



ROBERT LIMBERT

CRATERS OF THE MOON NM

*Compiled and interpreted from existing materials
by Lennie Ramacher, Park Guide*

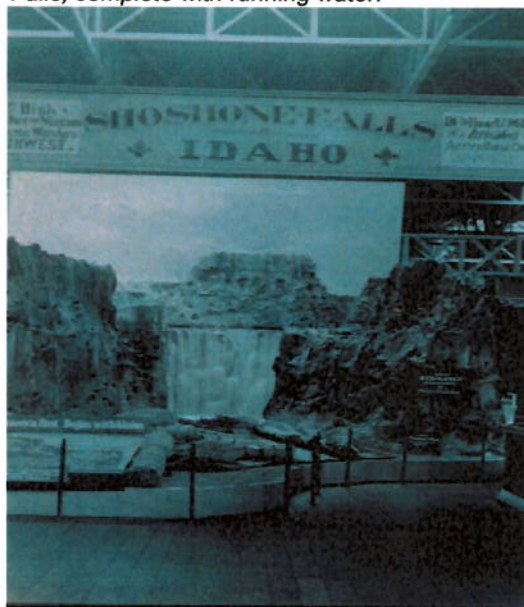
An apt description of Robert Limbert's pioneering life and travels is best summed up in his own words: he continually sought places "where the other fellows haven't been." Limbert may have been speaking about his explorations of the hidden regions of Idaho, but it also applied to his efforts to preserve scenic landscapes and promote Idaho as a vacation destination for the rest of the country. For close to two decades, Limbert was the face of Idaho's rough and rugged qualities. If ever an individual fit the title of jack-of-all-trades, it was Robert "Two-Gun Bob" Limbert. A taxidermist by trade, Limbert is described variously as a naturalist, outdoor photographer, writer, entertainer, promoter, and explorer. His experiences would support all of these claims.



Robert "Two-Gun Bob" Limbert.

Limbert moved to Boise in 1911 and began his career in taxidermy. His eye for subtle details soon made him one of the premier taxidermists in the area, and by 1915 he'd established one of the region's largest taxidermy businesses. Shortly thereafter he landed the high-profile commission to produce the Idaho state exhibit for the San Francisco World's Fair of 1915. Intricately detailed displays of the Sawtooth Mountains, Idaho's agricultural bounty, and Arrowrock Dam—at the time the world's highest dam—garnered large audiences. As Idaho's unofficial ambassador to the world, Limbert was in his element as promoter of the state's natural resources and recreational opportunities.

Limbert's design of the Idaho exhibit at the 1915 World's Fair included Shoshone Falls, complete with running water.



Soon after the success of the exhibition, Limbert began looking for other opportunities to raise Idaho's profile. He explored the depths of Bruneau Canyon and petroglyphs along the Snake River, snapping photographs all the while. Several of his photo essays covering these excursions were published in national magazines. These photo essays were the basis for one of Limbert's most enduring legacies, as he unknowingly created a vast record of the region's primitive natural and historical resources for scholars to study later.



Limbert with petroglyphs at Map Rock.

By the end of the decade, Limbert had made a couple brief forays into a remote area of the Snake River Plain, a place known for its seemingly unending lava flows and little else. In May of 1920, accompanied by Walter Cole of Boise and an Airedale terrier by the name of Teddy, Limbert set out on a 17-day exploration of what would later become Craters of the Moon National Monument. Limbert's records reveal a journey that combined exploration of unique

features while tackling difficult obstacles at the same time. Just days into the trek, the rugged expanse of a'a flows that were crossed left Teddy's feet in tatters, requiring the men to carry the dog over some of the rougher surfaces. Water was also hard to come by on the lava flows, even in the spring time. One method of retrieving water required one of the men to climb down into a crevice and break off pieces of ice to melt into water. If no ice could be found in crevices, Limbert keenly tracked the flight of doves to locate the few naturally occurring waterholes within the lava fields. Finding their way across the lava with a compass proved difficult, too. As basaltic lava rock is high in iron content, Limbert and Cole had difficulty determining true north and the direction of their travel across the lava fields on several occasions.

For all their travails, they were rewarded with amazing natural features and named several prominent landmarks that retain their names to this day. One particular stretch of flat, barren landscape and the lava tree casts contained there

reminded Limbert of the trenches of World War I, which earned the area the name Trench Mortar Flats. Other features received much simpler names, such as Yellowjacket Waterhole, named for the layer of dead bees floating on the water's surface. A natural bridge, left standing when a lava tube collapsed on either side of it, was christened Bridge of Tears when a member of their party hit his head passing beneath the arch.

Lava trees on the Trench Mortar Flats.



Upon returning from the 80-mile journey, Limbert set about efforts to protect the lava fields as a national park. Partly to establish a tourist attraction for Idaho, Limbert was also motivated to protect this rare landscape as a place of natural and historic heritage. Urging protective status for the lava fields in the *Idaho Sunday Statesman*, Limbert stated, "There is one thing to be deplored and it is that the mounds and other features built by the Indians will have been torn down and destroyed with their contents carried off for the personal gratification of an unthinking few. Cannot something be done to prevent this?"



Limbert and Cole explore a cavern at the Craters of the Moon lava fields.

Collectors and the "unthinking few" were but one obstacle to overcome. His efforts to draw national attention to the area were stymied when National Geographic Magazine froze publication of Limbert's essay and photographs of the Craters area for over two years until his account could be verified independently. Despite this setback, by the time of publication the area was receiving serious consideration for preservation status. To help propel the effort over the top, Limbert sent a scrapbook with photographs and brief essays of the area to President Calvin Coolidge. Later that year, in 1924, Craters of the Moon National Monument was created.

After the creation of the monument, Limbert turned his attention to other endeavors but continued to promote Idaho's recreational attractions. In the mid-1920s he moved his family to Redfish Lake at the foot of the Sawtooth mountain range. There he built Redfish Lake Lodge and several cabins as a wilderness resort for vacationers, leading pack trips through the forests and fishing expeditions onto Redfish Lake.

In order to drum up business for his resort—and earn a living during the lean winter months—Limbert toured east coast cities to extol "wild Idaho" and its attractions. He developed the persona of "Two-Gun Bob", a brash, sharp-shooting showman to wow the crowds back east.



Limbert led packhorse trips into the wilderness near Redfish Lake Lodge.

Limbert routinely beat the best gunman each town had to offer in a shooting contest. His repertoire included breaking two glass bottles simultaneously by splitting a bullet fired at an ax blade from twenty paces; holding an item at arm's length, dropping the item, drawing his gun and firing, and hitting the object before it touched the ground; shooting through the neck of a glass bottle tossed into the air, breaking the bottom of the bottle and leaving the rest unharmed. Amazingly, Limbert rarely practiced with live ammunition. Instead, as practice his children would throw an object into the air and Limbert would simply practice sighting objects with his gun. After such exhibitions and tales of his adventures, audience members eagerly signed up for summer visits to his resort.

For all his explorations and adventures, Robert Limbert's life came to an end far removed from the rugged frontier life. Returning home in 1933 to be at his ailing mother's side, Limbert suffered a massive brain aneurism and died in Cheyenne, Wyoming. For all his successful explorations and efforts to boost tourism in the state of Idaho, Limbert's greatest legacy may have been his extensive collection of photographs from around the state. These photographs have allowed archeologists to gauge the number and variety of petroglyphs left by American Indians, and resource managers can compare today's plant and wildlife habitat to the near-pristine settings captured in his shots of Craters of the Moon and other places throughout Idaho.



Limbert and his camera left an enduring legacy for others to appreciate Idaho's scenery and heritage.