

GASPE OF YESTERDAY

## THE BASQUES

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## EARLY EUROPEANS IN GASPESIA

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Basque fishermen and whalers were in Gaspesian waters long before Jacques Cartier in 1534 and probably before the voyage of Columbus in 1492.

KEN ANNETT



THE BASQUES- EARLY EUROPEANS IN GASPEZIA

As the year 1992 A.D. approaches we are reminded that it will be the 500th anniversary of the historic voyage of Columbus and his crew to "discover" the New World. In fact, a Quebec City daily newspaper of October 15th.,1991 has a headline:

"LES CARAVELLES DE COLOMB EN ROUTE POUR L'AMERIQUE"

and proceeds to say that for the second time in 499 years the NINA, PINTA and SANTA MARIA, the three famous vessels of Christopher Columbus, in replica, sailed from the seaport of Huelva for sea trials prior to an Atlantic crossing and rendezvous at New York on July 4th., 1992. Those of an older generation would recall the lines they had to memorize in a one-room school of Gaspé -

"IN FOURTEEN HUNDRED AND NINETY TWO

COLUMBUS SAILED THE OCEAN BLUE..."

Notable and important as the achievement of Columbus was it is now accepted that he was not the first European to cross the Atlantic to the "New World". In fact, what Christopher Columbus accomplished with the acclaim and publicity of official authority had been done long years before and repeated on an annual basis by hardy Basque fishermen and whalers. The historian, J.M.Reade, writing in the 1888 TRANSACTIONS OF THE ROYAL SOCIETY OF CANADA, has stated:

"Basques may have been on the coasts of North America as early as 1436..."

"The name, CANADA, may have been given by the Spanish Basques to the Saint Lawrence long before the voyage of Columbus..."

In his well-researched book, "LES BASQUES DANS L'ESTUAIRE DU SAINT-LAURENT" the Québec historian, René Bélanger points out that the Basques had early fishing stations at Gaspé, Barachois, Percé, Bonaventure Island, Pabos, Newport and Gascons in Gaspesia. At the entrance of Bay Chaleur the Basques had an established fishery at Miscou. The rich fishery of the Magdalen Islands had been exploited by the Basques from very early times when the islands bore the name "ILES RAMEES". Basque vessels from the ports of Bayonne, Saint-Jean-de-Luz and Ciboure came yearly for the fishing season to the Magdalens. In Prince Edward Island or "ILE SAINT-JEAN" as it was then, the Basques had a fortified fishing station on Cascumpeque Bay.

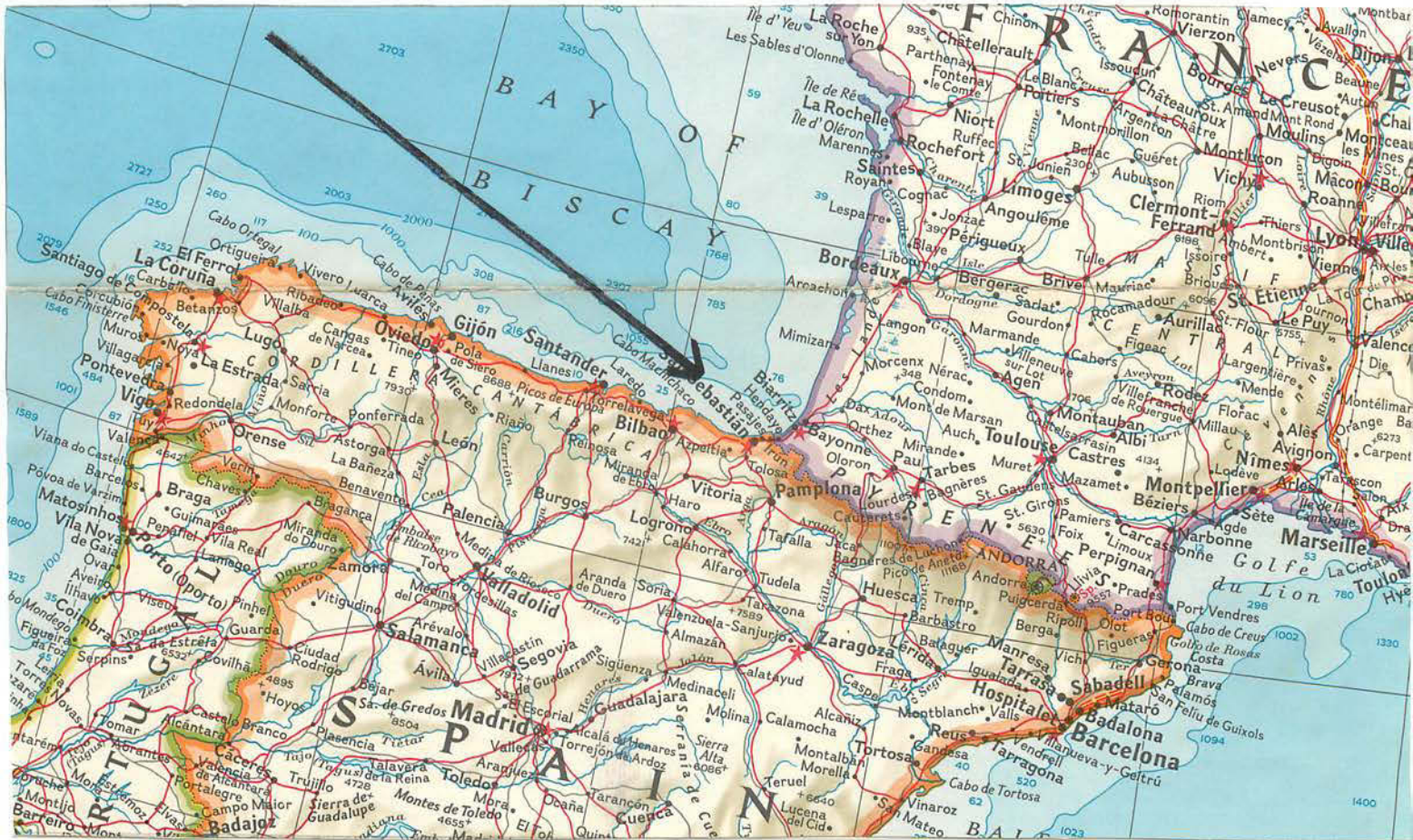
As very early European visitors to our shores the Basques were contributors to the Gaspesian heritage. They were in seasonal contact with the native Indians. One of the early French missionaries was astonished to find that the Indians he met called the Sun, "JESUS" - a name he believed they had learned from the Basques.

THE BASQUE      The homeland of the Basques, divided between the nation-  
HOMELAND      states of France and Spain, lies in that south-west  
                          corner of the Bay of Biscay where the Pyrenees Mountains  
 form the international boundary between the two states. In France, the "Département des Basses-Pyrénées" has within it the Basque city of Bayonne, the noted Basque tourist centers of Biarritz and Hendaye and the ancient fishing port of Saint-Jean-de-Luz. The visitor to the industrial city of Bayonne will find there a fine museum that traces the history of the Basques and exhibits their traditional tools, costumes and furnishings.

The greatest concentration of Basques is to be found, however, in the northern Spanish provinces of Guipuzcoa (capital city, San Sebastian), Alava (of which Vitoria is the capital) and Biscay

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(where the capital is Bilbao). There is also a Basque population in Upper Navarre province, about the city of Pamplona. Along the coast, washed by the Bay of Biscay, lie the Basque ports that sent out bold and hardy fishermen and whalers to the distant shores of Canada long before the voyages of Jacques Cartier. In common with the sons of Scandinavia who took to the sea because their land was relatively poor, the Basques developed unique skills and experience as maritime venturers. Their seafaring competence and commercial vision put them in the vanguard of western Europeans in developing the rich cod and whale fishery in the Gulf and River Saint Lawrence.



BASQUE            The Basques are a unique and different people than  
ORIGINS           either the French or the Spanish with whom they share  
                      land-space. Their language, ESKUARA, is likewise  
absolutely isolated from other European linguistic families. The  
Basques are thought to be the sole surviving relic and witness of  
an aboriginal Iberian population dispersed by intrusive Indo-European  
tribes. In contrast with their neighbours their systems of communal  
land and law of primogeniture, without regard to sex, are distinctive.  
In ancient times the Basques of Spain made treaties with the rulers  
of the expanding Roman Empire. As that Empire declined the Basques  
sustained a ceaseless struggle against the invading Visigoths and  
Franks. Thus centuries of struggle by a distinct and determined  
Basque people lie behind the current headlines of their campaigns  
for independence from Spain.

FISHING        Basque vessels bound for the New World fishery would sail  
SEASON        from the Bay of Biscay ports about the first of March so  
                      as to arrive at their fishing stations at the beginning  
of May. Two characteristics of the Basque fishing industry were the  
detailed, written contracts governing crews of the fishing fleet and  
the system of insurance devised to cover potential losses. Once on  
station at their Gaspeian or other bases the vessels were laid up  
for the Spring and Summer while the fishing was carried out from  
smaller boats. The cod were sun-dried on flakes erected on the beaches  
of the fishing station. Through the long days of May, June, July and  
August the store of dried cod accumulated. At the beginning of Sept-  
ember the vessels would be loaded and made ready for the homeward  
voyage. By November the crews would return to their home villages to  
recount their experiences and join their families for the festive  
Christmas season. By February they would be preparing for yet another  
season.

THE BASQUES  
AS WHALERS

Gaspesians have a particular interest in the Basques as whalers in that a significant whaling industry was centered in Gaspé Bay in the 19th century. References to this industry have been made in such "GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY" articles as: No. 30 "THE GASPÉ WHALERS" and NO. 123 "GASPESIAN TRAVELOGUE PART II - ABBÉ J.B.A.FERLAND".

Gaspé tradition holds that whaling "know-how" came to Gaspé Bay with the Coffin family, members of a noted whaling fraternity of Nantucket. (Ref. "THE WHALERS" - TIME-LIFE BOOKS 1979) The Coffin family had come to the New World from Devon, England and it is on record that the British Crown had, in the 16th century, requested Spain to send Basque whalers to England to teach their whaling techniques. Thus it seems entirely likely that a definite link existed between the Basque and later Gaspesian whalers.

Fortunately, records of Basque whaling have been preserved and from one such document we have the following account.

A Basque whaling vessel carried four whale-boats that were used to approach and attack a whale. These narrow boats, a metre or less in width, were some eight or nine metres in length. Their depth of a metre at the bow and stern dropped off to half of that in the middle, creating the form of an arc. Planked with thin cedar over a light frame these Basque whale-boats were designed for speed and maneuverability.

Each whale-boat had at least five oars and a steering oar called the Stinor at the stern. Again at the stern was a small deck fitted with a wooden post in the form of a capstan. To minimize noise the wooden thole-pins for the oars had greased fenders. Three oars were 4.5 metres long, the other two were 4.3 and 5.3 metres respectively and the steering oar was about 6 metres long. All of the oars were of first quality ash wood.

THE BASQUES  
AS WHALERS

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When rowing stopped on approaching a whale the handles of the oars were inserted in a hole provided in a cleat fastened to the frame of the boat at the rower's feet.

Thus secured and peaked the oars were at rest but ready for instant use.

At the bow of the whale-boat was a smaller deck than that at the stern, cut in the shape of a half-moon. The stem post at the front of this small deck was pierced with a square, lead-lined hole.

All whale-boats had a hole pierced through the planking, either forward or aft, that could be unplugged to let water drain out before the boat was stored after use.

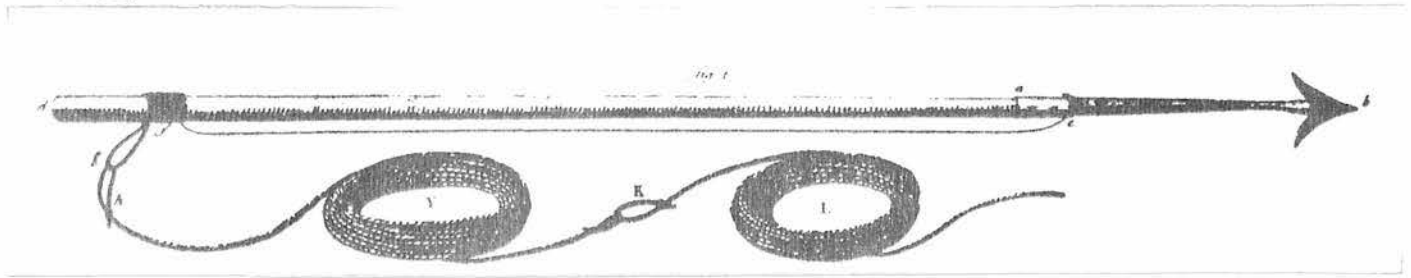
Whale-boats were equipped with a small, copper compass; a hermetically-sealed cask containing a lantern, candles, flint, tinder, matches, biscuits, and sometimes, cheese; a five gallon container of fresh water; a bailer; a small box of caulking; a gaff; a flag-pole, a sprit sail and a small graplen. In addition, for use in bays only, they had a small anchor and a staysail.

The whaling gear for each whale-boat included five harpoons, three lances, a spade, a knife, a small hatchet and a half-tub in which was coiled with the greatest of care, two whale-ropes of 116 m/m diameter, each 120 fathoms or approximately 200 meters long.

The shape of the head of the harpoon was that of a triangular arrowhead, sharp on each side and increasing in thickness from point to stem. This stem, about the size of a finger, was of soft, malleable iron and ended in a socket in which a wooden handle, about 1.6 meters long and 4 cm in diameter, was inserted. This handle was attached firmly in the metal socket of the harpoon head by a rope which lay along the length of the handle and had at its end a loop. To this loop the end of the rope from the half-tub was attached. Two such harpoons were always at hand during a chase for immediate use.

THE BASQUESBASQUE WHALING HARPOONAS WHALERS

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The lance differed from the harpoon, having an oval shaped head like an apple leaf. It had a longer stem of 1.5 or 1.6 metres, ending in a socket for a wooden handle of 2.4 to 2.6 metres long, with the same kind of roping as the harpoon. To the loop a lance rope of 9 or 10 fathoms was attached. This served to retrieve the lance after use. Razor sharp lances, ready for use, were stored on the thwarts of the whale-boat and along its sides where it was available immediately at need.

BASQUE WHALING LANCE

The "Spell" or spade, with a head like the cutter used by gardeners to trim the grass along flower beds, was a sort of flat, cutting shovel. It had a socket that was fitted with a handle of wood.

BASQUE WHALING SPADE



THE BASQUES  
AS WHALERS

(ctd) All such whaling gear, with the exception of the shanks and sockets which were of soft, malleable iron, were of excellent quality steel, carefully maintained and razor sharp.

Thus equipped, four whale-boats were hoisted on davits on each side of the ship, outside and above the gunwales, with their keels resting on wooden or iron supports called "CRENES". They were placed in such a way that they could be hoisted out and lowered quickly without danger or detriment to safety. Some vessels had only three such whale-boats while other much larger vessels might have five. The norm however was four. Usually three or four other whale-boat hulls were kept in reserve should need arise. Those usually in charge of the whale-boats were:

- No. 1.....The Captain
- No. 2.....First Mate
- No. 3.....Second Mate
- No. 4.....Third Mate

Each whale-boat had five rowers, one of which was the harpooner who rowed from the 1st thwart nearest the bow of the boat.

As soon as the lookouts who were always, weather permitting, stationed at the crosstrees of the mizzen and main masts, saw the spout of a whale they cried out to the deck below, "Ead Eiblos" or "Whale in sight". If they saw from the kind of spout that it was a Right Whale they added the cry of "RETWEL" and pointed to the direction where they saw the whale spout. The ship was steered in that direction, keeping up-wind as much as possible.

The half-casks of coiled whale-ropes were then loaded into the whale-boats and placed between the 1st and 2nd thwarts.

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The two ropes were tied together, the end underneath coming up on the half-cask and forming a loop. The upper end of the rope was taken aft to make a turn around the upright or capstan described above as on the rear deck, then taken forward, above the oars for insertion through the lead-lined hole in the stem-post at the bow, care being taken to place a "PINOCHE" or wood block under it to prevent the rope forming a kink or knot. This end was then brought back unto the deck and pulled through into a reserve of 4 or 5 fathoms before being firmly fastened to one of the harpoons. Now ready for action the harpoon was placed at the bow with its stem resting on a small cleat and its handle supported in a forked holder.

A second harpoon, having a similar reserve rope of 5 or 6 fathoms attached by a sliding knot to the rope of the first harpoon, was on standby. All being in order in the whaleboat and the vessel now nearing the last sighted position of the whale, the ship hove to and the crew kept watch for the instant the whale next would blow. At that spout the whale-boats were launched swiftly, always two at least, and each officer in charge headed for the point where, in his experience, the whale might reappear. As soon as the whale was sighted and if it was close at hand, the officer would cry "STANHOP". On this command the harpooner would cease rowing, place the handle of his oar in the cleat at his feet, rise, turn and move quickly to place his left leg in the half-moon concavity of the bow deck. With his right foot firmly placed against his thwart he would then seize the first harpoon and hold it ready to throw, while the four other rowers doubled their efforts on their oars. Should the boat be near the whale and preferably near its head or anterior part, within harpoon range, the officer would cry "HOLE BOT", on which the rowers "backed-water" or stopped with their oars the forward motion of the whale-boat.

THE BASQUES  
AS WHALERS  
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Its "way" or forward motion having been stopped the whale-boat became stationary momentarily, then commenced to back up. At this instant the officer would order "GIVE TWU" upon which the harpooner would hurl his harpoon with all his strength and dexterity into the whale, seeking to have it penetrate deeply. Immediately he would follow up with his second harpoon. Should both harpoons be planted deeply in the whale all had gone well for the harpooner, but often it happened, for one reason or another, that the first harpoon glanced off the tough skin of the whale and did not drive "home"- in which case the harpooner had recourse to his second harpoon. Should both harpoons miss the mark a new start was called for. At times, when the first harpoon was in, the whale would "sound"; or dive quickly, or take off so fast that the harpooner had no chance to throw his second harpoon into the whale. Yet in such case because the two harpoons were linked by a rope with a sliding knot, it was necessary to throw the second harpoon lest the whale-boat be upset. If the whale is only lightly struck, that is to say the harpoons didn't penetrate properly and pull back out it the would be more difficult to strike again. If, on the contrary, the harpoons were driven "home" they would not pull out easily, the triangular head acting in the same way as the end of a watch chain when pushed through a buttonhole and well able to resist the force required to pull the whale-boat through the water. Thus, after being harpooned the whale could continue on its way towing the boat. Sometimes the whale remained where it had been struck and made little movement but more frequently it fled rapidly for some time. At other times it sounded, that is to say it dived deep in the water; in such case the whale-rope would run out so rapidly that it was necessary to wet it with a bucket provided to cool it down. On occasion the

THE BASQUESAS WHALERS

(ctd) heat from friction of the running rope was such as to set fire to the little capstan at the rear of the whale-boat. From time to time the whale-rope was hauled against with the purpose of making the whale to surface sooner because of its wounds; despite that the whale would sometimes sound so deeply that the whale-rope of 240 fathoms all ran out. If another boat was near it might be possible to join the end of the line of the first to that of the second. If no other boat was at hand the end of the whale-rope was tied to a kind of buoy about 50 cm square of spruce wood. This buoy, called "TRUSQUIN" by carpenters, actually provided greater "drag" on the whale than the whale-boat and served later to recuperate the whale-rope when the whale surfaced.

Such extreme situations are very rare, fortunately, and normally after having gone some distance rapidly the whale would stop and seek to dislodge the harpoons by violent movements before becoming quiet enough to approach. The officer of the whale-boat who had taken the place of the harpooner as soon as the whale was struck now took up the lance and held it ready to thrust for a mortal wound to the heart or lungs of the whale. If successful, the spout from the whale will be marked by an abundance of blood and its energy will soon diminish and it will cease to move. At this point care must be taken against the final flurry of the whale that might upset the whale-boat.

