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COVER:

Cliff Segerblom (American, 1915-1990)
Hoover Dam Needle Test, 1941
C-Print on Dibond
48 x 38.4 inches
Collection of Segerblom Family



NEVADA: THE PHOTOGRAPHY OF CLIFF SEGERBLOM

MARCH 15 - JUNE 13, 2010



printed on post-consumer paper

THE BIG SPRINGS GALLERY

Nevada: The Photography of Cliff Segerblom

Welcome to *Nevada: The Photography of Cliff Segerblom*, the next in our new series of fine art programming

Cliff Segerblom's photographic work has been largely unknown and consequently underappreciated until now. What a delight to discover and present his work to this audience and to those who thought they were familiar with his *oeuvre* but now have new material to explore and admire.

My personal hope is that this will increase interest in Mr. Segerblom's work and career and will also inspire a new appreciation of the Nevada landscape and especially of those who build our communities. I am especially grateful to Mr. David Millman and the staff of the Nevada State Museum for their assistance on this project. The generous and unstinting support of the Segerblom family has been of vital importance in presenting this exhibition and a warm thank you and congratulations to our curator Mike Spiewak, Komkrit Thusanapanont for his technical assistance with the negatives, and the staff of the Springs Preserve for their superb work! We are indebted to our colleagues at the Las Vegas Valley Water District and, as always, are very grateful for their interest in and support of our programming.

This programming is supported, in part, by your financial and in-kind contributions.

The Springs Preserve Foundation is a 501(c)(3) non-profit foundation.

Welcome to Cliff Segerblom's Nevada!

With best personal regards,

Elizabeth Herridge

Managing Director, Springs Preserve

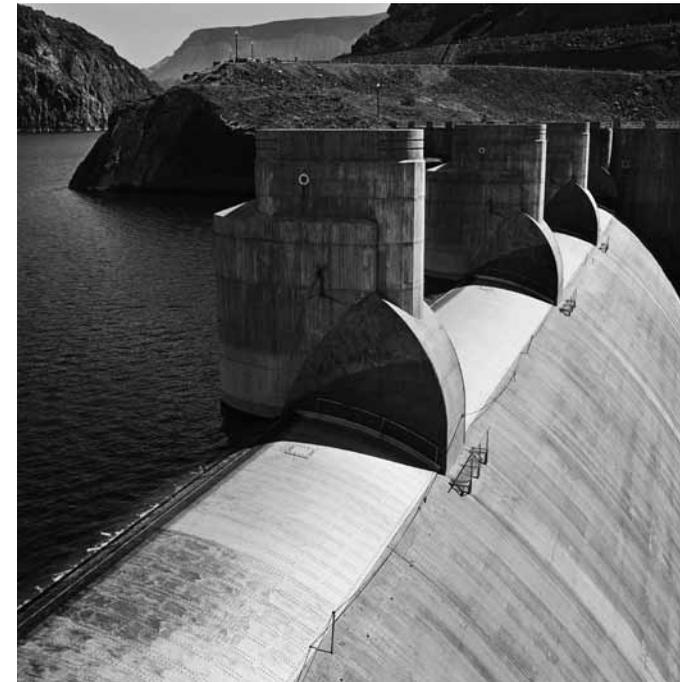


Cliff Segerblom (American, 1915-1990)

Hoover Dam Spillway in Action, 1941

Photograph courtesy of US Department of Interior,
Bureau of Reclamation

Preserving Nevada



Cliff Segerblom (American, 1915-1990)

Hoover Dam Spillway with High Water, 1958

C-Print on Dibond

36 x 36 inches

Nevada State Museum, Las Vegas

Segerblom Collection

Mike Spiewak

Curator

Born in 1915 to Swedish immigrant parents, Cliff Segerblom moved from California to Reno in 1934 to study art at the University of Nevada, funded on a football scholarship. Upon his graduation in 1938, he relocated to Boulder City. He was offered a job as a photographer with the Bureau of Reclamation to document the recently completed Hoover Dam. His career as a photographer started when there were only 90,000 people living in the state. Shortly thereafter, Segerblom's public-relations photographs were seen across the nation in the publications *Life*, *Time* and *National Geographic*. At the time of his death in 1990, the population of Nevada had exploded to over 1.2 million, and this enormous influx of residents brought great change to the cities and landscapes of the state he had come to love. Throughout his life, Segerblom strove to capture images of a Nevada that was gradually disappearing from the landscape, including artifacts of rural living, mining towns, and the vast tracts of land that make up the state.

The Modern Desert: Photographs by Cliff Segerblom

In addition to the photographs created while employed by the Bureau of Reclamation, Segerblom assembled an archive of several thousand large and medium format film negatives that are currently housed at the Nevada State Museum in Las Vegas. The photographs presented in this exhibition cover 40 years of work starting in 1941 with the iconic *Hoover Dam Needle Test*. This image demonstrates the scale and power of the monolithic structure without including the dam itself in the image. A party of engineers can be seen in the midground being lowered on a skip during a test of the canyon wall needle valves. All the power of the water being created by the natural pressure of Lake Mead behind the dam is visible. Images like this helped the Bureau of Reclamation to sell their projects to the people and Congress of this country.

Although best known for his photographs of Hoover Dam, Segerblom and his wife Gene, a fourth generation Nevadan from Ruby Valley, traveled the state documenting the ghost towns, created by defunct mines, that litter the Nevada landscape. These artifacts of the state's history of rich mineral strikes, the most famous being the Comstock Lode, serve as reminders of how the state developed during moments of sudden gold and silver "rushes" and how quickly these bustling metropolises emptied of residents once an ore deposit was exhausted. The Cosmopolitan Dance Hall and Saloon pictured in *Belmont, NV*, enjoyed great prosperity during the 1860s and 1870s but by the turn of the century the city was abandoned. Segerblom photographed it in a state of disrepair. Currently the structure no longer stands and after years of abuse by the weather and vandals, its remnants are slowly being swallowed up by the surrounding landscape.

Segerblom's photograph of the construction of Boulder City's Federal Homes Development depicts the homes being built on Department of Interior land by Eastern financiers who agreed to develop the property in an attempt to alleviate a projected housing shortage in the early 1950s. When the housing shortage did not turn out to be as severe as anticipated, the company ended up having to rent the unsold homes and was not able to build further on the initial development. This image in particular recalls recent Nevada history and its gold rushes by land developers, with unsustainable growth planning, as well as the impact of the current economic environment.

Cliff Segerblom's photography, historic in nature, distills pressing themes that are just as current today as when they were photographed. With a passion for the elements of Nevada that he attempted to preserve before they disappeared, his images bring to light issues that Nevada continues to address regarding sustainable development, the environment and our cultural resources.



Cliff Segerblom (American, 1915-1990)
Las Vegas, NV, 1973
C-Print on Dibond
36 x 36 inches
Nevada State Museum, Las Vegas
Segerblom Collection

Kirsten Swenson

*Assistant Professor of Contemporary Art
University of Nevada, Las Vegas*

Landscape photography is a kind of pointing, a way of saying, "Look!" Often, a photograph simply points to the scenic; in other instances, the photographer's interest in the landscape is more complex and compelling than the quest for a postcard view. Natural beauty abounds in Cliff Segerblom's photographs, but he was primarily intent on documenting a transitional era: his photographs are visual records of the ways in which human enterprise altered the Nevada landscape in the modern age. His photographs look to the past and the future. Some document ghost towns—remnants of nineteenth-century gold and silver prospecting—while others, taken on the cusp of Las Vegas's late-twentieth-century population boom, survey the expansive desert floor in seeming anticipation of the housing developments and shopping complexes to come. Overall, Segerblom's photography documents an epochal shift in Nevada's lands, from wilderness to source of mineral, ore, and water resources and sites of rapidly expanding human settlement.



Cliff Segerblom (American, 1915-1990)
Lake Mead View from Quartermaster Canyon, c. 1941
C-Print on Dibond
48 x 38.4 inches
Nevada State Museum, Las Vegas
Segerblom Collection

The subjects of Segerblom's photographs reveal his fascination with the modernization of the desert, and his photographic sensibility—that is, his approach to technique and compositional elements—suggests a familiarity with modern landscape photography. In the second half of the 19th century, the photographer Carleton Watkins took photographs across the American west, including mining operations in Virginia City, Nevada, as well as newly laid railroad tracks, roads, and burgeoning towns in the Yosemite region. His photographs of a rapidly modernizing American west contrasted with representations of the west by painters such as Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran who, earlier that century, had painted out traces of human activity in their luminous portrayals of timeless, virgin landscapes that conveyed notions of the romantic sublime. Photography, unlike painting, is beholden to that which appears before the lens, and photographers of the American West often sought to capture an historically-specific landscape.

Segerblom, like Watkins and other photographers of westward expansion and settlement, was inclined to picture tensions between industry and wilderness. In 1938, he was appointed the official Bureau of Reclamation photographer for the Hoover Dam project, which was nearing completion. The Hoover Dam was the first of several massive concrete dams to be built in the west by the Bureau of Reclamation in the 1930s, including the Fort Peck Dam in Montana and the Grand Coulee Dam in Washington.



Cliff Segerblom (American, 1915-1990)
Ruth Copper Mine, 1953
C-Print on Dibond
36 x 36 inches
Nevada State Museum, Las Vegas
Segerblom Collection

These dams were quintessentially modern symbols, heralding a new era of hydroelectric power and the taming of rivers—not least the mighty Colorado—for drinking water, irrigation, and flood control. The Hoover Dam in particular represented a great feat of engineering that would sustain human populations in one of Earth's most inhospitable environments.

Segerblom's work for the Bureau of Reclamation—which he once referred to offhandedly as “public relations photography for the government”—was a formative experience. In this first major professional assignment, Segerblom captured the tests of the spillways and valve outlet houses in hundreds of photographs for the Bureau. In this capacity he learned to use a large-format camera, working with 8 x 10 negatives that recorded a stunning level of detail. While working for the Bureau, Segerblom encountered luminaries of twentieth century photography: Ansel Adams, Margaret Bourke-White, and Alfred Eiesenstaedt all visited the dam to take their own photographs while Segerblom was on assignment. “They all wanted to use my darkroom to load film and take test strips—and I was only 24,” he recounted.¹

Segerblom's brush with these towering figures—not to mention the dam itself as a subject—undoubtedly shaped his ambitions, technique, and photographic eye. Bourke-White's famous photograph of the Fort Peck dam had appeared on the cover of the inaugural issue of *Life* magazine in 1936.



Cliff Segerblom (American, 1915-1990)
Las Vegas Club Billboard, 1953
C-Print on Dibond
36 x 36 inches
Nevada State Museum, Las Vegas
Segerblom Collection

Her pictorial reduction of the dam, then in progress, to an abstract procession of geometric forms emphasized a monumental feat of technology over the natural environment. Bourke-White's dramatic reading of the dam's symbolism was an important precedent, but the example of Adams who, by the time he visited Hoover Dam, was famous for his visionary photographs of Yosemite taken with a large-format camera, was most significant for Segerblom.

The ethos of the f.64 Group, a highly influential affiliation of California photographers that counted Adams and Edward Weston as key members, is in evidence in many of Segerblom's photographs. Key among the aims of the f.64 was to foreground the "actualities and limitations of the photographic medium."ⁱⁱ This implied fully exploiting the "light writing" capacity of a photosensitive medium: recording true blacks and luminous whites, and achieving the greatest possible level of detail and precision. The group employed large-format cameras set to a tiny aperture—f-stop 64—that allowed minimal light to enter the camera, thereby involving a long exposure time resulting in richly detailed pictures.

Segerblom returned to the Hoover Dam and Lake Mead reservoir as subjects over the 1940s and 1950s, taking photographs influenced by the principles of the f.64 Group, though Segerblom used slightly larger



Cliff Segerblom (American, 1915-1990)
Lake Mead and Hoover Dam Construction Railroad, 1950
C-Print on Dibond
36 x 36 inches
Nevada State Museum, Las Vegas
Segerblom Collection

f-stops and a medium-format camera (many photographs in this exhibition are printed from 6 x 6 negatives) in addition to a large-format camera. Photographs such as *Lake Mead View from Quartermaster Canyon*, c. 1941, are deeply reminiscent of Adams's photographs of Yosemite, such as *Valley View, Yosemite National Park*, c. 1933. Segerblom's photograph captures a sharply detailed foreground, middle ground, and background; each crevice and striation in the canyon walls is visible in greater clarity than could be detected by the naked eye. Each wisp of cloud has texture and volume. Indeed, this photograph, taken on a day when cumulous cloud formations cast dark shadows on the canyon walls, suggests that Segerblom was emulating the composition of Adams's photographs of Yosemite quite directly.

Yet while Adams turned his camera on a National Park, a rarified preserve of unspoiled nature, Segerblom's photographs of Lake Mead, the nation's largest reservoir, record a monumental human alteration of the natural world. Particularly striking in this regard is *Lake Mead and Hoover Dam Construction Railroad*, 1950, an elevated view in which the reservoir recedes to a distant horizon. A railroad track, its sinuous path tracing the topography, is a reminder that the sublime beauty of the expansive landscape is not natural beauty but that of a manmade lake. Likewise, in 1953 Segerblom documented the permanent transformation



Cliff Segerblom (American, 1915-1990)
Naval Airport Runway, Boulder City, NV, 1940
Photograph courtesy of US Department
of Interior, Bureau of Reclamation

of the landscape through human intervention in a photograph of the Ruth Copper Mine. The mine is both beautiful in its patterned steps carved deep into the earth and terrifying in its scale and implications. *Ruth Copper Mine*, 1953, is an example of the “industrial sublime,” a term used to characterize the subjects of photographer Edward Burtynsky whose more recent photographs of “nature transformed through industry” include mines and oilfields that possess an unsettling dramatic beauty.ⁱⁱⁱ

Much of Segerblom’s landscape photography employs extreme wide angles, high horizon lines, elevated perspectives, and great depth of field—photographic conventions used to emphasize the wide-open space of the desert. However, the expansive landscapes that Segerblom is effective in framing are rarely untouched by human presence: in the case of photographs taken in the environs of Berlin, Nevada and Boulder City, Nevada, winding roads cut diagonally across the compositions to guide the eye from foreground to background. By contrast, photographs of Ruby Valley, Nevada and Winnemucca Lake, Nevada employ low horizons and appear almost as cloud studies reminiscent of Dutch and British landscape painting traditions. And these photographs appear free of the theme of human presence in the natural landscape—unless one considers that Winnemucca Lake shrank to a fraction of its original scale after the damming of the Truckee River early in the twentieth century.

Human inroads deep into the vast desert are a motif common to Segerblom’s photographs of the Las Vegas environs from the 1950s through the 1970s. In 1953, Segerblom photographed a roadside billboard for the Las Vegas Club. “Real Lifelike Western Badmen,” the advertisement reads, illustrated by cartoonish outlaws in wide-brimmed hats. Power lines cut diagonally across the photograph’s upper-left corner and run across the desert in the background. The “Old West” of lore is here lampooned and commercialized, and the rise of the “New West” is apparent in power lines crisscrossing the desert. In a 1973 photograph of the city’s modest skyline that appears to have been taken several miles to the northwest of The Strip, Segerblom lowered his camera to the level of the barren, rocky desert soil. The terrain is vegetation-free, as if the sagebrush, yucca, and cacti had been recently cleared, and power lines cut across the photograph’s middle ground. The implications are clear: the landscape would soon be irrevocably changed, and Segerblom sought to document this shift in the identity of the west.

By the early 1970s, Segerblom’s pointing to the evolving western landscape coincided with that of many other photographers, including Robert Adams (whose series “The New West” documented the suburbanization of the Denver area in the 1960s and 1970s), Stephen Shore, Lewis Baltz, and others. In 1975, these figures were included in a landmark exhibition entitled “The New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape” that has come to define a prevalent direction in contemporary landscape photography. While Segerblom never achieved broad recognition for his photography outside Nevada, he was engaged from early on with the most pressing photographic themes of the day that had implications for sustainability and environmental movements, and urban planning. His pointing is not judgmental, but motivated by an understanding of the profound implications of what he was witnessing: the transformation of Nevada into a modern, industrial landscape.

ⁱ Segerblom quoted in Mary Whalen, “Cliff Segerblom,” *Nevada* (May/June 1989): 68.

ⁱⁱ The Group f.64 manifesto is quoted in Mary Warner Marien, *Photography: A Cultural History* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2004).

ⁱⁱⁱ See www.corcoran.org/burtynsky/ to view the website of Edward Burtynsky’s recent retrospective “Oil,” for which the artist gave a talk entitled “Edward Burtynsky and the Industrial Sublime.”