

10-19-2010

# VideoPoetry: Historical Photography in the Desert Garden

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*Abstract: This paper presents an integration of poetry, history and photography through the video medium to convey a cultural history of the irrigated desert in southern Idaho, USA, around 1900. The VideoPoetry project is an investigation of cultural history that employs video and poetry to make it come alive. This social history is revealed through the lives of Clarence E. Bisbee and Jessie Robinson Bisbee of Twin Falls, Idaho. Their marriage focused on their photography business that involved documenting the transformation of the desert into farms, towns, and cities. This project brings out for public view a selection of historical photographs from a vast archive of images, most of which were produced by Clarence E. Bisbee over a thirty-year period. His remarkable technical competence and extraordinary breadth of subject matter reveal the texture of daily life as the settlers struggled with an inhospitable environment. In the video, a narrator provides historical contextualization, linking the photos together to create a cultural narrative. Following the narrative introduction, spoken poetry provides an imaginative, but historically based, personal perspective within this new society. VideoPoetry integrates these elements to make these photographs accessible and engaging to viewers a hundred years later, especially to young viewers who may have very few images of the early history of their state. Such dissemination of scholarship is especially important now. Budget cuts, emphasis on external funding rates, and charges of irrelevance have degraded the role of the arts and humanities on many campuses. Public scholarship and scholarship of engagement with communities—known as public history in the field of history—are essential to the preservation of humanities in higher education. VideoPoetry offers a dissemination method that engages audiences in non-traditional ways and highlights the complex, important social functions of humanities research.*

Keywords: Video, Poetry, History, Irrigation in the Western USA, Idaho, Public History, VideoPoetry, Bisbee, Photography, Twin Falls, Idaho

**T**HIS PAPER IS rooted in stories. The story of the Snake River Plain long pre-dated the arrival of the first European settlers. Its story took a dramatic turn with the introduction and development of large-scale irrigation projects around the year 1900. The transformation of arid lands into farms and towns was vividly captured by professional photographer Clarence E. Bisbee of Twin Falls, Idaho. Using his photographs in combination with poetry, we are retelling this story through the medium of VideoPoetry.

## Story and History

Human beings are storytellers. Narratives have formed the genesis of creation stories and sacred writings. Stories unite generations of people through time by weaving threads of meaning that tell us who we are and how we've come to be here. Mother Goose, fairy tales,

fables, and *cuentos* (morality and cautionary tales) entertain children and teach them life's lessons. Stories use many forms in prose, such as novels, plays, news articles, and journals. From ancient times, stories have also taken such poetic forms as songs and epics, for example, *The Odyssey*, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, *the Song of Roland*, and *Paradise Lost*. Besides these narratives of entire peoples, stories are what we bring home at day's end and share around the campfire or dinner table.

Stories engage the human imagination, which transforms the story's phrases into sequences of action that we see and hear in our minds. For millennia bards and balladeers have given us experiences that we act out on our mental stages. When we're engaged with a story, we momentarily lose our self-awareness and our awareness of the storyteller: "The storyteller makes no choice/ Soon you will not hear his voice./ His job is to shed light/ And not to master..." (Garcia & Hunter, 1977).

Written history, like narrative poetry, usually takes the form of a narrative. Whereas history documents events through prose writing, narrative poetry uses condensed language and imagery to evoke experiences. Poetry typically leaves more gaps than prose for the audience to fill in by using their imagination. When combined, these two genres can complement one another in providing opportunities to tell a story from different perspectives and with different narrative voices. In addition, each can challenge the other to alter traditional frameworks of "telling."

## Place

Where and when the story occurs—its setting—is an essential element of every story. Even the language we use to talk about a story's setting reveals the importance of the story's locale. When we say that "the story takes place in ...," we usually mean that "the story happens in ...." The phrase "takes place," however, implies deeper meanings, particularly the word *takes*, which can mean "requires," as the story requires a place. *The story takes place* also can mean that the story actually takes the place, in the sense of inhabiting it or possessing it. In an essay exploring her heritage, Leslie Marmon Silko (1996) writes about the centrality of place:

Pueblo potters, the creators of petroglyphs and oral narratives, never conceived of removing themselves from the earth and sky. So long as the human consciousness remains *within* the hills, canyons, cliffs, and the plants, clouds, and sky, the term *landscape*, as it has entered the English language, is misleading. "A portion of territory the eye can comprehend in a single view" does not correctly describe the relationship between the human being and his or her surroundings. This assumes the viewer is somehow *outside* or *separate from* the territory he or she surveys. Viewers are as much a part of the landscape as the boulders they stand on (p. 27).

From this perspective, a person's identity is linked with the place where he or she lives and travels. Forces of weather and climate make each place unique and change key factors of living every day. Although it doesn't often cause events in a story, its place influences characters' feelings, decisions, and actions, and thereby is likely to shape the story's direction.

The nature of the place where professional photographer Clarence E. Bisbee came to settle in 1906 had been forming for at least 17 million years. After a meteorite struck the earth,

piercing and fracturing its crust (Fiege, 1999), magma rushed from the mantle to the surface. As the earth's crust slowly moved over this "hot spot," a chain of eruptions created the furrow that later became the Snake River plain that presently extends between mountain ranges from southeastern Oregon across southern Idaho to eastern Wyoming. For millions of years these eruptions occurred, and the wind-borne volcanic ash settled on the plain and formed volcanic soil (Alt & Hyndman, 1995; Hackett & Bonnicksen, 1994). Over the last two to three million years, water came to the Snake River plain through glacial melting and the cataclysmic flooding of Lake Bonneville. "The swirling waters scoured the Snake River canyon and created alcoves, rapids, and a series of magnificent falls" (Fiege, 1999, p. 14. See Figure 1.) As the last Ice Age came to an end, the climate became warmer and drier, and the mountains surrounding the vast plain captured much of the atmospheric moisture. The Snake River Plain became arid, a place with rich volcanic soil, but little precipitation. These conditions, and the presence of the Snake River, which flowed westward out of the Rocky Mountains and across Idaho, motivated the large-scale irrigation projects that began in the last decade of the nineteenth century.



Figure 1: Magnitude Bisbee 551 [Snake River and Shoshone Falls]. Used with Permission of the Twin Falls Public Library

Settlement of the Snake River Plain did not occur until federal legislation made irrigation in the sagebrush deserts of southern Idaho possible. Indeed, overland emigrants on the Oregon Trail (1840-1865) passed through the Snake River Plain as quickly as possible, purposefully

leaving it behind on their way to the well-watered lands of the Willamette Valley in Oregon, or the gold mines of northern California. Oregon Trail travelers and prospective homesteaders gave Idaho's dry terrain little notice except an attention to avoid getting stranded there.

By the 1890s, however, a national irrigation movement and concern in the United States Congress over the vanishing future of the American "frontier" gave way to a series of federal laws that enabled the construction of large-scale irrigation projects. Independent investors had tried to irrigate portions of the Snake River Plain, particularly in the Boise Basin, but had failed to sustain the massive capital investment required for such projects. Under the 1894 Carey Act (also known as the Desert Land Act), named after its sponsor, Wyoming Senator Joseph Carey, participating states could claim up to one million acres of public land if they agreed to establish a state reclamation engineer to oversee irrigation and the creation of canal companies (Idaho State Historical Society, 1971).

Ira B. Perrine's Twin Falls South Side Project became the nation's most successful Carey Act venture (Pisani, 2002). Where other projects failed, Perrine successfully attracted investors who bankrolled the construction of Milner Dam, which in turn provided irrigation water to settlers who purchased Twin Falls project plots. Contemporaries admired the size of the project's main canal, 80 feet wide at the base and 112 feet wide at the surface. Saloons, churches and a grand hotel with crystal chandeliers—the Hotel Perrine—rose from the desert within months of the establishment of the town site. By 1909, nearly six thousand people called Twin Falls home (Pisani, 2002; Link et al., 1998-2002). "The steady growth of population in Idaho has already given the supremacy to those," wrote irrigation booster William Smythe in 1905, "who are trying to put the farm in place of the desert, to develop the best methods of fruit-culture, to bring the irrigation system under rigid public supervision, and to establish the highest standards in political and social life" (Smythe, 1899, 1905, p. 196).

## The Bisbees

Clarence E. Bisbee both participated in the culture of this large-scale irrigation project and documented it. As a settler in Twin Falls after its founding in 1904, Bisbee made his living by photographing the people and activities of the evolving area. He was also a historian, telling the story of this place in a fragmented way through still photographs. Using state-of-the-art technology, he thought of himself as an artist, not as a social scientist. He proclaimed his artistic identity in the inscription he had chiseled in stone above the storefront entrance to his business: "Life and art are one." Bisbee's choice of subject matter and the way he composed his photographs reflected his aesthetic sensibility as well as his personal and business senses. As a witness to transformational events in Twin Falls and its surrounding agricultural communities, Bisbee was uniquely positioned through his personal life and his public record to give us an entryway into the early decades of a large-scale irrigation project in the arid West. Figure 2 shows Milner Dam, which provided irrigation water to many farms in the Twin Falls area. In Figure 3 a new settler viewed the challenge of bare but fertile land that was his homestead. Figure 4 illustrates the fulfillment of irrigation's promise.



Figure 2: Milner Dam Bisbee 645. Used with Permission of the Twin Falls Public Library



Figure 3: The Early Settler, Bisbee 813. Used with Permission of the Twin Falls Public Library



Figure 4: Threshing Schwamb Ranch. Turnipseed Bros. Overseers. Russell Thresher. R.W. Steele Owner. Bisbee 1894. Used with Permission of the Twin Falls Public Library

Bisbee was born in Ponca, Nebraska, in 1875. As a youth he developed an interest in photography and carried around a “little box camera” (Kelker, 1997a, p.1). After engaging in farming as a young man, Bisbee attended and graduated from the Illinois College of Photography at Effingham. Before his graduation, Bisbee met Charles Diehl, the publisher of *Twin Falls News*, who urged him to consider opening a photography business in this promising new agricultural area (Fretwell, 2000). Arriving in Twin Falls in January 1906, Bisbee soon opened a photography studio in a tent on Main Street South, where he had to wash his photographic plates and prints in water carried “from a nearby ditch” (Kelker, 1997a, p.2). Bisbee’s photographic talent was soon recognized by the promoters of this burgeoning agricultural region who hired him to document the success of the irrigated fields and orchards, such as those appearing in the *Twin Falls Country* brochure (Twin Falls Country, [1909]). He also color-tinted his photos to produce postcards of some of the area’s scenic attractions such as Shoshone Falls, the Blue Lakes, and the Lava Terraces in the Snake River Canyon.

Clarence developed a reputation for his photographic work in the surrounding region. In 1910 he married Jessie Robinson of Hastings, Nebraska, who had completed training as a kindergarten and primary teacher at Nebraska State Normal School. According to her teacher, Lou E. Hosmer, “Jessie M. Robinson is one of the most natural and spontaneous teachers ever graduated from my department” (Kelker, 1997b, n.p.). Arriving in Twin Falls, Jessie chose not to pursue her teaching career, but instead became Clarence’s enthusiastic partner in this photographic enterprise. Years later, Jessie remembered in a note, “We used to walk ten miles a day viewing and carrying an 8 x 10 outfit and sometimes a 5 x 7 outfit, too—with all extra plates and camera cloths” (Kelker, 1997d, p.1). They also traveled on

horseback and later in their automobile to photograph farms, towns and new construction sites (see Figures 5 and 6). In 1914 they built a home-studio where they operated their portrait business and shared their free time in front of the fireplace or out in the garden (see Figure 7). In another note she wrote, "Our life partnership has found expression in many delightful common interests. Our business for years absorbed us both. Our recreation the outdoors..." (Kelker, 1997d, p.3). Whether in their backyard, which they called "our park," or taking daytrips to regional landmarks, the Bisbees photographed their excursions. Jessie compiled photo albums in which she captioned or wrote descriptions to document many of the photographs that they took (see Figure 8). To view additional Bisbee photographs, see Appendix B.



Figure 5: Clarence E. Bisbee with Horse and Photographic Gear. Photo 1059 used with Permission of the Twin Falls Public Library





Figure 6: Jessie Robinson Bisbee. Caption on Photo: "One Hill of Potatoes. Grown by J.R. Newton." Photo 169 used with Permission of the Twin Falls Public Library



Figure 7: Bisbee Building Left End. Photo PC-2400 used with Permission of the Twin Falls Public Library



Easter Sunday,  
April 20"-1930  
Here is Bee  
placing the bird  
bath for the first  
time in our park.



Tuesday,  
August 13"-1929  
Bee and  
our tall sunflower.  
The last day he was  
53 years old.

Figure 8: Photos and Captions by Jessie Robinson Bisbee. Photos G1490 and G1476 used with Permission of the Twin Falls Public Library

As other photographers moved to the area and as the need for promotional materials waned, their business focused more on portrait photography, and in the 1920s their financial situation began to deteriorate. When the Depression hit in the thirties, income from their portrait business dried up, and they were forced to sell their home studio and other assets in 1935. A year after the loss of their business, Jessie died, having been in declining health since 1927. Clarence continued to work as a photographer until his death in 1954, but “he never again owned his own photography business” (Fretwell, 2000, p.33). In reflecting on her life with Clarence, Jessie wrote:

We began our life together with not much beside our love, faith in each other, and our high hopes of success. It has been a game—truly enough—a glorious one at times—a fizzling one at times and one of almost unsurmountable [*sic.*] difficulties at other times. But we have played it with our weapons of industry, initiative, courage, enthusiasm, and confidence in ourselves. We have played it honestly and for the most part happily

and with the sweetness of romance blended always with our cherished memories and shining dreams. (Kelker, 1997d, p.3)

## VideoPoetry Projects

The medium of VideoPoetry, through which we're telling the Bisbee story, originated in our conversation (as a poet and a filmmaker) that explored the idea of combining original poetry with video images. To give the narrative poem a context, we decided to precede each VideoPoem with a prose Introduction that provides a linear, historical background of facts. The VideoPoem itself is more personal and impressionistic than the Introduction, evoking the texture of daily life and giving voice to the often untold stories of ordinary people.

Over the last ten years making VideoPoems has evolved into a process. The poet's encounter with a specific place or an historical person inspires a poem that emerges in narrative form, exploring the imagined experiences that may have taken place. A narrative such as this reflects a human desire to make meaning by ordering events and images into a coherent chronology. The narrative poem presents a skeletal structure for the video, but we seek images that do more than merely illustrate the poem. The narrative suggests visual images—sometimes literal, sometimes more atmospheric—that are captured through still photography and videography. In an overall sense we want the visual images and sound effects to evoke an experience in which the action and events of the poem occur.

Our first collaboration, *Mountain Seasons*, consisted of nine VideoPoems that developed a sense of the passing seasons over two years. In subsequent VideoPoems, the poet and filmmaker have collaborated with a historian, and the three of us have explored the environment of the Intermountain West. This high-desert region depends upon irrigation as the basis of its food production and economy. Our current VideoPoetry project attempts to create the sense of what life might have been like at the beginnings of the agricultural experiment around Twin Falls, Idaho, as seen by the Bisbees.

We first encountered Clarence Bisbee's work on a visit to the Twin Falls Public Library and were overwhelmed by the extraordinary quality of his still photographs in the library's archives. Opening the two file cabinets containing his work revealed a multi-faceted world that the Bisbees inhabited and preserved. We found over 1500 8x10-inch black and white photographs, which were mounted on matte board. The pictures were organized by subject matter, such as agriculture, bridges, dams, events, Shoshone Falls, towns (e.g., Jerome, Burley, Hagerman) and the city of Twin Falls. Within these subject dividers the photographs were in no particular order. A white notation in Bisbee's hand appears usually in a bottom corner of the photograph, identifying the photographer, the site, the date and sometimes a more descriptive caption, always written in short rows of capital letters:

- "J.B. VAN WEGENER RANCH, 6 MI. SE of JEROME, IDAHO. 4 MONTHS FROM SAGE BRUSH. BISBEE PHOTO 197"
- "THE FIRST YEAR OF HEAVY BEARING. G.A. LINCOLN'S 5 YEAR OLD ORCHARD 5 1/2 M. S.W. OF TWIN FALLS, IDAHO. BISBEE 611"
- "FIRST LOAD OF CORN MARKETING IN TWIN FALLS CITY, BY THOMAS WOODS. BISBEE PHOTO 288"
- "PAVING MIXER FOR THE 4 MILES OF BITULITHIC PAVING LAID IN TWIN FALLS IN 1910-11. BISBEE-569"

- “THE MYSTICAL RIVER. BISBEE 585”
- “FIRST PASSENGER TRAIN. BARRYMORE, IDAHO. AUGUST 9, 1911 BISBEE PHOTO B-29.”

What we observed then was a collection of high-quality individual shots, precise and evocative images ranging in subject matter and scope from wide-angle landscapes to individual portraits to school pageants. In reflecting on the collection of pictures, we wondered about the stories that had connected them. We had only diachronic slices of Bisbee’s experience—a fragmented view of his world. We wanted a more coherent sense of what Bisbee’s life and the Twin Falls area were like over the years. Thus, we embarked upon the VideoPoetry project to understand his life in this region by selecting and ordering images that represented the start of Bisbee’s work in a new settlement through the changes over the next thirty years.

Whereas one of our impulses had been to make sense of this collection, another was to share it with others who might find it equally fascinating. Conserved in a secure room of the library, Bisbee’s impressive collection was not readily available to the public at large. We were fortunate to be among the relatively few people who had travelled to Twin Falls to view this collection. Over the last ten years the library staff has taken on projects to bring Bisbee’s work out to public view. Cecil Wright, a staff member, digitized the Bisbee prints so that library patrons can view the photographs on a computer screen without damaging them. A local print shop, Blip Printers, restored Bisbee photographs and created ten-foot tall high-resolution images that now wrap around the stone pillars supporting the main room of the Twin Falls Public Library. Passing through the front doors, a visitor glances left and sees a mural made from a street scene of early Twin Falls that Bisbee photographed. We hope to extend the availability of Bisbee’s work beyond these library walls.

## Two VideoPoems about the Bisbees

From our encounter with these images, two VideoPoems have emerged, the first about Clarence E. Bisbee and the second about Jessie Robinson Bisbee. Clarence Bisbee’s work intertwined his commercial instinct with curiosity and passion for the striking features of the Snake River Plain and surrounding mountains. For example, his photograph of the Twin Falls on the Snake River appeared as the cover art of a 64-page promotional brochure, *Twin Falls Country* (Twin Falls Country, [1909]). This color-tinted photograph captures the roiling energy of the cascades and the expansive desert plain in the background. The photograph draws the viewer into the scene in the same way that the land and railroad companies wished to draw new settlers to the area.

What struck the poet was Bisbee’s view that “Life and art are one,” which became the first line of the poem. In composing the poem, the poet drew on a series of images related to Clarence’s work, such as a farmer grubbing sagebrush, a family dressed in their Sunday best in their apple orchard, and alfalfa farmers pitching hay. The poet also explored the closeness of the Bisbees’ companionship. The joyful spirit of their relationship suffuses the images of their studio, house and backyard garden, all located on the same premises. This energy infuses the mood of the resulting poem, “Clarence E. Bisbee” (see the Appendix A).

Viewing the collection of Bisbee’s photographs affected the way that the poet wrote the poem and the way the video was produced. The first process was circular: The poet viewed the photographs, then found a verbal expression to represent them, and later, we inserted a

digital copy of these same photographs into the VideoPoem's timeline. For example, the poem's fourth stanza presents a sampling of Bisbee's agricultural photos that were used to promote the Magic Valley:

Prize-winning apples, threshing wheat, piled alfalfa bales,  
Rows of russets bulging below the baked surface—  
Your mind reveals the valley's bounty. (Appendix A)

A second and more complex composing process was inspired by biographical information in addition to Bisbee's photographs. For example, reading about the Bisbees' close relationship and viewing the way that Clarence posed and photographed Jessie led the poet to imagine the spirit that held them together. What came to the poet then were expressions of what he imagined that Clarence felt while he was photographing Jessie, as revealed in stanza six:

When you pose her by the garden pond  
And once more by her portrait on the wall  
She catches your breath as your lens shutters. (Appendix A)

In this second process, then, the poet uses print information as well as the photos to imagine the interior world of historical figures. This process culminates with our looking for the most appropriate visual images to correspond with the text of the poem. Sometimes we find a photograph that literally illustrates the poetic line. In other instances, however, we discover an image that suggests the mood that the poetry generates. For example, we had to locate photographs of Jessie Bisbee that showed her in an introspective moment that corresponds to the foreshadowing in the poem's seventh stanza:

What your camera doesn't record will come unbidden  
Like suffering to the Old Masters' art: Jessie's sickness,  
The Depression, selling your studio, farming fish. (Appendix A)

From the sparse information available on the lives of the Bisbees, we selected the most salient facts to include in the Introduction to each VideoPoem. We chose to emphasize Clarence as a professional photographer whose work served his own portrait business purposes and the promotional efforts of the agricultural community. But he was also an artist, who revealed the natural beauty of the Snake River's canyon and plain as well as the aesthetic aspects of everyday human activity such as farmers tilling soil and harvesting crops, engineers and laborers constructing dams and canals, and settlers building homes, towns and the city of Twin Falls. Considering Jessie's life, we had to infer more about her than about Clarence because, as Kelker notes, "little has been written about Jessie Robinson Bisbee," especially prior to her arrival in Twin Falls (Kelker, 1997d, p.1). For this reason we emphasized her preparation as a teacher, her central role as Clarence's inspiration and business partner, and her documentation of their lives in her journal writing and photographic albums.

Our decisions about what to include in the Introductions were also based on the photographs available to illustrate the context of their work and their lives together. In addition we wanted the Introductions to provide a framework for the vignette-like stanzas of the poem that are presented with minimal references to the passage of time.

The next phase of the project was to identify readers to do the voice-overs for the poems and the introductions and then to record them. These soundtracks then became the basis of the video timelines during the editing stage of the project.

Through the process of video editing, these VideoPoems emerged in a sequence of visual images with the spoken word as the soundtracks. Almost all of the images are Bisbee photographs. During the post-production process, we cropped some images and introduced some movement within the frames both to add visual variety and to direct the viewers' gaze to important elements. Now, with the completion of these VideoPoems, we can bring out for public viewing a portion of the Bisbee collection that had been hidden from view. We hope and intend that this multi-disciplinary project will appeal to people of varied backgrounds, ages and interests.

## Public History

VideoPoetry is a form of public scholarship. We plan to make available the Bisbee VideoPoetry Project to schools in Southern Idaho and to include it in a traveling exhibition on the culture of the early irrigation communities in the Intermountain West. The dissemination of scholarship and research to audiences outside of the academy, including archives, museums, public media, cinema, and documentaries, has created a sub-discipline within History—Public History—with its own conferences and journals, of which the national Council on Public History and the journal *Public Historian* are the best known. Public history and public engagement with non-academic audiences is especially important now. Mainstream media outlets have argued that budget cuts, emphasis on federal funding rates, and charges of irrelevance have degraded the role of the arts and humanities on many university campuses (Merrill & Kerber, 2010). The number of graduates, moreover, in humanities fields has declined. Eight percent of bachelor's degrees in the United States were awarded in the humanities in 2004, compared to nearly eighteen percent during the late 1960s (Conn, 2010). Recession-related reductions in state funding have disproportionately impacted university humanities departments, where the majority of funding comes either in state appropriations (40-45%) or from tuition (Merrill & Kerber, 2010). Access to federal grants is significantly limited in the humanities, particularly in comparison to the sciences. Recent increases under the Obama Administration in federal funding expanded the National Science Foundation's funding pool, but not that of the National Endowment for the Humanities. President Obama requested \$161.3 million in fiscal year (FY) 2011 funding for the National Endowment for the Humanities, an overall decrease of \$6.2 million (4.0%) from the FY 2010 enacted level of \$167.5 million, while the White House requested an 8% increase (\$552 million for just the increase) for the National Science Foundation (Mervis, 2010; National Humanities Alliance, 2010).

While there is no broad agreement on the causes or solutions for the changes impacting the humanities in higher education, it is clear that audiences outside of the academy support humanities programming, if they have access to such events. And there is no doubt that the humanities matter, not just in the abstract, but in the applied social and political arenas. Public scholarship and scholarship of engagement are essential to the preservation of humanities in higher education. As historians Christopher Merrill and Linda K. Kerber have recently written, "The humanities teach students to think critically, creatively, and courageously—to evaluate arguments not only [for] their merits but for their moral and philosophical import"

(2010). VideoPoetry offers a dissemination method that engages students and non-academic audiences. In this way, humanities research and aesthetic expression combine to serve the public by enriching people's sense of how their history forms the foundation for understanding present-day realities.

## Conclusion

As a photographer at the turn of the twentieth century, Clarence E. Bisbee used the best technology then available to reach both local and distant publics with informative images of the newly irrigated lands in the Twin Falls area of Idaho. He and Jessie witnessed and recorded local events, such as high-school graduations, parades, and other cultural events, and his photos appeared in the Twin Falls newspapers. Through such documents as promotional brochures and postcards, Bisbee's photographs showed potential settlers living in the East and Midwest a vision of a productive life that could be obtained and the natural beauty that could be experienced in the New West. His images conveyed the achievements of massive public works, the agricultural and commercial accomplishments of private individuals, and the rhythms, textures, and struggles of everyday life. With the passage of time, his work became a form of public history, though it was presented in fragments as still photographs hanging on library walls. For decades, however, much of this historical archive remained hidden from public view in steel file cabinets.

A hundred years later, the struggle to wrest a garden from the desert may be hidden behind the bountiful produce of the Magic Valley and the urbanization of southern Idaho. With the influx of new residents to Idaho and the passage of generations of native Idahoans, we've forgotten this early struggle and transformation. We've come to take for granted the benefits of the large-scale irrigation system. But commercial success and growth have brought their own new challenges as cities and agriculture increasingly compete for limited resources, especially water. Making that history vivid in the minds of the public could be a crucial step towards grounding discussions about the long-term future of this region of Idaho. By using narrative prose and poetry to present Bisbee's extraordinary photos, VideoPoetry attempts to engage the people living in southern Idaho with the historical context of their lives.

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## Appendix A

### CLARENCE E. BISBEE

By James Armstrong

"Life and Art are One"—

Chiseled over your Twin Falls storefront  
Your studio, your livelihood, your vision.

Looking through the Kodak's viewfinder  
You see an apex where tree rows converge,  
A wide-angled isosceles apple orchard.

You compose ranches, fields, and towns  
Newly sprung from irrigation's wand,  
Your photos in brochures gleam like melons.

Prize-winning apples, threshing wheat, piled alfalfa bales,  
Rows of russets bulging below the baked surface—  
Your mind reveals the valley's bounty.

On time off from land-company contracts—  
You and Jessie lug camera and glass plates here and there,  
To shining Blue Lakes and phantom canyon walls.

When you pose her by the garden pond  
And once more by her portrait on the wall  
She catches your breath as your lens shutters.

What your camera doesn't record will come unbidden  
Like suffering to the Old Masters' art: Jessie's sickness,  
The Depression, selling your studio, farming fish.

Decades dim in the distance, but your art kindles essences:  
The solitary homesteader waiting for water,  
The unrelenting river carving its canyon.

### **JESSIE ROBINSON BISBEE**

**By James Armstrong**

"A natural and spontaneous teacher" wrote Lou E. Hosmer  
From Nebraska's State Normal School. Children come up to you  
Even if you haven't taught a class in Twin Falls.

You remember your first outdoor dinner with friends  
Where the man you'd just met made you the only extra cup of coffee.  
24 years on, you recreate the menu at Camp Silver Spray.

You learn to see him through his camera's eye—  
Eager photographer who meets the public  
An artist in his studio's darkroom, at home with business.

You learn each day how to assist him  
Carrying the box to a photo site—  
A new ditch for business, Balanced Rock for beauty.

His help-mate in the kitchen, everywhere his muse—  
In formal dress with flowers, or seated by a dirt road,  
Or in a rocky canyon—yet home together is the best.

You sit for each other by the window in special light,  
Make companion photos at a desert waterfall, in oval portraits,  
In front of the church where you married 16 years earlier.

After you take photos of him in the garden  
You write his name, “Bee,” and document the date—  
Jessie the incessant writer, turning photos into albums.

Sitting for him at Boulder-Bound Lake, again by Sunset Lawn pool  
Your gaze into the water suggests reflection  
Your journals revealing the peace that water brings.

## Appendix B



“Four Year Old Orchard, Sudweek’s Ranch, 1 mi. S.E. of Kimberly, Idaho.” Photo 10 used with Permission of the Twin Falls Public Library



“The Fair 1910.” The town of Buhl’s Agricultural Exhibit. Photo 304 used with Permission of the Twin Falls Public Library



Clarence Standing in front of the Bisbee Studio. Photo g1493 used with Permission of the Twin Falls Public Library



Jessie Seated at Bisbee Garden Pool. Photo g1580 used with Permission of the Twin Falls Public Library



The Bisbees in their Backyard Park, Circa 1930. Photo G1471 used with Permission of the Twin Falls Public Library



Clarence and Jessie before the Fire. Inscription above the Fireplace: "God's in His Heaven—All's Right with the World." Photo gb73 used with Permission of the Twin Falls Public Library

## About the Authors

### *Dr. Peter Lutze*

Peter Lutze grew up in Oklahoma where his father served as pastor to black parishes. After graduating from Valparaiso University, he obtained an M.F.A. in Filmmaking at Brandeis University and a J.D. at the University of Wisconsin, where he also completed his doctoral dissertation on the German film director and social theorist, Alexander Kluge. Since 1990 he has taught at Boise State University, where he has also served as Director of University Television Productions. He was a founder and served for several years as Chair of Treasure Valley Public Access Television. He has produced numerous films and videos.

### *Dr. James Armstrong*

Dr. James Armstrong has been a professor at Boise State University since 1992 where he has taught courses in reading education as well as reading and study strategies. As an undergraduate at Stanford University, he majored in English and completed the Honors Program in Humanities. He went on there to receive his master's degree in education with a California teaching credential in English. He received his doctorate in reading education from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He has written two textbooks, *Reading Tools for College Study* and *Patterns and Connections*, and two books of poetry, *Landscapes of Epiphany* and *Moon Haiku*. He enjoys reading, writing, bicycling, running, golf, and photography.

### *Dr. Laura Woodworth-Ney*

Laura Woodworth-Ney is an associate professor and Chair of the Department of History at Idaho State University. Dr. Woodworth-Ney is also co-founding editor of *Idaho Landscapes*, the state history magazine of Idaho, and the author of *Women in the American West (ABC-CLIO, 2008)* and *Mapping Identity: The Creation of the Coeur d'Alene Indian Reservation, 1805-1902* (University Press of Colorado, 2004).