

## **Custom and Culture**

“The cultural resources of Winnemucca District represent an important part of our heritage. Preserved in place, these resources provide important data potentially useful for answering scientific questions about man’s relationship to his physical environment. Equally important, they provide tangible witness to the efforts of the ancestors of the modern population to wrest a living from an often harsh and intolerant environment. For both these reasons, they are worthy of our interest and protection.”<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction**

The peoples of Humboldt County and their vibrant blend of customs, cultures, lifestyles, and living history are sustained by their relationship to the vast lands and natural resources within the County’s boundaries. From the ancient ancestors of local Shoshone and Paiute tribal members, to the vaqueros, stockmen, miners, and other settlers who brought their Spanish, Basque, Italian, German, Chinese, and other folkways to the County, the traditional, historical livelihoods of the County’s residents depend on the productive use and enjoyment of public lands and natural resources, as well as the quiet enjoyment of private property rights and property interests. Specifically, public land uses such as cattle and sheep ranching, mining, and traditional recreational activities like hunting and fishing are not only economically important—these uses also support unique regional lifeways, traditions, skills, knowledge, and art forms with roots stretching back to Basque, Italian, Spanish, Hispanic, and other origins, as well as to the early Native American peoples of northern Nevada.

Humboldt County is entrusted with safeguarding the public health, safety, and welfare within the County. An integral part of safeguarding public welfare and local quality of life is to ensure that our unique blend of local cultures, and the lifestyles that underpin these cultures, are recognized, protected, and perpetuated. Because many locally significant cultures and traditions are dependent upon activities that involve public land uses, Humboldt County shall seek to ensure that federal agency planning and management decisions do not erode practices and livelihoods that are important to Humboldt County’s unique cultural identity. In coordination with Humboldt County, public land managers should carefully take into account whether, and to what degree, management decisions impact local custom, culture, and folkways, and seek to eliminate, reduce, or mitigate impacts wherever possible.

### **Ranching Custom and Culture in Humboldt County**

Humboldt County’s ranching and cowboy culture represents a unique and complex mix of historic skills, traditions, and art forms heavily informed by the practices of Hispanic *vaqueros* from Spanish colonial California (later Mexico) which can be traced to Spanish and Moorish

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<sup>1</sup> Smith, Regina C., Peggy McGuckian Jones, John R. Roney, Kathryn E. Pedrick. *Prehistory and History of the Winnemucca District: A Cultural Resources Literature Review*. Cultural Resource Series No. 6, BLM publishing, 1983.

traditions many centuries old. Local settlers from Italy, Spain, The Basque Country (Euskal Herria), Germany, and other European countries, as well as members of the Paiute and Shoshone Tribes, have adopted and augmented these traditions, which today are manifested in the regional “buckaroo” (a derivative of *vaquero*) culture. The existence and subsistence of this unique set of folkways, as well as traditional stock raising—which still uses tools and practices largely unchanged from the nineteenth century like the use of stock horses and stock dogs, roping, and branding—depends on the continued use of public lands for livestock grazing.

Humboldt County’s Great Basin ranching and buckaroo culture has been extensively studied and recorded by the American Folklife Center, the nation’s primary authority on preserving the living folkways of distinctive American communities. The Folklife Center’s ethnographic field research project, the *Paradise Valley Folklife Project*, was conducted between 1978 and 1982 in and around Paradise Valley, Humboldt County.<sup>2</sup> The Project aimed to recognize the distinctive living history practiced by ranching families and buckaroos (as cowboys are still called in the Great Basin) for posterity and the education of the public. The Folklife Center’s research ranged from studying ranching, farming, and agricultural practices (including traditional branding of livestock and irrigation) to locally practiced art forms (like rawhide braiding and silver engraving) to traditional foodways, vernacular architecture, and oral traditions. The multi-year project culminated in an exhibition at the Smithsonian Institution National Museum of American History, and the Project’s extensive collections of books, essays, photographs, and film now reside at the Library of Congress.

The continuing buckaroo and ranching traditions of Humboldt County are directly connected to the County’s economic welfare as well as its cultural identity. Every year, thousands of visitors flock to Winnemucca to enjoy the Winnemucca Ranchhand Rodeo, the annual Basque Festival, the Buckaroo Hall of Fame, and other venues to enjoy and partake in the skills, artforms, history, and events that celebrate the vibrant living folkways of the Great Basin buckaroo’s integrated European, Hispanic, and Native heritage. In a time when many historic ranching communities across the West have succumbed to the pressures of development, urbanization, and the encroachment of generic cultural influences, Humboldt County remains a bastion of iconic Great Basin buckaroo and ranching traditions due to the ongoing practice of public lands ranching.

### Basque Heritage

The Basques are a fiercely independent people of ancient origin, native to the Basque provinces of the Pyrenees Mountains which straddle the border between Spain and France. Their language, *Euskera*, is unlike any other European tongue and can still be heard in the streets of Winnemucca and the remote communities of Humboldt County. And while pockets of Basque culture may be found across the western United States, researchers at the Center for Basque Studies at the University of Nevada have recognized Humboldt County as “the heart of the Basque States of America.”

Many of Humboldt County’s Basque families trace their origins to great-grandfathers who came as young men in the early 1900s to herd sheep for big sheep outfits, which ran tens of thousands of sheep across the state. These young men drew their wages in sheep instead of cash and,

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.loc.gov/collections/ranching-culture-in-northern-nevada-from-1945-to-1982/about-this-collection/>

through thrift and perseverance, eventually established their own ranches and brought their families over from Spain and France. According to the County's Basque elders, at one time most of the ranches in Humboldt County were Basque owned. Today, many of the grandchildren of these original Basque immigrants carry the ranching tradition forward, raising sheep and cattle on Humboldt County's vast public lands. Their stories have been told by Pulitzer Prize nominee and Fulbright Scholar Robert Laxalt—himself the son of a Basque shepherd—writing in National Geographic as well as in a dozen books of fiction and memoir.

Although many Basques continue their ranching traditions in Humboldt County, others have migrated to the County's towns to become business owners, professionals, and community and political leaders, all the while maintaining their cultural traditions and family connections with their old-world relations.

Basque culture is closely intertwined with food and drink. Basque boarding houses such as Winnemucca's Martin Hotel began as winter homes for shepherders in the early 1900s, where a picon punch and a bowl of lamb stew were always available. Meals at the Martin are still served family style, highlighted in a recent Smithsonian Magazine by author Johnathan Gold: "If you want American Basque food, follow I-80 through Northern Nevada...to the splendid Martin Hotel, where hungry travelers can get a grilled rib-eye buried under a mountain of mushrooms and garlic, and also something very like chicken-fried sweetbreads with country gravy."

Every June, tourists flock to the Winnemucca Basque Festival to partake of the region's vibrant cultural heritage. Groups of Basque dancers from all over the West travel to Winnemucca to join in the dancing, while competitions of strength and stamina pit young men against their elders in feats of wood chopping and weight carrying. Traditional food on offer includes shepherd breads baked in massive Dutch ovens, exhibited by local bakers and devoured with grilled chorizo and a glass of red wine. Lesser-known Basque celebrations occur throughout smaller communities across Humboldt County. Young children perform Basque dances with their grownup relatives and friends at the spring dinner in Denio. An annual *mus* tournament sponsored by Paradise Valley's Santa Rosa Basque Club pits players of the traditional Basque card game against rivals from all over northern Nevada. The club sends tournament winners to the international competition, most recently in Argentina.

Preserving and cultivating its living Basque custom and culture is a priority for Humboldt County, and essential to County's economic welfare and social identity. Ensuring the ongoing practice of activities and land uses that support local Basque lifeways—like public lands ranching—is an imperative means of achieving this end.

### Mining Custom and Culture<sup>3</sup>

Humboldt County's mineral wealth has supported a thriving culture of free enterprise, exploration, innovation, and discovery since 1849. It was then, *en route* to the California gold fields, that James Hardin stumbled upon shiny rocks in the Black Rock Range which he took to

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<sup>3</sup> Information in this section is drawn in part from Smith, *et al.*

be veins of lead but proved several years later, when Hardin bothered to have the rocks assayed, to be silver.

Today, mining dominates as the most economically lucrative natural resource use in Humboldt County. Mining also provides more jobs than any other industry to the local economy, and pays average earnings far surpassing most other job sectors.<sup>4</sup> Notably, over 140,474 mining claims have been staked in Humboldt County since claims have been recorded, including some 28,293 currently active claims today.<sup>5</sup> The County's mineral wealth ranges from important gold and silver deposits to exotic black fire opals to more utilitarian but highly valued base metals like lithium, tungsten, and mercury, and useful non-metallic minerals like gypsum and diatomite. Mining opportunities within the County are open to any U.S. citizen with a sense of enterprise and adventure. While some claims have become major mines worked by multi-national corporations with significant benefit to the County's economic prosperity, others are staked by rugged individuals who work their claims by hand in the tradition of the County's earliest miners. The existence and subsistence of the diverse local mining culture, and the unique set of geological skills and knowledge it enshrines, depend on continued access and use of public lands for mineral location and entry.

#### ❖ Silver

In 1860, Humboldt County's first major silver strike in the Buena Vista District caused a flurry of excited speculation. Towns and camps sprung up around the action. Miners from the neighboring Comstock Lode, among them a young Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain) flocked to Unionville (the first Humboldt County seat) in hopes of striking it rich. Nearby Star City, which at one time was the County's largest settlement with 1,200 inhabitants, boasted the Sheba Mine owned by George Hearst, father of the newspaper baron William Randolph Hearst. The National District in the Santa Rosa Range between Orovida and McDermitt produced \$5M in electrum and ruby silver from the 1870-1890s. By 1893, however, with the repeal of the Sherman Silver Purchase Act and other political headwinds, the price of silver fell precipitously and silver mining in the County came to a near standstill.

#### ❖ Gold

The first gold was discovered in the Winnemucca District in 1863 and Winnemucca's Pride of the Mountain gold mine is reported to have produced some \$1M in gold during its operation between 1868 and 1877. 1873 saw gold discovered in the Red Hills on the northern perimeter of Paradise Valley, later organized as the Mount Rose District. These areas died out by turn of the century. However, the 1907 discovery of extremely high-grade ore at the National Mine on the western slope of Santa Rosas opened the 20th-century's era of important gold strikes within the County. These included the Getchell Mine in the Potosi District discovered in 1933—Nevada's largest gold producer between 1939-1941—and the 1935 discovery of the Jumbo Mine in the Awakening District, which between 1935 and 1959 yielded some 25,648 ounces of gold from the Slumbering Hills.

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<sup>4</sup> See *Nevada Economic Assessment Project: Humboldt County*, pp. 40-41.

<sup>5</sup> Statistics supplied by Nevada Division of Minerals, 2022.

A 1942 executive order closed all gold mines in order to recruit industries for the war effort. The Getchell mine was allowed to stay open during this time, however, to utilize the rare arsenic and antimony sulfide minerals that were also mined there (one named “getchellite”) as well as tungsten.

By the early 1960s, gold mining in Humboldt County was to experience another revival. A geologist named John Livermore discovered “invisible gold,” which would put Nevada on the world exploration map. He and his associates, notably a brilliant mining engineer, self-taught geologist, and prospector named Whit DeLaMare, revolutionized the gold mining world by changing the way precious metals exploration was conducted. Carlin-type micron-sized gold deposits were discovered around many exhausted vein deposits, notably in Humboldt County at the Getchell Mine, Marigold, and Livermore and DeLaMare’s Pinson and Preble mines. Together, these mines comprise an astonishing 20 square miles of mineralization in two major intersecting trends. Whit DeLaMare was a quietly brilliant scientist who changed the world from his unassuming home in Winnemucca. As with many geologists, he found Nevada to be the very best place to explore as well as to live. The DeLaMare Science and Engineering Library at the University of Nevada-Reno carries his name.

#### ❖ Opals

Not everything that glitters in Humboldt County is precious metal. The Virgin Valley Opal Field, located in the collapsed caldera of an extinct volcano in remote Virgin Valley—135 miles from Winnemucca—is the only gem-quality black fire opal district in North America. The district was allegedly discovered by cowboys who brought raw gems into the Denio Bar to trade for whiskey. In 1917 the district’s Rainbow Ridge mine yielded up the astonishing Roebing Opal, a 2,585-carat specimen now housed in the mineral collection of the Smithsonian Institute. Today, the Royal Peacock and Rainbow Ridge mines continue to produce spectacular stones for rockhounds and collectors who may camp and pay to dig at each of these sites. Visitors learn about mineral identification, enjoy the thrill of the hunt, and participate in the local culture of mining exploration.

#### ❖ Base Metals

Humboldt County has also proven to be a leader in production of base metals such as tungsten, copper, lead, mercury, and most recently, lithium.

The McDermitt Caldera is a massive, 28-mile long, 22-mile wide collapsed volcano some 40 miles northwest of Winnemucca. Its incredibly rich mineral deposits were first identified by Basque shepherders in the 1930s when they discovered mercury ore during the lambing season. Soon after, the Cordero Mine west of McDermitt (named after the Basque word for “young lamb”) became Nevada’s leading producer of mercury from 1940-1976. More recently, it has been discovered that lakes within the collapsed volcano contain a lithium-rich clay called

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hectorite. These deposits currently represent the largest known source of lithium in North America, and one of the most significant in the world.

Located in the southern end of the caldera, northwest of Orovada, the Thacker Pass Lithium Mine is currently under construction. When complete, it will process lithium carbonate into battery-grade lithium products, providing a major national resource for the manufacture of in-demand lithium-ion batteries, essential for electronic devices, electric cars, and wind and solar energy storage. Notably, lithium has been listed on the federal government's "35 Minerals Deemed Critical to U.S. National Security and the Economy," i.e. those minerals that are "essential to the economic and national security of the United States, the supply chain of which is vulnerable to disruption, and that serves essential functions in the manufacturing of products." Humboldt County is proud to be a primary source of America's lithium for the foreseeable future and supports the use of America's natural mineral resource as a means of sustaining traditional lifestyles.

The living mining traditions of Humboldt County are directly connected to the County's economic welfare and quality of life as well as its cultural identity. Mining in Humboldt County has vastly enhanced individual wealth, economic growth, and U.S. industries with critically-needed raw materials. Long term access to the County's public lands for mining location and entry is essential for the subsistence and preservation of local mining custom and culture.

### Hunting and Fishing Culture in Humboldt County

The aboriginal ancestors of the region's Shoshone and Paiute residents were the first people to hunt and fish in the landscape that would later become Humboldt County. These early inhabitants depended on the harvesting of fish and game to provide them with sustenance and the raw materials necessary to survive in the uncompromising climate of northern Nevada. Today, modern recreational hunters and fishing enthusiasts of all backgrounds carry on this ancient tradition in Humboldt County, with local families passing down hunting and fishing knowledge and skills from one generation to the next. The long-standing tradition of responsible harvesting of Humboldt County's trophy elk, antelope, mule deer, bighorn sheep, upland and waterfowl, and many species of fish depends on the ongoing ability of hunters and anglers to reasonably access the public lands within the County where wildlife abounds, and the maintenance of areas for hunting and fishing use.

Humboldt County is especially aware of the social importance of hunting and fishing pursuits to the County's youth. In an era in which too many young people assume food comes from a grocery store, hunting and fishing provide young people with a deeply grounded connection to an actual, natural food source, and allows youngsters an important break from smart phones and social media to hone skills once essential to human survival—tracking, stalking, reading sign, and the conscientious handling of firearms. Regardless of age, for many of the County's residents, hunting and fishing trips are above all a chance to share time with family, make memories, and be mentally and physically rejuvenated by the outdoors.

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As big game habitat, Humboldt County excels. Antelope, mule deer and elk all reside within the County's desert and mountain landscapes. Hunters looking for a particularly challenging hunt in rugged country may apply for a limited number of elk tags available for the Santa Rosa Range. Almost every mountain range in Humboldt County hosts California Bighorn Sheep; populations in the Jackson Mountain and Pueblo Mountains are thriving. An increasing number of locally guided hunts are also available for a burgeoning population of mountain lions.

Dubbed the "Chukkar Capital of North America," Humboldt County attracts flocks of upland bird hunters in search of these wily creatures. While populations fluctuate widely due to weather conditions, chukkar partridge bounce back from tough winters more quickly than any other species of game bird. Devoted hunters keep their favorite locations secret; still, the characteristic "chuk-chuk-chuk" can be heard in steep canyons across the County. Developing populations of other upland birds like ruffed grouse may also be found in the Pine Forest and Santa Rosa Ranges, while sage grouse (a special status species, but still hunted in limited numbers) are especially prevalent in the Lone Willow Crescent.

Humboldt County is home to several different types of fishing sure to delight any angler. High alpine lakes nestled in Pine Forest Wilderness Area host trophy trout fisheries accessible only by foot or horseback. Popular easier-to access reservoirs include Onion Reservoir, boasting tiger trout, rainbows and cutthroat hybrids up to 6 pounds, and early arrivals can take advantage of camping sites tucked in the shade of aspen groves. Mountain streams stocked with brown, brook, and rainbow trout by Nevada Department of Wildlife tempt fly fishermen from across the County and beyond. Perhaps the County's most rarified fishing experience may be found on the Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge, where determined anglers can venture some 45-dirt road miles west of Denio to Catnip Reservoir in search of the ancient Lahontan cutthroat trout, which once inhabited prehistoric Lake Lahontan during the last Ice Age. And for very small anglers or those with just an hour or so to spare, the James Kinney Community Pond offers an urban fishery located within the Winnemucca metropolitan area and is a popular spot for kids and grandfathers to catch hatchery-raised rainbow trout, catfish, bass and bluegill without leaving the city limits.

The continuing hunting and fishing traditions of Humboldt County are directly connected to the County's economic welfare as well as its cultural identity. Visitors from across the country converge on Humboldt County to enjoy desert and mountain hunting and fishing in remote mountains and nearby canyons, faraway reservoirs and alpine streams. In addition to fueling the local hospitality industry, these welcome visitors support a thriving local industry of outfitters, guides, and hunt clubs. Maintaining reasonable access to Humboldt County's public lands regardless of age, ability, or financial status is the key to providing many more generations of hunters and anglers with unparalleled enjoyment of nature and the outdoors, whether they are long-time locals or visitors from further afield.