by Damian Koshnick

**A Matriarch’s Picture Postcards**

_Capturing Life on Eastern Oregon’s “Dead Ox Flat.”_  
1910–1920

**OREGON PLACES**

_In Mid August 2019, I made a pilgrimage with my father, William Koshnick, to a landscape formerly known as “Dead Ox Flat” near Ontario, Oregon—a 200-acre homestead claim that once belonged to my great-grandparents, Otto and Stella Koshnick. Although I had researched the region and my family for a year leading up to the trip, it was not until my father and I drove toward Malheur County that I felt much more like Otto and Stella’s great-grandson. The land, located a few miles northwest of Ontario, is now Bohlender Farms._

On an unusually cool and rainy day, Teldon Bohlender, one of the current owners, graciously led us for over an hour around the footprint of the old homestead. Although no obvious structures or signs remained, we speculated about the most likely location for their home on the landscape. From the southern end of the property, you can look out miles across a beautiful, variable landscape, into Malheur Valley, toward Malheur Butte and the massive Malheur Siphon below. During our visit, heavy clouds brought rain, and a few waves of emotion caught me and my father by surprise—it felt good to be there and helped me visualize the setting for the family history I had uncovered.

It was in this place that my great-grandmother Stella diligently choreographed, wrote, and sent hundreds of picture-postcards between 1910 and 1918 to her family in Minnesota. Long before the modern ease of photography, it is remarkable how many picture-postcards Stella took, retook, developed, and sent. These postcards were very popular at that time, and drug stores were the primary place where amateur photographers had their photographs developed. As years of advertisements in the Ontario newspaper show, the Ontario Pharmacy, located next to the train depot that still stands today, sold Kodak supplies and finishing. Developing picture-postcards there would have cost Stella about 10 cents, postcard-sized prints were 6 cents. Stella’s postcards were not just about loneliness and anxious communication with distant family; they also provided a critical outlet for her artistic sensibilities and reveal her unique sense of humor. This essay reproduces some of the dozen or so of Stella’s postcards that survive, showing views of the region and telling a story of early-twentieth-century migrants to eastern Oregon.

**STELLA EVELYN ALEXANDER**  
(1886–1920) was educated and working as a school teacher when she married Otto August Koshnick (1885–1960) in 1905. The following year, they took a train west, joining waves of Midwesterners relocating to the Northwest. This region is the traditional homeland of the Wadatika Band of Northern Paiute. In 1872, President Ulysses S. Grant established the nearly 1.8 million-acre Malheur Reservation intended for eastern and southeastern Oregon tribes. The federal government promptly redraw the reservation’s boundaries, under pressure from White migrants who wanted to use the reservation’s grazing land, and following the Bannock War of 1878, closed the reservation and returned to public domain. The federal government’s removal of Native people made way for a homesteading boom in Oregon’s southeastern High Desert between 1905 and 1920. A consensus had emerged among boosters, engineers, and politicians that arid land reclamation was beneficial and could transform the West. And yet, only half the dry-land homesteaders stayed long enough to gain title to their land. In the end, it “was a failed effort.” Although family letters do not make clear exactly how Otto and Stella
made the decision to move to Oregon, we know that by 1900 Congress had "provided generous land grants to promote Western settlement — to build railroads and military roads, to attract settlers through homestead laws, and . . . for reclamation projects." We can also surmise several personal and historical factors that led them to settle on this extremely dry patch of elevated desert land.

Otto and Stella arrived in Oregon during a wave of migration that accelerated in 1909 with the Enlarged Homestead Act. This expansion of the Homestead Act of 1862 allowed up to 320 acres to be claimed in non-irrigable areas in response to the promotion of dry farming in the West during the early twentieth century. At the time, these dry farming methods were experimental and highly dubious. The land, made available at little cost to White men and women, likely appealed to the young couple who were setting out on their own, despite it being "among the least desirable of all land remaining in the public domain at that time." Stella revealed in her letters that she was distraught to leave her family, but also determined and confident in their abilities. Both Otto and Stella grew up on farms, and unlike some settlers, would have known the risks of trying to turn arid land into productive land, but like many migrants during that time period, they were also likely encouraged by promotional materials produced by land boosters, railroad companies, and local governments.

The 200-acre homestead claim that once belonged to Otto and Stella Koshnick is shown on this map.
IN THIS IMAGE dated November 1, 1910, Stella Koshnick and Otto Koshnick are pictured next to their wood-frame tent in Ontario, Oregon. They look to have lifted parts of the canvas for cross-ventilation, and many of their daily chores are discernible from the collection of wash bins, tables, and canisters that are stacked around the tent. We know from letters that they often burned in their stove widely available sagebrush, not wood, on what must have been cold nights during the winter in such a structure.

Owyhee River Basin in 1903, but work on the Owyhee Dam did not start until 1928, two years after the Secretary of the Interior approved the project. In fact, most of upper “Dead Ox Flat” was not irrigated until about 1935 or 1936, and some parts not until the 1960s.

Encouraged by the visit, the Ontario Argus weighed in on the energetic debate about who should build the big reservoirs. Siding with the government over private parties, the Argus shared the belief of farmers and citizens of Dead Ox Flat, all of whom supported the idea of government irrigation.

Ballinger’s visit was seen as even more promise that progress was imminent for Ontario generally, and upper Dead Ox Flat specifically. That same year, reporters in the founding issue of the Malheur Enterprise conveyed the ongoing tension between hope and fact with an extremely contradictory narrative under the headline, “Will Construct Great Water System Here”:

That the country immediately surrounding Vale [Oregon] will soon be the scene of activity in ditch construction is now a certainty. While plans have not yet been definitely announced, it is safe to say that the visit of Major L.H. French, of New York, to Vale, will result in the construction of Water systems for the purpose of irrigating the extensive and rich lands in Malheur County, although he, himself, declines at present to speak of the matter except as a probability.

As it turns out, Stella and Otto arrived nearly a century too early to benefit from the dam project. On my visit to their old homestead plot, I learned it is still tricky land to farm because the allotment of water out of the Snake River is still low — and has taken 110 years of technological advancement to make it work at all.

When Stella and Otto had arrived in Ontario, Oregon, in 1910, they camped for a brief time on the outskirts of town in a humble, wood-frame tent. Their first child, Otto, Jr., was born the following year. From Ontario, the Koshnicks moved to their 200-acre Homestead Act claim on what is referred to today as “the Slope.”

Stella refers to the area as “Dead Ox Flat,” although local land owners agreed in 1911 to change the name to “Payette-Oregon Slope,” with the hope of attracting more investment. It is this same area that Dorothea Lange featured twenty-five years later in photographs taken for the Farm Security Administration. Arguably, Stella’s own photographic postcards are equally as compelling.

Most of the time, Stella directed Otto to do the “camera stunt,” as she put it, with the tripod. Otto would take the photographs, but under Stella’s extensive instruction. She had very specific ideas about what could or should work in a photograph. Reading the backs of Stella’s postcards, you get the sense that she approached her work like W.H. Auden adopted in his poetry — photographs that adequately captured her family were never finished, only abandoned. Stella also took joy in surprises and failures, such
ON MARCH 10, 1912, Guests pose for a photograph on the Dead Ox Flat homestead. The back of the image reads: “Baby is asleep and Otto does the camera stunt. This shows the hen house, the chicken corral and the corner of the barn. This is our saddle horse.”

as when the dog or a rooster would walk into frame mid-process.

In a message on the back of a postcard dated March 10, 1912, Stella neatly summarized her directorial and artistic approach to photography. In the photograph, Otto, Jr., sits alone in a pram at their Dead Ox Flat homestead. Stella relays her husband’s failure in this photograph because he was “too far away to take good pictures” — to which she added: “He will soon learn I guess.” The contrast between the baby and the harsh surroundings is striking, and scenes such as this one helped Stella share with her mother and siblings both her family and her ever-unfolding artistic process that documented this challenging landscape.

Despite the hard work required to build a homestead, they also found time for pranks. From family stories, we know Otto was fearless. On the same November 1910 day that he and Stella photographed themselves in front of their tent in Ontario, Otto climbed the scaffolding of a church under construction in town. In the photograph, he is wearing the same wide brimmed hat, although he has chosen a much different kind of seat.

I have often imagined the conversations, the patience, and the arguments they must have had together during the process of taking new photographs, such as repositioning the tripod. Picking up the developed pictures must have been a big and important event for them. Although just a few of Stella’s postcards remain, so much of her correspondence includes passages about photographs they just took, the images they would capture, and how her next pictures would be even better. Her correspondence also included details about struggles that migrants to the area faced during the early twentieth century.

Reading through issues of the Ontario Argus and the Malheur Enterprise from 1900 to 1930 makes it obvious that topics such as politics and baseball were important, but local gossip and reports on livestock, crops, and irrigation were the main areas of focus. And there are endless reports about water and irrigation. Otto and Stella moved to their claim, optimistic that significant irrigation was imminent, but many also sought to have water for personal use while waiting. Some drilled 400 feet and more to try to find water on their properties. From Stella’s letters, such as this excerpt from December 1912, we get a glimpse of the “hope” for water that nearly everyone shared on upper Dead Ox Flat:

One of our neighbors put in a well; at 48 feet they struck a good flow of water but cased it off, I guess the owner thought they might hit an artesian well to go further so they drilled nearly 400 feet and haven’t got enough for their own use. I guess the drillers are coming back to go still deeper.

Otto and I are going to dig down 50 feet or more before we get the drill. He intends to rig up some sort of an apparatus to use a horse in the deal to pull the dirt up, I’ll boss the horse and he will do the digging. Otto explained it all to me, but I didn’t listen, will understand it better when I see it in operation. We live in hopes that we don’t have to go very far for water.

IN 1912, Otto Koshnick, Sr., poses with his son, Otto, Jr. Stella Koshnick wrote on the back of the photograph: “The Two Otto’s. That stove pipe you see is a vent leading from the cellar. Got another on the opposite side of the house. Put them as high as house so nothing could crawl into cellar. They draw better. Otto minus a shirt and half shaved but I wanted him to hold baby. Both right there with the mouth ain’t they? You can see baby’s two lower teeth. Oh little joy of mine.”
OTTO, JR., sits alone in a baby carriage on March 10, 1912. On the back of the photograph, Stella wrote: “Baby alone. Otto was too far away to take good pictures. He will soon learn I guess. Last Sunday we took half a [dozen] more and will try again Sunday. Took some views on the ... to the river thru the canyon but they aren’t finished yet. Will send some home. Am going to some good cabinet pictures taken of the baby next time we go to town.”

IN THIS PHOTOGRAPH taken on November 1, 1910, Otto Koshnick sits atop a church in Ontario, Oregon. Stella Koshnick wrote on the back: “Look who’s on top. Otto is the only one of bunch, taken at noon before the rest are back from dinner.”
Stella’s letter reveals how she was often partially entertained and partially skeptical of Otto’s self-fashioned plans. Meanwhile, ongoing reports of possible irrigation solutions, such as a November 5, 1912, article in the Oregon Daily Journal, must have been eternally frustrating for Otto and Stella, and their neighbors:

For years past men have cast greedy eyes on the great expanse of level land in Malheur county, called Dead Ox Flat. The plateau is bounded on the east by the waters of the Snake. The land was fertile, and imagination pictured hundreds of prosperous farms, if only life giving water could be supplied. But the great river flowed by its eastern boundary a hundred feet and more below. Could it be possible to lift sufficient quantities to the highest point of Dead Ox Flat, by pumping, to fill the canals and ditches needed for those future farms? . . . If water could be pumped 100 to 150 feet in elevation, why not between 200 and 300 feet if power to do the great work could be found?33

On our 2019 visit, Teldon Bohlender explained that even with current technology, irrigation is still an issue. The area does not have a large allotment of water from the Snake River, and while the soil is nutritious and fine, like cake flour, getting water to “hold” with the slope and soil type is quite technical. As new owners, the Bohlenders were still experimenting with various cultivation methods, such as minimum conservation tillage and no-till farming, the latter resulting in voles and California ground squirrels (locally known as whistle pigs) disturbing the seeds. Bohlender explained that even aided by irrigation and technological advancements, this land would have been a challenge to farm 30 years ago, let alone 100 without irrigation.34

In 1939, Dorothea Lange put Dead Ox Flat on the map when she photographed the large water siphon crossing Malheur Valley that would provide irrigation to these eastern sagelands.

The siphon was part of the larger U.S. Reclamation Service irrigation project surveyed in 1903 and funded in 1927, which also included the construction of the Owyhee Dam, diversion tunnels, and hundreds of miles of channels.35

If you follow the siphon with your eye north, you can almost see the in the distance the southwest corner of Otto and Stella’s homestead claim on Dead Ox Flat.36 When visiting in 2019, I could see the contours of a horizon full of water just down the slope in the Snake and Malheur rivers and the Owyhee canal. These were the same sources of water that Otto and Stella would have been anxious to access in the early twentieth century.

Despite the lack of irrigation, we know from letters and photographs that Otto and Stella grew rye, bought and sold cattle, and kept chickens. They also had horses, including one named “Shorty,” due to his minimal stature. Stella’s letters detail their day-to-day operations, including Otto’s hauling tons of hay, “slough hay,” corn fodder, and straw.
recounted fluctuations in prices and costs from year-to-year: “Hay is cheap this fall, last year at this time we paid $8.00 a ton for alfalfa and only $4.50 for it now and five for slough hay. Got the fodder for $2.00 a load and straw for .50 cents.”

As excerpts from Stella’s letters and picture postcards demonstrate, they succeeded by working together. Our small family archive reveals the details of their progress, her eye for the carefully framed family moment, her attention to homesteading concerns, her unwavering sense of style, and most notably her fantastic sense of humor.

Together they were ambitious in their plans and plenty proud of their work:

Only used three horses last week for Otto hadn’t had time to shoe “Shorty” all around. He does his own horse shoeing for none of the blacksmiths do it to suit him. We are going to fit up a little blacksmith shop for our own use here on the ranch and get all our farm implements fixed up for spring work. I expect the neighbors will think that will be duck soup but they will be disappointed for Otto says if anyone brings anything here to fix he will fix it for them and charge them for it same as they do in town.”

They shared a sense of pride, ambition, and a dedication to self-reliance, sometimes making Otto a bit untrusting of others. He was guarded, and trusted his abilities and hard work over the motivations and goodwill of others, including his neighbors.

Stella’s eye for framing photographs and her sense of style comes through in a photograph titled “The Two Otto’s,” from fall 1912. In it, Otto sits in front of their home with Otto, Jr., on his lap. With the low hills in the distance and miles of sagebrush on the flats behind the house, Otto, Jr., stands out, dressed in an ornate style, as a poetic counter-point of the often-used shovel leaned against the modest house behind them. On the back of the photograph, Stella’s commentary is engaging as usual. She mixes her descriptions of the practical functions of the house with wry observations and her boundless adoration of her family.

We again glimpse Stella’s humor and style with a picture-postcard simply captioned, “Oh, you Rooster!” Here, she took some joy in pretending to be upset at the proud rooster for walking into the left margin of her carefully framed portrait. She holds eight-month-old Otto, Jr., next to a buggy parked in front of the main house. The photograph beautifully captures all the movement along their home’s thoroughfare. In a letter that winter, however, Stella admits to being lonely and desperate for correspondence from her family.

Dear Mother, What’s the matter with the girls [sisters] that they don’t answer my letters, been looking every day for a month to hear from home. Well, I just got my baby to sleep after giving him a thorough rubbing with olive oil. He is teething and kind of fretful. He always wants to go to bed along about 6:30 and seven o’clock. Otto isn’t home tonight, both of our cows ran back to Washo so he had to go after them on horseback today, he got a late start so won’t be back till sometime tomorrow.”

Her letters also reveal Otto and Stella’s playful relationship. They both thought they knew best, but let each other believe the other was the one who knew better.

Wednesday morning, 5:30 o’clock. Otto won’t get up, just wait till I wail long enough then do some cussing and you’ll see him beat it out of bed, at a pretty swift gait. Breakfast is nearly ready, you bet we’ll feast on cream, that’s why I’m up at this extreme early hour, and already got my head combed. Curious to see how much cream rose on the milk. It sure is the finest I’ve ever seen. She [milk cow] gave her six quarts last night good and strong. Baby is crazy for it, he drank almost a glass full last night. Think I’ll start to wean...
It is notable that they were doing well enough to have things like olive oil for the baby and that they could afford to go to restaurants in town. And Stella was unsurprisingly busy as she described in this Friday evening report:

Am kind of tired, I washed, scrubbed and got most all my ironing done today. Will finish in the morning, am baking bread today, that finishes my work till Saturday. Oh, yes, I don’t think I told you about baby dancing. Otto plays a jig and tries to step a little and baby jumps around to the music as near as he can like him. I wish you could see him. He tries so hard to talk and can say quite a few words now plain.

Otto and Stella’s family grew in 1914, when their only daughter, Esther Stella, was born. In 1917, their second son was born, Joy Monroe, who went by “Jay” later in life. It was around this time that they moved back to Ontario but maintained ownership of the homestead claim. In a 1917 photograph of their humble new house, Stella shared news of their ten-day old baby, Joy. As usual, Stella shared her exacting directorial self-critique and honest insight about life with children.

Within the year, Stella was pregnant with their fourth child, Robert Arthur. In a 1918 photograph, Stella, who is about six months pregnant, smiles as her oldest “babe,” Otto, Jr., leaves for his first day of school.

In 1919, Otto and Stella’s zenith year together, they moved to Claytonia, Idaho, to begin a new life and profession. The land on Dead Ox Flat allowed them enough collateral to buy, co-own, and run a general store in Claytonia until an unfortunate event that was a blow to the Koshnick family. In January 1920, while working in the general store, Stella tripped over a box and was hospitalized. She suffered from internal bleeding and had a miscarriage, and developed pneumonia at the hospital during a major regional outbreak of influenza. Having been sent the news, her family raced from Minnesota to see her, but her mother, younger brother, and youngest sister, Esther Opal, did not make it in time. Stella, who had not seen her family in fourteen years, died on January 16, 1920, at Caldwell Sanitarium.

The Koshnicks were not alone in feeling the loss of Stella in the community. On January 22, 1920, the Oregon Ontario Argus reported that Stella Koshnick was a local pneumonia victim who “had come to fill a large place in the community [and] being of a happy, joyous disposition was the light of her Christian home.” Her death, “means deep loss to the husband and four children, Otto, Esther, Jay, and Robert as also to the many friends who loved and esteemed her.”

The consequences of
Stella’s sudden and tragic death had massive implications for the family. Stella’s mother and siblings stayed in Idaho to try to help ease the burden. In a photograph of Stella’s children, taken a few months after her death outside their home, it is hard not to see their sadness.

Eventually, Stella’s mother, Laura Alexander, took the youngest child, Robert, to Minnesota. There, he was raised by Stella’s mother and all of his aunts and uncles who were still connected to the Alexander family farm.

For the older children — Otto Jr., Esther Stella, and Jay — life was more difficult. Otto, Sr., often disappeared, for weeks on end, to run his honey-based beer up and down the West Coast throughout the Prohibition Era. He would often take Otto, Jr., but leave Stella and Jay in Ontario to fend for themselves. Often, they had to rely on the kindness of neighbors and friends for basics such as food. Esther Stella died at age sixteen from pneumonia, only a short period after she had been assaulted by a local man.47

One of the most important photographs to me in our small family archive was taken in July 1941. At the time, Robert (my grandfather), was stationed in California conducting anti-artillery training at Camp Haan.48 Otto, Jr., was working as an electrical engineer for Wagner Electric Corp. in Los Angeles, and Jay was working as a professional bus driver for Pacific Greyhound Lines, north of San Francisco in Sonoma. Otto, Sr., was also working many odd jobs in San Mateo. Their close proximity allowed them to have a small family reunion that July. It was one of the only times the three adult brothers would ever be together.

This time, it was Otto, Sr., making the notations on the back of the photograph. I like to imagine that as Otto, Sr., took this photograph, he might have thought briefly about how Stella would have directed him to capture this special family moment on film. I also love to imagine the humor and emotion Stella would have shared alongside this rare image of her three boys, her “babes,” together again, after twenty years and five months apart. She would have worked hard to get the image just right.

NOTES

The author would like to dedicate this article to his grandfather, Robert Koshnick.
2. An example of such advertising appeared in the Ontario Argus on July 13, 1922.


10. Allen, Homesteading the High Desert, 37. At that time, as many as one in six homesteaders in Oregon were single, White women. See Bradsher, “How the West was Settled,” 35.

11. On promoting the West, see Wrobel, Promised Lands, 19–29.

12. “To Irrigate Dead Ox Flat,” Sumpter Miner (Oregon), September 12, 1900, p. 2.


21. In any given issue of the Ontario Argus between 1909 and 1922, water, and specifically irrigation, was a constant topic of discussion. Specifically, topics included how many water permits were issued, updates on small-scale ditch and canal construction, information on dry land farming, new centrifugal pump technologies, the formation and then the disbanding of new irrigation districts, land surveys completed, and reports about the ongoing tensions between who should back the big water projects, Eastern capital, other private companies, or the federal government.


24. Bohlender interview.


27. Stella Koshnick to Laura Alexander, December 17, 1912.


30. Bohlender interview.

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32. Stella Koshnick to Laura Alexander, December 17, 1912.


34. Bohlender interview.


37. Stella Koshnick to Laura Alexander, December 17, 1912.

38. Ibid.

39. Ibid.

40. Ibid.

41. Ibid.

42. Ibid.


44. “Influenza Has Grip on the State,” Caldwell Tribune (Oregon), February 3, 1920, p. 7.

45. “Mrs. O.A. Koshnick is Pneumonia Victim” Ontario Argus (Oregon), January 22, 1920, p. 10.

46. Ibid.


48. Camp Haan opened in 1941 as a training camp for men who would be assigned to the 815th Anti-Aircraft Artillery and Automatic Weapons Battalion in World War II. Robert’s brigade, Minnesota National Guard AA, was the first to arrive at Camp Haan in January 1941. It shifted to a Prisoner of War camp a few years later. See https://militarybases.com/california/camp-haan/ (accessed October 15, 2020).