VARDIS FISHER STATE PARK

by Tim Woodward

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

I checked reference books and The Idaho Statearchive, and neither said who Billingsley was. Our fishing guru, Pete Zimowsky and Roger Phillips, didn't know. Idaho for the Curious author and Curt Conley didn't know. Not even the district manager for a Hagerman-areastate 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 Lorrie Johnson said. "We don't even know if he lived in the area."

Yet the state is considering naming a park that includes the homestead 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.

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 hope the state will establish a park at the Fisher homestead and name it after him. We think it would be fitting that other states have done a much better job of honoring their writers."

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

Whatever becomes of the property, it shouldn't be named after Billingsley the Obscure (someone will be calling him that if he's not saved). 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, wherever 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.

The paper project has been a kind of overnight success. It was a brief, yet joyful conversation between old friends leading to something new with it. Something not only new, but unique and grotesque as well.

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't have to travel very far to know that other states have done a much better job of honoring their writers."

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

Billingley'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 Vardis Fisher 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 obscure," Allen Ellis said.

My search for Billingsley had included reference books, Statearchive 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 angels 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 added 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 park. So the Billingsleys were pioneers. They helped settle a wild and dangerous part of the country, survived scary times continued on page 2

What they have created genuinely illustrates how the combination of naturalist, artist, comedian, environmentalist and businessman can be a grand success for society. 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 nur­tered 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 can convey their sense of humor and creativity with the name of their venture, known officially as "Dung & Danger.

"It was obvious once we saw the material [dung] for what it really was. The bison chips are simply wonderful, green globes of paper," said Bruha. "Bison are less 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 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 page from which to capitalize on the free advertising and exposure. Story after story began running in numerous newspapers, television news programs, magazines and informational websites. It seemed like fortune was about to change.

The 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
Vardis Fisher—continued from page 1

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't 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 man of wide respect, before him, there was no literature from this part of the world. Fisher, according to Professor Joseph Flora of the University of North Carolina, "wasn't everyone's favorite."

"I just never imagined that I would ever was able to develop his own distinct style and gather many unique experiences that led him to end, each of the animals graze on nearly the exact same grasses in of markets should increase ten-fold since elk are found wild in so many more states and coun-

ery of the beautiful places they had seen.

"When I'm in the mountains, all my senses are sharper, all my thoughts are clearer. It is a

"I love being able to produce enjoyable pieces of art that stimulate so much con-

with nature.

"I am at peace with myself," explains Hidalgo.

"My friends and evaluated amidst, however at times it would conflict with his schooling. Doing drawings instead of homework, or doodling cartoons on

Victor Bruha collecting "Brown Gold" in the field.

both Bruha and Hidalgo have formal edu-

and even slaughter by groups led by the Montana Department of Livestock.

both admit that they are surprised by the media interest in the paper.

"It's altogether fitting that a trout stream where they once lived be named for them."

"It was wonderful to give them a glimpse into our hearrs and how we feel about this marvelous place with our art."

"In the mountains, all my senses are sharper, all my thoughts are clearer. It is a

Victor Bruha with pulp machine.

The 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.

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the two admit that they were inspired by a small group in Thailand that use elephant dung to

The artwork Bruha and Hidalgo create uses a

Dung and Dunger is not just about fame and profit. They are currently working to assist

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 is encouraged as a respect for native plants, animals, and natural materials and captures the essence of the mighty and powerful buffalo.

Tatanka (Tah-thahn-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 has 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 dunging the soil.

"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!"