

Pelota Fronton

The *pelota fronton* in Jordan Valley is a handball court built by Basque shepherders in 1915. This landmark is a symbol of the cultural traditions of Basque immigrants during a period when shepherding dominated the local economy. Popular in the provinces of southern France and northern Spain, the game of *pelota* spread throughout the New World with Basque immigrants.

Basques immigrated to the West beginning in the late 1840s, but most of those who traveled to eastern Oregon arrived between 1900 and 1920 and worked as shepherders on open rangeland. When herders went into Jordan Valley between 1902 and 1916, they stayed in one of the three boardinghouses operated by Basques.

To build the *fronton*, herders carried stones from a quarry east of Jordan Valley and hewed them by hand to make the two uneven walls. While the exterior masonry is rough-hewn stone, the interior is stuccoed with earthen mortar. The short wall is almost square, 30 feet long and 30 to 35 feet high. The long wall is 100 to 120 feet long, and the height is stepped down toward the back of the court.

The walls were topped with a ten-foot-high screen (now chain-link fencing). On the inside, a strip (originally tin) three feet above the cement floor, extends across the short wall. Vertical lines mark distances along the long wall, one of which is a pass line. The eighteen-inch thick walls are buttressed on the outside.

Players used a ball made from a rubber core wrapped with twine and covered with wet goatskin. Once the cover dried, the balls were hard. The players used their hands or a wooden *pala*, or paddle, made of maple, about eighteen inches long, six inches wide, and one and one-half inches thick at the hitting point. The wicker racket, or *cesta*, common elsewhere, was not used in Jordan Valley games.

Blaid was the version of *pelota* played in Jordan Valley. Usually the game was played by two players, but sometimes two teams of two or three players each competed against each other. Players stood behind the pass line and hit a ball against the front wall directly or by bouncing it off the sidewall on their left side. If a ball landed below the tin strip or beyond ninety feet or if a player failed to return a point, then the opposite side gained a point and the serve. Games were played to thirty points, or any number agreed upon.

Fewer herders immigrated to the United States after quotas were imposed from 1921 to 1924. The Taylor Grazing Act of 1934 caused rangelands to be withdrawn from grazing and imposed fees for permits on the remaining lands. The next year, Basques in the Jordan Valley were granted permits for about eight percent of the applications they filed. With fewer herders in the area, the *fronton* fell into disuse.

The *pelota fronton* was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1972, and restoration efforts began in the 1990s. The restoration included the installation of memorial bricks and a small, gated park. The restored *pelota fronton* was inaugurated in September 1997 with a large festival.

Written by [Sarah Munro](#)

Further Reading:

Baker, Sarah. "Basque-American Folklore in Eastern Oregon." M.A. Thesis in Folklore, University of California, Berkeley, 1972.

Douglass, William A. and Jon Bilbao. *Amerikanuak: Basques in the New World*. Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1975.

Walton, Elisabeth. "Jordan Valley Pelota Fronton." Nomination to the National Register of Historic Places, 1972.

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