

# People Person in a People's Business

John Ascuaga left a legacy of success, philanthropy and hard work in his business, the community and the Hereford breed.

by *Katie Maupin Miller*

Even when the Nugget's Celebrity Showroom stage was filled to the brim with Hereford bulls, as those heavy gilded curtains rose, the biggest presence might have been the slightest man. Standing just 5 foot 2 — in his signature cowboy boots — John Ascuaga and his short-brimmed silver belly hat captivated the crowd before the Western Nugget Sale hosted at his own Nugget Hotel and Casino.

The Nugget Casino's Celebrity Showroom often served as a pedestal for giants — from the literal giants like the elephants, Bertha and Tina, to figurative giants such as the countless celebrities and entertainers who stopped in Sparks, Nev., to share their talents. Yet, few cast a larger shadow than John himself, who left a broad swath of change in his wake. He will long be remembered as a gaming pioneer, visionary businessman, stockman, Hereford enthusiast, devoted family man and an example of the American dream.



John purchased the Nugget for \$3.75 million in his mid-30s without a penny down, and he paid it off five years early. John's integrity was noted by bankers, business owners and cattlemen alike. He often did business with a handshake.

While it may be easy to look at John's legacy and assume his path to success was paved smooth or luck played the only hand, a closer inspection of John's humble roots serves as a reminder that hard work still makes way for those who dream big.

## The epitome of the American dream

Along with his twin sister, Rose, John was born to Spanish Basque immigrants on Jan. 7, 1925. Raised during the Great Depression, John learned how faith, family and a good work ethic saw people through hard times. His parents, Jose and Marina, instilled these values in their four children on the family's modest Caldwell, Idaho, homestead.

"I don't think he ever forgot where he came from," says Cleo Shaw, of Shaw Cattle Co., in John's hometown of Caldwell. "I don't

think he ever forgot that his parents were immigrants, and they worked their tails off to get to where they were and to be successful farmers in the community."

John's high school yearbook foreshadowed his professional success when his classmates predicted, "He would own the biggest gambling den in Reno." Indeed, John was destined for the gaming and hospitality industry, but he first furthered his education at the University of Idaho and Washington State University. John paid his way through school after a short stint in the Army. While his education gave him knowledge of accounting and hotel and restaurant management, a summer job helped John find his way to Nevada.

While still going to school, John worked as a bellhop at Shore Lodge in McCall, Idaho, where he met Dick Graves, an Idaho slot machine owner and soon-to-be Nevada gaming pioneer. Impressed by the bellhop's energy, Dick hired John after he graduated college in 1952. Idaho declared slot machines illegal statewide just two years later, so Dick relocated to Nevada, and John followed. Dick named John the general manager of his Sparks, Nev., location, and the Nugget was born as a 60-seat coffee shop with a few slot machines on March 17, 1955. After just three years of growth, the Nugget outgrew its humble coffee shop home and moved across the street to its current location.

When Dick wanted to retire in 1960, he sold the Nugget to John with a simple handshake and without a single penny down. John was just 34 years old when he agreed to pay \$3.75 million over 12 years for the enterprise. He paid it off in seven.

John continued to build the Nugget with his friendly, personal service, excellent dining, headlining entertainment, special events, and of course, gaming. Under John's leadership, the Nugget grew into one of the largest Nevada hotel-casinos. When John sold the Nugget in 2014, it boasted more than 1,600 hotel rooms, 75,000 square feet of casino gaming, nine restaurants and much more.

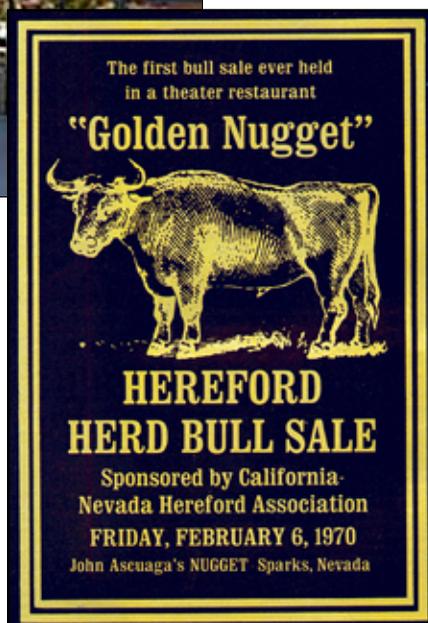
## Solid stockman

Even while John was at the helm of the Nugget, his business empire didn't distract him from his Idaho roots. His father was a shepherd, and John always appreciated agriculture. Like his father, John kept a herd of sheep, but it was when he returned to Caldwell to visit family that John discovered his love for the bald-faced breed.

John had returned to Idaho to visit his brother, Frank Ascuaga, who raised row crops on the family's farm. Frank and his wife, Winnie, were dear friends to Hereford breeders Tom and Mary Shaw, or as John came to call them teasingly, T.S. and M.S.

When John was in town to see Frank, he ended up on the Shaw ranch looking through Hereford cattle.

It wasn't long before John purchased some Herefords for his Jack's Valley Ranch, which became his family's home in 1970. The 1,250-acre ranch near Carson City, Nev., was the perfect backdrop for John to impart the same lessons of hard work and



responsibility to his children while pursuing his lifelong dream of ranching.

At the height of his cattle enterprise, John also owned land in Smith, Nev., and Bridgeport, Calif., where he ran a commercial cattle operation designed to supply beef to the many restaurants he owned, in addition to his Hereford seedstock. He was said to be quite proud of raising his own beef and would tell patrons about his cattle and production agriculture. While many entrepreneurs might seek out a branded beef program for their enterprises, only a cattleman would raise cattle, feed them and harvest them for their hospitality business.

While others with John's responsibilities might have had trouble finding time for ranch work, John relished in it. He both oversaw and worked in the cattle operation. He wasn't afraid of a bit of dirt or hard work. John accompanied the crew to drive cattle from Smith to Bridgeport, checked cows and calved out heifers.

One story passed along told of the time a man drove to Jack's Valley to see the famed gaming maven John Ascuaga only to find a small man dressed in chore clothes feeding cattle in an old pick-up truck. Little did that gentleman know he had met the owner of the Nugget.

Even at 95, John called Greg Shaw to visit about a set of bred commercial heifers he planned to calve out with the help of his hired hand.

"He just didn't ever quit until it was time to quit," Cleo says.

John's work ethic and boundless energy were nearly unfathomable. It was unsurprising for those who knew him that John was known for working alongside his thousands of employees rather than managing his interests from afar.

### People person

Nearly everyone remembers John for his humble leadership — picking up a piece of trash in the Nugget's parking lot rather than asking one of his employees to do so. And, John remembered everybody.

"I was one of those people that thought, you know, I will just be another face or another number if I'm lucky enough to be introduced to or get to visit with [John]. But the very next time you met that man, John would stick his hand out and call you by name," says Patty Wolf, who worked many Western Nugget sales with her husband, Willard. "He was just the most amazing man. He remembered everyone's name, and he treated everyone as if they not only had a name but had a story."

Besides his uncanny knack for recognizing faces and remembering names, John took a genuine interest in each person he



Even with the striking display of Hereford bulls taking center stage at the Nugget Hotel and Casino, John's presence loomed large over the event, and his contributions to the Hereford breed will long be remembered.

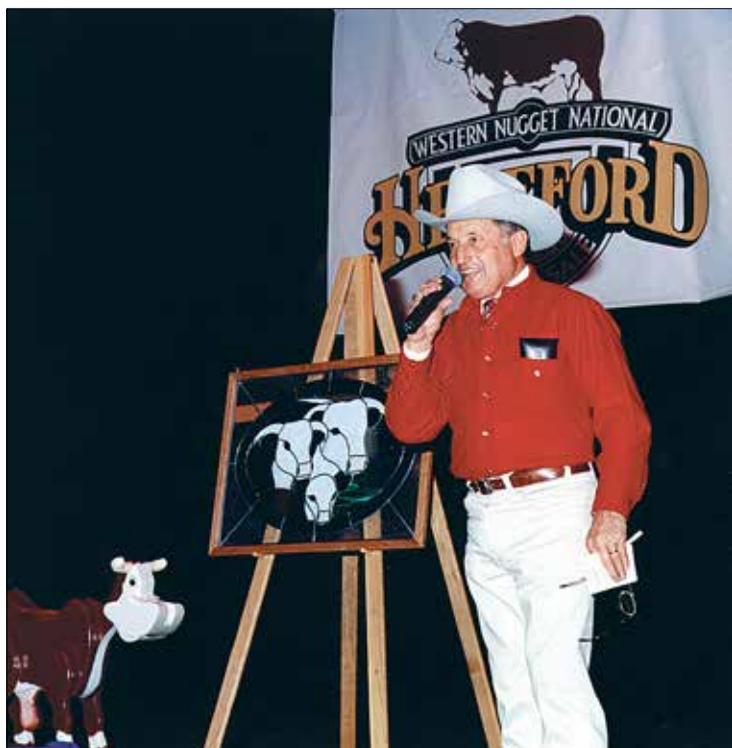
met, inquiring about family and work. He took time out of his day to show kindness to everyone he met.

"He was a people person. Of course, he was in a people's business, too," says Sherry Colyer of Colyer Herefords, Bruneau, Idaho.

Sherry recalls when her family was dining at one of the Nugget's restaurants with their then 3-year-old daughter, Katie. John not only stopped to chat, calling each family member by name, but after he



Past Hereford fieldman Willard Wolf and John were kindred spirits as Willard's wife, Patty, recalls. She said John always took a genuine interest in everyone he met, and Willard strove to do the same. They were a couple of cattlemen who enjoyed the people side of the Hereford business.



John loved Hereford cattle and would often speak during the Nugget Show and Sale in his signature cowboy boots and short-brimmed silver belly hat.

excused himself, he walked across the casino to the Nugget's gift shop to get a plush elephant for Katie.

"I always think as many things as [John] had to do that he would take his time to go get a 3-year-old a stuffed pink elephant was just very thoughtful," Sherry says. "That's one thing that I'll always remember because I just thought that he was a very important man and a very busy man, but he always took time for people and to do things that were kind for others."

John was beloved by his thousands of employees because he not only greeted each and every employee by name as they passed, but he also inquired about their families while working alongside them.

"[John] knew all of his employees at the casino ... and he called each one by name. He would ask them something about their family, and you could just see [the employees] blossom because he took an interest in them," Sherry says. "It didn't matter if it was

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With his Nugget Hotel and Casino as the backdrop, John's knack for stockmanship and entertainment collided during the memorable Western Nugget Show and Sale. Hereford enthusiasts were greeted with a stage full of sale bulls to kick-off the festivities.

somebody that was the janitor type or one of the managers — he knew them all.”

John, in turn, held each employee to the same high standards he carried himself. During John's management, visitors to the Nugget said every employee shared John's work ethic, enthusiasm, meticulous attention to detail and friendly nature.

“He just surrounded himself with good, hardworking people that no matter what they were doing, they all seemed to enjoy their job. They just enjoyed working for John and with him,” says Mark Holt, former fieldman for the American Hereford Association (AHA).

John also passed these traits onto his children. After meeting his wife, Rose Ardans, in the late '50s, the couple was engaged after three dates. John and Rose had four children, Camille, John L., Michonne and Stephen, and by all accounts, John was a devoted father.

“As proud as John was of the Nugget and his cattle herd, he was even more proud as a father and a husband,” Cleo says.

His children recall John making the hour-long drive from the Sparks casino home to the Jack's Valley Ranch to sit down for a family dinner nearly every evening, even if he had to turn around and drive back into town for business after the plates were cleared.

Perhaps that isn't surprising, though. John was noted by those who knew him as a man who gave to things he loved. An adamant believer in education, John gave more than 700 scholarships in Nevada. In 2016, the National Junior Hereford Association awarded the first Hereford scholarships in his name. True to his Basque heritage, John often supported Basque charities. Cleo even recalls him sending hundreds of Basque bread loaves to his hometown each year for a community fundraiser. John also supported many Catholic charities as a man of faith. Plus, stockmen always felt at home at the Nugget. Cattle shows, sheep shows, Cattlemen's conventions and more were welcomed into John's hotel and casino. Perhaps none were welcomed as warmly as the bald-faced breed, though, as John helped found the Western Nugget Show and Sale in 1967.

### Herefords at the Nugget

Hereford enthusiasts who were there still get chills when they recall Leroy Van Dyke's baritone voice cutting through the crowd with the chant of The Auctioneer song — “Hey well alright, sir. Here we go there, and what are ya' gonna give for 'em.” As those heavy golden curtains raised, they revealed a stage full of Hereford bulls — fitted for the show ring with a dusting of glitter to catch the spotlights as they stood above the crowd.

Mark recalls standing next to John as the gilded curtain rose at the Nugget.

“It was just a really, really special moment to see [John's] face light up as the song played,” he says. “It hasn't been done, and probably will never be done, in any other breed.”

It was a memorable sight for those in the audience, too. A stage full of big bulls was also a testament to the Hereford breed. Nary a one spooked at the bright lights, crowd or curtains during the decades the sale bulls were showcased together on the Nugget's Celebrity Showcase stage.

“In the 15 years I was working for Hereford, no more than a wiggle,” Mark recalls. “Nothing ever stepped out of line or did anything. A bull might have rocked back and forth or moved a foot, but that's it.”

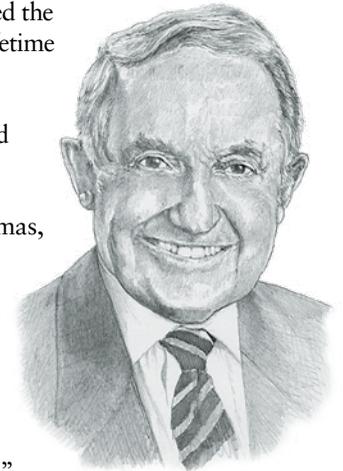
John loved entertainment and good Hereford cattle. His two passions met during the Western Nugget Show and Sale.

Even as the venue owner, John always found time to go through the sale cattle when the Herefords were in town. He could be found watching the show or walking through the aisles visiting with fellow Hereford breeders. He was putting his exceptional memory to use, recalling pedigrees and cattle.

In the Sparks-Reno area, John was such a noted businessman that he could still do business with a handshake, just as he sealed deals with cattlemen in the barn or pasture.

“His word was better than any contract you could find. And so business with John was always just a handshake,” says Cleo. “And you knew that it would never go south because he was that type of man.”

For generously hosting the Western Nugget at his hotel and casino for decades, John received the Western States Hereford Association's Lifetime Achievement Award, a standing ovation and a Bud Snidow painting during the 2007 event. In 2014, the businessman and cattleman was inducted into the AHA Hall of Merit.



In his nomination form, Cheryl Thomas, who was secretary/treasurer of the Western States Hereford Association penned, “John is the reason the Western National Hereford Show and Sale takes place. It all started with a Hereford bull sale in a tent in the Nugget parking lot in 1967, which evolved into the sale on the stage inside.”

Outside of his contributions to his business, community and the Hereford breed, John was simply a hard-working, humble, kind man who left a lasting impact on everyone who crossed his path.

Perhaps Patty sums it up the best.

“The man was just the most common, ordinary, huge, huge mighty man.” **HW**



John Ascuaga, Carson City, Nev., was inducted into the Hereford Hall of Merit Oct. 31, 2014, in Kansas City, Mo. Pictured (l to r) are: Eric Walker, 2015 AHA president, Morrison, Tenn.; Craig Huffhines, AHA executive vice president at the time, Kansas City, Mo.; John Ascuaga; Michonne, Ascuaga, Reno, Nev.; and Steve Lambert, 2014 AHA president, Oroville, Calif.