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BOISE-IDAHO CITY TOLL ROAD

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Access routes to the Boise mines around Placerville and Idaho City at the beginning of the gold rush in the fall of 1862 came from the Payette country to the west. Then after deep snow melted in the mining country the next spring, wagons from the Oregon Trail moved over a route that left the upper end of the valley of the Boise and traversed Highland Valley. This road, open by June, served traffic from Salt Lake and points east. Later in the summer, after Fort Boise was established as a military post several miles farther west, a government sawmill was installed on Robie Creek. In August, the United States Army built a road high above Cottonwood Gulch (rather than along the stream) and across McRay's Gap to their sawmill. This road provided a more direct access to the Boise Basin mines from the new city of Boise, which grew up adjacent to Fort Boise. Both routes soon became toll roads. A legislative franchise was granted January 29, 1864, for the original Highland Valley route. Then on April 5, 1865, a county franchise was provided for a toll road through McRay's Gap. These arrangements were intended to finance maintenance and road improvements for existing routes. A legislative franchise for the Cottonwood-McRay's Gap route above Fort Boise of January 5, 1866, confirmed the county arrangement for the Idaho City toll road combine that managed both routes.

Although the legislature was reckless sometimes in awarding toll road franchises to companies that collected profits on routes that required little or no expenditure for maintenance or improvement, the Boise-Idaho City venture was clearly needed. James Reynolds, who traveled over the Army road in October of 1864--prior to application of tolls for improvement--explained the need for a better route to the summit of McRay's Gap. He also noted that a great deal more work was required to improve the toll section from the junction with the Highland route up to Idaho City:

Mounting one of Caldwell & Cornish's stages, with a fresh team, in the cool morning air of six o'clock, a stranger to the road would expect an easy day's drive of thirty-six miles to reach Idaho City. He does not anticipate that he has a whole day's work before him, and that with climbing hills that were better named

precipices, and being jolted the remainder of the way over the roughest of roads, he will, at the end of his journey, be as tired as any day's work ever found him, but that is certain to be his experience in the place of his morning's anticipations. This road, by the way, is a theme for poets, and a subject for philosophers to discuss and news mongers to scribble about. But this road is a wonder. It is a natural wonder--there being so little that is artificial about it. Before you have reached four miles from Boise City, you have climbed high up in the mountains, while many hundreds of feet below, and almost beneath your feet, winds a gradually ascending canyon to the very summit of the hill, and you wonder why a little labor has not before now made a track for vehicles there. You go climbing on over peaks that you wonder can be reached at all, until you see the feat performed. As you get further into the mountains the road becomes a curiosity. It is now an artificial curiosity, for there has been some work done upon it. It is curious to see how the ingenuity of man could find so bad a place to make a road over the same ground. But seriously, the condition of this road can be endured but little longer by the increasing travel and freight interests that seek a transit over it. The incorporators, it is said, have ten or a dozen men at work on it. What does that amount to? There ought to be a hundred, until a half dozen of the worst hills are worked. The tax that these hills levy upon all kinds of produce and merchandise that are consumed in the Basin and upon every passenger that passes over the road, ought to admit of no delay in its being put in better condition. Improvements that have been made along the way in the last two months, and the new stations that are building show very plainly that the past season has been one of business prosperity--indication No. 1 that the country is not "gone in," as has been harped on for the last year and a-half. Idaho Statesman, October 25, 1864.

With the toll revenue running over \$6,000 in the initial year of operation, the franchise holders for the McRay's Gap segment (which had its own toll gate) gained capital so that a new Cottonwood grade could be put along the bottom of the gulch. A number of months brought in more than a thousand dollars, and with a dollar per wagon, the owners could expect to recover their rather high maintenance costs. Wagons using the road had to pay two dollars additional to continue past another toll gate at the junction of More's and Robie creeks. Spring washouts made special problems along that part of the road. Thomas H. Stringham, toll collection and road manager, reported that on

April 29, 1867:

The road team and some of the road men went from the bridge, which I have watched continually, up the road to Thorn Creek, where the road is just breaking up, and they found the Davis canyon safe as far as could be seen. Some time Monday night or Tuesday morning the hill side from the creek up to the road, about ninety feet, slid off, taking a part of the grade, so that it was impassable for any wagon. Moore's creek commenced raising fast, so that a short grade was covered too deep to be safe for a stranger to the road to drive into it. Tuesday morning I informed the teamsters not to drive through it until the road men got there or the water fell. Tuesday night I received the first intelligence of the slide. I immediately sent orders to the road men (seven, besides Chinamen, instead of three) to go as quick as possible and repair it and hire every available man they could; and I sent word and told all the teamsters and drivers that they could not pass until the road was repaired. The man that took my order to the men on the road lost his pocket-book with all of its contents and the letter, so the men only got his verbal statement late Wednesday evening, and instead of going in the night, started Thursday morning; arrived there with team and tools at 12 ½ o'clock M., when all the men that I could hire met them. On Friday afternoon we passed all of the teams over safely. Everything was done with all of the dispatch possible. The stage driver told me Wednesday that he would not drive over the breach till I got it fixed, but would change stages or drive back with the down passengers, which they always have done when there has been a break in the road or bridges. I ordered all not to drive over either place until it was repaired, and the foreman on the road said it was safe. Idaho Statesman, October 25, 1867.

When stages could not get through washouts, switching baggage and mail was a nuisance. On May 2, one of the drivers tried to get through the bad spots instead of exchanging passenger with the other coach. He met with disaster:

The road on the east bank of Moore's creek, about a mile below Davis & Richey's, is under water in several places and utterly impassable for teams. The first place of difficulty is some two hundred yards below the mouth of the canon. There is from two to four feet of water on the track; heavy rocks have fallen in, and the current sets heavily on the road. It was here on

Wednesday, a four-horse wagon with its load and horses was swept off the track, the driver barely escaping. The wheel-horses swam out a half mile below, but the leaders, wagon and contents were lost.

The empty stage passed this place on Thursday without accident. Between this place and the foot of the hill, a short distance below, another place is washed out too deep for passing, and a grade has been constructed on the side of the hill to pass around it. This was the hill of difficulty. The down stage arrived first at the foot of the hill, and the driver, with Mr. Davis and Mr. Roberts, went to a very narrow spot near the summit to see if it was safe to attempt to pass. They decided it was not, and one of the party returned to carry the baggage over with the view of exchanging stages. The up stage was signalled not to approach, but the driver deciding that he could pass changed the whole plan. The horses were taken off, baggage unloaded, and the up stage taken over by hand with difficulty. In attempting to pass the other stage over the same spot with one pair of horses, it was found to be too narrow, and the skill of two very courageous drivers, with the help of over a dozen men, could not keep the horses and stage from plunging down the bank into the creek below. One horse was gotten out barely alive; the other was drowned. The mail and Wells, Fargo & Co.'s box were saved. Judge May's trunk, containing some gold dust, coupons and other valuable papers, as well as linen, was seen floating down the creek at race horse speed. Idaho Statesman, May 4, 1867.

The day after the accident, the road was repaired and the stage was fished out of the creek, undamaged aside from a broken pole. Six weeks later, with the spring run off over, a stage trip from Idaho City to Boise went smoothly. James O'Meara reported that on June 19:

A full load of passengers made the heart of the driver glad, and he took care to give a touch of the inspiration to his team which sped along over the road in splendid style and with high speed. A delightful day was vouchsafed, and everything was favorable. At Cooper's Minnehaha Ranch we stopped to water the horses, and the moment's stay gave opportunity for a brief but pleasing survey of the pretty place Mr. Cooper has there built up in the lap of wilderness. An air of charming cleanliness and neatness everywhere pervades the house and grounds, and the sweet music of

the bubbling, rippling waters of the Minnehaha as they leap and frisk over the pebbly, rocky bed, adds its cheery influence to the scene. Away from the "Laughing Waters," and soon to Davis' and right along until we reached the Half-Way House of Russell. There a quick luncheon, and then, with a fresh team, for town. Slowly up the high, long hills, rapidly down the grades, and speedily along the stretches of valley or undulating road, on we sped; then the Summit hill was climbed warily, and there below us, miles away, seeming like an ocean girt by mountains, lay the Valley of Boise. It is a grand and picturesque view, and in this approximate harvest season the cultivated Valley, all green and beautiful below, with the great blue and grey and grizzled, rocky looking mountains, about and all around it, here and there capped or tipped or patched with snow, the pretty conceit of the poet--Summer smiling in the lap of Winter--is enchantingly illustrated.

The Summit reached. Ad. gave the word to his team, and away the stage rattled down that one, continuous, long nine miles grade into Boise Valley, entering just where Uncle Sam, by his agent military, Major Pinckney Lugenbeel, a few years ago planted and built up the new and handsome military post of Fort Boise. Idaho World, June 22, 1867.

Lisle Lester, a traveling actress who performed in Boise and Idaho City, told of a similar trip taken late in September:

Before reaching the summit, I gained a seat on the outside of the coach, that I might have an unimpeded view of the surrounding scenery. The sun had just crimsoned the foothills with carmine, and wherever the eye rested, whether upon the high stretching mountains ahead, or the singularly beautiful valley behind, it rested upon rare pictures of scenery, made wondrously rich and fascinating in the morning's dawn light. Far back of us the great valley spread itself in wild unbroken beauty, save three distinct ridges or benches of different height, plainly discernible in the distance, looking as it were a great half-circular stairway let down by special favor of Providence for easier access to the valley below. Everyone who has passed over this route will remember after passing the first tollgate north of Boise City, a high, smooth surfaced mountain on the left, with a cluster of three large fir trees ornamenting its apex. Every one will concede, doubtless, that it is one of the most

remarkable (as well as beautiful) sights on the road--like everlasting sentinels, hugging each other's branches in close embrace, they can be seen miles away beyond the mountains, as if pointing out the pass through the great hills, and commanding attention from their lone and lofty pinnacle. Hardly a green bush can be seen elsewhere in this vicinity; the mountain sides are barren and rocky--uneven and broken by lava beds and rocky gorges--save that one smooth mountain, lifting itself gracefully away from the rougher masses, stretching itself far above all others, and terminating in a perfect cone, with the three tall trees crowning its beauty. It deserves a name, and who could wish for a more elaborate monument? If no one else claims the privilege of naming it, your "humble servant" proposes to do so. Pray see to it, editors of the Statesman, that no one "jumps the claim."

One obtains a fine view of valleys and hills from the summit: the ride down the steep grade, on this side, into the shadows of the pines, is indeed a pleasure. It seems as if one can never weary of such wild flights; there is such a keen pleasure in whirling rapidly round the curves, down, down, doubling and winding down the mountain side, flying almost down the smooth, narrow grade, looking off hundreds of feet below, and above at the great rocks looking down so solemnly! How it wakes up one's ideas! What beautiful imagination is infused into one's being, during such a wild, flying ride! Who can weary of them? Let those who like, take their fashionable airings in each barouches through city parks, but give me the dashing gallop, down a steep mountain grade, where there is danger enough to make me keep my eyes open, and where we almost fly round the narrow curves, so rapid, we hardly draw full breath, as the wind dashes over the face, and the horses' long manes stream out in the breeze, their ears laid back in saucy defiance, while they lift their feet as if proudly conscious of the sunlight's quick flash around their bright shoes! There is something in such a ride as this! Cold must be the nature that feels no enthusiasm over such a ride, and whose blood does not receive a quicker and healthier ebb and flow. We find more of the "Sierra" cast of scenery through the mountains, as we near Idaho City: features very relative to California, reminding us of similar journeys over the "Nevadas," three and four years ago. At "Minnehaha" station we found a good dinner prepared, to which we paid our best respects, and while taking an outside survey of the station, we

looked in vain for the "Laughing falls of Minnehaha;" "saw no gleam of sparkling waters" in the big trough for watering horses! Could not find the "gloomy hemlocks," "swaying branches" in the sage brush or elder bush; saw no "ancient arrow-maker," only the man tending stables! Probably it was all there, but we couldn't find it, early as we looked. Perhaps it will be there when we come back; shouldn't be at all surprised.

The road from Boise City to Idaho [City] is as good a mountain road as can be found on the coast, with the exception of one or two very narrow and steep places, which can be easily remedied." Idaho Statesman, October 10, 1867.

High water in the spring continued to plague the road owners. A new grade built along the creek in 1868-1869 cut out some bad hills and shortened the route. But the road became more vulnerable to flooding. Milton Kelly, who had purchased the road and a warm springs resort near Idaho City after a term as justice of Idaho's Supreme Court, faced more than his share of criticism--partly political--in the spring of 1870.

The toll road connecting Boise City with this city [Idaho City], or rather terminating at Turner's Warm Springs, now owned by Judge Milton Kelly, is not in a condition which the franchise of a toll road requires, or should require. This road is not only the main avenue of communication between Boise Basin and Boise City, but with the outside world almost, looking toward the railroad, from which nearly all the merchandise and freight of our merchants and business men passes over at the present time. To this is to be added the passenger and freight transit, which, to and from Ada county alone, is very considerable. Hay, grain, vegetables, cattle, sheep, hogs, and nearly everything of an edible character for consumption of man and beast must of necessity come over that road. The tolls ought to be a very profitable source of income to the owner of the road. All our U.S. mails from the East and West and South come in that way by Pinkham Bros.' daily line of stages. These important considerations require that this main artery of commerce and avenue of transit, travel and transportation should be kept always, as far as may be practicable, in a traveling, passable condition. This is imperatively demanded, as all will readily concede. Inevitable accidents will happen, which may temporarily render places impassable, but every diligence should be used to keep the road open

and to repair bad places. Now, at Cold Springs ranch, about seven miles below this city, this road has been, for several weeks, in a condition which endangers the lives of parties passing over it, and of animals as well. Why does not the wealthy proprietor of this road take efficient measures to repair such places? Nearly three weeks ago the editor of this paper, with some five fellow passengers by stage, were compelled to get out of the coach, about one mile this side of the Cold Spring ranch, on their way to Boise City, and to work hard with shovels for nearly an hour, to open the road so as to render it passable for the stage. Idaho World, May 26, 1870.

For a couple of years, the water grade had to be abandoned. Then, after Kelly disposed of his interest in the road to J. L. G. Smith, his successor made another water grade in 1872 to get rid of some of the steep hills again. A new bridge constructed the next year at the junction of More's and Robie creeks also helped. When Milton Kelly came over the route in 1875, he found these improvements made the trip much more comfortable:

Taking a seat by the side of Geo. Shanon drive, on the North Western Stage Company's Idaho City stage at half past six on Sunday morning, we soon found ourselves in the canyon hurrying along up the heavy grade to the summit, and from this point in rapid transit style we made the descent, five miles, to the twelve mile house. With a new team we soon made Dodges halfway house where we met the down stage and got dinner. The grandest improvement on the road is the splendid grade which Mr. Smith has made down Moores creek hill beyond the half way house. Smith is building a new house at Guile's old place where he intends to keep his toll gate at that point. The road is in excellent condition all the way and with another change of horses at Minnehaha we made good time to Idaho City. Idaho Statesman, October 19, 1875.

In 1876, W. A. Goulder found the road a refreshing attraction:

After passing over the broad sage plains, by the Overland road, where the view is only limited by the blue sides and snowy crests of the distant mountain ranges, I found the road between Boise City and this place [Idaho City] a pleasant and refreshing variety. The view is restricted, as the road winds through narrow defiles and over low intervening ridges, but the wooded slopes and heights, the clear rippling streams

and the constant succession of beautiful mountain pictures keeps the solitary traveler in a delighted frame of mind as he watches the hills unfolding themselves to view or passing out of sight behind each other.

This road has been made at great expense, and is kept in good repair by the owners. Mr. [Hugh C.] Clawson owns the lower portion, which extends to the bridge on Moore's creek, while the remaining distance is owned by Mr. J. L. G. Smith who deserves much credit for the improvements already made and for those in progress. The only thing to be regretted in this connection is, that a toll road should exist here, as the miners, who pay it all, and upon whose shoulders are laid most of the burdens borne in this region, are already quite sufficiently taxed, but this is the fault of the circumstances, certainly not the fault of the owners of the road, who have invested their money and labor. As I passed along the edge of the canyon where the road skirts Moore's creek I saw the stream running full of cord wood which was being floated to Boise City for fuel. Idaho Statesman, August 3, 1876.

After Jim McDevitt bought Smith's interest for \$3,500 late in 1880, additional improvements were made in that twenty-mile segment nearest Idaho City. An important change followed in the Boise portion in 1884. Hugh C. Clawson, who had taken over that part in 1869, and who operated a Cottonwood toll station at Orchard Gulch, constructed a \$3,000 moderate new grade the other side of McRay's Gap. That descent, winding downward from the 4,800-foot summit through timber on the south side of the original grade, has been used ever since. Some travelers who really wanted to hurry continued to follow the steep original grade. J. A. Lippincott--a Boise County official who once needed to get back to Idaho City as quickly as [possible--used that old route and completed his trip in an exceptionally short time of four hours and twenty minutes.) From 1884 on, Clawson and George Dunnigan (who succeeded McDevitt in the Idaho City segment) kept the road in pretty good shape. At the turn of the century, Clawson still was collecting \$15 to \$30 a day. But on February 13, 1902, he persuaded the county commissioners to pay him \$4,000 for the road and to have the county maintain it free of toll. In 1907, the other toll gate was removed from the Idaho City segment after a \$1,250 county purchase, and the road there eventually became a state highway.

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