was named its vice president in August 1922. He was now in a position to serve the needs of ranchers by providing them short-term loans. He was also one of the founding members of the Valley County Wool Growers' Association (VCWGA). The organization was established in Glasgow in March 1921 to enhance the marketing possibilities of local woolgrowers. Just one year later, in March 1922, Etchart was elected president of the VCWGA. Despite his relative wealth, his approach to the market favored cooperative marketing and also moved to create co-op warehouses, in which the wool clip could be held and released to the market when prices were more favorable; otherwise, the season's wool clip appearing on the market all at once could flood the market, driving prices down. While Etchart worked to establish cooperative marketing in 1920, he also ran unsuccessfully for the Republican nomination for state senate, supporting progressive Republican Joseph M. Dixon's winning campaign for governor (Anonymous 1921a, p. 1; Anonymous 1922b, p. 4; Anonymous 1922a, p. 1; on the political career of Joseph M. Dixon, see: Karlin 1974a; 1974b).

During the 1920s, like other regional and state woolgrowers' associations, the VCWGA engaged in cooperative efforts to help local sheepmen (particularly small producers) to reduce marketing costs, increase market outlets, and utilize co-op warehouse storage facilities for marketing the wool at the most favorable times. Cooperative handling of wool was facilitated by its non-perishable nature. If producers participated in a cooperative, it also meant that they could store it cooperatively and wait for higher prices instead of sending their clip individually to market when it would have to be sold for what the market offered at a time of surplus supply (Anonymous 1925b, pp. 220-221; US Department of Agriculture, 1930, pp. 49-52). At shearing time, sheep producers pooled their wool clips together through local associations and shipped them to Chicago on consignment to the warehouse of the National Wool

Warehouse & Storage Co. (the predecessor of the National Wool Exchange), from which the wool was sold when market prices were thought to be most advantageous. Individual producers received pay for their portions based on the price per pound.

This National Wool Warehouse & Storage Company was established in 1909 by western woolgrowers in reaction to the monopoly position acquired by warehouse companies. The Federal Farm Board, established during the Hoover Administration (1929 to 1933), described the creation of the Wool Exchange as “the outgrowth of dissatisfaction of western woolgrowers with the arbitrary and exacting methods of eastern wool buyers”. By 1924, the National Wool Warehouse & Storage Co. had ceased its warehousing and marketing business. Late that same year, a group of woolgrowers and eastern bankers organized another cooperative organization called the National Wool Exchange (with headquarters in Boston and a branch in Chicago). In Montana, Etchart was one of the founding members of the National Wool Exchange, and from this position he became more actively engaged in cooperative efforts in wool marketing. In 1943, after his passing, Montana Wool Growers Association (MWGA) would praise Etchart for his “cooperative spirit” and his willingness to help his fellow-stockmen (Anonymous 1932a, pp. 43-44; Fetrow and Elsworth, 1947, p. 9; Anonymous 1925a, p. 11; Anonymous 1925c, p. 7; Anonymous, 1943f, p. 5).

The expansion of Etchart’s operation continued until the early 1930s. The growth of this company was steady but certainly not without interruption. Like other ranchers, Etchart continued facing a long list of interrelated challenges, including market conditions, droughts, severe winters, and grasshoppers. During the New Deal, the Fort Peck Dam (a National Industrial Recovery Act project in 1933) brought additional complications for the Etchart ranch. The dam’s construction between 1933 and 1940 drowned large tracts of land largely devoted to hay raising (Saindon and Sullivan, 1977, pp. 37-45; Van West, 1994, p. 130). As a result of the dam construction, Etchart not only lost his own agricultural land and access to pasture, but he saw a diminishing supply of locally grown hay, which in turn increased production costs because he had to buy hay elsewhere and transport it. In the early 1930s, as the American economy was sinking into an economic depression and many farmers were going bankrupt, Etchart was able to survive the depression years by selling portions of his property.<sup>33</sup>

From 1928 until he passed away in 1943, Etchart was a board of trustees member of the MWGA, and in 1939 was named vice president of the organization. Moreover, in 1932, he became vice president of the Northern Montana Stockmen’s Association and its president one year later (Anonymous 1928,

33. Warranty Deed Book 1930-1941 General Land Office, County Recorder, Valley County, Montana.

p. 1; Anonymous 1929, p. 1; Anonymous 1930, p. 1; Anonymous 1935, p. 3; Anonymous 1940a, p. 7; Anonymous 1940b, p. 2; Anonymous 1939, p. 1; Anonymous 1932b, p. 6).

The Taylor Grazing Act of 1934 finally addressed the question of the free and open range in the West and brought a degree of grazing regulation to public-domain lands outside of the national forests. The first step for the new Grazing Division (later the Grazing Service) created under the provisions of the act was to persuade western ranchers to join in the formation of grazing districts to regulate the number of stock grazed, location of herds, the season graze (date of allowed stock entry and date of required exit from the range), and the type of stock. Local ranchers served on advisory boards that governed local grazing districts, making rules that generally complied with Grazing Service regulations on range use (Calef 1960, pp. 52-57; Foss 1960, pp. 58-72; Merrill 2002, p. 148; Skillen 2009). Etchart was an early and willing recruit to a local advisory board serving Grazing District 2 in Montana (Anonymous 1940c, p. 38).

**FIGURE 6** • *Members of the Grazing Service's National Advisory Board Council, including John Etchart (back row, left to right, second), posing in front of the "Old Interior" building in Washington D.C. in 1936*



Source: Etchart Family Archives.

Note: This board was composed of leading sheep and cattle ranchers of the West who advised Farrington R. (Ferry) Carpenter, first Director of the Grazing Service, and Harold Ickes, Secretary of Interior, on putting the Taylor Grazing Act of 1934 into effect.

## 6. John Etchart's company during the Great Depression

Between 1929 and 1932, Etchart's company was not immune to the effects of the depression and drought, even though he fared better than his neighbors. In 1928, John Etchart's real estate consisted of approximately 25,000 acres, his livestock consisted of around 700 head of cattle and 30,000 head of sheep. He had approximately \$90,000 on deposit with Larabie Brothers Bank at Deer Lodge (Montana). By 1932, he had spent his surplus and sold considerable livestock. His outfit was reduced to about 20,000 head of sheep and 500 head of cattle, and he accumulated a debt of around \$60,000. In the spring of 1932, the Larabie Brothers Bank closed its doors and Etchart was forced to seek other sources to finance his operations. In the Fall of 1932, he secured a loan from the Union Bank and Trust Company of Helena (Montana) for the sum of \$50,000. Yet this loan did not provide him enough advances for operating expenses.<sup>34</sup>

By the spring of 1933, Etchart was not able to secure any money from anyone and he felt that he would be forced to liquidate. But some months later, Etchart was able to obtain a refinancing loan from the Regional Agricultural Credit Corporation. In 1932, the Emergency Relief and Construction Act had created regional agricultural credit corporations to provide credit to farmers and ranchers as a means of assisting them in meeting economic emergency (Olson 1988, p. 86). Between 1933 and 1937, Etchart owed this corporation sums varying from \$75,000 to \$150,000. By the mid-1930s, while many sheep companies went bankrupt, Etchart's still remained as the largest sheep ranches in Montana. In 1935, his wool clip amounted to 142,253 pounds, much higher than average Montana ranch production of 15,000 pounds for this year.<sup>35</sup> By the fall of 1937, he was operating about 6,000 head of sheep and 500 head of cattle. Etchart would later recognize that if he had not had the large "reserve" he had in 1928 he would never had been able to survive the depression.<sup>36</sup>

In the spring of 1938, John Etchart had a \$90,000 loan against 7,000 head of sheep and 500 cattle. From northeastern Montana, he followed events in Spain with close attention, and was able to foresee what was about to come with a possible crisis developing in the near future.<sup>37</sup> Then he tried to restruc-

34. Summary of Deposits, Larabie Brothers Bank, 1935; John Etchart's ranch statistics, 1935-36; Financial Information of the John Etchart Company, 1939. Etchart Family Archives.

35. 1935 Wool Clip, Montana Wool Cooperative Marketing Association, 1935, Montana Woolgrowers Association Archives, Helena, Montana.

36. John Etchart's ranch statistics, 1937-38; Financial Information, 1939. Etchart Family Archives.

37. The Etchart family archive includes the following pamphlets and publications on the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939): Spanish Relief Committee 1937; Thorning 1937; McGuire 1937; De Leizaola 1938; Connolly 1938; De Azpilikoeta 1939; Thorning 1939; Hinkel 1939.



ture the company and make his sons partners in an attempt to reduce his tax liabilities. He attempted to create a family partnership with his four sons (excluding his daughter) to shift income to his children but more importantly for shifting tax away he had to pay for his business. But John finally discarded this strategy.

At that time, the Etchart children were too young to take charge of the family ranching business, even though they had been involved in it from a young age. His sons Gene and Mitchel were instructing flying to army aviation cadets at Oxnard (California). His son Mark, aged nineteen years old, was attending Helena aviation school and Leonard, aged fourteen years old, was attending school in Glasgow. After five months, John came to the conclusion that none of his sons would be able to contribute any capital or labor, and that under the rules and regulations of the Collector of Internal Revenue such a partnership would not pass. Certified public accountant Hugh D. Galusha advised John that the best means of reducing his income tax was to make gifts to his four boys of his real estate and then lease back. The normal rental would mean the building up of a reserve for the future. Finally, John entered into a lease with his four boys and he paid them the sum of \$7,500 per year rental. Since Leonard and Mark were underage, Gene was appointed their "guardian".<sup>38</sup>

In the early 1940s, despite everything, John Etchart continued purchasing land. In December 1942, he purchased the ranch of Charlie Conatser consisting of 1,300 acres of land for the sum of \$6,000. John purchased this property from the Federal Bank of Spokane in Washington. Etchart contemplated improving the Conatser ranch by leveling the land, using pumping plants for irrigation, and implementing a development program that would take about ten years. Earlier that year, in January, he had bought another section of land for the sum of \$500. John had actively managed the ranching operations and was apparently in good health until May 1942. At that time, John collapsed while in Markle Transfer Company store in Glasgow and was hospitalized for pneumonia. Before him, his son Leonard and wife Catherine had been hospitalized for the same cause. But after his hospitalization, John continued actively operating and managing his ranch until he died of a heart attack on 17 April 1943. John was sixty years old (Anonymous 1943b; Anonymous 1943e, p. 3; Anonymous 1943a, p. 4; Anonymous 1943c, p. 1; Anonymous 1943d, p. 1).<sup>39</sup>

The Montana woolgrowers lamented the loss, saying that "stockmen lost one of the finest friends of the industry the state has ever known". They praised him for his "cooperative spirit" and said, "... he never failed to re-

38. Thomas Dignan, Shorn testimony, Valley County Courthouse, Montana, 1943. Etchart Family Archives.

39. John Etchart's ranch statistics, 1942-43; Financial Information, 1943; Thomas Dignan Testimony, 1943, Etchart Family Archives; Standard Certificate of Death, John Etchart, Recorded April 29, 1943, Registrar's no. 32, Clerk/Recorder, Valley County.



spond to a call for service in any capacity or to support work of the association toward making Montana stock ranching better and more profitable. He lived to help his fellow-stockmen” (Anonymous 1943, p. 5). His son Mitch later recalled that his father “always worked with other ranchers to cooperate and help everyone’s business improve”.<sup>40</sup>

After his demise, Etchart’s sons took charge of the business. But his passing marked the end of a career that saw the heyday of Basque immigration, the role of social capital in the founding of successful businesses in that immigrant community, cooperative marketing strategies, and positive engagement with federal-land and stock-management programs on public lands. All were part of the Etcharts’ success story in the sheep business of the American West.

## 7. Conclusions

John Etchart’s biography illuminates an exceptional figure in the sheep business, whose career singularly can tell us not only about his own firm, but also about immigration, agricultural cooperation, and the business itself. First, his success on an *agricultural ladder* of advancement from wage sheep worker to independent rancher illustrates the typical pattern among successful Basque immigrants of this era. He began working as a wage sheep laborer in southern California. In less than a year, he put all the capital he had into a ranch partnership with his brother, cousin and a banker in Nevada’s Elko County, and soon became a leader in the state wool business. During his Nevada years, Etchart contributed significantly to the social capital of the Basque community of Elko by giving employment to his fellow countrymen. In less than a decade, this company consisted of 20,000 head of sheep, almost two hundred acres, and a forest permit. In 1909, John had a horse-riding accident that left him unable to work for several months. This accident led to the dissolution of the partnership, as far as I could find. Thereafter, the Etchart brothers returned home for a short time intending to go back to Nevada and form a new firm. But that never happened. Michel Etchart was drafted to the French army and John emigrated to Montana where he started a new operation in 1911.

John Etchart started this new company with 120 acres in Valley County and with 6,000 head of sheep. During the WWI years, despite receiving the sad news of his brother’s death, John continued expanding his operation. He had amassed more than 285 acres of land and ran more than 14,000 head of

40. Mitch Etchart, interview by Paulette Etchart, May 9, 2019, transcript, Etchart Family Archives.

sheep. Moreover, he did much towards improving his sheep and putting them on the market. In Montana, John continued to prioritize the recruitment of Basque immigrants as much as he possibly could. His story is precisely the type of narrative that spurs further young Basques to consider emigrating to America. The expansion of the Etchart ranch continued until the late 1920s. Etchart’s company was affected by the economic depression, but the wealth he had accumulated during the 1920s helped him to offer a better resistance than other firms. This company had achieved success based largely on land ownership. Furthermore, Etchart became a central figure in promoting cooperation among sheepmen at county and state levels. Among other things, he actively engaged in cooperative efforts to help local producers in reducing marketing costs and increasing market outlets.

This article has placed Etchart in his context, or rather, I used his career to explain this ranching economy in the West. In many ways, Etchart’s life and career grew and changed right along with ranching in the American West during the first half of the twentieth century. It is about the rise of a Basque “industrial cowboy” in the West. Inasmuch as Etchart did most of his company’s recruiting of Basques and others, his reputation as a ranch employer is of some significance. John Etchart is an excellent example of how success in the ranching business usually implies shrewdness. John Etchart was a shrewd rancher who seldom missed an opportunity to expand his ranch by acquiring more land. Indeed, Etchart was more a landowner and businessman than just a rancher. Despite his wealth, he helped to solidify a spirit of cooperation and participation among ranchers at the local, state, and national levels. His story also demonstrates how ranching profited from the New Deal’s pro-growth policies.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank the editors of *RHI-IHR* and two anonymous referees for their help and valuable comments. All errors are nevertheless mine. I acknowledge with pleasure financial support from the Research Group of the Basque University System IT1523-22 and both Grants PID2021-122846 NB-I00 funded by MCIN/AEI/10.13039/501100011033, ERDF A way of making Europe and PGC2018-094133-B-100 funded by MCIU/AEI/FEDER, UE.

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### ***Migració, banquers i capital social: l'ascens d'un «vaquer industrial» basc a l'oest americà: John Etchart, 1900-1943***

#### RESUM

Aquest article és una contribució als temes generals sobre migració, banca i capital social. Analitza la trajectòria empresarial de John Etchart a l'oest nord-americà entre 1900 i 1943; des que era un pastor assalariat fins que es va convertir en un dels ramaders més pròspers de Montana. L'enfocament centrat en la biografia es basa en el treball d'altres acadèmics que han estudiat els negocis ramaders i han emfasitzat la contribució del dinamisme de les persones que hi ha darrere les empreses. La biografia de John Etchart permet comprendre més bé qüestions importants relacionades amb l'estudi de la immigració basca i la indústria ovina a l'oest. La seva història exemplifica l'ascens dels immigrants bascos en el sector agrícola, el qual va suposar l'aparició de companyies dins de la comunitat basca. Etchart també està vinculat a la creació i el desenvolupament d'iniciatives cooperatives entre els productors de llana més enllà de la comunitat basca. Finalment, la història d'Etchart millora la comprensió de les diverses pràctiques empresarials que van dur a terme les empreses ramaderes de Montana a les dècades de 1920 i 1930.

PARAULES CLAU: immigració basca, trajectòria agrícola, indústria ovina, Oest americà.

CODIS JEL: N52, Q12, Q13, L26



### ***Migración, banqueros y capital social: el ascenso de un «vaquero industrial» vasco en el Oeste americano: John Etchart, 1900-1943***

#### RESUMEN

El presente artículo constituye una contribución a los temas generales sobre migración, banca y capital social. Analiza la trayectoria empresarial de John Etchart en el Oeste norteamericano entre 1900 y 1943, desde que era un pastor asalariado hasta que se convirtió en uno de los ganaderos más prósperos de Montana. El enfoque centrado en la biografía se inspira en el trabajo de otros académicos que han estudiado los negocios ganaderos haciendo hincapié en las personas dinámicas que se encuentran detrás de las empresas. La biografía de John Etchart ofrece una ventana a cuestiones importantes para el estudio de la inmigración vasca y la industria ovina en el Oeste. Su historia ejemplifica el ascenso de los inmigrantes vascos en la escala agrícola, que supuso la aparición de compañías dentro de la comunidad vasca. Etchart también está vinculado a la creación y al desarrollo de iniciativas cooperativas entre los productores de lana más allá de la comunidad vasca. Por último, la historia de Etchart mejora la comprensión de las diversas prácticas empresariales emprendidas por las empresas ganaderas de Montana en las décadas de 1920 y 1930.

PALABRAS CLAVE: inmigración vasca, trayectoria agrícola, industria ovina, Oeste americano.

CÓDIGOS JEL: N52, Q12, Q13, L26



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