

Mason Brayman and the Boise Ring, 1876-1888

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When he arrived in Boise, Governor Brayman hoped to substantiate S. S. Fenn's charges that Idaho (like many other American commonwealths just then) suffered under the control of a corrupt ring of territorial officials. Hoping to obtain an appointment for his son-in-law as territorial secretary, Brayman was predisposed to drive the members of the Boise ring out of office. Right at the beginning, he found irregularities in land office survey contracts (typical of the time), and plenty of Indian fund frauds (not normally associated with the Boise ring) to confirm his suspicion of general corruption. Fenn had preferred charges against territorial secretary E. J. Curtis (who already had survived an attempt at dismissal during the Moulton war), and Brayman anticipated using Fenn's accusations as a weapon to get an opening for his son-in-law. Unlike Moulton before him, Brayman preferred to proceed quietly. He decided to wait until Curtis' term expired, at which point he would prevent reappointment. To accomplish this aim, he convinced Curtis that the time had come to retire quietly from office. That way Curtis could avoid exposure and a disagreeable fight. In the event that Curtis and other corrupt swindlers (as Brayman viewed them) of the Boise ring should seek reappointment, Brayman felt his course was clear. His apprehension of the Boise ring's fraudulent conspiracy mostly lacked foundation in fact. The way matters turned out, Idaho's major frauds in territorial administration (Gilson's and Lyon's defalcations), while unmatched in the territorial service, had come to an end well in advance of the Tweed ring and Grant scandal exposures. Brayman dealt largely in myths. But he got prepared for an energetic campaign against the Boise ring, should the occasion demand.

While Brayman was waiting patiently for Curtis's term to expire, he got into trouble with North Idaho during the Nez Perce war. As a Civil War general, Brayman had some pretty strict procedures for management of an Idaho militia to go on the warpath with the army against the non-treaty Indians. Brayman arranged to defend the Weiser and Payette country against the Indians, who decided to go over the Lolo Trail to Montana instead of proceeding to southern Idaho. Northern Idaho complaints for defending the wrong part of the territory increased when Brayman's militia finally set out to join the Nez Perce pursuit in the Clearwater country. About the only volunteers Brayman could induce to head north with the territorial arms, as Brayman's militia, were Buffalo Horn and some Bannock scouts. Actually Buffalo Horn's Bannock band made a considerable military contribution during the Nez Perce campaign. But the whole episode made Brayman look pretty foolish in North Idaho. Instead of arming the settlers who

demanded protection, he armed the Indians instead! When Buffalo Horn and his friends got into the Bannock War against the army the next year, Brayman's course looked still worse.

Before the Bannock War got underway, Brayman had to open his war against the Boise ring, January 14, 1878. Curtis finally gained enough confidence to apply for another term as secretary after all. So Brayman advised president R. B. Hayes not to let Curtis continue in office. When news of Brayman's quiet drive against Curtis got back to Boise, Brayman faced a bitter fight. The Boise ring, which actually consisted of two warring factions until Brayman's attack changed the situation, consolidated into a solid front against the governor. Scarcely able to start explaining the situation, the Boise territorial officials retaliated against the governor by bringing disbarment proceedings on some rather absurd charges. Pretty soon Brayman had to reply to "their course of villification and slander," while United States Attorney J. W. Huston assailed Brayman's "garrulous vaporings of senile vanity" in one long blast after another.

Brayman figured that only about fourteen adherents to the Boise ring joined the chorus of his detractors, and he gained the support of all the traditional enemies of the Boise ring. Meanwhile, spokesman for the Boise ring complained that "Egypt was cursed with frogs, lice, and locusts; Idaho Indians, Mormons, and Brayman." Huston denounced the governor as "A convicted liar and slanderer; an established fraud and bilk, without character or morality or integrity...a stench in the nostrils of this people." At this point, Brayman got blamed for the Bannock War. Two forces of Idaho militia--a Brayman organization and an anti-Brayman outfit--spent about as much time denouncing each other as fighting the Indians. Brayman also got identified with some unpopular Idaho City Chinese who were imprisoned for defending themselves from attack. By this time he concluded that he had made some kind of disastrous mistake in ever consenting to come to Idaho.

Brayman managed to score a partial victory in getting Curtis replaced as secretary--not by his son-in-law but by R. A. Sidebotham of Rocky Bar, a former member of the Idaho legislature. Some carpetbaggers replaced other members of the Boise ring as their terms expired. But while Brayman was making headway in his campaign against the Boise ring, his opponents struck back. Taking advantage of a situation in New Mexico, where John C. Fremont wanted an appointment as governor, they got Brayman removed, June 8, 1878, to make an opening into which New Mexico's governor John C. Hoyt could be transferred. But during a long wait while Fremont was getting out to his New Mexico post, Brayman's friends convinced Hoyt that Brayman could not stand the indignity of being ousted by the Boise ring. On examining the situation, Hoyt decided he hardly wanted to become governor of Idaho. (Under the

circumstances, hardly anyone in his right mind would want to get mixed up in such a disagreeable fight.) He talked Hayes into an appointment to the Washington supreme court, and Idaho lost the possibility of getting a competent governor. Brayman was allowed to finish his term and served longer as governor than anyone else but Ballard. (They were the only two of Idaho's dozen territorial governors to survive a full term.) Brayman finally managed to get along a little better with the territorial legislature (which spent all but eight of the forty-day 1879 session trying to figure out who the members were and trying to get organized), and during the last two years of his term, the old fights quieted down.

Brayman's campaign against the Boise ring helped disrupt B. F. White's associated Malad ring in southeastern Idaho, and in 1880 newcomers took control. The old Independent Anti-Mormon party of Oneida County (which had serious trouble in 1878) collapsed, and a combine of county seat battles replaced anti-Mormon unity there. In North Idaho, which had participated in the Washington constitutional convention of 1878, and which ratified the Washington constitution with greater enthusiasm than Washington's voters had shown, an Independent Washington annexation party nominated Brayman for congress in 1880. Brayman carried North Idaho handsomely against the regular Republican and Democratic candidates, and a referendum on North Idaho annexation to Washington showed all but two voters in favor. Responding to some facetious suggestions from the southeast, North Idaho leaders hoped they could combine the votes of both sections for Brayman and win the election. This strategy failed, and Idaho continued as a strongly Democratic territory in 1880. But a rapidly increasing population, coming with new mines and new railroads, was about to bring a new era to Idaho's territorial development. North Idaho still wanted to return to Washington; the southeast still had an explosive situation with anti-Mormons opposing expansion of the Saints' Kingdom of God farther into Idaho; and the Boise ring still had a problem of keeping the other sections under control during a time of turbulent expansion.

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