

'TWO GUN' BOB

By Glenn Oakley

He moves across the stage with a distinctive Western swagger—cowboy hatted, woolly chaps on his legs, fancy revolvers holstered butt forward and a spinning lariat slicing loops and figure eights through the smoky air. He looks

out over the audience and smiles.

He feels a bit sorry for these Eastern city folks, all hemmed in by concrete and steel. Why, what wouldn't every red-blooded man out there give to live his kind of life—exploring the West, hunting big game, fishing in streams so thick with trout and salmon a man has to bait a hook behind a tree to keep the fish from leaping out of the water.

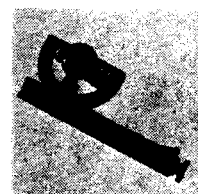
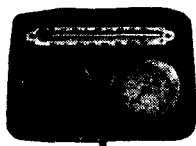
So he tells them how he discovered Craters of the Moon in wild Idaho, hiking 17 days across the greatest volcanic region in the world. How he and W.L. Cole were the first white men—maybe the first men ever—to explore the length of this expanse of lava, traveling 80 miles, following the flight of doves to find pockets of water, lowering themselves into bottomless volcanic pits, discovering the Lost Valley known only in Indian legends.

He shows motion pictures of the Sawtooth Mountains. In the Sawtooths, he says, "there are no snakes, no poison ivy, no dust, no hot days or nights, and no poisonous insects. It is the ideal vacation land of America." The Sawtooths and Idaho

practically overflow with birds and mammals of all kinds, he says. And then he gives imitations of their calls. He can do over 130 animal calls, so realistic they fool the animals themselves.

That is how he got so many of his fabulously close wildlife photographs, it is explained. He just called them right in. His skills as a taxidermist are not always included in his promotional literature.

After the motion pictures are over he readies the audience for the highlight of the evening—the most amazing trick shooting ever seen. He tosses a corked jar in the air and in a blue steel blur draws his revolver and shoots a hole through the cork and out the bottom of the jar, leaving the sides unscathed. He throws three glass balls into the air and explodes each one before they hit the ground. He sets an axe, blade forward, against a block of wood and places two plates on either side of the blade. Stepping back he draws his revolver and fires. The bullet cleaves on the very edge of the axe, shattering both targets.



His name was **Bob Limbert**: naturalist, explorer, guide, humorist, author, photographer, entertainer, poet, painter, trick shoot artist, taxidermist, sculptor, big game hunter, bird and animal imitator.

He was also undoubtedly the most flamboyant and active publicist Idaho has ever known, a one-man department of tourism. More than a half century ago Limbert perceived Idaho's beauty to be one of the state's greatest financial assets. He recorded the natural wonders of Idaho on film and canvas, toured the nation extolling its grandeur, good fishing and hunting, and started several enterprises capitalizing on wilderness tourism.

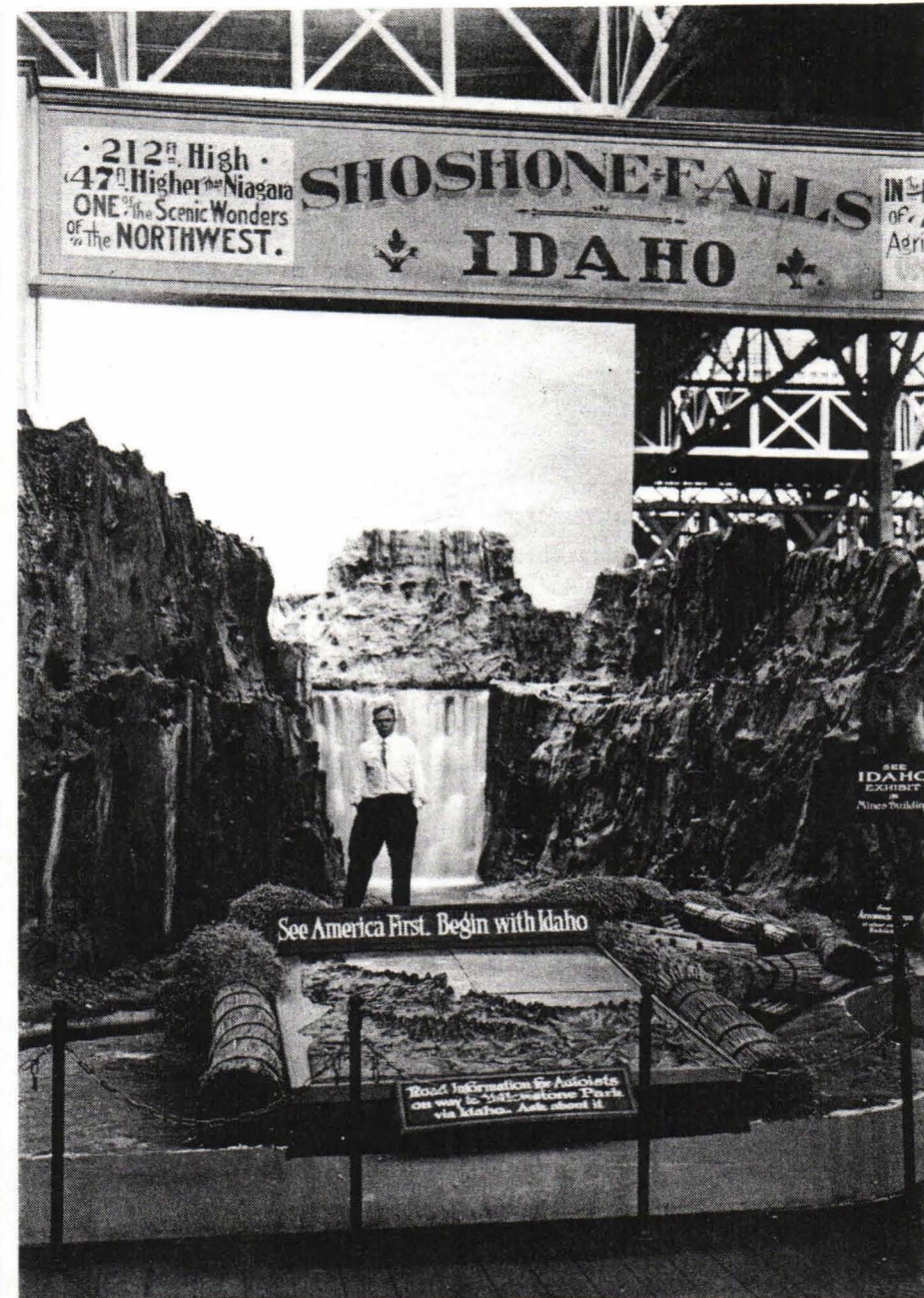
Today his collection of negatives, photographs, documents, and newspaper clippings from 1915-1933 are being catalogued and preserved in the Boise State Library archives. A gift from Limbert's daughter Margaret Lawrence (owner of Boise's Hollywood Market), plus material on loan from Craters of the Moon National Monument, the Limbert collection provides a unique look at Idaho in transition.

His photographs in particular document features of the state that have since changed or been destroyed—petroglyphs now obliterated by bullets, salmon runs now decimated by hydroelectric dams, vegetation since changed by grazing, fire and invader species, buildings since razed, communities and life-styles now non-existent.

The collection has potential uses for scholars and managers in a variety of disciplines: history, archaeology, geology and biology, for example. The National Park Service is using Limbert's photos of Craters of the Moon National Monument to compare present vegetation with that of 70 years ago. This information will help the agency prepare fire control and other land management strategies, according to the Park Service.

The Bureau of Land Management notes that Limbert's photographs of Indian Bathtubs "represent the earliest pictures we have of this area's pre-farming water level and clearly depict the once generous habitat of an endangered hot springs snail."

Even while the collection was being sorted, public historian Todd Shallat of BSU was able to use Limbert's photographs in a U.S. Bureau of Land Management-sponsored study of historical human occupation in what is now the Birds of Prey Natural Area. Limbert had spent much time along this length of the Snake River, photographing the extensive petroglyphs—which he first



chalked to provide clear detail—and photographing around Halverson Bar, a small settlement on the Snake River downstream from Swan Falls Dam.

Now in ruins, Halverson Bar was home to some of the more interesting characters in the region when Limbert photographed there in the 1920s. There is "Doc" Hisom, a half black/half Indian jack-of-all-trades, playing the bones with an impromptu band in his tiny, cluttered cabin. And wrestlers posed on a canyon rim above the river, arms locked around each other. The photographs not only revive the flavor of this lost community; they also provide missing facts. By studying the Limbert photos, BLM archaeologists were able for the first time to accurately identify the ruins of Hisom's cabin as well as other structures.

Shallat pointed out another, more

Above: A youthful Bob Limbert poses in front of his Idaho exhibition at the Panama-Pacific Exposition. Above right: Limbert chalked in petroglyphs to enhance photo reproduction. Right: Limbert's companions explored caves, lava tubes and craters in their travels across Craters of the Moon.

disturbing bit of information revealed by the photos. "It provides insight into just how hard people are on human relics," he said, noting that in a mere 50 years entire cabins have been reduced to a few piles of boards.

Other facts and insights no doubt remain to be discovered by scholars working with the collection. But first the materials must be preserved—flammable nitrate negatives copied; deteriorating manuscripts and documents reproduced; negatives printed.



What emerges from the packages of photographs, the black scrap-books and the dry, brown documents is the life of a man—one who was shaped by the West, and in turn helped create the West. Like a trick carnival mirror, Limbert reflected the state and its people with exaggeration and humorous distortion.

A lot of it was vaudeville showmanship, exploiting the Western myth for the entertainment of Easterners and profit. Limbert told the *Idaho Daily Statesman*, upon his return from the lecture circuit, "As a matter of fact, until I adopted the garb (cowboy hat, chaps) I couldn't make

any money. Nobody would believe that I came from the West, in spite of my sun-burned complexion and close acquaintance with firearms."

Indeed, two characters emerge from his letters: Limbert the mythical Westerner, and Limbert the businesslike American exploiting a new natural resource. He opened a letter written to Izaak Walton Leaguers with: "Well, by Golly—well, for crying out loud—well gosh darn but your (sic) looking fine. How the hell are you anyway I often think of you poor devils cooped up like you are while I, worthless good for nothing that I am out here in the land where men are real men and women

are mostly female impersonators and where red liquor costs you 25 cents across the counter with no thought of the Volstead Law. It's the life."

Two months earlier he had written a considerably more sedate, business-like letter to J.L. Kraft (the big cheese) soliciting financial backing for his Redfish Lodge. He told Kraft that he had spent from June 5 through Nov. 19 in the forests and mountains with a camera. "I did this because in my estimation the pictures I have secured are the basis of success of the whole proposition [the Redfish Lodge] after the accommodations are ready. Just to give you an idea I have at the present time a total of 14 different magazine stories relative to this region placed in 11 different magazines. *The New York Times* has offered me two pages in the rotogravure section if I will furnish the photos and write up note. What is the use of me giving publicity to the section before I am able to capitalize on it. I also have been on the lyceum and chataqua courses giving nature talks and bird whistling imitations. As you know I hold at the present time the world's championship with revolvers for exhibition shooting. Considered in a business way I do not flatter myself that this means anything but considered as a means of publicity to boost and interest people in a proposition like this, it is invaluable."

The real Limbert was probably an amalgamation of these extremes. He himself seemed to prefer the image personified by the leading characters in his



short stories, people like Lightning Lancaster, "who came and went as he pleased, asking favors of no one, yet continually going out of his way to do them for others. . . . His peculiar one-sided draw [same as Limbert's] was said to be so fast the eye could hardly follow it. . . . His accuracy was said to be so remarkable he could toss pennies in the air and hit them with a bullet."

From another short story is a dashing archaeologist "who lived the kind of life all red-blooded men would choose to live if they could."

Limbert did live out the Western myth. Born in Omaha, Neb., he had a boyhood fascination with nature that did not diminish. He studied taxidermy there, filling sketch books with detailed animal anatomies to learn the musculature and conformation of the animals he would stuff.

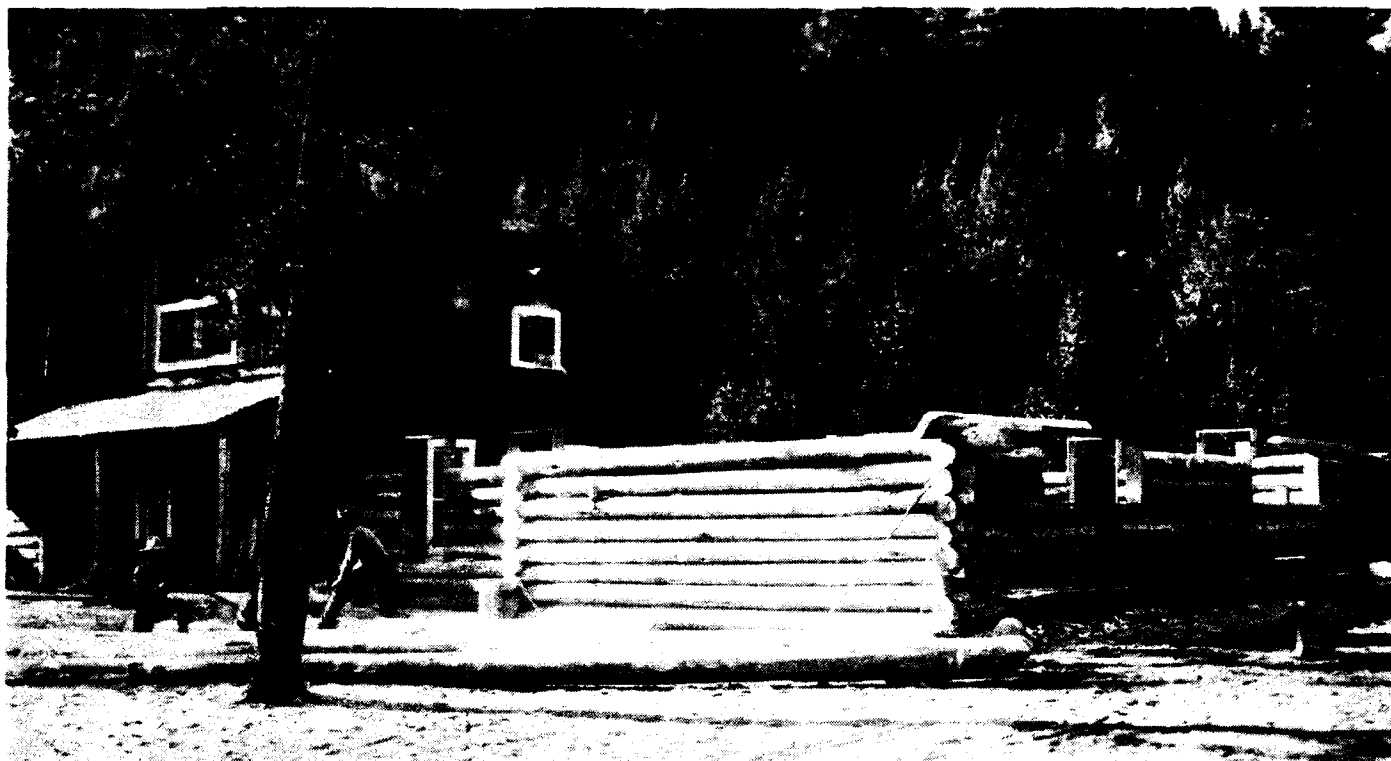
In 1911 he moved from Omaha to Boise to work as a taxidermist. He was apparently as good at self-promotion as he was at taxidermy. Just three years after his arrival in Boise he was commissioned to produce the Idaho exhibit at the Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco. That exhibit, with its large-scale models of Shoshone Falls (running water and all), Arrowrock Dam and irrigated farmland, and the Sawtooth Mountains, garnered a boxful of medals, more than any other country or state at the expo.

It showed off Idaho as never before, and it showed off Bob Limbert as never

before. He returned to Boise with a heightened sense of showmanship and adventurism, notes Nick Casner, a BSU public history student who is cataloging the collection of photographs. Limbert began giving nature talks to local groups and he formed a chapter of the Audubon Society. With friends he would travel into the Owyhee desert with his camera, recording Indian pictographs, digging up Indian massacre sites, photographing the spectacular canyons. In the spring of 1917 he made an epic journey across the Craters of the Moon, making some 200 photographs of the region with a large view camera.

Limbert did not discover Craters of the Moon. The vast volcanic region was known all too well to numerous homesteaders, ranchers and travelers. But it was known as a place to avoid, and those who did venture into it quickly left, says Craters of the Moon park interpreter David Clark. "As soon as they got into it they decided they'd had enough and got out," he said. "Limbert appears to be one of the first people who explored the Great Rift." Furthermore, he began to promote Craters of the Moon as a major tourist attraction.

He sent President Calvin Coolidge a scrapbook with pictures and narration detailing his trip across the Great Rift. His 1924 *National Geographic* article brought additional attention to the area. Within a few months Coolidge declared a portion of the Great Rift as the Craters of the





Above: Limbert in his cowboy garb. Above left: Limbert always carried a camera and a gun. Below: The construction of Redfish Lodge was Limbert's final project. Right: Limbert photographed the Sawtooth Mountains to promote tourism in the region.

Moon National Monument, although it is doubtful the article itself induced the president's decision.

Limbert quickly secured a contract to provide guided tours through the new national attraction. He also repeated his south-north traverse of the Great Rift with a group of friends, finishing the journey with an all-town welcome from the people of Arco, complete with brass band. His photographs of the area, according to Clark, "Are as far as we know the only source of early photographs of the area."

By the mid-1920s Limbert was busy enough with his guiding services in the summer and speaking engagements in the winter to abandon his taxidermy business. With Dorothy Fox as his agent, Limbert hit the road with a Wild West show. Under the auspices of a newly formed conservation group, the Izaak Walton League, Limbert toured the Midwest and East, giving two-hour shows in auditoriums for crowds of people who only wished they could be like "Two Gun" Bob Limbert—"The Man from the Sawtooths."

His shows were apparently successful, due in no small part to Limbert's flair for publicity. When he arrived in Chicago for a series of shows he publicly challenged Al Capone and other gangsters to a gunfight. He told the press: "From what I read, I supposed I'd meet some real he-shooters here. Say, print a piece for me in your paper, will you? Say that I'd like to take on any 10 bad men in your burg. Sure, I'll take 'em on all at once. I ain't boasting, mind you, but if I can't shoot the guns out of the hands of these starched-up little pets, my name ain't Bob Limbert."

The press loved it and was more than willing to perpetuate the myth of the West. The *Des Moines Register* said he "became proficient as a pistol shot through the pastime of plugging grasshoppers on the fly from the back of a speeding cayuse."

In many ways Limbert was a visionary, foreseeing the attraction of wilderness and wild places, the longing for the disappearing frontier—and recognizing that people would be willing to pay to experience it.

But in some cases he misjudged what sort of wildness the public wanted. Craters of the Moon never became a destination point for vacationing Easterners. And to this day the Bruneau Canyon remains an unknown even to most Idahoans living within 50 miles of it. Those places were too severe.

Limbert apparently learned from his Wild West shows that folks responded best to the Alps-like Sawtooth Mountains, the hunting and fishing and camping. He began concentrating his efforts there, building Redfish Lodge and securing Forest Service rights to the best—and sometimes only—building locations on Alturas and Petit Lakes. Touring with the Wild West show in the winter and guiding in the summers, he was getting by, if not exactly making a killing. In March of 1948 the publishing house Little Brown made him an offer that would guarantee both a steady income and a place in history. He was asked to write his autobiography.

The next month, while still on the traveling circuit, he received news that his mother was dying. Rushing back west he died of cerebral hemorrhage in Wyoming. He was 48 years old.

