En las montañas

Spaniards in Southern West Virginia

By Tom Hidalgo

In 1920, 17-year-old Avelino Cartelle found himself in New York City, down to his last 50 cents and no job. He had arrived with high hopes a few months earlier from the town of Arnoya, in the northern region of Galicia, Spain, but now was thinking about trying his luck in Uruguay where he had a brother.

Then, Manuel Basquez, a Spaniard who had come from Spain with Cartelle, paid him a visit. Basquez had been to Logan County, West Virginia, where he had an uncle, and was preparing to go back there. He encouraged Cartelle to return with him to Logan and get a job in the mines.

West Virginia? Coal mines? It wasn't what Cartelle had in mind when he set sail for the Americas. "I wanted to stay in New York. I wanted to go to school. I didn't want to go to the mines," he recalled in a 1993 interview, at age 90.

He decided to go to West Virginia anyway, taking with him a two-dollar guitar he had brought with him from Spain. "I wore it over my shoulder all the way to Logan County," he said. Arriving in Logan, he went to work for the Guyandotte Coal Company for $10 a day.

Regardless of where they went first, eventually it was coal that brought most Spaniards to West Virginia.

Cartelle eventually settled in Oak Hill, and for many years owned and operated the popular Skyline Drive-In. He was one of thousands of Spaniards who came to West Virginia in the early part of the 20th century, drawn primarily by the prospects of jobs in the coal mines.

State Department of Mines records reveal that Spaniards first entered the mines in West Virginia in 1908, when seven were working at New River Coal Company's mines in Raleigh County. The number grew steadily over the years, peaking at 2,212 in 1921, when Spaniards were present in 19 of the state's 55 counties. Raleigh County had the most with 557. Logan had 467.

Spaniards came from throughout Spain, but most were from the southern region of Andalucia or the northern regions of Galicia and Asturias. Apparently, few came directly to West Virginia.

Francisco Ubeda Guirado left Almeria, Spain, and first went to Panama, according to his son Frank, who was born in Dun Loop, Fayette County, in 1914. "Daddy came over in 1908," Frank says. "He and a friend of his from Spain stopped off at the Panama Canal when they were building the canal. They just worked there a very short while because they were so afraid of the malaria mosquitoes. They thought they had better leave that and come to the coal camps, where they had originally intended to anyway." Francisco landed in Prudence, Fayette County, then lived in many

places, including Lillybrook in Raleigh County.

Asuncion Marquis Richmond says that her father Manuel Marquéz Cabrera left the Andalusian town of Belmez and first went to Illinois. The family name was changed to Marquis in the United States. "When my daddy first came over here, he went to work in Chicago in a meat packing plant where they butchered hogs," says Asuncion, who was born in Blue Jay in 1923. She now lives in Beckley.

Josephine Meijide Midkiff's father Juan Maria Rosa Bouza Meijide was from Leiro in Galicia. Her mother Maria Socorro Paz Fernandez was from Alen, also in Galicia. Juan Meijide made several stops before coming to West Virginia. Josephine pieces together the saga. "I think his first trip must have been in 1913. Looking [through] some of the passports, I found that date. He made several trips across the Atlantic. He also went to places like Argentina and Cuba. He'd go to a place and get a job and work until he got itchy feet again to go elsewhere. This, of course, was before he was married," says Josephine, who was born in 1926 and now lives in Beckley. Juan eventually settled in Ameagle in Raleigh County.

Frank Troitiño took a circuitous route to West Virginia from his hometown of Pousada in Galicia, where he was born in 1909. He fought in the Spanish Civil War from 1937 to 1939 and immigrated to the U.S. in 1941. He joined his brother Joe Troitiño, who had immigrated to West Virginia many years earlier, but was living in North Carolina at the time. Frank trained to be a stonecutter in Spain and took a job working on building the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. After World War II, Frank returned briefly to North Carolina and then settled in Mt. Hope in Fayette County, where he operated a strip mining company for many years. "I've lived in Mt. Hope ever since," Frank says.

Regardless of where they went first, eventually it was coal that brought most Spaniards to West Virginia. John Ubeda was born in the town of Tabernas, Almeria, Spain, and was five years old when he came with his family to Prudence in Fayette County in 1910. "I went to school to the fifth grade and then went to working in the mines when I was about 12 years old. Back in them days, even on a tipple they had little boys picking dirty coal out — the slate and rock and stuff like that," John recalled

Manuel Marquis Cabrera came from southern Spain and worked in the coal mines of Raleigh County. He was one of thousands of Spaniards who came to southern West Virginia in the early 20th century. Photographer and date unknown.

in a 1997 interview at age 92. He helped his father in the mine for about a year and then got his own job there. "I run a motor in there, and I got hurt. Motor run over my foot when I went to get on it. It smashed [my foot], got blood poisoning, and they had to cut it off." John received $12 a week for 160 weeks for the injury. Incredibly, he was fitted with an artificial leg and returned to work in the mines for almost 20 years before leaving to start his own trucking business. He died in 2000.

When Avelino Cartelle and Manuel Basquez arrived in Logan County from New York, they immediately set about getting Cartelle a job at the mine where Basquez was working. Cartelle was then 17 years old. As he recalled, "The big boss was from England, and he

Josephine Meijide Midkiff today at her home in Beckley. Photograph by Michael Keller.

Josephine's parents Maria Socorro Paz Fernandez and Juan Meijide Bouza at the time of their marriage in Spain, 1921. Juan traveled widely before this time, crossing the Atlantic several times before returning to Spain to claim his bride. The couple eventually settled in Ameagle, Raleigh County.

Josephine Meijide and her three sisters posed for this picture in 1928. Two-year-old Josephine is on the right. Sister Mary is at left, Rose is seated, and baby Mercedes is in her lap. The family ran a boarding house for coal miners in Ameagle at the time.

spoke a little Spanish. He asked me how old I was, and I told him 20. He said, '*Muy chiquito* (too little).'"

Bazquez intervened on his behalf, Cartelle recalled. "He said, 'He doesn't have a family over here. He has to eat.' So my buddy took me in the mines. He said, 'He's working with me, and I'll pay him.'"

Cartelle met my grandfather Cayetano Hidalgo who immigrated from the Andalusian town of Peñarroya in 1920. They became close friends and co-workers. When Hidalgo moved to Rocklick in Fayette County, Cartelle followed. Cartelle was there when my grandfather was killed in a mining accident in 1927. "*Dejame descansar* (Let me rest)" were his last words, Cartelle recalled. Cartelle died in 1996 at the age of 93.

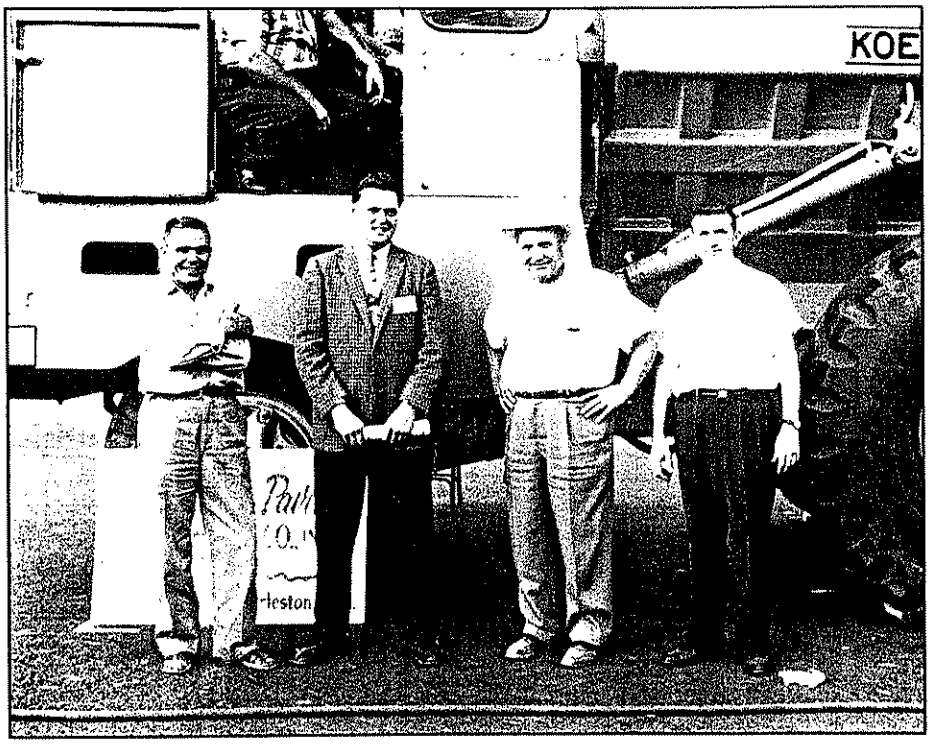
Asuncion Marquis Richmond recalls that her father Manuel Marquéz Cabrera was hurt several times in the mines. When he was injured, her mother Maria helped prepare him to go to work. "Let me tell you what my mother did," Asuncion says. "My mother had a thing — it was as long as from here to that wall over there. It was like a scarf, and it had all kinds of colors — blue and green and yellow — and it come from Spain. Well, Dad got hurt in the mines a time or two and hurt his back. So Mama wrapped him every time he went to the mines. It's cold in the mines anyhow, no heat or nothing down there, and she wrapped that thing around him every day. When he went to work, he always wore that thing to support his back."

After the Depression hit, life often became a day-to-day struggle for miners and their families. Jose Torrico Caballero and his wife Irene Garcia Gomez came from Belmez, Spain, in 1913. They lived in Stanaford and Blue Jay before eventually settling in Beckley. Their son Pedro, born in Blue Jay in 1921, describes what it was like. "There were nine of us altogether. I can't understand anyone having that many children. I used to envy kids whose parents had one or two children. I went to bed hungry half the time. That was the worst. They'd kill a chicken on Sunday and had to split one chicken between nine kids and two parents. But Mother made all kinds of stuff out of that chicken. We'd eat everything but the bill on that thing. We never starved or anything, but stayed hungry."

When the children were old enough, they were expected to work to make a few dollars to help the family. Pedro caddied at a country club golf course for several years from the time he was 12 to about 15, and turned over all the pay to his parents. He then landed a job at the old Valencia Café in downtown

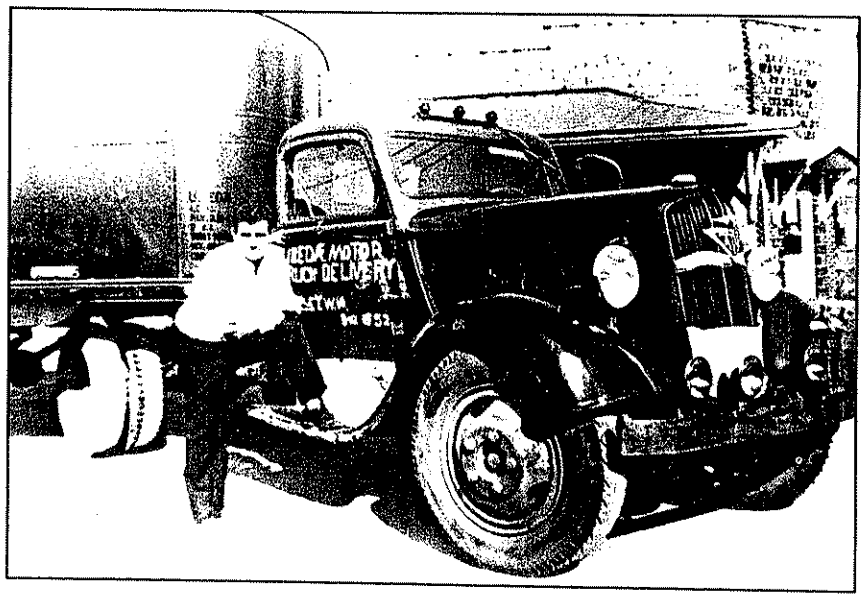
Frank Troitiño today at his home in Mt. Hope. Photograph by Michael Keller.

Frank and Joe Troitiño are shown here at a coal show in Charleston in 1952. Frank is at left, and Joe is second from the right.



Frank Ubeda today at his home in Beckley. Photograph by Michael Keller.

Frank, at center, with his brother Joe and sister Teny Ubeda at Fireco in the early 1920's.



John Ubeda with his truck in front of the Beckley Ice and Feed Store in the late 1930's. John died last year, at 95 years of age

Beckley, which was owned by two Spaniards. He worked Saturdays from 6 a.m. until midnight. "They paid me a dollar and all I could eat. I couldn't hardly wait until the weekend. That's the only time I could get full. I could eat, eat all I wanted to."

Boarding houses were common in the coal camps, and Spaniards often ran them and lived in them. Frank Ubeda's family ran the boarding house in Fireco. He recalls, "These men had their wives in Spain, or were single. Instead of them going out and staying in separate homes with different people, they stayed together in the coal camp house called the 'Spanish club house.' There were about 14 or 16 people that stayed there that mother had to cook for, laundry, and all that."

Although boarding houses often served a specific ethnic group — with "Americans" having their own — the Meijide family usually had a mix of nationalities represented at their boarding house in Ameagle. "We had a couple or three who were Greeks, we had Hungarians, we had Italians," says Josephine Meijide Midkiff. "We really learned a lot from all these people, and they liked staying in our place and eating my mother's food. We would gather around in the evenings around [the] fireplace, and they would tell us stories about how life was back in their countries. It was very entertaining. We didn't need television."

Typically, only Spanish was spoken at home. Many adult immigrants never learned to speak English fluently. Several parents even provided formal Spanish lessons at home. Frank Ubeda recalls, "At home, we spoke Spanish. Mom and Dad never could speak English, so we had to talk Spanish. As soon as we got outside, it was English." Frank's brother John, nine years older, recalled that his parents pro-

vided formal instruction to him and his sister Mercedes at home in Spanish. "I don't know what year it was, a fellow came from Spain," John said. "He had a pretty good education, and he taught my sister and myself to write and read in Spanish for a couple years. He stayed at the house. He didn't pay no board or nothing. That was the purpose of him staying there was to teach us to read and write in Spanish."

The Marquis family had a strict "Spanish only" rule at home. As Asuncion Marquis Richmond recalls, "You wasn't allowed to come in the house and speak English. When we come in the house and we said something in English, my mother said, 'In this house, we speak Spanish.' So we had to speak Spanish in the house."

Asuncion Marquis Richmond today at her Raleigh County home. Photograph by Michael Keller.

The Meijide family also adhered to a strict Spanish-only policy at home, although Josephine's father could speak English quite well. "I can remember that even after we started school, we were always expected to speak Spanish in our household," Josephine says. "Once you stepped over the threshold into the house, it was Spanish. It became automatic, like you turned on a switch. I've been very grateful for that, because it helped me to keep up with the language." Josephine went on to become a Spanish teacher.

When Spaniards came to West Virginia, they also brought their foodways with them. Along with daily Spanish fare, two other customs flourished for a time in West Virginia: wine making and *matanzas* — hog killings to make sausage.

They made wine during the fall. It was customary for groups of Spaniards to order large amounts of grapes together and have them shipped in. Frank Ubeda remembers, "There would be so many grapes bought that they'd come there in boxcars. Then the people would bring their cars or trucks or whatever, and each one would take whatever he had paid for, and buddy, they'd have a hell of a time, I'll tell you. You see, that kind of life, or that type of activity was what kept them going. That was common for them. Very rich and very good, and buddy, you couldn't beat that."

Matanza literally means killing. For Spaniards, it meant butchering hogs to have feasts, celebrate, and make typical Spanish sausages like *chorizo* and *morcilla*. Frank Ubeda recalls that it was a very special time. "It looked like a fever hit 'em," he says. "Time to kill hogs. When-

Asuncion and her sisters in Beckley, 1940. Asuncion is at left, Elizabeth is seated, and Mary is at right. Like most Spanish families in the region, they adhered to a strict "Spanish only" policy when speaking at home.

A group of unidentified Spanish men enjoy a picnic and some live music somewhere in southern West Virginia, about 1940.

ever that came about, you didn't have to go out and hire any help. Man, they all came. They'd get together and come and help each other. Back then, *chorizo* was the thing. All the Spanish people did that. It was a custom that I soon missed because it was good eating. It was a ritual you had to do."

Asuncion Marquis Richmond points out that it was an important custom. "They did that because that's the way they lived in Spain," she says.

Alex Lopez of Sophia fondly remembers the yearly ritual at his home. "Every Thanksgiving, we'd kill pigs, and that's when they'd make the *chorizo*. It was big, like a holiday fair. So for two or three days, it was just like a fiesta or like a picnic there. They'd eat and drink wine, and at night we'd play music and sing songs. They'd play Spanish songs. Grandpa'd play the *gaita* (bagpipes). They'd dance. Oh, it was just great times. Best times in my life. Family all together, all Spanish people."

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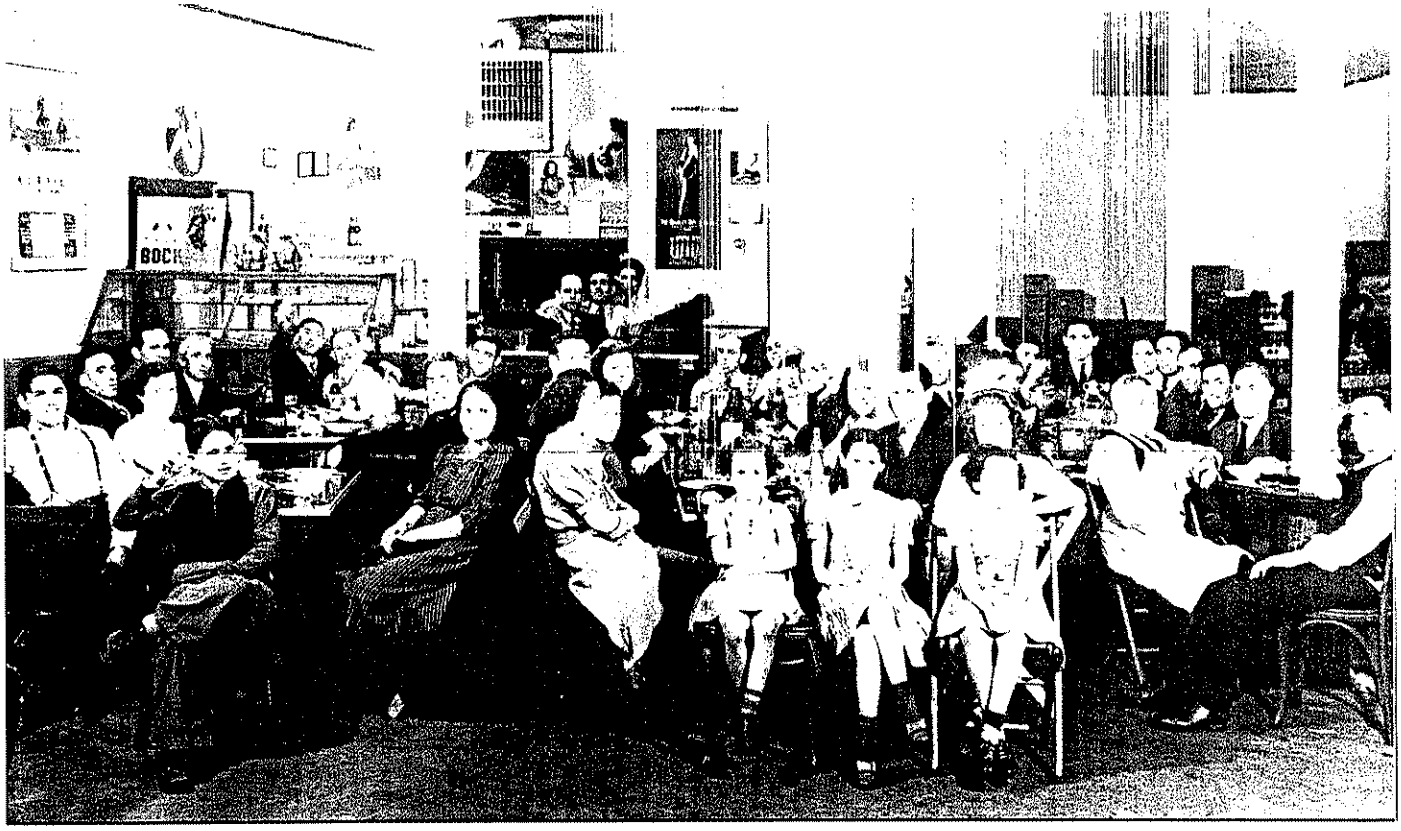
In 1938, a group of Spaniards decided to form their own organization. The Ateneo Español was organized to promote the "best interest and general welfare of all Spaniards in and around Raleigh, Wyoming, Fayette, Mercer, Summers, and Boone counties." In 1939, they built their own building on Prince Street in downtown Beckley. Instead of going to a bank for a loan, they raised the money themselves. Avelino Cartelle was one of the founding members.

Frank Ubeda was an early member and says that the Ateneo Español provided a place for Spaniards who were scattered all over several counties to come together for fun and fellowship. "A lot of them couldn't speak English — some of them could, of course — but whenever they got together, the world opened up for them."

Going to a dance at the Spanish Hall, as their building was known, was an event that people looked forward to. As Asuncion Marquis Richmond recalls, "We planned ahead of time what we was going to wear. Sometimes we had to buy a piece of cloth and make something. We met our girlfriends down there, and we gossiped and we had a good time and we danced with everybody, nearly. My mother loved to go with my dad, cause my mother got to speak with her friends at the Spanish Hall. Our parents wouldn't hardly let [us] go anywhere. They were protective of [their] girls, so that was a biggie for us."

Gradually, the Spanish colony dwindled. During World War II, many left to work in out-of-state defense plants and didn't return to West Virginia. By the 1950's, there were not enough members to keep the club open full time, so the Ateneo Español began to lease the building to a local business and hold meetings in the basement. Eventually, the members began holding regular dinner meetings in Spanish-owned restaurants in Beckley.

In January 1997, the Ateneo Español sold its building to a local lumber company which uses it for storage. The Spanish club still exists today with a membership of 40 to 50 people — the children and grandchildren of those who first came to West Virginia in



The Spanish Hall on Prince Street in Beckley was built in 1938 by the Ateneo Español. It became a popular gathering place for the many Spaniards and people of Spanish descent in the area. This photograph from March 1940 shows a festive gathering in the hall's lower level. Upstairs were a stage and a large dance floor. Avelino Cartelle is shown seated at the right-hand table, wearing glasses (see arrow).

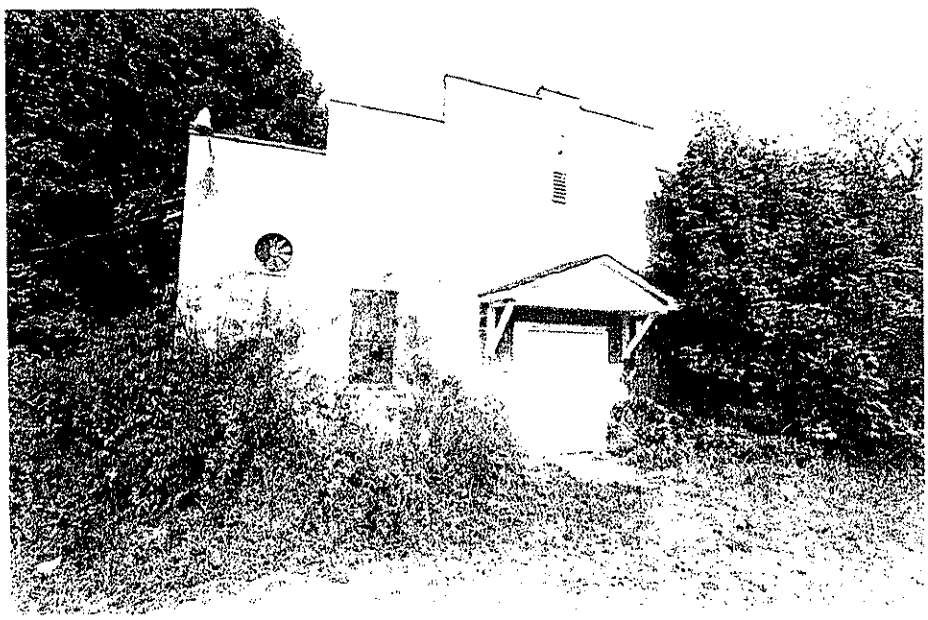
the early 20th century.

The current Ateneo president is Brenda Troitiño, Frank Troitiño's daughter. Brenda says that, at age 52, she is "one of the youngest members." She points out that it is mostly the older generation of Spaniards who keep the organization going.

The group gets together about three times a year and is "strictly social," according to Brenda. They gather at various meeting halls in the Beckley area, enjoy a "Sunday-type" meal (usually not Spanish food), have a short business meeting, and spend the rest of their time talking and visiting. While the business meeting is conducted in English these days, most of the conversation is still held in Spanish. Brenda says that they occasionally listen to recorded music from various parts of Spain and sometimes contribute money to local charities.

"The main goal," Brenda says, "is to keep the group together and to generate interest in the history of the Spanish people in this area — keep alive some of the heritage."

For membership guidelines or more information about the Ateneo Español, call Brenda Troitiño at (304)256-8688.



The Ateneo Español sold this building in 1997 to a local lumber company, which uses it as a storage facility. The Ateneo now holds its meetings elsewhere in Beckley, about three times a year. Photograph by Michael Keller.

THOMAS HIDALGO grew up in Beckley. He is the grandson of Cayetano Hidalgo, a Spaniard who emigrated from Penarroya, Spain, in 1920, to work in the West Virginia coal mines. This article is based on research Thomas conducted for his doctoral dissertation. A graduate of the University of Massachusetts, Thomas now lives in Springfield, Massachusetts, where he works as an education consultant. This is his first contribution to GOLDENSEAL.