Complexity in a Ditch

Bringing Water to the Idaho Desert

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HUGH T. LOVIN

INTRODUCTION BY

ADAM M. SOWARDS

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On the cover: Cottonwood flume south of Kimberly, Idaho (Milner Dam & Main Canal: Twin Falls Canal Company). *Bisbee Photo*, *William H. Eaton photographer*, *date unknown. Library of Congress 059465; original print located in the Twin Falls Library.*

Dedication

To Ida Carolyn Lovin, Hugh Lovin's wife of 58 years.

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Publisher's Preface

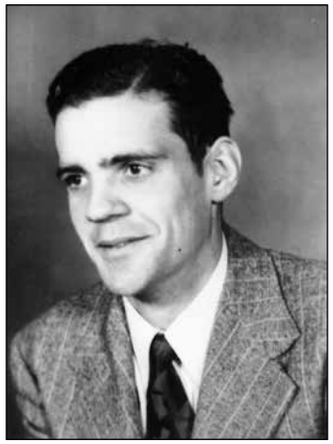
In 1998, historian Hugh T. Lovin, recently retired from Boise State University, submitted a manuscript for consideration to WSU Press. Working with then-editor Keith Petersen—who would later become Idaho's State Historian—Lovin proposed gathering a collection of his articles on water in Idaho into a book he tentatively titled "The Irrigation West's Dreamers, Schemers, and Doers at the Snake River Plain." For myriad reasons—staff changes, the passage of time—the project never came to fruition.

Fast forward sixteen years to 2014, when WSU Press editor-in-chief Robert Clark received a phone call from Jeffrey Lovin, MD, who had found in his father's records a copy of the original proposal and was interested in resurrecting the project as a gift and tribute to his aging dad. Within a few days, Judy Austin received a call from Jeff, and quickly leapt on the case, tracking down copies of Hugh's articles, including those on which she worked with him as editor of *Idaho Yesterdays*. She generously shared with us her time, her knowledge of Hugh and his work, and her knowledge and understanding of Idaho history and the critical role of water in the Idaho story.

Early enthusiasm from Mark Fiege and Keith Petersen for Hugh Lovin's work, and incisive, eloquent reviews of the manuscript by Laura Woodworth-Ney and Adam M. Sowards, confirmed the value of the project. When Adam agreed to write an introduction placing the work in the larger context of water in the West, the project was fast-tracked for approval by the WSU Press editorial board.

Our sincere thanks to the following for their permission to reprint Hugh Lovin's articles: the Idaho State Historical Society for articles from *Idaho Yesterdays*; the *Journal of the Southwest* for articles in *Arizona and the West*; and *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* and *Agricultural History*.
 Our hope is that a new generation of scholars will benefit from the deep and meticulous work of Hugh T. Lovin.

Foreword



Hugh T. Lovin in the 1970s.
Courtesy Jeffrey Lovin

Hugh Lovin (1928–2014) grew up on a farm in southeast Idaho—a farm watered by irrigation, the only possible way to raise most crops on southern Idaho's arid land. The system used on his family's farm was created by the community of Marsh Creek farmers themselves, who built dams on the creek and channels to their farms. Lovin did not stay on the farm; he did his undergraduate work at Idaho State College (now University) in Pocatello, a master's at Washington State University (1956), and—while serving as an instructor in history at the University of Alaska's military branch at Elmendorf Air Force Base—his PhD in history at the University of Washington. In 1965 he returned to Idaho to join the history department at Boise State, where he taught into the mid-1990s.

Lovin did not begin writing about irrigation until 1978. His doctoral dissertation was on the Spanish Civil War, and his initial published research was on politics and labor. Not politics in general, politics to the left and, if you will, the anti-left: the farmer-labor movement, the IWW, the Red Scare and vigilantism during World War I, the Progressive movement, the Nonpartisan League. Most but not all of this work was on Idaho events; two were on Lyndon Johnson and the Subversive Activities Control Board, some on other states' experience, some more general.

The articles that Lovin wrote for the Idaho State Historical Society's journal, *Idaho Yesterdays* (which I edited from 1967 to 2002), and other journals were admirably researched and written, scholarly in the best sense of the word. And they are about people,

not just about beliefs and tensions. In other words, they are accessible not only to fellow historians but to the general reader as well. I've always assumed that they reflect some of his own views, but we never talked politics in the years that I had the pleasure of working with him.

When Lovin began writing about irrigation (and, sometimes, irrigation politics), he again focused on people's experiences. Much of his work is about projects under the Carey Act, the 1894 law that established a complicated relationship among the federal government, states, private developers, and settlers. Lovin wrote about failures as well as successes, and he was intrigued by some of the quirkier examples of Carey Act projects. Politics and ideology are not the point here, though in some cases they may be a part of the story. Lovin wrote more generally about irrigation as well, including the opening chapter in this volume, "Dreamers, Schemers, and Doers of Idaho Irrigation." His essays are among the best work on a critical subject in Idaho history that needs much more scholarly treatment, making this collection especially valuable.

Lovin's two streams of research—on the development (and non-development) of irrigation projects and on more liberal influences in Idaho's politics—have led to both invaluable studies and good reading. They set an example for generations of students at Boise State. As his frequent editor, I learned an enormous amount about subjects in which I already had an interest. We shared a love of Idaho and its history—and we also shared a belief in the importance of its citizens' understanding of that history. Hugh Lovin's career as both teacher and writer was deeply committed to that belief. He was a warm and welcome colleague in helping Idahoans better understand themselves.

Judith Austin
Idaho State Historical Society, retired

Finding Complexity in a Ditch: Hugh T. Lovin and Idaho Irrigation History

ADAM M. SOWARDS

In history, the Snake River Plain has often been an obstacle. The storied nineteenth-century overlanders looked out from their wagons and saw desolation through most of the landscape that stretched nearly four hundred miles long and up to one hundred miles wide.[1] For decades, regional promoters saw plenty of arable land but it was much too far from water. Even modern observers, such as Hugh T. Lovin, whose work is collected in this book, characterized portions of the plain in less than inviting terms: "Mostly a hot, uninviting desert, this region was covered with straggling sagebrush and strewn with flinty outcroppings of volcanic rubble that impeded travel."[2] Yet today, if you fly over southern Idaho—or zoom in on Google Earth—you find huge bands and circles of green and, looking closely, see reservoirs storing the region's scarce water supply. The desert has been transformed. Early dreamers imagined five million acres (the delusional envisioned up to nine million) irrigated throughout the Snake River Plain. The first generation of irrigation projects, those completed before 1920, put two and a half million acres into production through 13,000 miles of ditches and canals flowing to 18,000 farms. All of this helped fuel the state's population growth fourfold in just two decades between 1900 and 1920.[3] Plenty of failures and hardship line the historical route to the present, but it is hard to argue against the green results of irrigation.

As the nineteenth century closed, the American West faced a challenge of accommodating a new, growing population that demanded more from nature, especially its rivers. So, civic boosters, tech-

nological enthusiasts, and government agents turned attention to ways of maximizing opportunity. Because past traditions seemed to be failing, or were at least inefficient, they adopted new practices and forged new policies to develop the West, yielding success, failure, and combinations of the two.[4] Then, much later, as the twentieth century wound down, new challenges came to accommodate ever more people and demands on a shrinking water supply, and government officials and environmental activists wondered if there might not be a better way. For instance, in 1977 President Jimmy Carter unveiled a so-called hit list of proposed water projects he planned to eliminate while Earth First! rabble-rousers proposed breaching dams.[5] It would surprise only the unobservant that writers and historians during the late twentieth century turned their attention to the century before to understand how and why the West built its hydraulic infrastructure and its irrigation communities as it did. Hugh Lovin exemplified this historical practice at that moment—looking backward from a time of uncertainty to investigate a similar moment of flux. He did not toil alone, in isolation, or from a blank slate. Other writers and scholars explored irrigated landscapes, examined water regimes across many locales, and built on earlier reclamation traditions. Situating this book and Lovin, then, requires attention to these contexts and Idaho itself.

Like the tobacco and wheat crops they harvested, American farmers grew the nation, a fact easy to forget today when suburban and urban populations far outpace their rural counterparts. The farms that nourished the young nation's economic and political roots sat in the humid eastern half of North America. Insufficient water rarely caused long-term problems for those agricultural communities. Thomas Jefferson, among others, viewed the nation's virtuous farmers as the republic's bedrock. Although the Jeffersonian foundation of American agriculture had problems—slavery being the most obvious—environmental limitations seemed minor and only occasionally inconvenient. The nineteenth-century myth of inexhaustibility also propelled the United States' citizens west, and

they brought with them cultural expectations that farming would continue much as it had along the Atlantic seaboard and eastern river valleys. Public policy reinforced and powered this movement of people and products, auctioning off and giving away the public domain. But then, the American West threw up the obstacle of aridity, an environmental challenge that demanded readjustments to communities, law, and institutions. As one of nineteenth-century America's most celebrated explorers John Wesley Powell plainly put it, "the climate is so arid that agriculture is not successful without irrigation."[6]

People inhabited the American West from time immemorial, developing varied adaptive measures to survive in arid places. These included irrigation systems, such as the vast complexes among the Hohokam in what is now central Arizona or the flood irrigation methods used by various tribes in the Southwest. Others grew food along watercourses, adjusting seasonal mobility to ensure they were in the right place at the right time to plant, tend, and harvest crops. Droughts certainly occurred and severe ones forced indigenous groups to relocate. But thousands of years of successful adaptation demonstrated that civilizations could thrive in western North America.[7]

However, the Euro-Americans who began exploring the far West in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries saw the arid landscape with a different set of cultural eyes and social practices. Some of the earliest, like Zebulon Pike, called it the Great American Desert, effectively discouraging resettlement by Euro-Americans. However, Latter-day Saints worked together to build communal irrigation systems, including the Great Feeder Canal in what became southeastern Idaho, that succeeded and inspired others, although the close-knit nature of Mormon communities and the power of the church proved difficult to emulate elsewhere. Eventually boosters and a new national mindset promoted and encouraged individuals and families to repopulate the West after dislodging and marginalizing Native Americans through political and military might.[8]

Legally, water became like property—something that could be bought, sold, or transferred—after the Spanish and Mexican

communal traditions gave way to American imperialism and its governing institutions. Prior appropriation—usually abbreviated as "first in time, first in right"—guided most western territories and followed the practices originating in the West's mining lands. This legal practice set important precedents. It encouraged early use of water, as well as continuous use, for if farmers stopped using it their right would disappear. As opposed to riparian rights, which derived more closely from English common law, prior appropriation divorced water rights from the land, which allowed farmers to import water from off their property, often a prerequisite for irrigating western farms.[9]

The federal government tried to provide for an orderly process to get the public domain into private hands through laws like the 1862 Homestead Act. The first step in creating that order was a government survey. When government surveyor and polymath John Wesley Powell returned from his investigation of the interior West, he wrote his *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region*, which appeared in 1878. The *Report* issued would-be farmers and enthusiastic lawmakers a stern warning: "Many droughts will occur; many seasons in a long series will be fruitless; and it may be doubted whether, on the whole, agriculture will prove remunerative." In highlighting the challenges the region presented to American agriculture, the *Report* signaled a need to reshape land law and governance. For instance, in proposed legislation Powell included in his report, he allowed groups to organize irrigation districts to claim public lands with individual plots limited to 80 acres (instead of the 160 acres in the Homestead Act and larger acreages in other land laws). Many western lands simply were not useful when divided in surveyors' sections but needed to be organized around water availability. In general, Powell offered more cautious and less individualistic plans than most Americans preferred, and his conclusions and recommendations flew in the face of tradition and predilection; before too much time passed, he lost his job.[10]

Needless to say, the federal government did not follow Powell's visionary suggestions, but eventually it had to adjust its practices. For example, it incentivized individuals to develop irrigation with the Desert Land Act, passed in 1877, that gave more acreage to a farmer who promised to bring irrigation to it. This failed and attracted fraud, as people and companies sought ways to acquire as much land as possible even it if they could not farm it. The business of land in the West was big business indeed and attracted the unscrupulous and genuine investors alike.[11]

The existing land system proved not as productive as many thought it ought to be. As journalist Marc Reisner explained, "For the first time in their history, Americans had come up against a problem they could not begin to master with traditional American solutions—private capital, individual initiative, hard work—and yet the region confronting the problem happened to believe most fervently in such solutions." And so, the federal government tried something new with the Carey Act (1894), a notable shift in government investment. The act gave desert states up to one million acres of federal public domain provided that the state get the lands irrigated, using private corporations and investors who profited by selling the water to farmers on the lands. The legislation largely failed across the West. But Idaho proved the exception, developing almost the full million-acre allotment and sending Idaho leaders to Washington, DC, asking for more. This success, along with the concomitant difficulties and setbacks, furnished Lovin much historical fodder.[12]

At the time, a national campaign for reclamation poured over the land like flood irrigation covered fields. William Ellsworth Smythe led the charge, publicizing all good things that would come from building irrigation works across the West. Writing at a moment of national imperialist fervor—the country had just emerged victorious with colonial possessions after the Spanish-American War—Smythe envisioned a western, domestic colonialism as a better bet. Filling up the West—characterized as *The Conquest of Arid America*, as he titled his 1900 book—would produce prosperity and a democratic one at that. Irrigation was a miracle, one chapter explained, that promised democratic communities comprised of Jeffersonian small farms. In Idaho, Smythe saw great potential, because the state "has barely crossed the threshold of its vast possibilities." What Smythe saw in underpopulated arid spaces of the West, like Idaho's Snake River Plain, were the roots of a greater

republic, places where irrigation would help tie people to the land and help propel a cooperative social and economic evolution that would fulfill America's potential. To advocates like Smythe, the transformation remained central to the *American* story, not just a *western* one.[13]

Tapping into this enthusiasm—and Idaho's exceptional success notwithstanding—reformers pushed for even greater federal assistance that they hoped might solve the shortcomings of the Carey Act, resulting in the National Reclamation Act, also known as the Newlands Act, of 1902.[14] This legislative program inserted the nation-state to a greater extent into efforts to promote and build irrigation systems in western territory. It would use proceeds from public land sales to seed a reclamation fund distributed for constructing dams and canals to expand the West's irrigated acres. Then: new homes, new farms, new crops, new money would spring forth from western deserts and sagebrush plains. With a limit of 160 acres on these federal projects, the law presupposed small-scale family farms, ever the American Jeffersonian hope, and showed how the reclamation campaign fulfilled ideological impulses as well as economic functions. Yet, by creating a new federal agency—the Reclamation Service, later promoted to the Bureau of Reclamation—and funding it through federal dollars, the act put the national government more firmly in the reclamation business.[15]

Although proceeds from successful irrigation projects were meant to repay the reclamation fund, results were mixed. After two decades, a scant 10 percent of the funds had been repaid and 60 percent of farmers were in default on their repayments. Ultimately the federal government forgave many projects' debts. Meanwhile, the Depression of the 1930s arrived and reclamation projects grew larger in response to the need for labor and the greater technical expertise engineers acquired. Irrigation history did not conclude with the Depression, but Lovin's interest remained firmly rooted in these initial decades.[16]

And for good reasons: those years were exciting times for Idaho. A chief engineer on the Twin Falls North Side Land and Water Company, E. B. Darlington, captured that zeitgeist in an essay,

"The Romance of a River," that appeared in 1920 in *Reclamation Record*. The engineer's romance grew out of an imagination as fertile as the Snake River Plain. Darlington shared a history lesson with irrigation engineers—"men of great vision and master designers"—at the center, who considered themselves "understudies of the Creator, delegated to bring forth upon the earth a better condition of life, a finer spirit of contentment, a higher state of development, and an advancement in human progress." The future beckoned for more of the same, but pitfalls lurked if farmers followed reckless plans. Darlington concluded that duty required the river be transformed into an agent "only of beneficence…for the greatest good of the greatest number." Darlington, who later served as the superintendent of the federal Minidoka Project, embodied the confidence of the era, a belief that experts could produce widespread benefits and "full utilization" of natural resources.[17]

Darlington's article showed how irrigation was always about fulfilling visions—of farmers, engineers, and politicians; in short, of anyone who hoped to transform desert spaces into productive farms. Historians like Hugh T. Lovin examined these stories, trying to show the ways these reclamation impulses served progress and development. But historians found many reasons not to share in Darlington's unequivocal enthusiasm.

In the mid-1980s, as Lovin researched and produced many of his studies, two major books on western irrigation appeared—one by a journalist and one by a historian—and each used the past to frame and explain then-present concerns. Both saw the West's current hydraulic regime as failing, a system that subverted both environmental and democratic ends. For the journalist Marc Reisner, watering the West came from a deluded biblical mission to make the desert bloom as a rose, an effort he characterized as "messianic." The book's epigraph, Percy Bysshe Shelley's elegiac (or is it prophetic?) sonnet "Ozymandias," evoked the inevitability of declining power in desert civilizations. Further, Reisner's story

in *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water* abounded in bureaucratic rivalries between the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Bureau of Reclamation competing for ever greater projects, rejecting economic and ecological rationality as a matter of course in the pursuit of administrative power. Dam failures, cost overruns, and corruption marked the West's history with reclamation, as surely as cowboys and Indians rode through 1950's westerns.[18]

The historian Donald Worster, on the other hand, connected the West to a long and global history, one rooted in despotism that grew out of past societies that sought to control nature—especially water. Controlling water, Worster maintained in *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West*, allowed ruling elites to control people in places like India, China, and the American West. Applying insights from thinkers like Karl Marx and Karl Wittfogel, Worster argued that rather than a place synonymous with freedom as it liked to think of itself, the American West "is increasingly a coercive, monolithic, and hierarchical system, ruled by a power elite based on the ownership of capital and expertise," best shown by the irrigation canal. To Worster, the West's hydraulic empire was a creation of the state melded with capitalism that wreaked unequivocal environmental and social havoc by serving an agribusiness immune to the people's interest.[19]

Both Worster's and Reisner's stories of the West show a certain imperialism at work. They see the West as a place colonized and manipulated by bureaucrats, engineers, politicians, and more, a region where nature itself was shackled to a statist-capitalist imperative. Consequently, the books are akin to medieval morality plays.[20] They are eloquently written, passionately argued, and, if not exactly caricatured, then perhaps they sell exceptions as more of the rule than is merited.[21] From that perspective, they might have become too influential. In these accounts, too, California and the Colorado River play outsized roles, exaggerating their history as indicative of the West writ large.[22] So, the history of irrigation in a place like Idaho might reveal other historical contours. This is why we need Lovin's work.

Building farms in Idaho's Snake River Plain was difficult and risky. Land needed clearing; water needed moving; pests needed removing; droughts needed avoiding. These factors and more had stalled agricultural expansion in the late nineteenth century before large-scale reclamation projects developed, and they would continue as ubiquitous challenges to Idaho farmers even when more investment and greater technological might arrived. Beyond environmental forces, aspiring reclaimers required steep capital investments and complex engineering works to transform a sagebrush-covered range into sugar beets, alfalfa, orchards, and, of course, potatoes. Money often ran out, even for scrupulous investors (and not all were). Meanwhile, gravity-fed canal systems were prone to failure and pumping systems required power, which made them more expensive. Laying out irrigation tracts required audacity in vision and comfort with risk against sometimes high odds. Against such obstacles, it's sometimes a wonder any irrigation systems got built.

So, in 1890 or 1920, what interested locals most was not grand theories about state power and despotism but getting canals to deliver water to fields so crops could grow and capital could flow. And no one accounted for this process in Idaho better than Lovin. What he showed in his many articles, some of the choicest pieces represented here, was no clear overriding thesis that might interpret all of Idaho's reclamation experience. After all, Idaho often fits poorly in sweeping historical generalizations, and reclamation history is no exception.[23] No one demonstrates this better than Lovin. His collective work succeeded where the morality plays failed in part because of scale. Often, his research focused on a single project, trying to account for its success or failure or some creative mix of the two—seemingly the most common outcome. Lovin developed these nuanced histories through painstaking research and attention to historical detail. That was often the criticism of other books: Worster's monolithic state was, well, too monolithic and did not reckon with the fragmented and localized nature of the nation a century ago.[24]

When Lovin searched for Idaho's history in an irrigation ditch, he found complexity. At one point, after years of research, Lovin characterized—typologized really—the main actors in Idaho reclamation efforts as "dreamers, schemers, and doers."[25] The labels functioned as a sort of shorthand for those who imagined a prospering plain irrigated by the Snake and its tributaries (dreamers), those who manipulated images and often others' money to promote this or that tract with an eye for profit (schemers), and those who buckled down and built the dams, canals, and farms that transformed the dry, fat bottom of the state (doers). The lines between types blended too easily, with shady developers promising easy riches and state agents promising water before it was available in close collaboration a century ago in a state hurrying to grow.

To a substantial degree, the state grew, as Lovin showed, through bringing irrigation to undeveloped landscapes. The process seemed straightforward: sagebrush (and rabbits) had to be removed; land had to be sold; and water had to be provided. But within those parameters much trouble might be made. Government officials—state and federal—overpromised water, leading to shortfalls. Financiers overpromised money, leading to bankruptcies. Engineers overpromised technical solutions, leading to system failures. At least sometimes. At other times, it worked. Investors like Frank Buhl and Peter Kimberly faithfully put together solid projects like the Twin Falls South Side project that irrigated nearly a quarter-million acres, a model under the Carey Act and envy of others.[26] Federal reclamation built its own projects, such as Minidoka and Boise, helping to create Idaho's landscape and build its economy. Lovin's work demonstrates how mammoth was the task of making the desert bloom as the rose, which promoters so easily promised.

To be sure, Lovin had blind spots or areas that may not have interested him. His histories are essentially about establishing projects and the political, financial, and technical requirements to do so. Cultural and social histories of irrigation might not have even occurred to him, although we now have searching analyses of some of the art and literature inspired by Idaho ditches, as well as personal reflections on water by Idaho authors.[27] Studies and

accounts of the way women both promoted and experienced reclamation projects add a contour Lovin neglected.[28] The sticky and ubiquitous issue of indigenous water rights and how they intersect with irrigation regimes did not gain attention from Lovin, although we know the importance of tracking those relationships.[29] The labor required to build irrigation works and, then, to plant, tend, and harvest the crops that are the ultimate products of reengineered rivers never drew Lovin's focus. And scholars still have done little to see the land-labor nexus in Idaho fields and along Idaho rivers as they have in other locations.[30] Concerns about the environment—concerns that occupied other histories, especially as Lovin's career wound down—played a minimal role in Lovin's scholarship.[31] Had he carried his investigations further into the twentieth century, Lovin surely would have had to reckon with questions related to groundwater pumping.[32] Any scholar working on reclamation in Idaho today would be expected to consider at least some of these topics.

None of which is to minimize Lovin's achievements collected in the exemplars contained in this book. In the pages that follow we confront the work of a careful historian, a scholar who focused a career on understanding one of the most fundamental elements that built the state that paid his salary as a professor at Boise State University. He pursued no overt political agenda. Lovin evinced a partisanship neither for free enterprise nor federal reclamation projects; his was a partisanship dedicated to historical facts, as he found them. Mythology didn't blind him in the archives. The result is a body of work that stands up to the test of time and helps Idahoans understand how their irrigated landscape came to look so much as it does today.

Adam M. Sowards is professor of history and director of the Program in Pacific Northwest Studies at the University of Idaho. He is the author of several articles and books, including *The Environmental Justice: William O. Douglas and American Conservation*, and the editor most recently of *Idaho's Place: A New History of the Gem State*.

Notes

1. Peter G. Boag, "Overlanders and the Snake River Region: A Case Study of Popular Landscape Perception in the Early West," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 84, no. 4 (Fall 1993): 122–29.

2. Hugh T. Lovin, "A 'New West' Reclamation Tragedy: The Twin Falls-Oakley Project in Idaho, 1908–1931," *Arizona and the West* 20, no. 1 (Spring 1978), 5–6. Reprinted in this volume as Chapter 7.

3. Most figures are Lovin's and are repeated in many of the following chapters. The outlier number of nine million acres came from the Idaho State Bureau of Immigration and is from Lovin, "Water, Arid Land, and Visions of Advancement on the Snake River Plain," *Idaho Yesterdays* 35, no. 1 (Spring 1991), 7 and is the Epilogue in this volume. For the canal mileage and farms, see Mark Fiege, *Irrigated Eden: The Making of an Agricultural Landscape in the American West* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), 23.

4. Perhaps the best overview of the efforts to develop the West's natural resources is Charles F. Wilkinson, *Crossing the Next Meridian: Land, Water, and the Future of the West* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1992).

5. On Carter, for instance, see Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water*, revised and updated (New York: Penguin, 1993), ch. 9; for Earth First! see Susan Zakin, *Coyotes and Town Dogs: Earth First! and the Environmental Movement* (New York: Viking, 1993).

6. William deBuys, ed., *Seeing Things Whole: The Essential John Wesley Powell* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2001), 156. The interpretation offered of agricultural expansion and the challenges of western aridity is a standard one. A good account can be gleaned from Richard White, *"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own": A New History of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), esp. chs. 6, 9, 15. A useful account of Jeffersonianism and its complicated reality is Roger G. Kennedy, *Mr. Jefferson's Lost Cause: Land, Farmers, Slavery, and the Louisiana Purchase* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

7. Adaptive measures to aridity and drought are described in William deBuys, *A Great Aridness: Climate Change and the Future of the American Southwest* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), ch. 3; Norris Hundley Jr., *The Great Thirst: Californians and Water: A History*, revised ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), ch. 1; Adam M. Sowards, *United States West Coast: An Environmental History* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-Clio, 2007), 74–78.

8. Although the main topic of the book is John Wesley Powell, Wallace Stegner accounts for the booster attitude imbued in the West in his classic, *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: John Wesley Powell and the Second Opening of the West* (1953; reprint, New York: Penguin, 1992). One example that shows the displacement of Native peoples is Ned Blackhawk, *Violence Over the Land: Indians and Empires in the Early American West* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

9. The best places to begin with the legal elements include Hundley, *The Great Thirst*, chs. 2–3; Donald J. Pisani, *To Reclaim a Divided West: Water, Law, and Public Policy, 1848–1902* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1992), chs. 2–3; Wilkinson, *Crossing the Next Meridian*, ch. 6.

10. For context, see Stegner, *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian*; White, *"It's Your Misfortune,"* chs. 5–6. For Powell's plan, see deBuys, ed., *Seeing Things Whole*, 149–208; quotation from 158; plan specifics from 192.

11. The most thorough account of federal land law is Paul W. Gates, *History of Public Land Law Development* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1968), 399–401 for Desert Land Law and its failure.

12. Reisner, *Cadillac Desert*, quotation from 110. For Carey Act, see Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 157. Lovin summarized the Carey Act in Idaho in Hugh T. Lovin, "The Carey Act in Idaho, 1895–1925: An Experiment in Free Enterprise Reclamation," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 78, no. 4 (October 1987): 122–33 (appearing as Chapter 4 in this volume).

13. William E. Smythe, *The Conquest of Arid America* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1900), quotation from 184; Smythe divided his book into four parts, the first concerning "Continental Expansion at Home," which culminated in chapter five: "The Miracle of Irrigation."

14. It is important to note that in Smythe's imaginings the federal government played a muted role. But his work helped legitimize the larger reclamation project, thus building support for what became the Newlands Act of 1902. On Smythe, see Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 118–25.

15. The Newlands Act is a central piece of reclamation history, and it plays a central role in Worster's argument. See *Rivers of Empire*, 156–69. Also see Pisani, *To Reclaim a Divided West*, 273–325; Reisner, *Cadillac Desert*, 111–19.

16. The default rate comes from Reisner, *Cadillac Desert*, 116.

17. E. B. Darlington, "The Romance of a River: A Past, Present and Future Survey of Irrigation in Southern Idaho," *Reclamation Record* 11 (March 1920): 122–23. Fiege analyzes Darlington in *Irrigated Eden*, esp. 23, 172, 177. Darlington's later position on the Minidoka Project comes from a letter appended to an Idaho Department of Water Resources decision found at www.idwr.idaho.gov/files/legal/orders/20130211_AFRD2-Final_Order_Re_Inst_to_Water_Dist_1_Watermaster.pdf.

18. Reisner, *Cadillac Desert*, front matter, 3, and passim.

19. Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, quotation from 7; see also chs. 1–2.

20. Perhaps this genre is inherent when writing about western water, for Wallace Stegner's biography of John Wesley Powell certainly frames the narrative around competing moral characters, too. See Stegner, *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian*.

21. Perhaps the most astute and persistent critic of these views is Pisani. For a concise version of his criticism, see Donald J. Pisani, *Water and American Government: The Reclamation Bureau, National Water Policy, and the West, 1902–1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 283–84.

22. Worster's index includes no entries for Idaho or the Snake River, for instance. Hundley argued an alternative interpretation for California, suggesting that it is not Worster's California focus that inherently created his argument; see *The Great Thirst*.

23. I make a similar point about Idaho as a poor fit in my introduction, "Idaho's Place: Reckoning with History," in *Idaho's Place: A New History of the Gem State*, ed. Adam M. Sowards (Seattle: University of Washington, 2014), 3–10.

24. No one has pushed Worster on these points harder than Donald J. Pisani. See, for instance, *To Reclaim a Divided West*, 331–33.

25. Hugh T. Lovin, "Dreamers, Schemers, and Doers of Idaho Irrigation," *Agricultural History* 76, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 232–43 [Chapter 1 in this volume].

26. Besides Lovin's work contained in this volume, see Pisani, *Water and American Government*, 66–77.

27. See Richard W. Etulain, "Shifting Currents: Cultural Expressions in Idaho," in *Idaho's Place: A New History of the Gem State*, ed. Adam M. Sowards (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014), for instance, 241–42 on Mary Hallock Foote's fiction and 247–48 for her art; Fiege, *Irrigated Eden*, 171–202, which examines myth and metaphor of Idaho's landscape; and Robert T. Hayashi's meditation on race and place in *Haunted by Water: A Journey through Race and Place in the American West* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2007), which includes both an analysis of Idaho's reclaimed landscape and his own experience of the larger landscape of the place with water as a key theme. Mary Clearman Blew, ed., *Written on Water: Essays on Idaho Rivers* (Moscow: University of Idaho Press, 2001).

28. For women and Idaho irrigation, see Annie Pike Greenwood, *We Sagebrush Folks* (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1934); Susan H. Armitage, "'Too Little, Too Late': Annie Pike Greenwood, Failed Sagebrush Pioneer," in *Terra Pacifica: People and Place in Northwest States and Western Canada*, ed. Paul W. Hirt (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1998); and Laura Woodworth-Ney, "Water, Culture, and Boosterism: Albin and Elizabeth DeMary and the Minidoka Reclamation Project, 1905–1920," in *The Bureau of Reclamation: History Essays from the Centennial Symposium* (Denver: U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Reclamation, 2008), 385–405.

29. One example of a scholar working through these issues is Amy E. Canfield, "'These Lands are Worthless without Water': The Federal Government's Divided Loyalties in Irrigating the Fort Hall Indian Reservation, 1902–1920," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 105, no. 3 (Summer 2014): 122–35.

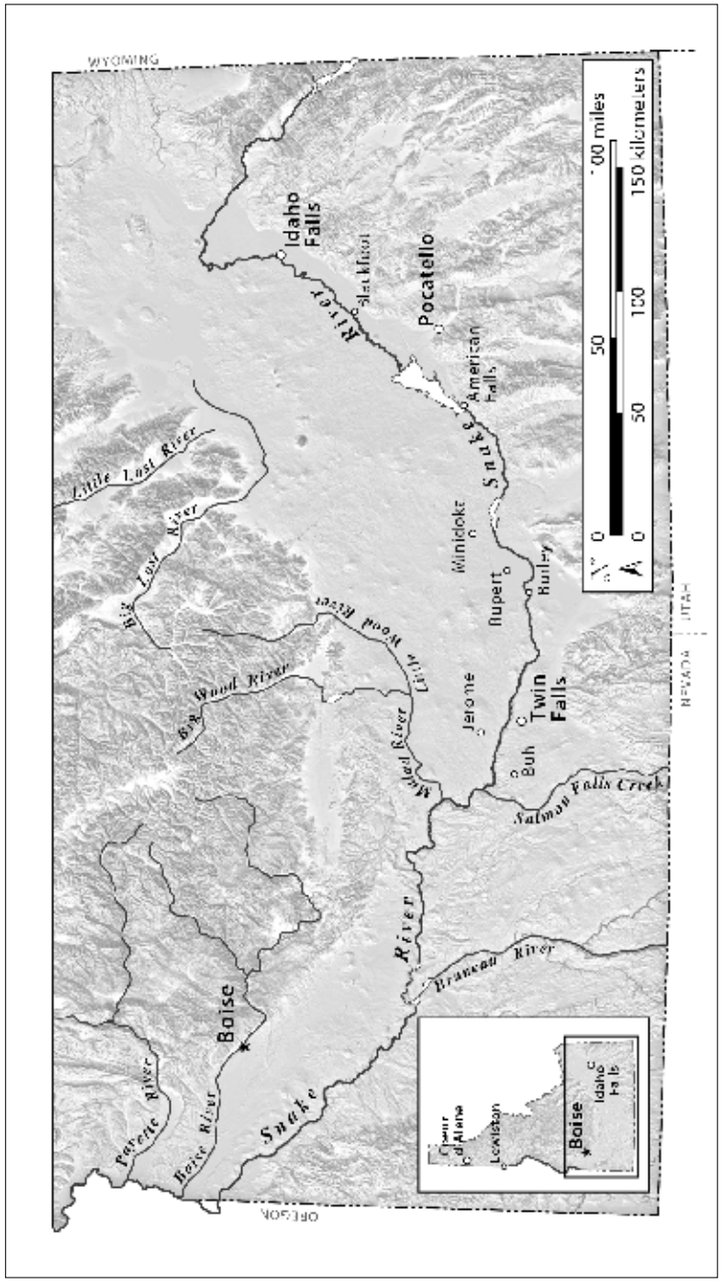
30. Again, Fiege's *Irrigated Eden*, 117–42 is an exception, although it essentially ignores the Latino presence that has grown into an important source of labor. Errol D. Jones, "Latinos in Idaho: Making Their Way in the Gem State," in *Idaho's Place: A New History of the Gem State*, ed. Adam M. Sowards (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014), 201–34 offers a useful overview.

31. The best account of irrigating Idaho primarily from an environmental perspective is Fiege's *Irrigated Eden*.

32. Zachary A. Smith, *Groundwater in the West* (San Diego: Academic Press, 1989), 97–103. Also, Adam M. Sowards and Brynn M. Lacabanne, "Instituting Water Research: The Water Resources Research Act (1964) and the Idaho Water Resources Research Institute," *Water History* (2017), doi:10.1007/s12685-016-0190-x, http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12685-016-0190-x, demonstrates some of these concerns.

PART I

Promoting and Settling the Irrigation Frontier



IDAHO'S SNAKE RIVER PLAIN.

Map by Chelsea Feeney, www.cmcfeeney.com

CHAPTER 1

Dreamers, Schemers, and Doers of Idaho Irrigation

Frederick Newell, first director of the United States Reclamation Service, predicted in 1910 that western land reclamation projects would at first attract people who believed "roseate descriptions of irrigation," ignored warnings about privation ahead of them when they tried to carve farms from arid land, and soon fled from such adversity. Certain "second comer[s]," he said, might persevere until they overcame the odds against them succeeding, but the western irrigation frontier required a third wave of people who "may be regarded as the final locator."[1] Newell's axiom, in turn, was rooted so deeply in western irrigation lore that commonly two irrigators were expected to fail before a third one prevailed. Even at Idaho's Twin Falls South Side tract, where irrigation development happened about as expeditiously as anywhere in the state, reportedly the last of three "crops of settlers" finally achieved greater agricultural and social stability than any of the others.[2] But such arithmetical equations hinted only at the realities of land reclamation and scarcely addressed the real interplay of purity of social purpose, commercialism, and villainy among those who attempted arid-land reclamation across southern Idaho between 1880 and 1940. In Idaho, an army of visionaries, schemers, and doers labored but finally fell short of creating what a publicist claimed to be their mission on the Snake River Plain—to establish a "Garden of the Gods."[3]

Partly what these dreamers, schemers, and doers of Idaho irrigation did over the decades 1880–1940 was shaped by how irrigation was judged nationally. Outside Idaho, thinkers like William Ellsworth Smythe, publisher of *Irrigation Age* and author of *The Conquest of Arid America* (1899), proclaimed new magic-by-irrigation gospels during the 1890s, and such boosting for irriga-

tion became even more infectious in commercial, publishing, and learned circles after 1900. The new theories so intrigued people like *Chicago Tribune* journalists that they accepted such ideas at face value; writing in the *North American Review*, another observer predicted the development of a new western empire comprised of 100 million irrigated acres. Agricultural scientists likewise touted the new thinking about irrigation. From Cornell University horticulturist Liberty Hyde Bailey and Iowa Agricultural College agronomist Perry Greeley Holden came glowing endorsements of irrigated farming. Writers for Bailey's agricultural cyclopedia placed the imprimatur of agricultural science on irrigation.[4] Hawking stocks and bonds of western irrigation companies, eastern and midwestern brokerages similarly emphasized notions of getting rich by irrigation farming.[5]

In part, the new irrigation gospels enjoyed acclaim because the new ideology embroidered the nation's old mythologies about the West. Such theories pictured irrigation as opening another roadway for Americans to travel on their journey to Eden. Such ideas about escaping from the wicked East to a blissful West remained the stuff from which human dreams were contrived long into the twentieth century. Furthermore, the irrigation gospels won public respect because of their high-minded arguments that in the case of the nation's social unfortunates, who had been shunted aside in the country's rush to industrialize, western irrigation offered them a second chance at social salvation. This notion of fostering irrigation for socially redemptive purposes gained even more support after President Theodore Roosevelt created the Commission on Country Life and placed Bailey at the helm. The commission handed its report to Roosevelt early in 1909. Its final words enlivened discussions that had already placed reaching Eden in the context of processes for reclaiming arid land in the West. The commission also called for arid-land reclamation under comfortable circumstances; hence, its proposals included schemes for bettering rural living with more material and cultural amenities. Moreover, the commission's work helped to inspire a back-to-the-land movement that, for the next two decades, encouraged city dwellers to flee from their urban abodes and find Eden at the end of their road.[6]

Ideas about creating one's own Eden on irrigated terrain piqued interest among eastern merchants who had tired of doldrums besetting Main Street commerce; but the prospects of making one's way to a western Eden appealed at least as mightily to plenty of people in the Midwest where, as in Iowa, too many people competed for the region's finite quantity of prairie land. So many midwesterners came to Idaho that early in the twentieth century, Iowa and Illinois clubs became commonplace; in many locales, the newcomers' Bible Belt mindset curried away the state's Old West subculture.

And the search for Eden in the arid West became even more a middle-class enterprise because lawyers, physicians, teachers, clergy, and clerical workers trekked westward in record numbers between 1900 and 1910. The group belonged, for the most part, to a generation imbued with the lofty ideals of socio-political progressivism for which Roosevelt was the ideology's best publicist, but the old sod seemed to supply this group neither enough professional opportunities nor sufficient chances to effect social uplifting. In 1906, Idaho's state immigration bureau reported shortages of craftsmen, hired hands for agricultural field work, and people willing to endure other types of hard labor despite the flocking of so many outsiders into the state. According to this bureau, "the class who perform common labor have not come in proportion to the small capitalist, the farmer, and the professional classes." For another decade, Idaho irrigation projects continued to absorb legions of middle-class people. At the federal Minidoka project, for instance, a special 1912 census of the entrymen revealed that many of society's more privileged folk persisted in swelling the ranks of those engaged in reclamation tract pioneering.[7]

For migrants to Idaho, dreamers like Smythe promised them extra dividends including rich water resources.[8] Those neophytes, unversed in irrigation realities, relied heavily on such representations because, in their reasoning, more water at their disposal equated proportionally to extra riches and greater well-being. But, on reaching Idaho, they learned at great expense to themselves that uncontrolled applications of water uprooted crops; worse yet, excessive watering induced so much alkali to accumulate on the surface of their land that no crops grew there.

Aside from encountering unfamiliar terrain and gravity irrigation technologies that puzzled them, the newcomers lamented other surprises as well. Firms like Clinton, Hurtt Company at Boise treated them fairly in dispensing land-locator services and information. But the newcomers more typically complained that the prophets of Eden had neglected to warn them of villains who met the unwary at the portals to Idaho and fleeced the immigrants. Echoing such complaints, a Colorado newspaper charged "land sharks of Idaho" with duping outsiders by the hundreds, and such newcomers bristled with indignation for good reasons. A Boise newspaper recounted the duplicity of promoters whose stock in trade consisted of luring eastern "suckers" to Idaho's land. Such enterprisers often styled themselves "Land Locators" but were simply real estate agents who collected liberal fees for steering settlers to arid land. The agents even knowingly placed their clients on land for which irrigation water would become available only after years of waiting for the moisture.[9]

Aside from running athwart such duplicity, Eden-seekers learned to their dismay that irrigation's prophets and reclamation tract promoters alike misrepresented the power and will of Idaho's state government to ensure that settlers received fair treatment. State officials actually offered them little protection in the dog-eat-dog capitalism by which even the best of Idaho's irrigation projects—save two federal projects—were financed, developed, and administered through their adolescence. But erroneous impressions persisted that Idaho took responsibility for shielding the settlers. A Boston businessman was not alone when he assumed that Idaho state authorities "aim[ed] to save the settler from disappointment, and the capitalist from investing in [irrigation] work[s] that will not bring expected results."[10]

Schemers elaborated on such myths by telling Eden-minded land seekers that entrymen enjoyed special state protections at projects that state authorities authorized and supervised under provisions of the federal Carey Act of August 18, 1894. Small wonder land seekers believed such a canard after encountering so much repetition of it. Like many others, the Kings Hill Extension Irrigation Company falsely advertised its tract as "Under State Management." A newspaper claimed that Idaho guaranteed "a sufficiency of water for all irrigation purposes" at a different Carey Act project; a subordinate of the Idaho State engineer privately assured potential settlers of another project that the state "amply protected" them; and a United States Department of Agriculture official advised prospective settlers that Idaho mandated "a square deal" for all entrymen to Carey Act tracts.[11]

Settlers of Idaho irrigation projects found plenty about their new lot to deplore, but altogether the new irrigators experienced mixed results between 1900 and 1920. Seekers of Eden complained legitimately, saying that people readily lost their shirts in the twinkling of an eye; conversely, astute speculators garnered quick profits from investing in land and water rights on reclamation tracts. Furthermore, in the end, remaining on new irrigated farms despite multiple hardships significantly enriched irrigation tract farmers. In fact, after 1902, the Twin Falls South Side project became an exemplar for a decade of rapidly escalating farmland values that translated into personal wealth and security for landholders. However, one entryman remarked that such advances at Twin Falls came at the price of his spouse "wear[ing] herself out trying to keep the dust out of the house." At the South Side project, where conditions were no different than at nearly all of the state's new irrigation tracts, land reclaimers stripped the soil of its covering of sagebrush and native grasses at the outset. Wind then enjoyed free play with this barren earth until irrigation water finally dampened the soil sufficiently that it stayed in place.[12]

With so many Eden-seekers knocking at Idaho's doors, only irrigation enterprising on a grand scale could provide all of them land, water, and a fighting chance of prevailing. Happily for those seekers, they at first judged the federal government had favored them by launching the Payette-Boise and Minidoka projects within the state. But the federal reclamation tracts never satisfied all of the newcomers' demands for space and water, and they finally depended more frequently on private enterprisers to translate their dreams into reality by peddling enough irrigation company stocks and bonds to pay for large-scale irrigation works. In the beginning, such capital seemed to be within easy grasp. A Chicago

newspaper predicted an outpouring of "millions of dollars" from this city to upgrade "the great irrigable section of the country." Nonetheless, such capitalistic processes were flawed, inefficient, and especially prone to failure at the hands of certain enterprisers. In one instance, the Mullins Canal and Reservoir Company pretended otherwise but actually placed only twenty acres under irrigation out of the company's 6,528-acre allocation.[13]

Bigger thinking about irrigation might produce results better than the Mullins Company's achievements, and even irrigation promoters in the same league as the Mullins group occasionally initiated large-scale reclamation projects despite jibing at them from the sidelines from Idaho old-timers. Idaho's oldsters called them "silk-hats" and despised their salesmanship of allegedly impractical irrigation schemes. Five silk-hats, for instance, each earned $5,000 for themselves by proposing to fill the Big Wood River valley with irrigated farms. Finally, they persuaded a Wall Street broker to arrange financing by outside investors of the project, and the business of putting water on this large acreage was at last underway.[14]

But depending on projects of large dimensions launched under such conditions could never suffice. Such projects developed too slowly to accommodate those Eden-seekers who could procure no place for themselves on the state's two federal irrigation projects. Clearly the times called for visionaries who possessed unassailable faith in irrigation endeavors, extolled large-scale irrigation technologies relentlessly, and overcame obstacles that irrigation's eastern prophets never mentioned. Furthermore, the chances of ever making fast progress along the road to Eden had shifted to the shoulders of free enterprise. Idaho irrigation's new visionaries needed charm, persistence, and guile to lure to the state enough money and an array of doers capable of creating large-scale irrigation projects aplenty. In particular, the new doers had to build and master the art of operating systems of dams across rivers, lengthy mainline canals, and thousands of waterways branching from the principal arterials.

Idaho's irrigation visionaries, albeit a parochial group of schemers, emerged early in the twentieth century and eventually claimed that the group had superintended the launching of a new hydraulic

agricultural order in the state. In this group, Ira Burton Perrine stood out. After emigrating to Idaho in 1883, Perrine tried out mining and the stagecoach business before deciding that agriculture was a better bet. He established his irrigated "ranch" at Blue Lakes in the Snake River canyon in south central Idaho. At the same time, his vision but not his dollars kept the prospectively rich Twin Falls South Side tract before the notice of financiers until two doers—Pennsylvania ironmakers Frank Buhl and Peter Kimberly—agreed to complete this irrigation project. Kimberly soon died, but Buhl persevered and, in the end, rued his involvement at Twin Falls chiefly because his profits were not larger.[15]

The South Side project was scarcely underway when Perrine proposed grand-scale development of potentially irrigable land stretching from the banks of the Snake River, opposite the South Side venture, for about twenty miles to the north. He cajoled Pennsylvania banker William Speer Kuhn and his brother, James Speer Kuhn, until they agreed to provide an irrigation system for the Twin Falls North Side tract. Perrine subsequently insisted the vast Mountain Home plateau succumb to irrigation. He likewise called for irrigated farming instead of emptiness on the Bruneau plateau that was situated west of the South Side project; and, as land reclamation developed, Bruneau plateau irrigation stayed barely beyond Perrine's fingertips until the 1940s. During the same time, he advocated transmontane diversion of water from Yellowstone Lake (the largest of several lakes in Yellowstone National Park), to ensure fuller irrigation of the Snake River Plain. In 1919, he sketched his grandest single proposal for new irrigation—Perrine's so-called Franklin K. Lane project containing one million acres.[16]

As for the Kuhn brothers, who had listened to Perrine's preaching, a journalist stated, "no [commercial] proposition" was "too big to be considered." In the end, they launched three irrigation projects in Idaho that altogether contained nearly 500,000 acres at the inception; they created a fourth irrigation venture in California; and they dabbled in Idaho's budding railroad and hydroelectric power industries.[17]

Aside from the Kuhns, the first doers of large-scale irrigation in Idaho included several other entrepreneurs whose commercial

designs nearly matched in size the grandeur of Perrine's visions for irrigation development. But many of their irrigation projects failed to prosper in the short run, and the big one in the Big Lost River valley collapsed. Even the Kuhns' irrigation empire toppled in 1913.[18]

The new doers of irrigation included enterprisers who exhibited less ambition than the Kuhns yet scarcely ever tackled the irrigation of so few as 50,000 acres. But these doers classed themselves in the Kuhns' league and carefully avoided the irrigation frontier's "grafters." Edwin Meredith—an Iowa publisher, subsequently governor of Iowa and later United States secretary of agriculture—insisted that he belonged to the group that reclaimed Idaho's arid land in good faith and practiced a type of capitalism that sold irrigation services in fair measure. Meredith even promised "to pull everybody through without loss" despite signs of abject failure at his West End Twin Falls irrigation project. Eventually, Meredith's project floundered. Many others were similarly unsuccessful despite the efforts of schemers to save them from abandonment. Although Governor Moses Alexander referred to one of these projects in particular, he explained what happened to many: the project "has had the mumps, measles and all the other childhood diseases," after which time its development remained at a standstill and only escaped "death and destruction by being well-nourished" verbally by its promoters.[19]

A second wave of doers invoked the likes of Buhl and the Kuhns during the 1910s and 1920s; like its predecessors, the group committed itself to satisfying Eden-seeker wants for land and water and to building a hydraulic agricultural order based on large-scale irrigation. However, the new group tried to avoid the errors of its predecessors who had underestimated the costs and non-monetary difficulties of reclaiming arid land on a grand scale. The work of the new doers, therefore, entailed patching the wounds of an old irrigation order, finding remedies to the mistakes of the first doers, and keeping alive the visions of crusaders such as Perrine while modifying old ideas to fit the economic, political, and environmental realities of the newer times. In trying to reshape irrigation in Idaho, the new doers depended heavily on counsel from engineers

such as Andrew Jackson Wiley and Warren Swendsen. Wiley and Swendsen had honed their irrigation science in the school of hard knocks while serving as advisers to irrigation's first doers and sharing responsibility for shortcomings in many of the state's biggest irrigation projects.

The work of Russell Easton Shepherd exemplified the more enlightened approaches of the new crop of doers to resolving the difficulties of Idaho's irrigation tracts. A Minnesota lawyer who relocated to Montana in 1906, Shepherd came to Idaho about a decade later to represent bondholders of the Twin Falls North Side Land and Water Company. The bondholders had paid for developing the Twin Falls North Side project to its imperfect condition; their investment of $4 million was imperiled by the collapse of the Kuhn brothers' empire in 1913. Shepherd decided that the bondholders could recover few dollars. But he also concluded that guarding bondholder interests, as well as saving North Side settlers from losing their land and improvements on their farms, depended on somehow nursing the irrigation project to better health. Shepherd's new preoccupations ranged from fashioning solutions to the project's water shortages and financial travail to dealing with North Side agriculture's sociological ills. Shepherd could see that the North Side project was not an island; instead, its destiny intertwined with irrigation developments across the Snake River Plain. Consequently, he plunged deeply into the state's irrigation affairs to make regional improvements such as building a new system of reservoirs in the Snake River basin. He carried irrigation's banners from leadership positions that he accumulated in canal companies, irrigation districts, land banks, intermediate credit banks, chambers of commerce, New Deal agencies during the 1930s, and political parties.[20] Until his death in 1944, Shepherd continued crusading to find ways of bettering irrigation in Idaho after the results had belied the dreams.

This second string of doers founded few new projects but, at their best, nursed older irrigation tracts back to health. They frequently improved conditions at such places by reducing projects to a size that was commensurate with the water resources actually at hand. Such practices, however, gave water to certain Eden-seekers

at the expense of others, and in places such as Churchill and Golden Valley in Cassia County, people were summarily cast aside and inevitably "lived and died for lack of water." For places like Taber and Kimama, irrigation's newest doers possessed no magic by which to relieve the miseries of people who had attempted to dry-farm desert land in the absence of reservoirs. In other instances, the ministrations of new doers helped farmers to gain more water but left the same farmers as vulnerable as ever to weather cycles and subsisting on variable streams of water from year to year. The commentary of a Wyoming farmer, in 1960, about his own circumstances near the headwaters of the Snake River just as accurately described the vulnerability of many Big Wood River, Big Lost River, and Salmon Falls Creek farmers after 1920. This farmer lamented "three years of good water supply and three years of inadequate or three years of medium." The consequence was a "boom-bust economy" in which a farmer "begins to get out of hock to the bank and then bang, he's hit with three years of inadequate water supply, doesn't raise anything, and is in it up to the hilt again."[21]

Architects and builders of grand-scale irrigation in Idaho often disappointed settlers and proved that irrigation's prophets had mistakenly pictured the road to Eden as short and straight. Nonetheless, irrigation's successive waves of doers accomplished more than their critics acknowledged. They had, at the least, demonstrated that irrigation was not inevitably a false idol for Eden-seekers. By Swendsen's estimates, Idaho farmers cultivated about 850,000 acres at Carey Act projects in 1924. In the same year, about 200,000 people lived within the confines of state government-sanctioned irrigation districts containing 1,723,673 acres. They irrigated the better part of this domain.[22]

But, in 1940, even the most fortunate of irrigationists also had good reasons to believe that the road to Eden stretched so far ahead and meandered so tortuously that reaching the end of it might require another fifty years. Each irrigation project had its own set of difficulties to surmount. Judy Austin's *Idaho Yesterdays* journal and Mark Fiege's *Irrigated Eden* (1999) analyze many of those problematic conditions. At the end of the twentieth century,

Idaho contained plenty of potentially irrigable land whereas its water resources were so finite that some of this land begged in vain for water. Given such conditions, the state's dreamers, schemers, and doers fell short of the mark that they had set for themselves. Clearly, the road to Eden in Idaho still meandered beyond the farthest horizon of human foresight; maybe all of the state's irrigable terrain can never be watered satisfactorily.

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Notes

1. F. H. Newell, "Progress in Reclamation of Arid Lands in the Western United States," *Annual Report to the Board of Regents, 1910* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1910), 171–72.

2. Roy E. Huffman, *Irrigation Development and Public Water Policy* (New York: Ronald Press, 1953), 62; Alfred R. Golzé, *Reclamation in the United States* (Caldwell, ID: Caxton Printers, 1961), 374.

3. *Evening Capital News* (Boise), February 18, 1912, 3.

4. Donald J. Pisani, *To Reclaim a Divided West: Water, Law, and Public Policy, 1848-1902* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1992), 249–51, 285–94; *The Register and Leader* (Des Moines, IA), October 18, 1908, 10; *Shoshone Journal* (ID), September 17, 1909, 4; Donald Worster, "Freedom and Want: The Western Paradox of Aridity," *Halycon* 14, no. 1 (1992): 27; L. H. Bailey, ed., *Cyclopedia of American Agriculture: A Popular Survey of Agricultural Conditions, Practices and Ideals in the United States and Canada*, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1907–1909). See especially R. H. Hess, "Socio-economic Aspects of Irrigation," 4:168–70, and for materials on Idaho agriculture, scattered articles in volumes 1 and 4.

5. See, for example, *Irrigation Bonds Based on the World's Greatest Industry* (Chicago: Trowbridge and Niver, 1909), copy in Romaine Trade Catalog Collection, Davidson Library, University of California, Santa Barbara.

6. Robert G. Athearn, *The Mythic West in Twentieth-Century America* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986), 31–33; Richard White, *"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own": A New History of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 405; Stanford J. Layton, *To No Privileged Class: The Rationalization of Homesteading and Rural Life in the Early Twentieth-Century American West* (Provo: Brigham Young University, Charles Redd Center for Western Studies, 1988), 5–19, 37–59.

7. *The State of Idaho: Official Report of the Bureau of Immigration, Labor and Statistics, 1905–1906* (n.p., [1906]), 107–108; "Report of Operation and Maintenance, 1912 [on Minidoka Project]" 68, Bureau of Reclamation Records, RG115, National Archives (hereafter NARG115). For accounts of how the newcomers fared on Idaho reclamation projects, see Richard Lowitt, "Irrigation Agriculture in Idaho as Seen by Henry A. Wallace in 1909," *Idaho Yesterdays* 35 (Spring 1991): 19–25; Richard Lowitt and Judith Fabry, eds., *Henry A.*

Wallace's Irrigation Frontier: On the Trail of the Cornbelt Farmer (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 118–68.

8. William E. Smythe, *The Conquest of Arid America* (1899; reprint, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1969), 186.

9. *Denver Post*, n.d., as cited in *Rupert (ID) Pioneer-Record*, December 22, 1910, 1; *Evening Capital News*, March 30, 1906, 1; "[Boise Project] History, 1902–11," 17, Bureau of Reclamation, NARG115.

10. Charles S. Miller to Wayne Darlington, September 19, 1904, Idaho Reclamation Records, Collection AR-20, Idaho State Archives, Boise.

11. Randall R. Howard, "Irrigation Frauds in Ten States," *Technical World Magazine* 17 (July 1912): 505; *Twin Falls (ID) News*, January 6, 1905, 4; typescript copy of paid newspaper advertising, n.d. [1908], Kings Hill Extension Irrigation Company Papers, Idaho State Historical Society, Boise; *Shoshone Journal*, October 9, 1909, 1; Herbert Wing to A. B. Gilbert, December 2, 1905, and R. P. Teele to James Stephenson Jr., May 25, 1909, Idaho Reclamation Records, Idaho State Archives.

12. *Twin Falls News*, February 23, 1906, 1; Ernest G. Eagleson to Charles Addison Beach, April 5, 1907, Ernest G. Eagleson Papers, Idaho State Historical Society; Addison T. Smith to W. B. Heyburn, July 14, 1905, Addison T. Smith Papers, Idaho State Historical Society; also see Mark Fiege, *Irrigated Eden: The Making of an Agricultural Landscape in the American West* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), 11–80.

13. *Chicago Daily Journal*, n.d., reprinted in *Burley (ID) Bulletin*, March 16, 1906, clipping in Bureau of Reclamation, NARG 115; James Stephenson Jr., "Sixth Biennial Report of the State Engineer to the Governor of Idaho, 1905–1906," 24; and Stephenson to F. R. Gooding, March 18, 1907, Frank R. Gooding Papers, Idaho State Archives.

14. *Idaho Daily Statesman* (Boise), November 11, 1905, clipping in Bureau of Reclamation, NARG115.

15. Merrill D. Beal and Merle W. Wells, *History of Idaho* (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing, 1959) 2:139–140; H. J. Kingsbury, *Bucking the Tide* (New York: Ganis and Harris, 1949), 45–47; O. A. Kelker, "The Story of I. B. Perrine," *Twin Falls (ID) Times-News*, June 27, 1971, A-4, A-5; James A. Connelly, "Frank Buhl's 'Other' Home," *Herald* (Sharon, PA), April 22, 1976; "Frank Henry Buhl," *National Cyclopedia of American Biography* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1967), 24:433; Joseph Riesenman Jr., *History of Western Pennsylvania* (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing, 1943), 3:93–95.

16. "Irrigating the Country between Boise and Mountain Home," n.d., 1, David W. Davis Papers, Idaho State Archives; Mikel H. Williams, *The History of Development and Current Status of the Carey Act in Idaho* (Boise: Department of Reclamation, 1970), 28–30; F. E. Weymouth to D. F. McGee, November 28, 1919, Bureau of Reclamation, RG 115, File 201-I, National Archives Branch Depository, Denver, CO; "Minidoka Project History, 1919," 51, 54–64, Bureau of Reclamation, RG 115; "Franklin K. Lane Reclamation Project [of] One Million Acres…," n.d., William E. Borah Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress; "Idaho Bruneau Prospectus and Suggestions," April 2, 1934, C. Ben Ross Papers, Idaho State Archives.

17. *Rupert Pioneer-Record*, February 25, 1909, 4; Williams, *Carey Act*, 72; Beal and Wells, *History of Idaho*, 2:145–47; *New California* (New York: A. Mestre, 1910), copy at New York City Public Library; *Sacramento Valley Irrigation Company: The Kuhn California Project* (n.p.: J. S. and W. S. Kuhn, n.d.), copy at Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

18. *New York Times*, July 8, 1913, 1, 2.

19. E. T. Meredith to Earl Sheets, November 11, 1913 (copy) and Moses Alexander to Senator William H. King, December 13, 1917, Moses Alexander Papers, Idaho State Archives.

20. Minutes of the State Board of Land Commissioners, September 10, 1919, Davis Papers; Byron Defenbach, *Idaho, The Place and Its People: A History of the Gem State from Prehistoric to Present Days* (Chicago: American Historical Society, 1933), 2:185–87; and for some of Shepherd's thinking about Idaho irrigation matters, see R. R. Shepherd, "The Financing of Irrigation Developments by Private Capital," *Transactions of the American Society of Civil Engineers* 90 (June 1927): 710–29; R. R. Shepherd, "Reclamation in Idaho," *New West Magazine* 11 (November 1920): 565–67.

21. *South Idaho Press* (Burley), April 17, 1972 and June 1, 1973, clippings in Al Dawson Scrapbook (copy), Idaho State Historical Society; Gerhard Riedesel, ed., *Arid Acres: A History of the Kimama-Minidoka Homesteaders, 1912 to 1932, By People Who Were There* (Pullman, WA: Gerhard Riedesel, 1969); *Upper Snake River Basin: Wyoming–Idaho–Utah–Nevada–Oregon* (Boise, Idaho: U. S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Reclamation Region 1 and Corps of Engineers, U. S. Army Engineer District, 1961), 2:18.

22. W. G. Swendsen to C. C. Moore, July 20, and August 20 and 16, 1924, Charles C. Moore Papers, Idaho State Archives.

Grubbing sagebrush on the Ferguson Fruit and Land Company, 22 miles west of Twin Falls. *Twin Falls Public Library, Clarence E. Bisbee Collection, 172*

CHAPTER 2

Sage, Jacks, and Snake Plain Pioneers

Crescent-shaped and bisected by the Snake River, the Snake River Plain reaches over three hundred miles westward from the mountains that divide Idaho and Wyoming to the Idaho-Oregon border. High mountain ranges, seventy-five to one hundred miles apart, mark the plateau's north and south perimeters. The plain's topography is spectacular as well as dimensionally grand, for the river long ago carved deep canyons, and elsewhere this awesome region contains "flat bottom lands sloping with the [Snake] river to high plateaus falling back, terrace above terrace, to the foothills on either side."[1] "A region awful in its aloofness and inexplicable in its calm," novelist Vardis Fisher wrote in 1937, the plain has defied man to conquer more than a small portion of that "rolling mass of loneliness and waste, with the integrity of granite and the changelessness of time." Today much of it remains, in Fisher's words, an "empire of aridity and stone."[2]

Through nearly all of the nineteenth century, few tried to make the plain habitable; the evidence against such undertakings seemed conclusive. Viewing the plain from hills looming above Fort Hall, John C. Fremont wrote in 1843: "Covered as far as could be seen with artemisia [sagebrush], the dark and ugly appearance of this plain obtained for it the name of the Sage Desert."[3] An 1846 Oregon Trail guidebook described the area as largely a "world of waste and wrack"; an 1839 traveler reported not a single acre west of Fort Hall suitable for "grains or vegetables"; equally uncomplimentarily, Captain Wilson Price Hunt characterized the region a "dreary desert of sand and gravel."[4] More widely read and influential, Washington Irving powerfully condemned the Snake River Plain as a place to settle. His account of the Hunt expedition, for instance, stated:

> It is a land where no man permanently resides: a vast, uninhabited solitude, with precipitous cliffs and yawning ravines, looking like

> the ruins of the world; vast tracts that must ever defy cultivation and interpose dreary and thirsty wilds between the habitations of man.[5]

When venturers ignored these dire warnings, they often regretted their rashness. Mary Hallock Foote, a resident of the Boise Valley in the 1880s and 1890s, concluded that life there became bearable only when one resignedly overlooked the area's multiple shortcomings. Another, less malleable, immigrant decried her desert farmstead near Hazelton, surrounded as it was by "miles and miles of wilderness, and not a sign of habitation; no tree, no green, only the pungent sagebrush. And everywhere leaping jack-rabbits."[6]

But tarnished reputation and continued negativism about the Snake River Plain finally no longer deterred; instead, thousands scurried there when federal and state governments and private entrepreneurs opened several dozen reclamation tracts between 1897 and 1917. The newcomers came on the advice of publicists, journalists, reclamation-tract salesmen, railroads, and best-seller novelists, all of whom preached that "honest fortunes" were "going to waste" on the long-maligned Idaho deserts.[7] At the height of the frenzy, a Colorado newspaper portrayed South Idaho as "The Land of Opportunity"; another promised that an eighty-acre "homestead" provided the certainty of reigning "farmer king, independent and happy"; and Filer, Idaho, promoters advertised their area as the "Center of the Modern Garden of Eden."[8] An amateur bard said of the Twin Falls reclamation tract:

> Oh! Come to the land of lotus and honey
> Where pleasures are plenty and everything money.[9]

The newcomers sharply boosted Idaho's population, which rose from about 100,000 at the turn of the century to 413,866 in 1920. South Idaho counties received almost 88 percent of the influx.[10]

The new farmers, a county agricultural agent observed, ranged from "struggling homesteader" to "retired capitalist." Many of them "city people," a significant number were "tired-out professional[s] and business-men" who, grasping for a last chance at the proverbial pot of gold, had every reason to hope that prophets had not misrepresented the "New West's" opportunities.[11] In their haste to create personal Edens, most incoming agrarians shunned

immediate comforts, first erecting crude housing on their domains. Tents or slightly more sophisticated canvas shelters could suffice in the southwestern counties where the climate was mild, but more commonly settlers built diminutive "prove-up" dwellings from tar paper over which they fashioned a wooden roof. On the Twin Falls South Side tract, such materials were obtainable for $125 to $150.[12] Playful settlers, unaware of their upcoming ordeals, placed signs on their homes proclaiming their unbounded optimism. "Paradise Avenue," one Twin Falls North Side hopeful christened his modest abode. Others, as if they sensed that these crude shelters might be their residences as long as they wrestled with the desert, used labels such as "Brimstone Bungalow."[13] However, those who expressed such negative outlooks incurred risks, for they brought suspicion upon themselves from reclamation-tract promoters and local civic boosters. The latter groups hated "knockers" and "croakers," and persistent pessimists might even be advised, as happened at Rupert, that a "croaker" was "a wart, a barnacle, and you had better sell out and move away. We don't need you and don't want you. Skiddoo!"[14]

Roofs above their heads, pioneers scanned their acres for renewed proof of fertility below the sagebrush that they must next remove. The State Engineer reported little difference in the richness of various Snake River Plain soils. However, if the sage was tall and bushy *artemisia tridentata* and their acres were free from low growths of greasewood, settlers exulted; local folklore and many experts equated the size and density of sage growth with soil fertility.[15] One expert, hired by the Twin Falls Land and Water Company to evaluate lands situated between the Salmon and Bruneau Rivers, classified the area "first class arid land." He reported:

> Those lands support at the present time a healthy growth of sagebrush and where the soil is deep and light in character, the growth is very rank. In one such place, we noticed a single bush which stood about a foot in height above a man's head on horseback. This is extra-ordinary. Both scientist and layman agree that sage-