Idaho Center for the Book newsletter

"...because people read t-shirts."

Vol. 12/No. 2 • October 2005

Upcoming Biblio Events

A VIRTUAL TOUR

The Idaho Center for the Book is pleased to announce "Evelyn Sooter: Finding Art Everywhere," a virtual tour of the North Idaho artist-bookmaker's homestead and work. Take the tour at www.lili.org/icb (listed under "Center Exhibitions").

BOOKER'S DOZEN 2006

Fourteen handmade books by Idahoans selected for the ICB's sixth biennial juried competition travel to twelve Idaho venues during the calendar year.

In this issue

"Cozy up to a book!"
This issue's literary t-shirt is by Severina Gates!

VARDIS FISHER STATE PARK

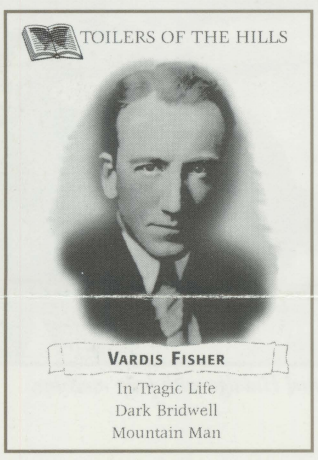
by Tim Woodward

Anyone into trout fishing in Idaho knows about the Hagerman area's famous Billingsley Creek, but who was Billingsley?

I checked reference books and The Idaho Statesman archives, and neither said who Billingsley was. Our fishing gurus, Pete Zimowsky and Roger Phillips, didn't know. Idaho for the Curious author and Cort Conley didn't know. Not even the district manager for a Hagerman-area state park that may be named after him knew who the mysterious Billingsley was.

"We're asking local people but haven't got a firm answer," Thousand Springs Park District Manager Lonnie Johnson said. "We don't even know if he lived In the area."

Yet the state is considering naming a park that includes the homesite of Idaho's most famous native author after Billingsley. Vardis Fisher, who lived and died there, wrote 36 books and was credited with creating a new regional fiction. His books were internationally acclaimed and translated into five languages.



Fisher card from deck of IDAHO AUTHORS! card game published by the ICB.

I couldn't even find anyone who knew Billingsley's first name.

"I have no idea who he was," Idaho Center for the Book Director Tom Trusky said. "But Fisher is our leading native Idaho author. We at the Idaho Center for the Book are hopeful the state will establish a park at the Fisher homesite and name it after him. We think it would be fitting as well as a visual and economic draw for the area."

Vacant for decades following his death in 1968, Fisher's home burned about five years ago.

"When the literary history of Idaho is written, one of the real regrets people will have is that the state didn't jump at the opportunity to save it and name a site there for him," said BSU English professor James Maguire, past president of the Western Literature Association. "People should be able to see where he worked and lived. You don' have to travel very far to know that other states have done a much better job of honoring their writers."

Photo by Rick Just, Idaho State Parks and Recreation

Vardis Fisher Lake with the twin chimneys of the burned out Fisher house on the hill in the center.

Trusky envisions a deck on the Fisher home' foundation and summer writers' workshops overlooking the property's spring-fed lake.

Whatever becomes of the property, it shouldn't be named after Billingsly the Obscure (someone will be calling any second now with his life story). It should be named for Fisher. Trusky's absolutely right that Hagerman, and Idaho, would benefit from the literary events that would result.

Two parcels of land comprise the area. If something besides the creek has to be named for Billingsley, whoever he was, name one for him and the one with the Fisher property for Fisher.

This is the haunting spot where Fisher built a log home, planted hundreds of trees and installed an irrigation system to water them. The secluded hideaway with the jade lake was his sanctuary. The prospect of people swimming, fishing, playing boom boxes, littering and peeing in the lake seems all but sacrilegious.

I'm not writing this because I wrote a biography of Fisher and stand to get a fat royalty check. My last royalty check for what's now an old book wouldn't have bought a good pair of shoes.

Telling Fisher's story wasn't about money. It was because he hadn't gotten the respect he deserved. Sixteen years later, that doesn't appear to have changed.

HONORING IDAHO'S LITERARY PIONEER OVERDUE

Well, now I know who Billingsley was.

Boy, do I know.

As expected, the ink had hardly dried on last week's column before e-mails from Billingsley descendants began arriving. The column had said, a bit irreverently, that a state park near Hagerman should be named for author Vardis Fisher rather than "Billingsley the Obscure."

The descendants, understandably, didn't take too kindly to that.

"It seems to me if you are going to call somebody Billingsley the Obscure you should do some due diligence to confirm that obscurity," Allen Ellis wrote.

My search for Billingsley had included reference books, Statesman archives and several people in a position to know, but had come up empty.

I should have called the historical society. Ellis did, and accordingly referred me to a Statesman article about his great grandmother, Jane Elizabeth Billingsley, published following her death in 1931. For anglers who have plied the waters of the famous Billingsley Creek and wondered who Billingsley was, here's a condensed version:

Jane Elizabeth Thorpe was born in England, came to America at 7, crossed the plains in a covered wagon and lived in Utah and Malad. She married Archie Billingsley, who had a ranch near Hagerman and sold hay to Wells Fargo. In 1878, fearing an Indian attack, she rode many miles to the safety of a settlement with her two small children on horseback. The Billingsleys later moved to the Carey area. Archie maintained a room of their home for public use as a school.

So the Billingsleys were pioneers. They helped settle a wild and dangerous part of the country, survived scary times

continued on page 2

PULP FACT STRANGER THAN FICTION

by Dung & Dunger

"Daniel, what would you say if I told you I had an art project that I think might get us a little attention?" – *Victor Bruha, artist - Fall, 2003*

"I think it is crazy. Just crazy enough to work!" – *Daniel Hidalgo, artist - Fall, 2003*

It was just about that simple of a beginning. The humble idea of taking an ancient form of paper-making and an equally ancient method of printing (both with origins in Asia) and doing something new with it. Something not only new, but unique and grotesque as well as traditional and beautiful. It was a brief, yet joyful conversation between old friends leading them to eventually create a new medium which quickly gained them artistic notoriety and modest media fame.

Victor Bruha and Daniel Hidalgo are two artists who share a common vision: A desire to create artwork that not only stirs the imagination, but also shares their unique sense of humor and love for the Greater Yellowstone region, particularly the American Bison. They are artists, outdoor enthusiasts and good friends that have known each other since their adolescent days of slamming locker doors at the junior high school in Blackfoot, Idaho. Both are suckers for the spotlight and well known among friends for their contagious and sometimes off-beat sense of humor.

◀ *Sample swatch of bison dung paper*

What they have created genuinely illustrates how the combination of naturalist, artist, comedian, environmentalist and businessman can be a grand recipe for success. Politically neutral, the two carefully balance their passion for nature and desire to be a financial success. They believe strongly that in America, you simply have to look hard enough and the answer to success is right in front of your eyes (if not under hoof). To prove that point, this idea they nurtured was so simple, that the original cost to start their tiny company was less than $100. Better yet, the materials needed to create their product cost them absolutely nothing.

They create paper. Dung paper to be more specific. Beautiful, rustic and odor free sheets are made from the droppings of bison and bits of recycled paper scraps collected from the trash. It is a wonderful story about recycling, ingenuity, creativity and conservation. The two artists even convey their sense of humor and creativity with the name of their venture, known officially as "Dung & Dunger."

"It was obvious once we saw the material [dung] for what it really was. The bison chips are simply wonderful, green globs of paper!" said Bruha. Fiber and lots of it. Cellulose plant fiber is the main ingredient for any organic, pulp based paper. The wonderful thing about it, is that it is all natural and that the bison are doing the majority of the hard labor. The bison macerate the plant fibers down into tiny particles that are the essence of what the paper is. By chewing the grasses and breaking down the bits, they then travel through the digestive tract until the tiny fibers are excreted as what Bruha and Hidalgo affectionately call "Brown Gold."

When word first got out to the media about this unusual project, the two had barely a moment to realize just how popular this idea would be. They knew that they had to move quickly to capitalize on the free advertising and exposure. Story after story began running in numerous newspapers, television news programs, magazines and informational websites. It soon became difficult to keep up with interview schedules and product demand since neither Bruha nor Hidalgo had given up their own full time career.

The paper project has been a kind of overnight success. It isn't often that a business can take a hundred bucks and begin producing a product that is so popular. It doesn't hurt that

continued on page 2

442

Vardis Fisher – continued from page 1

and did some admirable things. It's altogether fitting that a trout stream where they once lived be named for them.

Does it also mean a state park should be named for them instead of Fisher? With due respect, I don' think so. The Fishers also were pioneers. Vardis Fisher was born in 1895 and grew up on a frontier farm in eastern Idaho, 30 miles from the nearest town. He was a literary pioneer as well. Before him, there was no literature from this part of the world.

Fisher, according to Professor Joseph Flora of the University of North Carolina, "was not everyone's favorite,

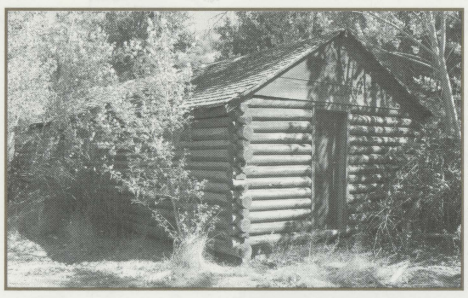


Photo by Rick Just, Idaho State Parks and Recreation

The Fisher house was a log building. This is one of the surviving outbuildings in the same style..

certainly, but he gave Idaho a literary prominence that it had not had before. Naming the new park for him would honor a heritage and serve Idaho well."

Flora's was one of 55 responses the Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation received on naming the park following last week' column noting that the public comment period ends today. Fifty-one of the 55 supported naming it for Fisher. (Three of them also said the creek should keep the Billingsley name regardless.) Three favored naming the park for Billingsley, one for Fisher-Billingsley.

"Idaho needs to honor its best-known writer," Gary Bennett of Emmett wrote. "Fisher's second book was ranked by The New York Times as one of the 10 best American novels ever written.... Idaho makes much of Ernest Hemingway and Ezra Pound, who barely lived here, and ignores the writer who spent the most time here."

Sherilyn Orr e-mailed the state to say the park should go forward "only if you name it for Fisher and devote some portion of use to conservation and higher learning such as historical exploration and writers workshops. We have plenty of opportunities to swim and fish and ride four-wheelers and jet skis. The history of this property is more significant than that. It needs to be honored."

"Idaho has many geological wonders, and this is one of them," Richard Andrews of Salt Lake City wrote. "It would be a shame to not preserve this place for future generations and name it after Idaho's most important writer."

No one is arguing to take anything away from the Billingsleys. Keep the creek and anything else currently named for them as they are.

But it's time Fisher got some recognition in the state he put on the literary map. True, he wasn't an easy man to like. He was an abrasive iconoclast, which is probably why recognition has been so long in coming.

He also was the author of the best books ever written in Idaho about Idaho places and Idaho people. Yet in the state where he was born and spent most of his life, not one thing is named for him. A Vardis Fisher State Park at the place where he lived, worked and died would be a fitting way to correct that.

Editor's note: These are slightly condensed versions of two columns by Tim Woodward which appeared June 23rd and 30th, 2005. They are reprinted, courtesy of The ***Idaho Statesman*** *and the author. Woodward has requested royalties from his biography of Fisher,* ***Tiger on the Road*** *(an ICB publication), support Hagerman park operations, if the State of Idaho names a portion of its holdings there after the Idaho author.*

Pulp Fact – continued from page 1

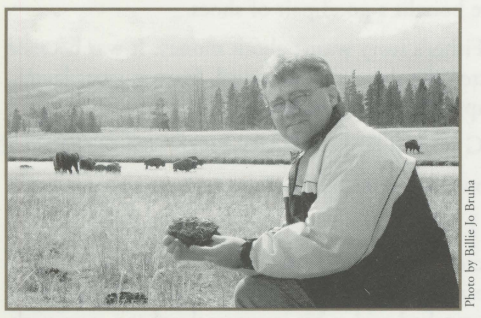


Photo by Billie Jo Bruha

Victor Bruha collecting "Brown Gold" in the field.

both Bruha and Hidalgo have formal educations in advertising, marketing and art. Hidalgo works in sales and design consulting, while Bruha is a commercial graphic designer. Each of their careers have conditioned them to accurately assess the potential of their art and product--although they both admit that they are surprised by the media interest in the paper.

"I love being able to produce enjoyable pieces of art that stimulates so much conversation, thought and humor. I feel very fortunate to be able to create this type of art and live in an area I love," states Hidalgo, a lifetime resident of east Idaho who currently lives in the small town of Teton.

Daniel Hidalgo was born in 1969 in Pocatello, Idaho, and grew up in Idaho Falls and Blackfoot, Idaho. At an early age his artistic ability was evident, however at times it would conflict with his schooling. Doing drawings instead of homework, or doodling cartoons on test papers, often got him in trouble with his teachers.

Both his grandfathers were farmers, and his parents passed on this respect for the land. His family enjoyed the outdoors and made many trips to the nearby mountains. Hunting, fishing, and berry picking were activities which taught him to appreciate and love being with nature.

"When I'm in the mountains, all my senses are sharper, all my thoughts are clearer. It is like magic or a holy experience. I am truly happiest, looking over a meadow in a valley, staring up at a canyon wall that touches the sky, or listening to the roar of a river going over a falls. This is when I am at peace with myself," explains Hidalgo.

Bruha still lives in Blackfoot, Idaho where he was born in 1970. When not attending school, he spent many of his childhood summers residing in West Yellowstone with his family, enjoying the vast scenery of both Grand Teton and Yellowstone National Parks. It was here that he developed his great love for the wilderness of the greater Yellowstone region.

By living so close to the park, Victor was influenced by a number of local artisans and craftsmen who displayed and sold their work in shops in and around the parks to visitors and tourists. Some were collectors, but most simply wished to take home with them a fond memory of the beautiful places they had seen.

Bruha says of his childhood, "I consider myself to have been very lucky. Most children only have a city park to enjoy. I, on the other hand, had Yellowstone in my own back yard. Instead of monkey bars and sand boxes, I had geysers, mountains and wildlife. As much as I enjoyed it, I really had no idea how lucky I was until I was older and had my own children to raise and teach."

He started his career as a professional commercial artist when he was only 17. Through on-the-job experience, a formal commercial art education and a desire to advance himself, he was able to develop his own distinct style and gather many unique experiences that led him to this latest creative project.

Interestingly enough, Bruha and Hidalgo are working on creating yet another dung paper. This time, the dung of elk will be the primary ingredient. Although vastly more numerous, they believe the interest for this will be even bigger than with bison. The number of markets should increase ten-fold since elk are found wild in so many more states and countries.

"We don't expect the dung paper to look much different, however it may have a slightly different color and texture...but in the end, each of the animals graze on nearly the exact same grasses in Yellowstone..." states Bruha, "I just never imagined that I would ever know so much about animal poop. Sometimes I forget just how disgusting some people may perceive this product to be, because to me, it is just grass fiber."

Both Bruha and Hidalgo admit that the most proud moment they have experienced thus far was being invited by Delaware North (the managing corporation for stores in Yellowstone National Park) to display and sell their artwork at three stores. "It was marvelous to share our artwork with visitors from around the world right in front of the Old Faithful geyser," exclaimed Bruha. "We were both tourists once ourselves, seeing Old Faithful erupt for the first time. Now, we were able to share a bit of our own private Yellowstone with wide-eyed, smiling strangers. It was wonderful to give them a glimpse into our hearts and how we feel about this marvelous place with our art."

"It is wonderful," Hidalgo explains, "to be able to provide an original and affordable piece of handcrafted art to the visitors at Yellowstone. It is much more impactful and memorable than the typical trinket most go home with. It is something local and meaningful, rather than a logo stamped T-shirt or coffee mug made in Taiwan."

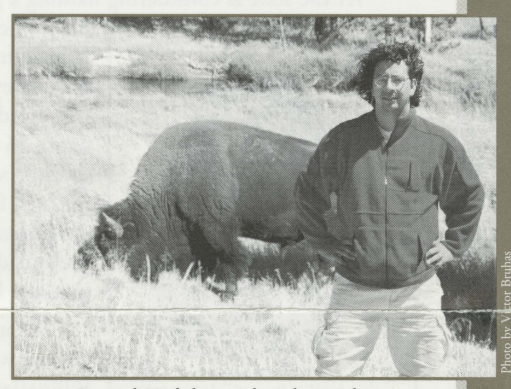


Photo by Victor Bruhas

Daniel Hidalgo with pulp machine.

The artwork Bruha and Hidalgo create uses a traditional method of block printing. A design is drawn out onto a block surface, then it is carved with blades to reveal the design. Once the carving is done, the block is inked with a black printers ink and the paper pressed onto the surface with pressure. It is much like a giant rubber stamp. It is the same basic idea that was developed in China nearly 2000 years ago.

The duo currently use bison as their subject of choice, although many other western animal and landscape designs are in the works. Their artwork can be seen online at their website www.dunganddunger.net

Many have asked where the idea originated. Rather than claiming the idea as their own, the two admit that they were inspired by a small group in Thailand that use elephant dung to create paper for tourists and artists there. The popularity of dung paper in Thailand motivated Bruha and Hidalgo to create their own distinct variety from the dung of the American Bison. People travel from around the world to see Yellowstone and the wildlife there. The American Bison to them represents something distinctly American, Western and Yellowstone. So with a lot of long hours and experimentation, the two were able to make something uniquely there own.

Dung and Dunger is not just about fame and profit. They are currently working to assist The Buffalo Field Campaign, an activist group in West Yellowstone, Montana. The Buffalo Field Campaign is made up of volunteers that work to protect bison that wander out of the invisible boundaries of Yellowstone National Park. It has long been feared (but not proven) that the bison of Yellowstone sometimes carry a contagious disease harmful to livestock known as brucellosis. During the harsh winter when the bison are at their weakest, they migrate to the West Yellowstone area to feed. The bison are often subject to capture, hazing, and even slaughter by groups led by the Montana Department of Livestock.

Although neither of the two are of Native American ancestry, both Bruha and Hidalgo feel their artwork and loving respect for Yellowstone embodies the spirit of Native American culture. It encourages a respect for nature by using recyclable materials and captures the essence of the mighty and powerful buffalo.

Tatanka (Tuh-tahn-ka) is the Lakota Indian word for "bull bison," or scientifically, the American Bison (Bison bison). In the Native American culture, the bison is revered as a powerful, spiritual deity, which had once numbered in the millions throughout North America.

Although they were in the midst of plenty, Native Americans were frugal with this important resource. The bison provided not only much needed food and clothing, but a variety of items and tools made by utilizing every last bit of the animal, including the dung in dried form.

"Well, it isn't quite like making lemonade out of lemons, but I guess it's close," says Bruha, "Our real hope and dream is simply to share a bit of the unique beauty and history of this great wilderness we find so enchanting. For those that buy one of our pieces of art, we wish them a lifetime of enjoyment. And if it forever brings a smile to their soul, we will have considered it a job well dung!"

◀ *Dung & Dunger block printed notecard*

IDAHO CENTER FOR THE BOOK

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