

Erma Irene Bruce

At a Glance:

Born: February 19, 1903, Tulsa, Oklahoma

Died: June 29, 1987, Carson City, Nevada

Maiden Name: Unknown

Race/nationality/ethnic background: Caucasian

Married: Harry Dryden Bruce

Primary city and county of residence and work: Reno (Washoe Co.), Virginia City (Storey Co.), Silver City (Lyon Co.), Carson City.

Major fields of work: Poetry



Irene Bruce

Photo courtesy the *Reno Evening Gazette*, 1945

A member of state's literary elite, Nevada poet actively promoted her art

A prolific author, Irene Bruce left a legacy of poetry written about Nevada. She was a resident of northern Nevada for over 50 years, living in Carson City, Reno, Silver City and Virginia City.

Born in Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1903, Irene Bruce moved to Reno, Nevada in 1936. Little is known of Irene's early years. Research on her was complicated by there being two Irene Bruces living in Reno at the same time. Both women were born in Oklahoma, and both were born in 1903. The other Irene Bruce died in 1963 and the poet Irene Bruce died in 1987.

Irene Bruce was the author of three popular books of poetry, and more than 500 of her poems were published in newspapers and magazines such as the *Christian Science Monitor*, the *San Francisco Examiner*, the *New Mexico Quarterly Review*, *Nevada Magazine*, the *Penwoman*, *Sunset*, and many others. Here are two of her poems published in 1937, [Dawn](#), and [Sunset](#).

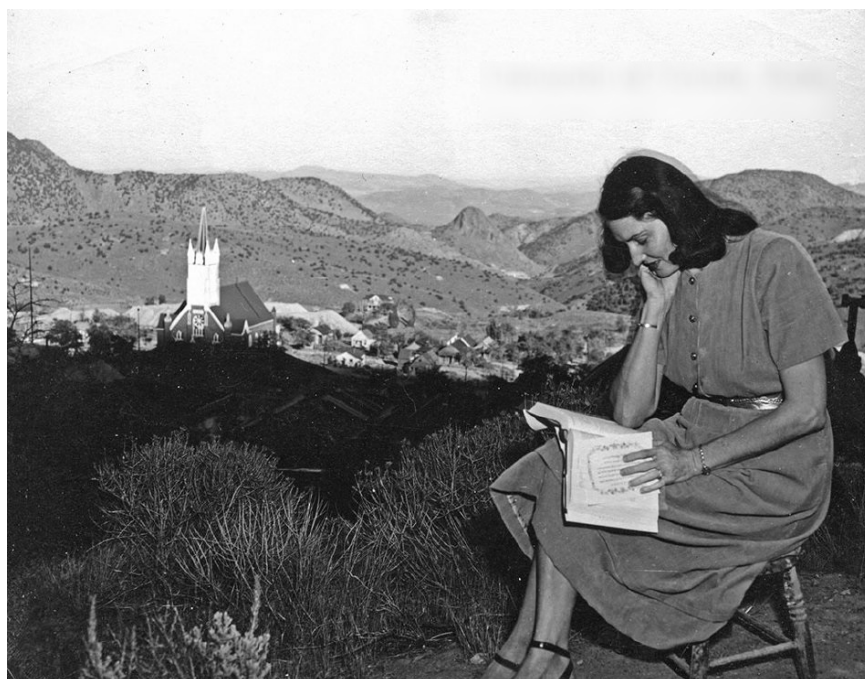
Her first book, *Crag and Sand* (1945) was popular enough to sell out in two years. A 1950 review of her second poetry book *Night Cry*, in the *Berkeley Daily Gazette*, declared that “it is seldom that the West with its desert, ghost towns, and Indians comes so alive as in the descriptive and well-disciplined verse of Irene Bruce.”

Irene Bruce founded the influential Reno Poetry Workshop in the 1940s, was the Reno branch’s secretary of the National League of American Pen Women and hosted a weekly poetry broadcast on KOH radio.

In a University of Nevada Reno, Special Collections blog post titled “[Poetry in Reno: The Brautigan Days](#),” Bernard Mergen, professor emeritus of American Studies at George Washington University, wrote that “Reno in 1956 wasn’t the Sahara of the Bozart, to use H.L. Menken’s famous put-down of the South. It had a small, but strong, community of publishing poets that included Margaret “Monte” Thornton..., Irene Bruce, Dorothy Caffrey, Robert Hume, Gus Bundy, and Harold Witt.”

Bruce was very active in the Biggest Little City in the 1940s and early 1950s, hosting poetry-themed teas at her home on South Virginia Street. Reno newspaper articles of the time show that these gatherings were attended by poets such as her friend Joanne de Longchamps, who became Nevada’s foremost poet by the 1960s.

Around 1951, Irene Bruce moved 30 miles up the hill to Virginia City, Nevada with her husband Harry Dryden Bruce, who was a Ragtime Dixieland pianist who played in establishments in the tourist town. Poet Gary Short recalls that Irene Bruce told him she and her husband rented a cottage on B Street from Doc Gallagher when they lived in Virginia City.



Irene Bruce and Virginia City, Nev.
Photo by Gus Bundy, courtesy of UNR, Special Collections.



Standing: Duncan Emrich, Roger Butterfield, Charles Clegg, Lucius Beebe.
Irene Bruce, center seated. Unknown woman.
Walter Van Tilburg Clark, kneeling.
Photo by Gus Bundy, courtesy of UNR, Special Collections.

In 1957, Irene and her husband moved a few miles south of Virginia City to another Comstock town, Silver City, Nevada. There they owned a home on Main Street near Devil's Gate, where she planted many lilac bushes and trees, and liked to *"wave at the people passing by in cars."* Mert Crouch and Patty Marshall bought the property from Irene Bruce in 1971, after her husband Harry died on August 17, 1971. The property is now part of the Satyachetana Silver City Ashram.

Bruce then moved to Carson City, Nevada, where she lived until her death in 1987. Poet Gary Short recalls that when he met her in 1979, she lived in a "one room cabin" on Airport Road in Carson City.

Irene Bruce was named one of the "12 best Nevada poets" in a collection of Nevada poetry called *Nevada Anthology*, published in 1981 by A Frosty Morning Press. Gary Short recalls that he and co-editor Roger Smith

"got a \$2,000 grant from the Nevada Arts Council to make a trip to Las Vegas to meet southern Nevada poets, and to research and compile the anthology. We divided the book into three parts--a historical introduction, a general anthology of poems dating from Comstock silver boom to the present, a section that featured what we thought were the best 12 Nevada poets. We determined to pay each of the living poets in that section \$100 each...When I brought Irene the \$100 check for her poems in the anthology, she was very pleased..."

Short remembers what she said at the time, partly because she said it with 20 syllables of iambic pentameter:

"It's so nice to have some recognition at the edge of my existence."

Irene Bruce played an important role in Nevada's literary world, not only in Reno but beyond. She was poetry editor for *Nevada Magazine*, co-editor of the literary magazine *Destinies*, and was the driving force for getting a proclamation in 1948 for Poetry Day from the Nevada Governor Vail Pittman. During a Reno Poetry Workshop event in 1948, Dr. Robert M. Gorrell, of UNR, read poems recently published by members, including Bruce's poem "Virginia City." Members of the workshop then voted to give Irene Bruce a "merit of honor for her untiring work in obtaining the proclamation for Poetry Day from the governor and in the furthering of poetry throughout the clubs and schools of the state."

Irene Bruce's writing continued to be recognized even years later. Some of her poems were included in *Desert Wood*, Shaun Griffin's 1991 anthology of Nevada poetry, and in Cheryl Glotfelty's comprehensive literary anthology called *Literary Nevada: Writings from the Silver State* (2008).

Irene died in Carson City on June 29, 1987. She is buried at the Lone Mountain Cemetery in Carson City, Nev. with her husband Harry Dryden Bruce.

Poetry Books by Irene Bruce

Bruce, Irene, *Crag and Sand*. Reno Poetry Workshop, Reno, Nev. 1945

Bruce, Irene, *Night Cry*. Poetry West, Reno, Nev. 1950.

Bruce, Irene, *Sonnets for Harry*, Reno, Nev. 1976

A Legend of Pyramid Lake

Published Works Including Poems and Information About Irene Bruce

Short, Gary and Roger Smith, *Nevada Anthology*. A Frosty Morning Press, Fallon, Nev. 1981.

Griffin, Shawn T., *Desert Wood: An Anthology of Nevada Poets*. University of Nevada Press, Reno, Nev. 1991.

Arrowhead by Irene Bruce

Rattlesnake by Irene Bruce

Sea Rose by Irene Bruce

Virginia City, Nevada by Irene Bruce

Glotfelty, Cheryll, *Literary Nevada: Writings from the Silver State*. University of Nevada Press, Reno, Nev. 2008.

Researched and written by Quest Lakes and Mona Reno

Sources of Information:

Bundy, Gus. Photos of Irene Bruce by Gus Bundy, UNR Special Collections

Glotfelty, Cheryll, *Literary Nevada: Writings from the Silver State*. University of Nevada Press, Reno, Nev. 2008.

Griffin, Shawn T., *Desert Wood: An Anthology of Nevada Poets*. University of Nevada Press, Reno, Nev. 1991.

"Irene Bruce." Reno Gazette-Journal (Reno, Nevada), 1 July 1987.

Irene Bruce Papers, 2017-26. Special Collections, University Libraries, University of Nevada, Reno. Related Materials: 87-14, Irene Bruce Papers.

Lakes, Quest, "Finding Irene Bruce, prolific poet and Silver City resident." *Reno Gazette-Journal* (Reno, Nev.) 31 January 2018.

Lloyd, Charlotte, "New Poetry." *Berkeley Daily Gazette* (Berkeley, Calif.) 7 August 1950.

Memories of Irene Bruce included in an email from Gary Short to Quest Lakes, 3 April 2022.

Mergen, Bernard, "Poetry in Reno: The Brautigan Days." Blog post of the University of Nevada Reno, Special Collections, 8 August 2014.

"Poetry Workshop Enjoys Tea Recently." *Nevada State Journal* (Reno, Nevada), 17 October 1948.

Short, Gary and Roger Smith, *Nevada Anthology*. A Frosty Morning Press, Fallon, Nev. 1981.