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TOP STORY

## John Etchart and the accident that changed his life

IKER SAITUA 23 hrs ago

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John Etchart with crutches leaning against the bar of the Basque-owned Overland Hotel in Elko in the fall of 1909.

ETCHART FAMILY

At the dawn of the 20th century, an 18-year-old Jean Etchart arrived in the United States from the rural town of Aldude in the Northern Basque Country. Jean was born there on August 2, 1882. As he reached adulthood, Jean decided to join his older brother Michel in America, who had immigrated to southern California some years prior.

On his arrival to California in December of 1900, he began working as a sheepherder in the Santa Monica hills. In the following spring, he began working for another sheep ranch north of Burbank in San Fernando Valley.

As southern California's rangelands became increasingly crowded, John and Michael Etchart decided to move to northeastern Nevada and build a sheep business of their own. From 1901 to 1909, the Etchart brothers, along with their cousin Martin Chabagno

and a fourth partner, created a sheep partnership in Nevada's Elko County that grew from about 6,000 head of sheep to 20,000. But just as he had started enjoying some success and respect, John had an accident that would change his life forever.

In the early fall of 1909, John 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 and threw him to the ground, breaking his leg. A Basque sheep worker that was with him made a travois, put John on it, and rode as fast as he could to the town of Elko so a doctor could take care of him.

The journey over the hills was unpleasant and paining for John. The Basque fellow did not tie up John's broken leg properly and, during the rough trip, he damaged it further, to the point it did enough damage polishing to the bone. It swelled considerably, going dark. His pain was so heavy that at one point he asked the other Basque to "finish it." But the rider ignored John.

They finally could ride into the town of Elko and John was carried to a local doctor. It took John several months to recover physically from the accident, although it left him with a noticeable limp for the rest of his life.

John Etchart expected that the partnership would cover all his own medical bills as he regarded it as an "industrial accident." However, the banker who was partner of the sheep operation, refused that the partnership had to pay Etchart's medical expenses.

Before the year ended, the Etchart brothers decided to dissolve the partnership. John's respective share of the partnership was \$28,000, a small fortune at that period of time. Taking the money they made in Nevada, John and his brother decided to go back home on a short visit, with the idea of returning to Elko County. Those Nevada years were crucial to John Etchart's personal and professional development. He not only became a knowledgeable rancher, but accumulated enough capital to restart with a new sheep operation.

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, although they would marry in 1912, after John had settled on to a ranch in Montana. A coincidental meeting would lead him to return and settle in Montana instead of returning to Nevada.

While in Aldudes, John met Pierre Sagarduluz who had previously run a sheep operation south of Glasgow (Montana) in the area known as the Harper's Ridge area today. Sagarduluz suggested John go first to Montana's Missouri River Basin before going back to Nevada and "take a look" at its grazing potential. John listened to him.

On March 11, 1910, John Etchart was back in the United States. As he had planned beforehand, John traveled from New York to Saco (Montana), although his intended final destination was Elko, as he told to the immigration officials. Once there, as the story goes, John rented a horse and rode southward as far as Larb Creek.

After crossing about 30 miles of marginal lands, John reached the grassy hills at the head of Willow Creek in south Valley County. John became enchanted with those grasslands. He would later admit that he had never seen finer grasslands anywhere. There, John spent the night in an old cabin ranch house. The next morning, he made a verbal agreement to purchase this plot of land that was for sale, although he did not formalize this purchase until the end of that year.

John Etchart made his home in northeastern Montana. He ultimately became one of the most knowledgeable ranchers in Montana and the West. With both a strong desire to succeed in ranching and to become a part of a small rural community, his immigrant experience made him a more cooperative stockman, respectful toward nature on which he depended, and compassionate to other local community members of Valley County.

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