

God and Reclamation

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Farmers waited decades for water.

by Roy Cuellar

“HAVE FAITH IN GOD AND U.S. RECLAMATION” said the prophecy painted on plywood. A famous photograph from 1940 shows the sign standing on double stilts in a barren west of Caldwell. “Desert Ranch,” the photo was called (see next page). Government photographer Walter Lubken posed a farm couple next to the sign, their faces stern and determined. The man wears a laborer’s cap and canvas coveralls. The woman wears a farm wife’s print-cotton dress. Tethered horses flank a Ford Model A amid a scattering of farm equipment. Beyond is the gray desolation of croplands withered by drought on empty canals.

Lubken’s “Desert Ranch,” widely reprinted, left a portrait that farmers in Canyon County might find hard to fathom today. Sold to the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, reprinted in government pamphlets, the photograph seemed to suggest hope in the face of hardship. It spoke for a place in time when farmers trusted the government’s science, when God was equated with progress and the Feds were His earthly agents. It pictured a West still gripped by the Great Depression yet in the midst of a grand transformation. A parable, an allegory, it framed the distance between independence and the farmer’s dependence on projects that flowed federal dollars to drought-stricken lands.

Dashed Expectations

Colorized postcards with nymphs and goddesses sold arid land for the Union Pacific as farmers rushed the Boise Valley on the eve of Arrowrock Dam. A postcard from 1912 showed Miss Idaho, the angelic queen of Idaho’s harvest. Posed in a fruited crown surrounded by a bounty of Idaho products, she beckoned with natural wonders, with food and fleece and forests and mineral wealth.

Federal dollars for irrigation sustained that promise in Canyon County. On the Boise and Payette rivers—at Lake Lowell in 1908, Diversion in 1909, Arrowrock in 1915, and Black Canyon in 1925—the U.S. Reclamation Service invested more than 400 million inflation-adjusted dollars in one of the world’s most remarkable networks of dams and canals. Vast enough to reclaim 300,000 acres, the Boise-Payette Project



watered tens of thousands of homesteads. Its farm economy thrived on soaring demand for wheat and potatoes during the Great War in Europe, 1914 to 1918. But peace in Europe crashed agricultural prices. By 1920, Miss Ida-ho's promise had soured.



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Arrowrock Dam, completed in 1915

Depression and drought in Canyon County predated the stock market crash on Wall Street by a hellish decade of dislocation. Arrowrock Dam, an engineering sensation, spilled water though leaky canals with structural failures. Lake Lowell at Deer Flat seeped and silted and clogged with filament algae. Promoters had water for as little as \$25 per acre. Farmers paid triple that cost. Congressional investigators in 1924 were shocked to find Idahoans threadbare on shanty farms without plumbing or electricity. Housing on the Boise Project was said to be “far below the ordinarily accepted standards.” Everywhere below federal dams were “shacks instead of houses... bareness instead of comforts; cold instead of warmth... mortgages and foreclosures instead of growing bank accounts; sullen hopelessness instead of genial courage.” Congress responded. Reinvesting in reclamation, it upgraded the “service” to “bureau” and adopted a more generous fee-based loan repayment system. Five percent of a farm’s crop yield became

the most farmers were required to pay to irrigate from federal projects. As commodity markets rose and fell, so did the cost of water.

But the reforms of the 1920s did little to tarnish the myth that prosperity would follow the plow, that new projects in the Boise Valley would eventually cover the cost of construction, that the problem of the Boise Project was too little acreage and too few dams. Bank-financed speculation floated that bombast until suddenly it was too late. In 1932, a year of comeuppance, 1,145 Idahoans lost farms to mortgage foreclosures. Wheat prices dropped to 26 cents per bushel. Sheep dropped to a century low of \$2.25 per head. Boise Valley prunes had sold for \$22 per ton in harvest before the collapse on Wall Street. In 1932 the prune market crashed from \$22 to \$6.50 per ton. Sugar beets lost three-fourths of their value, sinking to \$4 per ton. Wool prices tumbled from \$72 to \$18 per ton.

From 1929 to 1932, in aggregate, Idaho's farm revenue fell from \$116 million to \$41 million. Wages and salaries fell from \$139 million to \$81 million. Statewide annual per capita income dropped by half, falling from \$529 to \$268. The blow was violent enough to topple most Republicans from elected office. Governor C. Ben Ross of Parma—elected as a Democrat in 1930, reelected in 1932 and 1934—supported the New Deal of President Franklin D. Roosevelt with its emphasis on western water projects. Canyon County's First Congressional District also went Democratic with Caldwell native Thomas C. Coffin.

The lone Republican from the Boise Valley was Senator William E. Borah. But Borah's colleague in the U.S. Senate was a Democrat as stalwart as any in the era of FDR. Senator James P. Pope of Boise, elected in 1932, became a leader of the Democratic crusade to replace breadlines with work camps. Between 1933 and 1939, Pope and Congress appropriated \$300 per Idahoan—a total of \$111,804,931. California, by comparison, received \$266 per capita. The State of New York received even less. Out of all 48 states, Idaho ranked eighth in per capita expenditures.

Treasury dollars streamed west through dozens of work relief New Deal programs. The Civilian Conservation Corps

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Sheep ranchers took a double economic hit when per head and wool prices plummeted.

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President Franklin D. Roosevelt asks the nation for their continued support for the New Deal.

and the U.S. Bureau of Land Management employed thousands of displaced workers. FDR's Works Progress Administration (WPA) funded more than 500 Idaho projects. Canyon County's WPA served hot lunches, surfaced roads, repaired schools, eradicated weeds, and fought cricket infestations. Canyon County's reclamation funding included \$1.6 million to improve dams and canals.



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Grass to Dust

Dry sandy soil made farming impossible.

Irrigation, then as now, was mostly snowmelt in Canyon County. For grain, hay, and alfalfa, a year of flood irrigation required 2.5 acre-feet. Vegetables, sugar beets, and potatoes demanded additional late season irrigation. From 1924 to 1938, as farmers added these crops, a water shortage developed. Wind and erosion swept the valley. Idaho storms of drought-stricken soil rivaled the infamous dust bowl that drove the farmers from the Great Plains.

Ditch rider Donald B. Mutch worked for the Reclamation Bureau during years so arid that no water could be released from Lake Lowell. Mutch, in the 1920s, had patrolled canals south of Kuna on horseback. Saddlebags carried padlocks to secure vandalized head gates and a gauge to measure the water



Wind erosion covered the remains of an unsuccessful farm in Idaho.



Farmer tilling dry land

rushing through weirs. Kuna ditches lured snakes, mice, and gophers. One season on the Mora Canal the ditch rider killed 13 rattlers. Water theft was common, but the telephones to report it were scarce. “You had to go to some farm that had a telephone or to the government phone,” Mutch remembered. “There was only one on my ride.”

Mutch endured some of the driest weather on record. From 1929 to 1934, Canyon County’s rainfall was 65% of normal. In 1934, the heaviest rain measured less than a tenth of an inch. Blinding dust suspended air travel. Governor Ross spent Sundays at prayer vigils, pleading for moisture. From late June through the end of August 1934, eight weeks of murderous heat brought no measurable rainfall. At last, on the last Wednesday in August, the *Idaho Statesman* forecasted the hope that a storm might douse the valley. But the storm rained dry sticks and dust. “Governor Ross Drought Relief,” the paper derisively called it.

New Dealers responded in 1935 with the founding of the U.S. Conservation Service. Idaho Soil and Water Conservation,



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an office in the Idaho Department of Lands, followed in 1939. Depression-era reports show that 27 million Idaho acres had serious erosion problems. In Oneida County, for example, where ranchers ran cattle and sheep near Utah, FDR's Resettlement Administration purchased 140,000 acres to relocate 75 families. Another 9,000 Idaho farmers received loans and conservation assistance via the Farm Security Administration. Historian Leonard Arrington estimated that the New Deal programs sustained Idahoans with \$39 million in emergency relief and \$50 million in low-interest loans.

Desert Ranch

Water, more than the soil, preoccupied Canyon County during the cruelest years of the regional drought. More water meant agrarian votes for New Deal stalwarts such as Senator James P. Pope. On April 24, 1934, the *Statesman* reported success in the senator's negotiations for \$1 million for reclamation improvements in Gem and Canyon counties. Pope called the project "a long step toward permanent prosperity."

Water was hauled 5 miles in oil drums and cans for families enduring the drought.



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Senator James P. Pope

On the Snake River Plain and elsewhere lay “millions of acres of unreclaimed land on which nothing of value is produced, but on which abundant crops could be grown.”

Among those cheering the loudest were farmers in the sagebrush barrens that came to be called the Black Canyon Irrigation District. Desolate and impoverished, it stretched from the Payette River to the Boise River like a steppe triangle of busted dreams and financial mishaps. Farmers since the



Herbert and Sadie Mersdorf had come to the end of a losing battle against the choking drought when the Resettlement Administration came to their aid with a rehabilitation loan.

1920s had relied on a low concrete dam on the Payette near Emmett. The dam fed canals running south and west toward the farm colonies at Notus and New Plymouth. But the shallow Payette had little storage capacity, and the flow had not been enough to justify regular maintenance. The Bureau of Reclamation responded with pumping stations that lifted water from the Payette River. One beneficiary was Desert Ranch, west of Caldwell. It was there where the Notus Canal crossed the Old Oregon Highway that photographer Walter Lubken found Herbert and Sadie Mersdorf. Posing with the sign

proclaiming their faith in God and Reclamation, the Mersdorfs became a cultural symbol. Some said their sign was proof that Idahoans were grateful to Congress. Others said the Mersdorfs were sarcastic and rueful because the flow from the Payette River, long anticipated, had not flowed fast enough.

The story behind the story was that the homesteaders who had cleared the sagebrush were seldom the farmers with the resources to prosper. Land speculators who purchased the farms in foreclosures were the johnny-come-latelies who prospered the most. Herbert James Mersdorf, born in Michigan, had been a Meridian school superintendent before moving to Notus. Sadie hailed from Missouri. Shrewdly, they had waited for Senator Pope and Congress before investing in Canyon County. Faith in God, they well understood, was glorious but not enough to make hay from desert farming; government was essential as well.



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