

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

THE EFFECT OF MINING IN THE ECONOMY OF THE BOISE REGION

Number 172

Gold discoveries in Boise Basin, August 2, 1862, brought thousands of miners to the region. Pioneerville and Idaho City were founded October 7, and by December, a major gold rush had commenced. From late in 1862 until 1864, the new Boise mines offered the main attraction in the Pacific Northwest. In the spring of 1863, prospecting on the south fork expanded that area of interest. Around Rocky Bar the South Boise quartz mines gave a more permanent economic foundation to the region. Lode discoveries in Boise Basin also contributed to the regional economy. (Important silver mines in the Owyhee country, while not on the Boise River, offered similar economic support to the Boise region for a half century after their discovery in 1863.) Then in 1864 the new Boise mining empire expanded to take in Atlanta on the middle fork. Together with placer mining in Boise Basin and on a number of other streams within the water shed, these lodes helped greatly to stabilize the regional economy.

Because of the water distribution pattern, early placer mines in the Boise Basin could not be worked out too quickly. During the annual mining season, after early high water had gone down enough to permit mining and before water had given out entirely, work went on day and night. Placerville, which was gaining ascendancy late in 1862, lost out to Idaho City where a longer water season maintained placer operations on a greater scale. (Placerville's location near the entrance of the Harris Creek road into the basin had given that community an initial boost that a short water season undermined the next spring.) With water available for a relatively short time each year, placering in the basin continued for many more seasons than would have been possible if most of the gravel could have been processed continuously and quickly. As a result, mining communities in the basin lasted far longer than they would have otherwise. And service communities in the valley--both Boise and the newly-irrigated farming tracts--were supported far longer as well. Mining communities--both Boise River and adjacent Owyhee--provided farm markets for the early valley settlements, and by 1864, all of the easily irrigable land along the river had gone into production.

Lode mining promoted Boise Valley's economic development over a still longer period. By 1864 arastras were common around the South Boise and Boise Basin quartz mines. (These were simple rock crushers of Spanish origin: they worked very slowly, but required very little in the way of capital investment for installation and very little in the way of ore for processing.) Large fast-operating stamp mills were brought into lode mining districts at great expense. But by 1866, after only a season or so of operation (if they ever got into operation at all), most of the stamp milling enterprises had failed. Initial costs for installation ran exceptionally high.

Transportation to remote, often nearly inaccessible, mining areas cost a lot of money. Experienced labor was scarce. And, to make matters worse, most of the quartz lodes remained undeveloped until after large expensive mills had been imported to awkward places. More often than not, mining companies which had financed a mill operation discovered to their horror, that they had about enough ore to keep an arastra going. Their handsome new stamp mills sat idle after exhausting available ore in short order. Or, in places like Atlanta more than Rocky Bar, technology for gold and silver recovery still remained unavailable for refractory ores that had a great wealth of gold and silver for which no one could figure out an effective procedure. With widespread South Boise and Boise Basin stamp milling experiments in 1866 and 1867, development of the country suffered a severe set back. Only a few gougers, over the next decade or two, managed to work a little of the highest grade ores in the lodes. But effort to get major properties into production went on year after year, continuing to support the valley's economy through failure longer than if the early ventures all had succeeded. By 1870 the lodes were largely shut down and the typical Boise Basin placer miner was a Chinese gentleman who had come a long way in search of mineral wealth.

Boise had about a thousand population then compared with 1,600 in 1864; the entire basin had declined from a peak of well over 20,000. During the gold rush Boise Valley had a rural population of _____, with the city and valley still dependent mostly upon the mining and military expenditures at Fort Boise. As capital of Idaho since 1864, Boise got a little help from federal expenditure in addition to Fort Boise. However, quite a few years went by before non-military governmental expenditure did much for the community's economy.

Major transportation improvements came abruptly after mining began in 1862. Stage lines from Umatilla on the Columbia and Atchison, Kansas, on the Missouri began to operate by 1864. Boise served as western terminal for Ben Holladay's Overland Stage Company which offered service to Salt Lake, Denver, and points east, with another branch to Virginia City, Montana. Stations had to be provided every ten or fifteen miles along these routes, and road improvements and ferries resulted from this transportation development to serve the new mining country. Competition from Sacramento Valley for the Boise trade, with terminals at Red Bluff and Chico, brought major competitive rate reductions from Portland and the Columbia. A steamboat was built in 1866 at Fort Boise to try to improve service to the Columbia. But that enterprise came a little too late, and had too much of a fuel shortage problem, to have any chance for success.

Rail service seemed essential if the lode mines of the Boise region were to produce in any major way. Completion of the Central Pacific across Nevada brought better transportation closer, but Kelton (Boise's nearest eastern terminus on the transcontinental railroad) to the northwest of Salt Lake was _____ miles over a hard, dusty stage and freight road. Other roads to the Central Pacific (Toano, Elko, and Winnemucca) also shared in the Boise trade, but they weren't a lot closer. An early concerted effort to promote a Snake River Valley rail line got well under way in 1868 and showed considerable promise until the Panic of 1873 dashed the hopes of most railway builders for a few years. Finally, after construction of the Southern Pacific, a change in the competitive position of the Central Pacific and the Union Pacific brought long-sought rail service to southwestern Idaho. (After the Southern Pacific had an alternative to the Union Pacific-Central Pacific overland route, the Union Pacific needed its own access to the

Pacific to respond to Southern Pacific's threats to take traffic from the Central Pacific and use the Southern Pacific route instead. With an outlet past Boise to Portland, the Union Pacific could retaliate if the Southern Pacific diverted traffic from the overland route.) In 1880, construction of the Oregon Short Line commenced in Wyoming, and three years later track-laying reached Indian Creek. In order to avoid difficult grades between Indian Creek and Boise, the OSL simply descended Indian Creek to the river, where a new town of Caldwell immediately sprang up.

Rail service, extended to the northwest in 1884, transformed the Boise region. Farming, hitherto dependent largely upon mining for markets, now could profit from national outlets for crops. And the local mining markets expanded considerably. Rocky Bar and Silver City enjoyed their major years of lode production after 1882, now that rail transportation reduced their geographical isolation. Boise Basin placers, in which hydraulic giants had been productive after an expensive system of major ditches and flumes had been installed, continued to utilize innovations. Hydraulic elevators--a water system designed to lift placer gravel to a level at which sluicing could be managed--came into operation. Rocky Bar lode mining mostly came to an end by 1892, while Atlanta, after a number of attempts which at best succeeded only in part, still was searching for recovery technology effective for the vast Atlanta lode. A large Boise Basin lode--the Gold Hill near Quartzburg--had a long productive period that lasted until 1934, in fact. A new system of placering flat stream beds came with dredging at the turn of the century.

Twentieth-century dredging spread from the basin (where operations continued until 1942 and resumed for a time after World War II) to Feather River below Rocky Bar on the south fork and to the Boise King well below Atlanta on the middle fork. Atlanta finally obtained an effective flotation process which brought major production there in 1932. Operations at Atlanta continued through the war (unlike Boise Basin, where gold mining was suspended) and beyond. Although the greater part of Atlanta's \$18,000,000 production came during this later period, and although mining there continued to support the area's economy, these recent operations had a relatively more modest impact. When Atlanta finally shut down, the mining era in the Boise region came to an end. Boise Basin had produced over \$60,000,000 (or over a hundred million at 1934 prices) in a period of less than a century, and all of this mineral yield had made a substantial contribution to the Boise Valley economy. Settlement and irrigated farming in the area came about a generation sooner than it otherwise would have, and the basis for subsequent water resource development came as a result of mining--a pursuit that--for placers--depended upon utilization of upstream water anyway.