

Trees in Early Boise

Number 31

Long before white settlement of Boise Valley, a grove of trees along the river welcomed travelers who came off the desert along an old Indian trail that crossed southern Idaho. Early trappers often called the stream Wood River if they were British or Boise River if they were French. (The two words are about the same: Boise is French for wooded.) As soon as the founders of Boise could manage it, they made their new community a city of trees. First they had to put in an irrigation system. Then they had to bring in nursery stock. They started with fruit orchards and fast-growing shade trees: poplars, cottonwoods, and willows. Thomas J. Davis (who in 1908 donated forty acres of his fruit orchard for a park to the city in memory of his wife, Julia) planted 7,000 fruit trees in the spring of 1864. Phillip Ritz, numbered among the most prominent northwestern nurserymen, turned up in Boise in November, 1864, with a large stock of trees for sale. This ambitious beginning had great promise, although as late as 1870, the Statesman complained that "the virgin soil of capital square is innocent of a single tree, except a few scattering sage-brush." Early in 1869, the two leading hotels--Hart's Exchange and the Overland--were improved with rows of young cottonwoods and quaking aspen, and many homeowners followed their example. By spring, the Statesman commented that:

The tree maina prevails in this city. Almost every street is already ornamented with poplar, cottonwood, and willow trees, and as but few men are in the tree business, they observe a strict system of setting them out in a true line, and of the proper depth to make them live with a good supply of water. We flatter ourselves that we will be the premium or star city of the plains, when the water ditch is completed, and the street shrubbery abundantly supplied. The trees already set out make a marked change in the appearance of our city. Some of the new owners had problems, though:

We have noticed in several cases horses tied to young shade trees. The trees are entirely too young for such treatment. They are being raised at great expense and trouble. Give them a chance, and in four or five years they will be strong enough to hold horses.

By 1869, Tom Davis had a thousand of his apple trees bearing fruit, with prospects for a much larger crop in 1870. Not long after this auspicious start in orchards and shade trees, variety was introduced on a big scale. Lafayette Cartee, who had brought a sawmill and a stamp

mill to Rocky Bar at the time Boise was founded, became surveyor general in 1867 and settled in Idaho's territorial capital city. There he joined in the drive to transform the community with handsome new trees. To help meet the great demand, he decided to start a local nursery in 1870. Ordering a substantial stock from a supplier in Bloomington, Illinois, he spent \$176.70 for trees and \$55.39 for postage to get them shipped. (His trees came by rail to Kelton, Utah, and then by mail stage for 232 miles over the Overland road to Boise.) He started with plum, cherry, crab apple, quince, mulberry, black walnut, balsam, fir, Norway spruce, box elder, sugar maple, and even orange trees among others; soon he added magnolias, lilacs, and many other kinds of fruit trees and flowers. As part of his nursery, which covered twenty-four acres between Grove and Myrtle, and Third and Fifth streets, he soon opened a greenhouse. In 1878, he opened a fruit cannery. Orchards around Boise had only a local market until rail service made commercial shipment possible. During the early years, more than a few strange problems had to be overcome in order to produce fruit even for the local market. Tom Davis had to get out a crew of men during some of the earlier summers to shake grasshoppers out of his apple trees. Finally, expansion of the city accomplished what the grasshoppers had failed at: houses and businesses supplanted the Davis orchard and the Cartee nursery. But Boise's trees kept expanding with the city, and a half-century after Lafayette Cartee began his nursery, Emil Grandjean's census of Boise's trees showed an astounding variety that other communities which participated in the Forest Service's national tree survey could not match. Boise really lived up to its name as a city of trees.

Idaho State Historical Society • Idaho State Archives • 2205 Old Penitentiary Road • Boise, ID 83712
Phone: (208) 334-2620 • Fax: (208) 334-2626 • For more information, visit
www.history.idaho.gov

The ISHS reference series was produced over many years by a number of individuals, some of whom devoted more time to their topics than others. Reference series entries are not updated. The series is designed to be a starting point for research.