

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

SITE REPORT - BOISE BASIN

Number 198

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Historic-site reports contain information designed to assist in two preservation functions. One is preservation planning at the local level. The other is the work of federal agencies in carrying out their responsibilities to comply with historic-preservation requirements prescribed by federal statutes and regulations. These reports summarize local archaeological, historical, and geographical contexts; existing surveys of historic sites; architectural, engineering, industrial; and other cultural resources; and available maps and literature concerning each area. Natural geographical, rather than governmental, boundaries have been used to identify seventy-two areas that vary greatly in size. Site reports reflect a broad cultural and geographical disparity characteristic of diverse regional components found in Idaho, but the areas are designed to incorporate cultural elements of immediate local significance that need to be taken into account for preservation planning.

1. Geographical context: Idaho's major placer gold production came from this area, but forest products have replaced mining in importance. Various components of More's Creek flow out of Boise Basin, which has a central dividing ridge encircled by higher slopes. Elevations range from from where Grimes' Creek joins More's Creek to at Pilot Peak. This entire area is timbered, and recreation has joined forestry as economically important after mining declined.

2. Prehistory and significant archaeological sites: People have inhabited southern Idaho for fourteen thousand years or more. Until about eight thousand years ago they were noted primarily as big game hunters. Since then, they specialized more in camas, bitterroot, and other natural crops and seeds, as well as in smaller game. But they continued to hunt large game that remained after earlier elephants, camels, giant sloth, and other ice age creatures left as climatic conditions changed.

3. Prehistory and significant archaeological sites:

4. Historical summary: A major 1862-1864 gold rush brought thousands of fortune seekers to Boise Basin, and Idaho City, with

a population of 6,000, exceeded Portland in size for a year or two. As placer production gradually declined, Chinese miners became more prominent. After initial problems were surmounted, lode mining gained increased significance, as did dredging after 1900. Twentieth century development is associated more with forest products and United States Forest Service operations. Major episodes in Boise Basin development include:

1. gold rush years, 1862-1864
2. continued placer production and early attempts to develop lode mining, 1865-
3. technological development for larger scale lode and placer operations
4. twentieth-century logging and dredging

Mineral discoveries in Boise Basin, August 2, 1862, led to a gold rush that fall and to the creation of Boise County by the Washington legislature that winter. From a wilderness inhabited only by Indians in the summer of 1862, the Boise region became the largest population center of the Pacific Northwest in less than six or eight months after settlement commenced on October 7, 1862. Four major Boise Basin mining camps, Idaho City (called Bannock City or West Bannock during its first year), Placerville, Centerville, and Pioneerville (known generally as Hogem in the early days) flourished during the gold rush; by the end of 1862 they constituted the four major mining communities in all of Washington Territory. (From 1859 through 1863, all of what later became southern Idaho formed part of Washington Territory.) When the Boise mines were discovered in 1862, they were in Idaho County--which included about all of Washington Territory south of the present Oregon-Washington boundary, and which stretched eastward to the Continental Divide in present central Wyoming. Because Florence, the county seat, was remote from the new mining basin, the Washington legislature established Boise County, January 29, 1863. It included all the southern part of what had been Idaho County and reached from Oregon to the Continental Divide. With an area of more than 62,000 square miles (over 50,000 in what is now Idaho and 12,000 in Wyoming), this was Washington's largest county; at that time, only six states in the entire nation were as large as Boise County.

When Congress created Idaho, March 4, 1863, Boise County exceeded the others both in area and in population. From late in 1862 until the summer of 1864, restless miners along the Pacific Coast regarded the Boise region as the leading place to seek a fortune. Although Placerville enjoyed the advantage of a location convenient to the point at which the gold rush entered the Basin, better water conditions soon made Idaho City the major

camp. With more than 6,000 population in 1863 and 1864, Idaho City surpassed Portland in size for a time. The gold rush, in fact, quickly made Idaho City the largest community in the Pacific Northwest.

Unlike some fabulous placer booms which went through a spectacular brief cycle from gold rush to ghost town, mining in Boise Basin lasted over a long period of years. Large placer areas could not be worked long enough each season to be exhausted quickly. And quartz mines, discovered as early as 1862, went through a long period of development that supported the region's economy for decades. Idaho City and the other Basin camps gained an air of permanence right from the beginning. Before the community was a year old, Idaho City had a newspaper (*The Boise News*, which in 1864 became the *Idaho World*), three express offices, three livery stables, a mattress factory, a photographer's gallery, four sawmills, seven blacksmith's shops, eight bakeries, nine restaurants, two bowling alleys, three pool halls, three drugstores, four breweries, and twenty-five to thirty-five saloons. A harness shop and various jewelry, tinshops, and other businesses attested to the town's importance.

Building lots ranged in price from \$500 to \$2,000 each, and even a series of four disastrous fires did not destroy the community.

Rebuilt more often than the early residents would have preferred, Idaho City continued to be the center of a major gold-producing region for many years.

Shortly after 1870 the easily-worked basin stream gravels had yielded most of their gold, and miners shifted their attention to washing down higher bench placers with hydraulic giants. To get water to the elevation needed to cut down the hillsides, extensive systems of flumes and ditches were required.

Some of these ran to eight to ten miles in length. Augmented by several important lodes--primarily the Gold Hill near Quartzburg--these operations sustained the basin's gold production until dredging commenced in 1898. From 1919 until 1926, mining was limited largely to lode properties, but later dredging proved productive, except during the war-time shutdown (1942-1946), until 1952. By that time, over 3,000,000 ounces (about one-sixth from quartz mines) of gold (now worth more than a billion dollars) had come from Boise Basin.

Twentieth century diversification broadened out the economic base of Boise County. Early sawmills had made some use of local timber. Then in about 1900, timber lands were taken up and soon consolidated into important holdings such as those of the Barber Lumber Company. For many years these lands were useful primarily for grazing leases, but for two decades after the Intermountain Railway was completed in 1915 from Boise to Centerville, timber was hauled out of Boise Basin. After a severe decline in the Depression, lumber production rose again with construction of logging roads. Thus at the end of a century of settlement, timber rather than mining undergirded the region's economy.

5. Historical documentation and literature:

6. Historic sites inventory:

7. Industrial archaeological and engineering sites summary:
Surface evidence of placer mining in this area offers opportunities for study of industrial procedures utilized in historic production. Hydraulic pits, patterns of dredging operations, or tailings that distinguish hill claims from stream claims--or that identify Chinese services--provide information of historic importance. Prospector's pits disclose gravels that were searched unsuccessfully for gold. Ditches, flumes, stream diversions, and similar evidence of water sources also are important.

Lode mining operations left a variety of indications, many of them relatively permanent in nature. Disturbance of surface outcrops includes trenches and exploratory shafts. In other places, tunnels and raises or stopes that reached surface outlets reveal important aspects of mining activity. If accessible, underground workings have still greater importance for industrial archaeology and engineering analysis. Abandoned tools and equipment, along with items like timbering in tunnels and stopes, add to this record.

8. Architectural resources:

9. United States Geological Survey Maps:

Arrowrock Reservoir NE 1969
Dunnigan Creek 1969
Garden Valley (15') 1959
Idaho City 1957
Pine Flat 1972
Pioneerville 1957
Placerville 1957
Rabbit Creek Summit 1972
Robie Creek 1972
Shafer Butte 1957
Sunset Mtn. 1972
Warm Springs Point 1957

10. Cultural resource management recommendations:

(This information has not been edited.)

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