

Idaho's Wine Country: A Devil's Bargain?

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Introduction

The spring time weather in Boise Idaho changes quickly, and a late afternoon in March proved no exception. Driving up to the newly remodeled tasting room at Bitner Vineyards on Caldwell's Sunny Slope, the wind had started to blow intensely, and across the river in Marsing snow squalls followed the foothills. Ron Bitner, vineyard proprietor, ducked his head against the wind as he made his way to the tasting room. In a nondescript barrel on the counter he had a "port" wine that had been aging in oak for the last eighteen months. The wine showed real promise. Bitner cannot truly call his wine a port since it hails not from the Duoro Valley in Northern Portugal, but by law in Idaho he must call it a port if he is to sell it in State Controlled Liquor Stores. Making the story more interesting: Bitner is only making the fortified, brandy-cured beverage because Idaho law also stipulates that to have a tasting room on premises, you must actually make wines - something not every vineyard does.

Bitner was anxious to talk about the law as it relates to his business and shared anecdotes as he opened bottles of Bitner Vineyard sourced wines made by award-winning vintner and distiller Greg Koenig whose property is just down the road. In the small world of Idaho Wines, there is still more news to share not least of which is Polo Cove, a new project on which Bitner is consulting. From a back room in his tasting facility he brought forth a three foot by two foot poster board illustrating the new development that

will border his property. A hotel, polo grounds, wine makers cooperative, restaurant, bungalows, day spa, truffle fields, orchards, and yes, more grapes will fill some 1600 acres on hill top property looking south towards the Snake River.¹ It is a massively ambitious plan for this area, one that will bring certain change.

A county away in Eagle, retired Apple, Inc. executive Lloyd Mahaffey has a competing vision: his own wine making community starting with four acres of his own plantings. His near-term plan involves development of a forty acre parcel just north of Beacon Light Road, an area some hope will become the next wine producing region in Idaho.² Developer Dave Buich plans 150 homes, a restaurant, retail shops and an events center at the Eagle Knoll Winery site, which he purchased late last year. Even Eagle's Chamber of Commerce is boosting the area as a wine country of the future - even though meaningful commercial production is a decade away. Caldwell and Eagle - two cities with similar but competing visions, different histories, and different cultures and character - both turning an eye toward developing the wine trade. The end goal of all this: envisioning the region as the next great tourist attraction - Idaho Wine Country.

Excepting Earl Pomeroy's 1957 *In Search of the Golden West*, historians largely ignored the subject of tourism until Hal Rothman's 1998 *Devil's Bargains: Tourism in the Twentieth-Century American West*. In titling his book "Devil's Bargain," Rothman neatly summarizes his thinking on the

topic that now engulfs Eagle and Caldwell Rothman: he laments the tourist trade. Rothman wrote that communities would change - and not for the better as a result of developing a tourist trade. His second lamentation is that long-time inhabitants will eventually lose control of the place they once knew and the place will become dominated by "neonatives" and outside capital. For Rothman, history ends once a community adopts tourism.

I argue in this working paper that the development of the tourist trade is not a Devil's Bargain but an informed decision by local residents which follows historic patterns of development in the West, and that tourism represents a legitimate strategy for placemaking and retention of local flavor. Rothman's case studies, which offer needed cautionary tales, fail to consider long-term historical realities that provide better guidance when considering the nature of place, and how to preserve it.

The same year Rothman's book appeared so too did Elliot West's seminal book of western history, *Contested Plains*. In that book, West argued that the Great Plains have been shaped by the agency of nature and a continuous flow of changing people groups; his history of the Plains is a dynamic history. With Rothman and West's theories in mind I present case studies of two western cities - Caldwell, ID and Eagle, ID - both of which find themselves in the very early stages of developing the tourist trade around budding wine industries following the designation of 5.2 million acres along the Snake River Plain as an American Viticultural Area (AVA). Using local

news coverage of both city's efforts this working paper records the early days of building a wine based tourist trade and assesses what local leaders can learn from scholars such as Rothman and West as they move forward.

West and Rothman, Applied

Rothman and Caldwell

For the last fifty years or so the rural areas of Caldwell have largely remained thus and the urban areas have fallen to decay as the Treasure Valley urbanized from Boise outward. While Caldwell's farmers were developing new crops in response to new markets, urban businesses were busy dumping offal, industrial waste, and other pollutants in Indian Creek, which runs through the heart of the city. Eventually, the creek had all but disappeared and the downtown all but died. In the last decade the city became known for ethnic gang-related crime, and a local Hispanic legislator who gained national attention for his stringent opposition to immigration. Where Caldwell was once nearly the same size as its rival Nampa, Nampa is now twice its size in some part due to its reputation as a cleaner, safer city. Even still, urban Caldwell has seen a resurgence as Canyon County has consistently been one of the nation's fastest growing counties with people moving there to take advantage of affordable real estate, and the comparatively easy commute to jobs thirty miles east in Boise. The city has also recently "daylighted" Indian Creek, removing the car wash which had fallen into it near the center of the city. Today, the creek and another

important component, the recent move of the Idaho Wine Commission offices to Caldwell's downtown, make up the center of Caldwell's economic development strategy.

Caldwell's business and political leaders are excited at the prospect of increased tourism driven by the cluster of wineries in the area. Rothman would counsel that Caldwell is about to face the "Devil's Bargain" but Caldwell hardly sees things in that light and for good reason. A 2002 study by the University of Idaho reported that visitors on day trips to the region's wineries spent an average of \$139 with \$42 of that total spent in area businesses such as restaurants and local stores, and economist Garth Taylor believes that the wineries have "an almost unlimited potential as a tourist industry."³ Rothman argues repeatedly that tourism dollars never quite achieve the level predicted. But few locals, if any, are arguing that the reason they are focused on developing the wineries in the Sunny Slope area is because of some master economic development plan. These people are self-interested, and they love wine. But, Caldwell does have other options.

Caldwell could, for example, follow the lead of its neighbor Nampa, plow under its agricultural land, put up cheaply built starter homes, and sell off every last inch of land close to the freeway to big box retailers and car dealers. There are yet other options. But Rothman ignored any other options for the communities he assessed, as if political and economic decisions were made in a vacuum, or they were made with conditions that could exist only

in a theoretical economic experiment. Rothman six times suggested that stasis was an option for some communities.¹ He also fails to recognize that for some communities tourism is the only option. As Anne Hyde wrote in *Environmental History*, "Tourism might be a Devil's Bargain, but for many communities it is the only bargain around. Local people might make choices fully aware of the past history of tourism and knowing that it brings irrevocable changes, but they could still see it as a positive choice."⁴ For Caldwell, and Canyon County, certainly the choice to develop tourism around the long-standing agricultural community is preferable to what Nampa has become. Even if all of Rothman's prophecies come true at this point in time it does not appear that Caldwell has made a Devil's Bargain.

In Rothman's view, communities adopting tourism will change for the worse. Communities will indeed change over time, but Rothman's assumption seems ahistorical, determinist, and polemical. Just across the Snake River from Caldwell in Marsing, that small town is reacting to the changes in Caldwell by morphing in its own right. A writer for the Idaho Statesman described the small agricultural town as being at a cultural crossroads. With a restaurant focused on local wines, a new espresso bar, and old-school sprint boat races on the river, the result said Susan Whaley, "is a blend that offers a little something for everyone."⁵ The kind of change that Caldwell residents fear is *not* the tourist trade, but change that would

¹ Page 25, 95, 127, 139, 253, and 255.

result in Caldwell looking like a "southern California abomination of subdivisions and traffic jams," with "house, after house, after house."⁶

Rothman's final warning to communities that make the Devil's Bargain is that local residents with grand visions and limited resources will eventually lose control of their place to outside interests. Rothman documents this well in *Devil's Bargain*, but several questions emerge. Little work has been done on wine tourism in America so it is unclear if places such as Napa Valley, Sonoma, Walla Walla, and the Willamette Valley have lost local control and flavor and if that loss of control had negative consequences. For the Caldwell area, some of this loss of control has already happened. In other instances it is too early to tell if tourism will result in the loss of control, and again if there will be negative consequences associated with it.

In 1997, Corus Brands, the second largest wine company in the northwest, purchased the Ste. Chapelle Winery. In early 2001, Corus then sold Ste. Chapelle to Canandaigua, the wine division of Constellation Brands, the second largest beer and wine supplier in the United States.⁷ Little has changed visibly, functionally, or politically since the Symms family sold the winery. The same tasting room stands where it has always stood. The Symms family still farms the ground where they always have. One change that has occurred is that the Ste. Chapelle Winery now charges for its tastings much like the wine tastings in popular wine destinations; other Idaho wineries still offer their tastings for free. The Sawtooth Winery is also

owned by Corus brands. The winery still features wines made by Brad Pintler and the region seem little changed because of the corporate ownership of these two producers.

Rothman may have selected case studies where local control was more likely to be lost. He also fails to demonstrate that other communities are not subject to influence from outside cultures and money, and does not distinguish between changes wrought by tourism and changes as a part of regular city growth. And in *Devil's Bargains* locals are passive actors with little agency of their own. In some cases this may be true, but not in Caldwell.

Since 1999, local business owners in Caldwell have planned the daylighting of Indian Creek, and have selectively brought in outside funding and assistance while making sure that locals controlled the process and the result. Caldwell business owner Bob Carpenter even worried allowed that "the city won't be strong enough to say no when a developer shows up with the wrong kind of plan for Caldwell."⁸ Local business owners, residents, vintners, and even the Wine Commission have taken an active role in the development of the city; residents are guarding against outside control.

Rothman and Eagle

The headlines say it all about the city of Eagle: "Local wine lovers help promote Eagle as wine country," "City to hold first Eagle Food & Wine Festival," and "Developer works on new wine-inspired subdivision."⁹ Eagle

wants to make the Devil's Bargain. The city dreams big. Reporter Ken Dey captured the overriding sentiment among Eagle's hoi-polloi: "It's not Napa Valley, but it could be someday."¹⁰ As a populace, Eagle has a short history. It first appeared in the U.S. Census in 1980 listing 2,620 residents.¹¹ The 2004 estimate places the population at just over 16,000, the 2007 estimate at greater than 20,000. A virtual outpost since well after Idaho was a majority urban state, Eagle's people have barely had the chance to define the character of the place; they likely will never get that chance.

For Eagle, the Devil's Bargain has already been made – but not around tourism. Its history up to this point has been as a supply town to the sheep and cattle ranchers who came down from Ada County's foothills. Open space and a rural feel seemed assured until about a decade before that pastoral vision was squashed for good. Between 1990 and 2000, the town grew from 3,327 people to over 11,000.¹² It was right about mid-way in the 1990's when local leaders noticed growth threatened to overtake their lifestyle. In the 1995 mayoral and city council elections, growth and pressure from developers wasn't an issue it was *the* issue. Mayoral candidate Chuck Bower running on the Eagle Citizen's Alliance platform won the election. Ousted in a recall two year later, Bower never made the changes needed for Eagle to control its own destiny.¹³ The theme of the 1995 campaign repeated itself in the 2007 mayoral and city council elections with the same predictable result: the smart-growth slate of council candidates gained two seats on the

council.¹⁴ But this time, it was too late.

Eagle's administrative failures, i.e., its complete inactivity on the legislative front during the time of its most rapid growth, guaranteed that it would lose control over its destiny. Eagle never negotiated with the county to expand its area of impact, nor did it attempt to annex lands that proved key to its future: the Foothills that lie to the north. By 2007, numerous developers had purchased massive tracts of land from retiring ranchers who had held thousands of acres for generations. When the new Eagle City Council and Mayor took their seats on the dais in 2008, they were staring down tens of thousands of new homes in an area they hoped might become their wine country. These developments included:¹⁵

- M3 planned community on 7,000 acres (get the final number of homes from the latest articles)
- Dry Creek Ranch development of 3,800 homes on 1,414 acres
- Cartwright Ranch development of 700 homes on 1,000 acres
- The Bragail development of 127 homes on 636 acres
- two subdivisions built by Kastera Homes of 159 homes on 938 acres

All of the new developments include elements area residents hoped for: vineyards, equestrian areas, and lots of open space. But that open space came at a price. Developers traded open space for the ability to build denser developments the result of which is the largest of these developments, M3, in its initial phases would be four times denser than Idaho's most dense neighborhood. So while Eagle hopes to make the Devil's Bargain - the development of winery based tourism - developers and residents on county property outside the city limits but bordering the city, have made a bargain

of another sort. This bargain, as residents would attest, seems far, far worse than what Rothman described of the tourist trade but it is still early in this city's history.

Though Eagle has already made its bargain it still intends to develop tourism, and Rothman as we know contended that tourism only brings negative changes. But in the short life span of Eagle change has been the norm especially in the last decade; tourism would not be the first change Eagle will endure, or the last. Much of what people know of Eagle today was not so long ago the bottom of the Boise River. Work by Dan Blue at the Idaho Department of Water Resources shows that the earliest cultural markers in the Treasure Valley were found in some cases a mile and a half from the banks of the river. With early settlers wanting to be close to water, why would this be so? As Blue showed in his analysis, prior to the construction of the Arrowrock dam in 1915 the Boise River was up to a mile and a half wide through what is now Eagle. As mentioned, prior to 1980, Eagle barely registered as an inhabited place. So Eagle is still in its infancy as far as a people inhabited place. One expects it will change over time.

Another key distinction Rothman fails to make is that local leaders often have culpability in their loss of control of their nascent tourist operations. In the Steamboat case study, Rothman describes a familiar scene: an individual with a vision fails to secure the necessary capital and expertise at the local level and has to turn to national or international

financial backers and managers.¹⁶ But Eagle defies that model as it lost control over its future because of its own inaction. Longtime Eagle resident Alasya West who has ridden horseback on trails in the Foothills for over 20 years even understood this when she lamented the loss of protected open space saying "the solution is having foresight."¹⁷ The fate of Alasya West brings up yet another question that Rothman leaves muddled in his analysis.

Rothman uses the terms natives and neonatives in discussing the changing nature of communities. This might leave some readers with the mistaken sense that control of a city passes from average residents to international corporate elites. In actuality what you witness is local elites losing control to new elites - the average citizen loses little that they wouldn't lose through growth or progress of another sort. The political and economic history of the City of Eagle is much more complicated than can be encompassed by Rothman's theory.

Eagle's loss of 'local' control started when long-time area residents like the Little Family began selling off ranching operations to out of state developers. Once the northern side of what would one day be Eagle City limits was lost, neonatives began making alliances with local elites (business and political leaders) to craft a new vision: that of an Eagle wine country. Encouraged by newcomer Lloyd Mahaffey, a retired Apple Executive, the Eagle City Council adopted a resolution creating a "wine district" in north Eagle and the Foothills.¹⁸ At the same time, Mahaffey began developing his

own wine centered subdivision, Vigne D'Aquila (Vines of Eagle), a forty acre subdivision divided into eight lots of five acres each. Each property must maintain a residence of certain dimensions and a vineyard.¹⁹ Eagle, it seemed, was forced into two competing visions, neither of which was its 'own' making but the Devil's Bargain of wine based tourism clearly emerged as the preferable alternative. Facing pressure from citizens to reign in out of state developers, both Ada County and the City of Eagle embarked on comprehensive plans for the Foothills north of the city. The result surprised Eagle residents.

The City's plan favored twice the amount of development in the Foothills as did the County's plan. The city plan called for 24,000 homes on 36,000 acres; the county's called for 12,000 homes on 39,000 acres. Area residents were angry. "It's outrageous that the city (draft) plan has that level of impact," said the leader of the North Ada County Foothills Association John Petrovsky. Amidst the outrage the group he led grew from 200 - 300 members in the span of a year²⁰

Eagle only wishes it had made the Devil's Bargain sooner. The character of the place is changing regardless of whether they adopt tourism or not, and the native residents - almost too few to number - have rarely asserted any kind of control over the area. In fact, it's almost the opposite: the oldest residents, the ranchers, were the first to box the city into a corner and willingly give away control to out of state developers.

West and Caldwell

Elliot West would tell a far different story of Caldwell than would his colleague Hal Rothman. For Rothman, the most significant variable in determining the fate and direction of a community is whether or not they adopt tourism. Elliot West's *Contested Plains* offers a much broader view (similar to the *Annales School* approach) of how places are shaped over time. *Contested Plains* takes readers through 25,000 years of natural history on the Plains describing how changing weather conditions altered flora and fauna, and how people groups reacted to those changes. The point: nature has agency. People are not the only actors in the shaping of place. In Caldwell, the natural landscape is a major actor.

Grapes cannot be grown everywhere. Caldwell's location between 43° and 44° latitude mirrors locations of the great wine growing regions of France, Italy, and Spain, which indicates that Caldwell could be a prime fruit and grape growing region.²¹ But latitude is not enough; the area must also have the right climate - a combination of warm days, and cool nights. Idaho's continental interior location is unique in that it sits on a climatic hinge; it exhibits continental and marine climates. Most precipitation in the region comes in the winter as a result of storms originating in the Gulf of Alaska and westerly winds, and tropical moisture from Hawaii blown inland via the subtropical jet stream, the "Pineapple Express. The proximity to the Snake River allows for cooler evening temperatures in the area. The rain

shadow created locally by the Owyhee Range and regionally by the Cascades provides for warm dry weather in the summer months necessary for growing fruit. These climatic and geographic patterns have a long history of shaping the region.²²

14,500 years ago, the ancestral Great Salt Lake, known in recent times as Lake Bonneville, jumped an earthen barrier pouring water into the western Snake River Canyon for six months. The "Bonneville Flood" created the Western Snake River Plain we know today and the topographic and pedologic (soil) conditions necessary for growing grapes. The Bonneville Flood slackwater silts, combined with surficial loess and sand, quartz, feldspar clay, and mafic minerals underlie most of the vineyards in Canyon County, which produce seventy five percent of Idaho's wine grapes.²³

In the 1880s, French and German migrants found the steep slopes of Caldwell, and fast draining soils good for grape growing and planted European clones in the region. Prohibition put an abrupt end to Idaho's wine industry, but in the 1970s area orchardists and farmers again took note of the conditions around them. Their land use choices were limited by the soil conditions and topography; much of the Sunny Slope was not prime farm land. But its steep hillsides were well suited for growing grapes. The Symms family, original Sunny Slope orchardists started the Ste. Chappelle vineyards and winery in 1976, and Idaho's wine country was reborn. And following the familiar Biblical allegory, Idaho was reborn in none other than water.

Idaho is a desert. As a team of Boise State researchers noted in 2006, most slopes in Caldwell though in close proximity to the Snake River would only support native vegetation - sagebrush, rabbitbrush, and bunch grasses - if not for irrigation.²⁴ And irrigation came to Idaho almost entirely because of outside capital. Were it not for the massive federally funded Hells Canyon dam complex, and canal systems funded by eastern capital, Canyon County would have remained a desert. So this area now known as an agricultural Eden has no memory of itself as anything but that. In the face of Rothman's theory about local control, one wonders how far we should rewind that memory further in an effort to restore control to locals.

In a very real way, Caldwell is a city that is path dependent. As the Santa Fe Institute's W. Brian Arthur would say, the choices that Caldwell made in the past created the path the city must follow today. The geography, climate, and choices made by eastern bureaucrats and financiers also helped shape what we know of the City. With irrigation available, hillsides appropriate for growing grapes, beautiful natural scenery, and a booming international wine economy, wine tourism seems not a Devil's Bargain but more an evolutionary step in Caldwell's history. Calling it an evolutionary step also means it is not the *last* change the city will go through. Rothman's view of tourism seems to indicate that he believes it to be a final destination, which is a strangely ahistorical position for an historian. West's *longue duree* treatment of the Plains and Arthur's path

dependency theory seem to offer better descriptions of Caldwell's status today.

West and Eagle

Eagle too is a City shaped by the natural environment. When the Boise River was as yet tamed by a series of dams, early settlers found themselves backed up against the foothills to the north. The foothills themselves with a plethora of wild grasses made for prime grazing land for cattle and sheep. Ranchers snapped up huge tracts of land for just this purpose. As the Arrowrock and Lucky Peak dams slowed the Boise River to a comparative trickle, the City expanded south toward the River where property values skyrocketed. Eagle residents literally turned their backs on the Foothills.

The ranch land Foothills to the north - up to eighty five percent of it - eventually became owned by well-entrenched, politically powerful families. Meanwhile the City along the river became known as a mini-California with wealthy suburban refugees taking up residence. The city sported few businesses. It was a bedroom community for Boise. In 1995 an alarm bell sounded - growth is coming. But neonatives who had not known the early Eagle at the base of the Foothills, were unimpressed. They already knew growth was coming to *their* Eagle along the river. This Eagle though had nothing to do with its pastoral roots. This Eagle was a swanky suburban enclave and area residents wanted more and more of it. Eagle ignored the warning signs.

As history marched forward and Eagle found itself in the twenty-first century, even the neonative began to understand what was at stake but it took a relative nuclear bomb to bring that point home. The long forgotten ranching families had begun selling huge tracts of land to out of state developers. For the neonatives who had built the city into a bedroom community this meant one sure thing: all these neo-neonatives would be driving through their neighborhoods and living where people formerly hiked, biked, and otherwise communed with nature. But after ignoring the Foothills for all those years the city of Eagle - native and neonative alike - found that they had no ability to control their corporate future.

Rothman's model with tourism as the irreducible variable provides no explanation, guidance, or hope for Eagle even if they choose that path. West's more holistic approach tells a more sophisticated and meaningful tale. The City of Eagle will consider Rothman's Devil's Bargain and the city may become a tourist destination. That option could be better than the other option it faces: becoming a densely populated yet sprawling exurban bedroom community separated from area employment centers to which it is connected by an aging and underfunded transportation network. West's methodology in describing the shaping of the Plains - a process of two competing visions - is most apropos here. There is the vision of out of state corporations and the vision of neo-natives only. "Natives," if they ever really

existed in Eagle, long ago gave up any vision of the City if they ever even harbored one.

Tourism as a variable also fails if the unwanted result of it is that the place changes. Eagle is changing, like the Plains changed in West's book. For Rothman, removing tourism seems to indicate stasis but in West's world that is not an option. Time marches on. In Rothman's story the constant character is the "local." In West's history, a "local" only exists at a specific period in time. This is truly the case in Eagle. Today, a "local" is someone who might only have lived in the city for twenty years. The outside capital, residents, and political and financial control that Rothman fears and condemns arrived in Eagle early on, the most important of which was the construction of the Arrowrock Dam. But even before that, the natural resources available – especially the grass on the rolling foothills - set the city on a path from which it will find difficult to emerge. Outside capital and control have placed the city on a new path that it is fighting to escape. But these conditions are always changing and will continue to do so, just like West's Plains.

Conclusion

Historians Elliot West and the late Hal Rothman both provide models for explaining the changing nature of places over time. West presents a more holistic model, one that considers the agency of nature and a much longer time-line. Rothman considers a much narrower scope - how tourism

impacts places over time. With Idaho cities Eagle and Caldwell both in the early stages of developing economies based upon wine related tourism these two models provide excellent insight into the likely futures of both cities.

Rothman argues that tourism constitutes a "Devil's Bargain" because local residents will ultimately lose control of their town and be forced into social and cultural changes they did not anticipate, and do not welcome. While Rothman's warnings may come to pass, both cities efforts at tourism are so young, it is hard to tell how the places will respond. In the case of Eagle the place is still being shaped and compared to the vision of the city as a sprawling yet dense bedroom community, tourism looks good by comparison. Caldwell's situation is much the same. Compared to the vision of its neighboring stripmall and cheap subdivision filled city of Nampa, wine tourism looks like a spectacular bargain even if Rothman's prophecies hold true.

Both Caldwell and Eagle have been greatly shaped by the agency of nature. This is not an argument based on the thesis of geographic determinism, but nature and man's manipulation of nature has had an important role in determining past and will continue to shape the future of these cities. West's treatment of the Plains provides a splendid model for understanding why Caldwell and Eagle find themselves in the place they are today.

What we learn from both models, as applied to Eagle and Caldwell is

that the development of the tourist trade is not always a Devil's Bargain but an informed decision by local residents which follows historic patterns of development in the West, and that tourism represents a legitimate strategy for placemaking and retention of local flavor. Rothman's thesis, while helpful in the local decision making process, is flawed in its conclusions; West's model provides a better explanation of how these places were shaped over time.

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