

# Eastern Oregon ghost town lies underwater

By JAYSON JACOBY  
Baker City Herald

BAKER CITY — 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 earth-fill 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



Photo by Pete Basche/Baker County Library Historic Photo Collection

**A view of Robinette looking south up the Snake River. An electrical distribution facility is at the lower right. LEFT: A self-portrait of Pete Basche, who documented the town of Robinette, from the early 1950s.**



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 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 this month when Dielman added 270 photos, most of them taken by Pete during the 1950s while he was raising his family at Robinette.

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.

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