

The town that disappeared

by By Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald

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An electrical distribution facility is at the lower right. (Photo by Pete Basche/Baker County Library Historic Photo Collection)

BAKER CITY, Ore. (AP) — The series of black-and-white photographs that scroll across Gary Dielman's computer monitor tell the story of a Baker County town that disappeared 59 years ago.

But Robinette is nothing like the county's many other ghost towns.

You can't go there and stand where its homes once stood, or glimpse what might have been the corner of a foundation or touch the shard of brick that was part of a chimney.

Because Robinette is underwater.

The place where parents raised their families and where kids ran through the sagebrush and rode their horses and hooked catfish from the Snake River — all of it lies more than 100 feet below the surface of Brownlee Reservoir near the mouth of the Powder River.

Robinette was inundated in 1958 when Idaho Power Company's Brownlee Dam was finished and the Snake's water started to back up behind the 420-foot high earthfill structure.

Robinette, which was never incorporated, endured almost until the water began to rise, slowly but inexorably, on the basalt walls of Hells Canyon.

Robinette's post office, established on May 3, 1909, closed on Nov. 29, 1957.

A little more than five months later, in May 1958, the Brownlee Dam's gates were closed.

The site of Robinette, several miles upriver, soon was gone.

Some of the town's buildings were moved — a laborious process along the narrow roads that connected Robinette with Richland and Halfway — and survive still.

But the pictorial history of Robinette exists, and in rich detail, mainly because of one man and his affinity for photography.

Pete Basche was born on Nov. 23, 1913, at Home, another Baker County village, about 20 miles upriver from Robinette, that was also covered by Brownlee Reservoir.

Home was near the mouth of Connor Creek about 17 miles north of Huntington, where Pete graduated from high school in 1933.

Before he attended Huntington High, Pete for a time had to row a boat across the Snake — then still a free-flowing river, subject to the vagaries of rainstorms and spring snowmelt — to Idaho, where he was a student at the mining town of Mineral.

After marrying Ernestine Carnahan, Pete moved to Halfway where he and his brother, Bert, owned the Halfway Grocery and Meat Market.

In February 1942, Pete and Ernestine moved to Robinette. The town was named for James Robinette, who settled there in October 1887.

Over the next 15 years, Pete was the Standard Oil Co. fuel distributor, hauling gasoline and diesel and heating oil around Baker County's Panhandle. But he also used his camera to document life in one of the more isolated towns not just in Baker County, but in Oregon.

Pete's daughter, Betty Basche, who was born on Dec. 30, 1942, in the family's home at Robinette, said her father "always had a camera."

"We didn't go anywhere without a camera," Betty said.

She said her father not only enjoyed taking photographs, but he often read magazine articles to learn about the latest techniques and the most advanced equipment.

Pete's photographic subjects ranged from Christmas pageants at the one-room, K-8 Robinette school, to boat trips down the Snake River's rapids, to family outings in Hells Canyon or to Anthony Lakes to escape the Canyon's oppressive summer heat.

In the last few years before Robinette was submerged, Pete focused his lens most often on the very project that doomed his town — the construction of Brownlee Dam.

He photographed the multi-year process — it started in 1955 — from the ground on both the Oregon and Idaho shores of the Snake, from the steep slopes above, and in several cases from an airplane.

"That was his passion — photography," said Dielman, who curates the Baker County Library District's Historic Photo Collection, an online archive that includes almost 8,200 images.

The collection surpassed the 8,000 threshold last week when Dielman added 270 photos, most of them taken by Pete during the 1950s while he was raising his family at Robinette (Dielman also included some photos, mainly of the Brownlee Dam construction, supplied by Idaho Power Company).

Pete, who moved to Richland in 1957, died on July 17, 2004, at age 90.

The Pete Basche Collection is included with Gallery 6 on the online collection, which is available at bakerlib.org. To get to Pete's photos, click on Gallery 6, then either search for "Basche" or click on the Table of Contents and scroll down to the start of the Pete Basche Collection.

Dielman became aware of Pete's irreplaceable photographic legacy through two people who grew up in Robinette — Betty, who lives in Richland in the very home in which she was born; and Richard Carrithers, a retired lawyer who lives in Bellevue, Washington.

Betty inherited much of her father's photo collection — more than 1,000 images.

But many years before Pete Basche died, he had also given a box of photos to Carrithers.

Carrithers eventually decided to preserve those photos by having the negatives processed into digital positives.

Betty said that several years after her father died she was asked by the Baker County Historical Society to give a presentation about Robinette. That prompted her to call Carrithers, who knows much about the town's history, and he told Betty about digitizing her father's photos, some of which she used to illustrate her talk.

Carrithers, who graduated from Yale University and its law school, eventually got in touch with Dielman, which led to Pete's photos being added to the Library's collection.

Betty said she's "really happy" that those photos are now available to everyone.

Dielman said Carrithers' efforts, which included writing many of the captions that accompany the photos, was invaluable.

"I have a lot to thank Richard for," Dielman said.

Besides helping to compile Pete's photographs, Richard Carrithers also took recent photos from nearly the same place that Pete was standing when he made his images in the 1950s.

The purpose of these photo re-enactments was to show how far the reservoir rose on the canyon walls. Carrithers drew a red line across Pete's historic photos to approximate the water level when Brownlee is full.

Carrithers' sister, Diane Carlisle, who also grew up in Robinette and now lives in Baker City, also contributed to the project.

Carlisle, who moved with her parents to Robinette when she was 6 and her brother was 4, said that although Robinette was isolated, it was also a much more active community than its population, which generally ranged between 25 and 30, might suggest.

"It was an amazing childhood," said Carlisle, 76.

Her parents, Ray and Frankie Carrithers, owned the grocery store in Robinette as well as a ranch on the Idaho side of the Snake River. Either her mother or her father usually operated the Robinette post office as well.

Although road access to Robinette was relatively rudimentary — today's Highway 86 from Halfway to Oxbow and Brownlee had not been built — the town's real lifeline was the railroad, Carlisle said.

The line, which started at the Union Pacific rails at Huntington, was extended north along the Oregon side of the Snake River, reaching Robinette in 1909.

Carlisle said the train ran at least once a week, and twice a week when cattle and sheep from the Eagle, Pine and lower Keating valleys were being hauled to Huntington.

For people in, say, Halfway, it was often easier to reach Baker City by driving to Robinette and taking the train, Carlisle said.

“I remember I got a new bicycle for my seventh birthday, and it arrived on the train,” she said.

Betty Basche shares Carlisle’s affection for Robinette.

“It was really a fun way of growing up,” Betty said. “I always felt blessed. We had the run of the town.”

Dielman, who in addition to overseeing the Library District’s historic photo collection has written extensively about Baker County history, said the Pete Basche collection has been among his more rewarding projects.

The history of Robinette is fascinating in large part, Dielman believes, because the town hasn’t simply been weathered by time and neglect.

It’s literally gone — and in a more complete sense than other towns, such as Auburn, for which no remnants remain.

But Robinette’s record also is far more complete because Pete Basche ran so much film through his camera.

“For me this was maybe the most important thing I’ve done,” Dielman said. “It’s an important story.”

Information from: [Baker City Herald](#)