



Idaho State Historical Society

Sisters of J.R. Field in his orchard in 1914. The Field farm is located at the bottom of Freezeout Hill near the present day Sanders Fruit Ranch.

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Once there were

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TREES

by Don Cutbirth

There was a time when a family would drive to Emmett in the spring-time just to see the fruit blossoms. It was a breathtaking sight of pink and white flowering trees. Along with their lush beauty, trees in bloom exude a sense of hope in us. The blooms somehow promise that, through their new beginning, our world will be made anew. In some way our spirits are lifted in trouble-free, childlike joy by the delightful spectacle of blossoms skirting the Emmett Valley to the distant horizon. Today the landscape of the Emmett Valley is different. The drive on State Highway 16 to the rim of Freezeout Hill and down its steep slope reveals an impressive view. But it is a different view now. After more than 30 years of change, most of the fruit trees that once defined the valley below are gone. Emmett was once called the "Valley of Plenty" due to its rich soil and access to water. What was an agrarian community has become a suburban community of commuters. More than 50 percent of the Emmett households earn their

78 growing closer

living by working in the Boise-Meridian, Nampa-Caldwell, or Payette-Ontario areas. So, what happened to the fruit trees?

The early settlers to the Emmett Valley found the moderate climate and soil conditions ideal for growing fruit, which was used to supplement the family's diet. Surplus crops were sold to miners who craved fresh fruit and produce. With the extension of the railroad to Nampa and beyond, land developers started to advertise the valley's potential as far east as New York. By the 1890s, imaginative land developers realized that the valley's irrigation systems, then in their infancy, could open more sagebrush land to development, including fruit orchards. During those early years, real estate advertisements enticed many people who had the wealth and the strength of will to follow their dreams to Emmett. For many years the valley bloomed as farmers planted huge tracts of fruit trees that flourished for the next 80 years. Then the landscape began to change. Amendments to the Clean Air Act during the 1970s brought about major changes in the fruit orchard business. Farmers traditionally heated their orchards during the cold spring nights by burning fuel oil in rudimentary stoves called smudge pots. When these devices were not available, growers sometimes openly burned old automobile tires or coal in their orchards. This heating process raised the ambient temperatures and held back the damaging effects of the frost during the early morning hours until the sun came up to heat the valley. Smudging was an expensive operation. In some years, the costs of fuel oil and additional labor consumed the farmer's profits.

Air quality suffered whenever smudging took place. The smudge pots consumed thousands of gallons of oil, creating a huge oily black cloud of smoke that hung over the valley, especially in the early morning hours. But changes in the Clean Air Act put an end to smudging. After the practice was prohibited in the 1970s, orchard production, particularly in the lower, more frost-prone areas, became unreliable and economically unsustainable. Growers were forced to find alternative uses for their land. A common solution was to convert their property to other crops or pasture for livestock. Following the 1970s, some landowners found it advantageous to sell off portions of their property to housing developers. Out-of-state competition from Washington and other fruit producing areas had reduced the profitability for Emmett's orchardists. Changes in the produce distribution systems, which relied upon eastern buyers and brokers, reduced demand for Emmett's prune and plum producers.

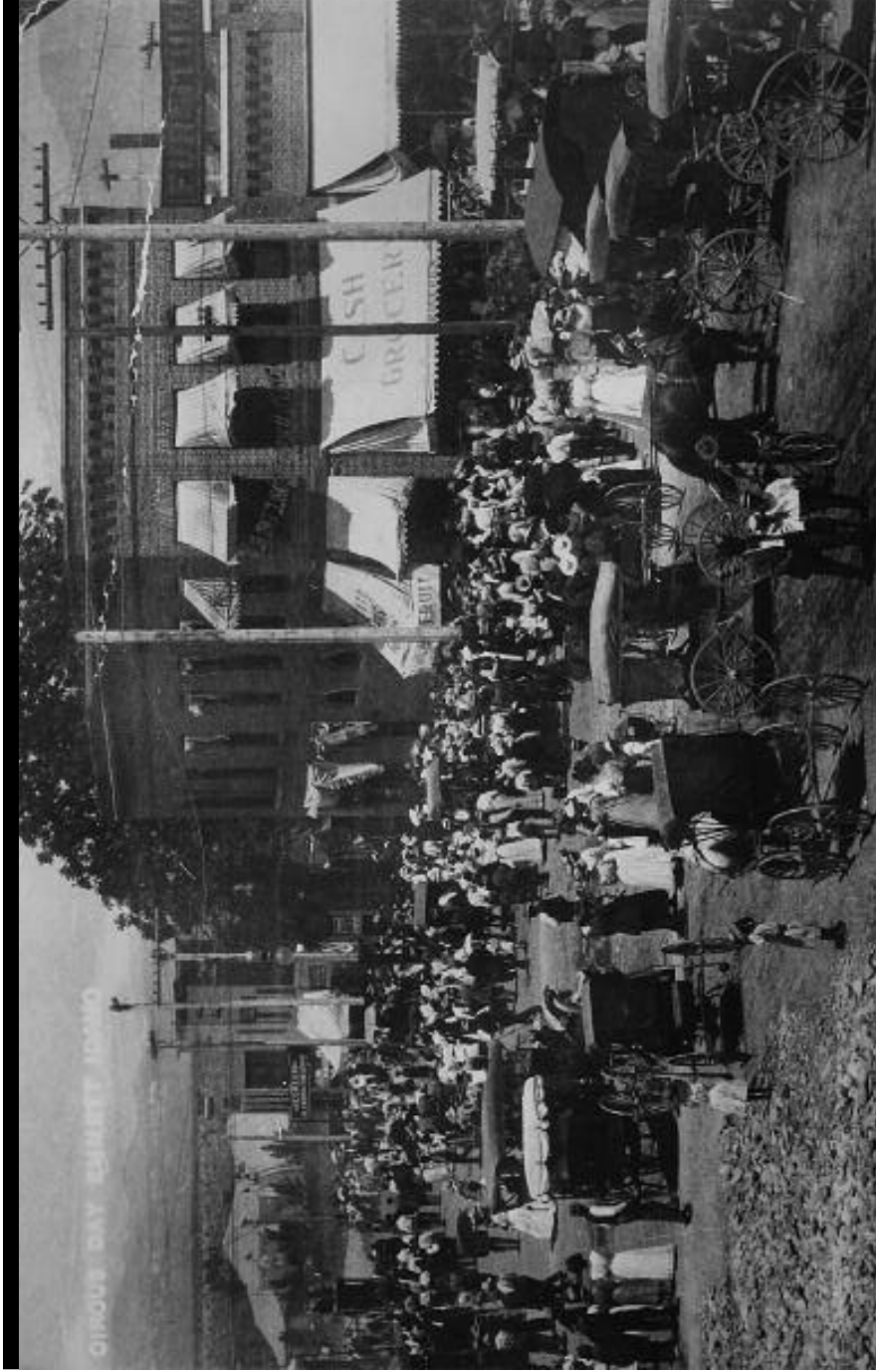
Another economic incentive enticing Emmett farmers to sell their land for development has been the growing real estate market, along with the increasing number of people who want to live there. Gradually, much of

Gem County's farm and ranch land has been converted to residential property for a commuter population who works outside the county. In some cases, land that once produced fruit has gone idle, been seeded to pasture or reverted back to desert while waiting for a developer's offer to buy it. Emmett Valley's population has increased over the past 40 years. Much of this growth can be attributed to the development of new subdivisions and individual houses on rural acreages. The force driving this development relates both to economic concerns and to quality of life issues. People who work for employers in Boise or other nearby cities find that housing costs in the Emmett area are lower than those closer to their work. Those savings offset the costs of commuting to work. The quality of life and small-town atmosphere found in areas like Emmett have attracted many families. There is a perception that the community offers a wholesome country life. Parents see it as a good place to raise their children. Retired folks see it as a place to live out their years for the same reasons.

The story of the Emmett Valley is one of hope and opportunity. Beginning with the early settlers irrigating desert land and developing fruit orchards, to the commuter community of today, people have worked for a better life. Many of the orchards are gone and have been replaced by houses, asphalt and concrete. Bringing the trees back is no longer an option. The springtime flowering orchards that once awakened our optimism for life anew are a fading memory.

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Don Cutbirth, an Emmett native, earned a BBA in finance from Boise State University in 1974 and a master's of divinity from Southern Methodist in 2001. He has completed coursework for an MS in instructional & performance technology and plans to earn a certificate in conflict management.



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Founded in 1883, platted in 1900, Emmett emerged as a way station between Boise and Baker City. Electricity and irrigation began to transform the valley after 1907. Pictured: Emmett Main street with buggies and automobiles on "Circus Day," 1910.



Fruit canning plant on the George Hall orchard near Emmett, 1914. The plant could produce 5,000 cans in a day.



HABS/Library of Congress

Plowman Sawmill above Emmett on the north bank of the Payette River. Built in 1896, the mill recalls an era of logging and mining that predated irrigated agriculture.



Works Progress Administration photographer Russell Lee contrasted the lushness of orchards in Emmett with the barren cut through Freezeout Hill, 1941



Cherry orchards beneath Emmett's Valley of Plenty, from a study by Russell Lee of the Works Progress Administration, 1941.



Subdivisions pave over farmland in the Valley of Plenty between Squaw Butte and Freezeout Hill, 2008.

Phydeaux460/Flickr



Library of Congress

Young farmer with tractor, Gem County, from a study of New Deal farming cooperatives by Dorothea Lange, 1939.



picturelinda/Flickr

Russell Lee reported that southern Idaho exported some 200 carloads of black cherries in 1941. Pictured: cherry orchard.



Paul Wicks/Flickr

Emmett's smudge pots were an import from the orange groves of Southern California after a bad freeze in January 1913. Federal regulations phased out Idaho smudging after the passage of the 1970 Clean Air Act amendments.



Jimmy Emerson/Flickr

Brick storefronts on Emmett's Main Street recall the heyday of the Valley of Plenty. From 1920 to 1939, after fire destroyed the courthouse, the building held the assessor's office.