

Santa Clara monuments: the Convent (today a hotel), the Church and the Preceptory.



Balmasedak 800 urte beteko ditu datorren Urtarrilean. Urte hauetan garrantzi handia izan du Bizkaiko garapean eta garrantzi berezia emigrazioan. Ugari izan baitziren bertatik Ameriketara joan ziren pertsonak.

Next year on January 24th Balmaseda, the oldest “villa” in Bizkaia will celebrate the 800 anniversary of its foundation. On that same day in year 1199 Don Lope Sanchez de Mena, Lord of Bortedo, granted the town the Fuero de Logroño, separating it jurisdictionally from the surrounding villages. After eight centuries the town, located only 30 kilometers away from Bilbao, has a population of 7,580 people and is a flourishing town lying in a valley surrounded by mountains, next to the river Cadagua and crossed by four bridges.

Balmaseda has always been present in the memory of historians. Its historical importance is undeniable although it is true that its influence in the Señorío de Bizkaia has been for centuries more substantial than it is now. Balmaseda suffered a slow process of decline, from times of relative splendor in

16th century, going through times of stagnation and even of slump during the following centuries, and nowadays it has found an ample economic development.

The town is located in the westernmost region of Bizkaia: Las Encartaciones, and is considered to be its capital. Its location on the royal way that linked Bilbao and Burgos, and from there with all Castille, was essential for its historical importance and especially for its economic development. Long lines of salesmen carrying wools, cereals and a variety of foods crossed daily the town to provide for the needs of the Señorío de Bizkaia and also in many cases on the way to the port of Bilbao where the goods were to be exported.

Two weekly markets were celebrated in Balmaseda, which was until the year 1841, as well as Orduña, one of the customs offices of the region. The town also had an important Jewish population, which was expelled in the year 1486.

Moreover, apart from the trade, the town had important copper and iron industries. Their products were exported all over Europe and even to America, in different articles ranging from nails to cauldrons.

This industry became outdated in 19th century, Balmaseda lost the industrial revolution train, and the industry disappeared gradually. The trade also

received a heavy blow with the loss of the royal way, which was taken to a new trail by the Peña de Ordeta around 1770.

These economic catastrophes were helped along by five wars –with their difficult post-wars–, which afflicted the town between 1794 and 1874. The worse experience the town had to endure during that period was the burning of the town by the French troops. On November 8th 1808, Balmaseda burnt to the ground during the Independence War.

TOWARDS THE NEW CONTINENT

During the long period going from the beginning of 16th century to the end of 19th century the inhabitants of Balmaseda had a wide range of motives to emigrate from their land. Certainly the economic crisis we have already mentioned were the main cause of the emigration that took place during 19th century from Balmaseda. Most of the families with little resources decided to go to America in search of better life conditions. When the poorest inhabitants left the town its impoverishment was relieved. However, young people also emigrated and they are the most dynamic and enterprising elements. America's lure grew stronger for the Balmasedans, especially with the good

news they received together with metals, which were growing more abundant, and that indubitably fed the people's desires.

Trade and consequently riches are the fruits of migration. During the 17th century the Bizkaians took hold of an important part of the American trade monopoly. They established themselves in Seville and Cádiz and opened from those cities subsidiary companies in America, which were nearly always controlled by close relatives. This originated powerful communities of merchants, mostly in the most important mining societies in Mexico and Peru.

The inhabitants of Balmaseda chose Mexico, Cuba and Peru, on that same order, as their main destinations. In Mexico they were especially attracted to the mining centers of Chihuahua, Guanajuato and Zacatecas, where silver was extracted and exported until the beginning of 18th century. In the island of Cuba they established themselves mainly in Havana, which became in 19th century the greatest center of immigration, even bigger than Mexico during last century, after that colony had become independent. Finally the mining centers of Potosí (in high Peru) lured many emigrants, as well as the city of Lima. However there were also people from Balmaseda in Venezuela (La Guayra and Caracas), in Chile, in Colombia (Cartagena de Indias) and in Guatemala and Panama.

In time the Basques in general and among them the people from Bizkaia, came to have considerable political influence in America; they controlled from positions of high responsibility a great part of the Spanish administrative structure. Therefore, there were quite a few Balmasedans occupying important positions in the Spanish army and administration. The Town Council of Balmaseda decided to acknowledge their prestige giving them the title of Honorary Mayor of the town.

THE RETURN

The emigrants always try to go back to their motherland, but not all of them are able to do so. However, even if the dream of their lives cannot come



Above: Medieval 12th century bridge. It forms part of the City's coat of arms.

Below: Twinning with Balmaceda (Chile). The former Chilean Consul in Bilbao, Antonio Ortega, with the Mayors of Balmaceda and Balmaseda, Eduardo Santelices and Jesús Suso, respectively, and a Councillor of the latter locality.

true, they never lose completely the links uniting them to their place of birth. This mutual feeling has been constantly proved between Balmaseda and its American children.

The peculiar character of the "Indiano" appears with the definitive return home. They were generally people who had made a fortune and were willing to use it. But these emigrants who had been clever, dynamic merchants, businessmen or civil servants in America did not usually invest their fortune back home in any productive activity. Most of them built small palaces, they renovated churches or they offered expensive gifts to their Virgin, as a symbol of their riches before their neighbors. Marcos de la Arena Bermejillo was probably the only "Indiano" who created direct wealth in the town. On January 14th 1892 he founded –in collaboration with a British textile firm– the Basque beret factory "La Encartada",

which is nowadays a relic of the industrial past and will in the future become a textile museum.

The emigration of people from Balmaseda to American lands was very important and grew constantly between the 16th and the 19th centuries, although the features, motives and social groups varied as a consequence of the historic, social and economic events endured by the town. However there is still a lot of research to do –a complex but fascinating study that we haven't finished yet- if we want to uncover the real power of these "Indianos", both in their American activities and in their commercial back rooms of Seville and Cádiz. ■

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