

This month's theme:  
Ferry Boats



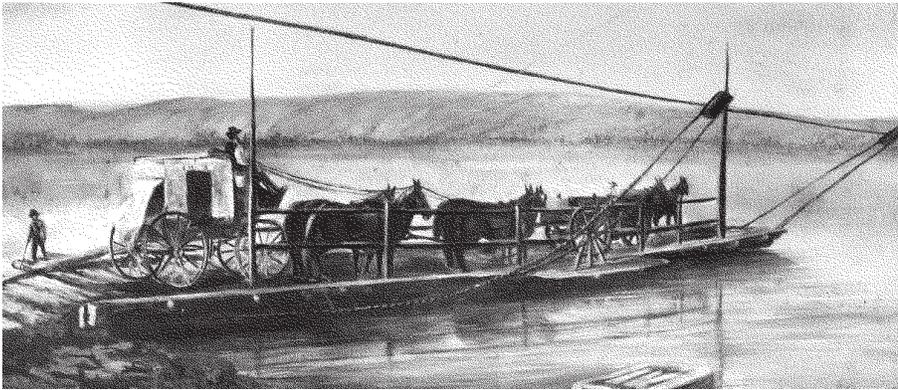
Contents

Feature	1	Fun page	3
Next month	5		

The Newsletter of the Idaho State Historical Society's Junior Historian Program

# PROSPECTOR

April, 2007



## Ferry Boats

**H**ow would you cross one of Idaho's wide rivers if there weren't any bridge? The pioneers were often faced with this problem. Not only did they have to get themselves across; they had to get their horses, cows, sheep, wagons, and stagecoaches safely across too.

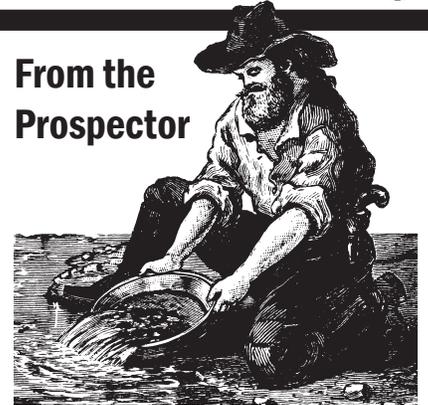
The first thing you might do would be to find a shallow place in the river which you and your animals could wade across. Such a place was called a ford. Without a ford, only the strongest

animals could cross by swimming, and this was very dangerous. Many were drowned in the attempt. It was especially hard to cross a river when the water was high. After a storm or when the snow was melting in the spring, the rivers often became raging torrents and nothing could get across alive.

Why not build bridges? Rivers like the Snake, the Salmon, and the Clearwater were usually too wide or deep for bridge making with the tools and materials that the pioneers had with them. Also, people

*Continued on next page*

## From the Prospector



### Howdy Prospectors

**T**here was a heavy rain last night and the creek near my mining shack quickly turned into a raging river. Normally, we'd just sit and wait in the shack, but we were out of supplies and needed to get to the grocery store. Well, my mule and I tried to cross on foot, but the water was too dangerous.

Instead, we walked downstream to the highway and crossed on the bridge. As we were looking over the guardrail at the water below, my mule asked how the pioneers crossed rivers before all the bridges were built. That, I thought, is a perfect topic for this month's Prospector. After some hard research, I came up with some interesting stories. I hope you enjoy this month's issue on the history of ferry boats in the West.

*Lucky Noah*

passing through were usually in a hurry to get where they were going before winter snows caught them. They just didn't have time to build a bridge.

The solution to this problem on almost all of Idaho's major rivers was to build ferry boats. The Idaho pioneers didn't invent the ferry boat.

Ferries of some sort of another have been used throughout the world whenever people were faced with repeatedly crossing a river. In Idaho, the combination of well-traveled pioneer roads and frequent treacherous rivers made our state well suited for this type of transportation.

River ferries look very different from ocean-going ships. Typically they resemble large rafts and are very simply built. Some of these ferries were only strong enough to carry a few people across a river. Others were big enough to handle wagons and livestock.

A few ferries were moved across the river using oars, but this wasn't very efficient. Rowing was a

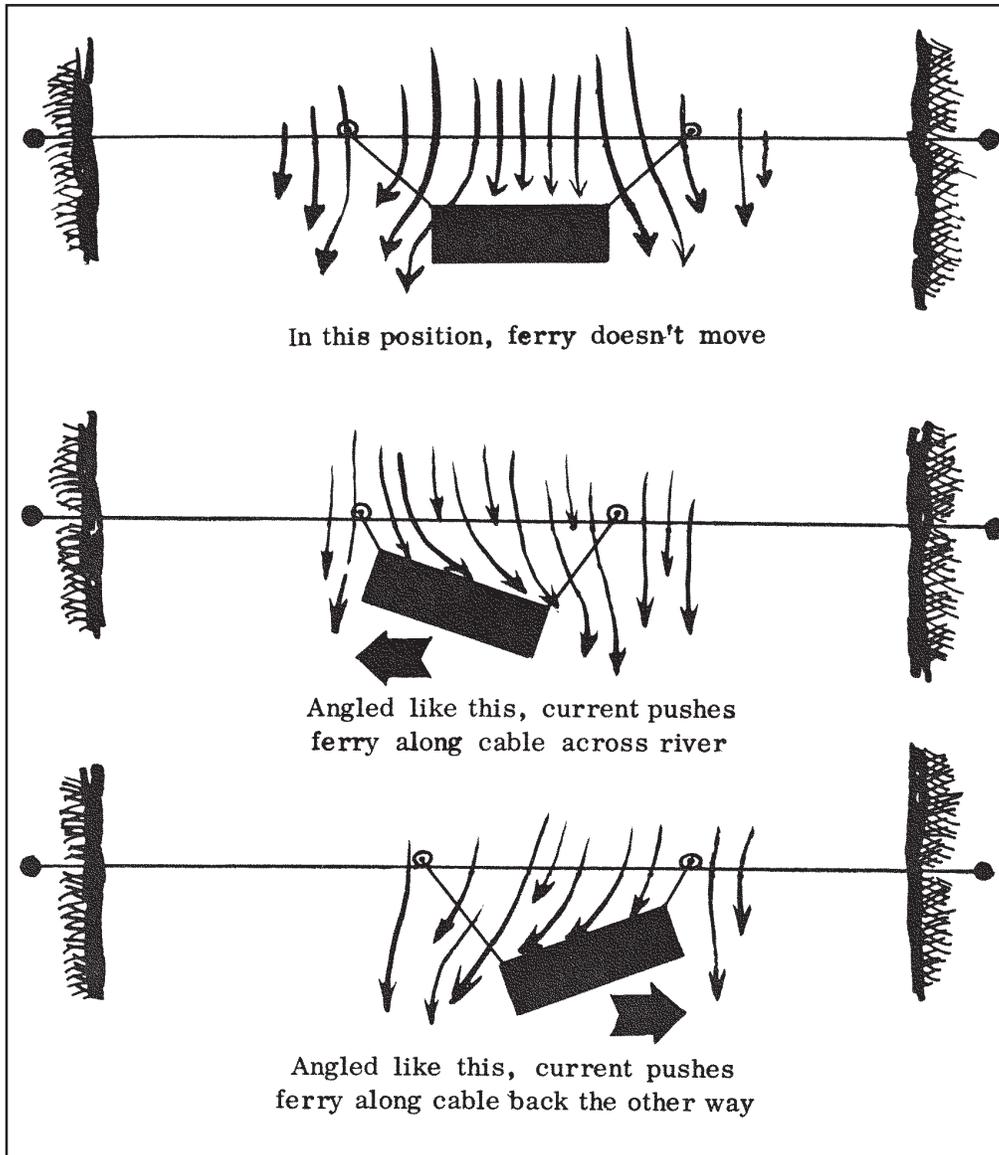
lot of work and it was difficult in a strong current to land the boat at the same place on the bank. Most ferries had long ropes or cables that attached them to both banks of the

from charging for each person, animal, and vehicle that rode on the ferry, operators could also make money selling food and supplies to passing travelers. On busy days,

passengers would have a long wait for their turn to cross the river. A clever ferry operator could make extra money by running a tavern or inn to serve the waiting travelers.

In the late 1800's there were hundreds of ferries operating throughout the state, but by the early 1900's the business began to disappear. With the population growing, it made sense to build bridges across the most traveled routes. Once a bridge spanned the river, there was no need to have a ferry.

Although the



*How a Rope Ferry Crosses a River*

river. These ferries could cleverly use the force of the river itself to propel the boat across (see diagram).

Ferry operators on a busy route could make a good living. Aside

ferry business in Idaho is long gone, you can still easily find traces of its important history by studying maps. Towns with names like Bonner's Ferry, Smith's Ferry, and Glenn's Ferry remind us of a time when crossing a river could be a major adventure. ❖



# The Fun Page

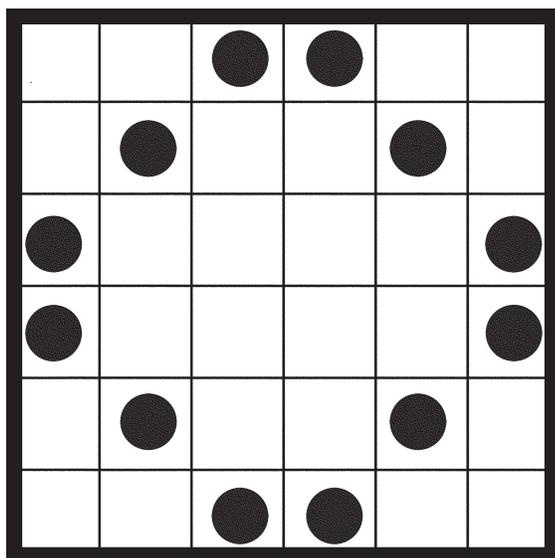
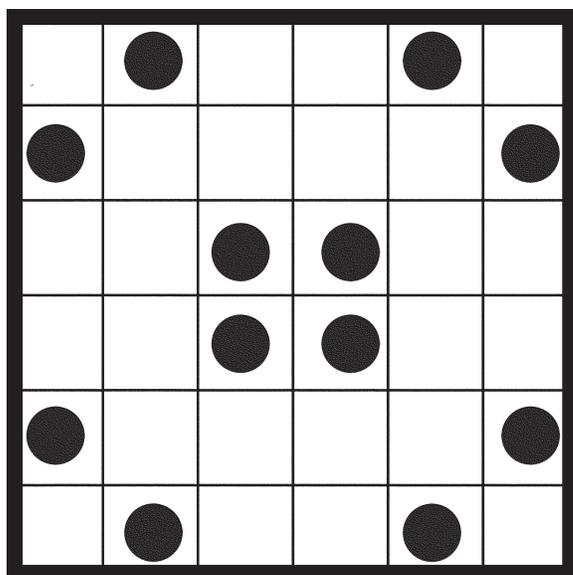
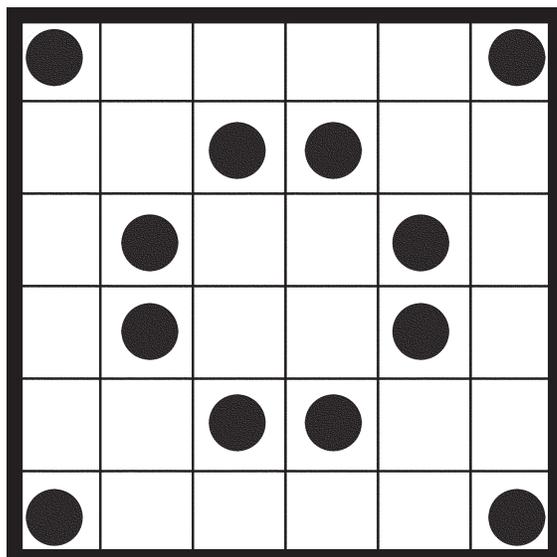
## Balance the Boat

**A**s ferry boat captain, it's your job to distribute the cargo and passengers evenly on the deck. If you put too many things on one side of the boat, you'll tip over and sink. Pretend the grid below is the deck of your ferry

boat. You need to arrange the passengers to keep your vessel afloat. Take 12 markers (pennies or rocks or anything else you have around) and arrange them, one to a square. You have to follow two rules. First, there have to be two

and only two markers in each of the six horizontal rows. Second, each of the two diagonals has to have exactly two markers. We came up with three possible solutions (on the next page). See how many you can come up with.


# Solutions





## Next Month's Activities

**W**ell, we've told you all we know about ferry boats in Idaho, but we need your help so that we can learn more. Pick from one of the activities below or make up your own ferry boat project and send it in to our Prospector Headquarters. We'll take some of your best work and print it in next month's magazine. Remember to include your name, where you're from, and the name of your Prospector Chapter. We can't wait to see what you send in!

**The Captain's Day:** What was it like to be a ferry captain the late 1800's? Pretend that you are the owner of a popular ferry on one of the large rivers of Idaho. Write a fictional diary of a day in your life. How long was your work day? Did you meet any interesting travelers? Did

anything out of the ordinary happen? We can't wait to hear your story!

**Bagons or Woats?** You are an inventor in the 1870's who's tired of paying money every time you need to cross a river. If you want to cross Idaho Territory you are

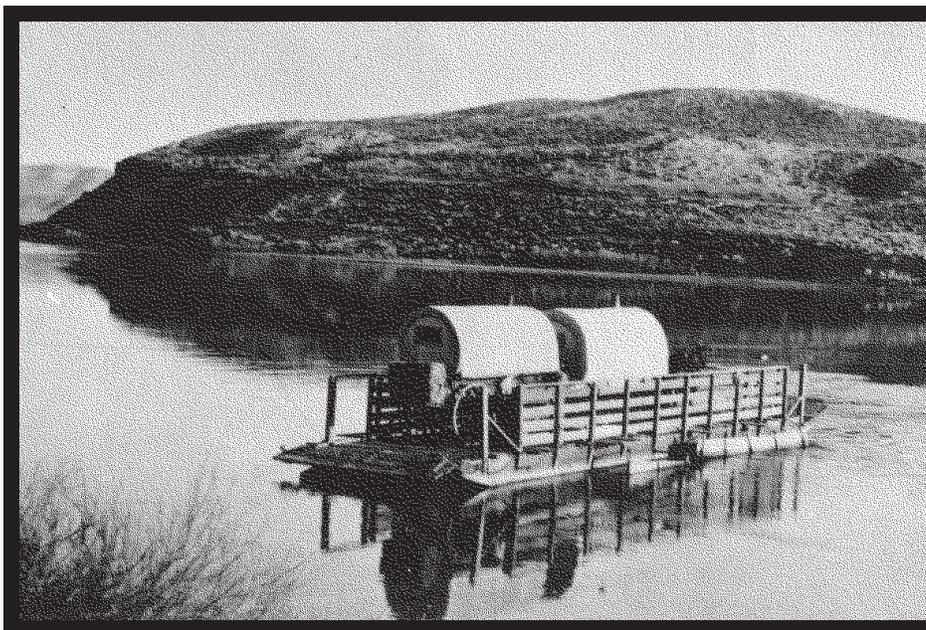
explain to us how it works.

**Ferry Boat History:** No matter where you live in Idaho, there is probably a river somewhere nearby. Many of those rivers would have had ferry crossing in the late 1800's. Do a little research and try to find a

historic ferry crossing near where you live. What was it named? Who owned it? When did it operate? We'll share your report with the rest of the Prospectors.

Send in your work by May 25th to:

Prospector Club  
Lucky Noah  
Idaho State  
Historical Museum



constantly giving up your hard earned savings to ferry boat captains. Enough is enough. It's time someone invented a wagon that can go land and on water. Draw us a picture of your fantastic new anti-ferry wagon design. Be sure to

610 North Julia Davis Drive  
Boise, ID 83702

Or email it to us at  
kzwolfer@ishs.state.id.us.