

# IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## REFERENCE SERIES

### LEESBURG

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Located in a high Salmon River mountain basin, similar to those of Idaho's earlier large mining camps at Florence and Warrens, Leesburg began as an expansion of mining in nearby Montana. F. B. Sharkey and four more Deer Lodge prospectors found gold at Leesburg, July 16, 1866, and a month later a stampede to Idaho's newest mines depopulated Montana's capital city for a few weeks. Five to six hundred miners found enough at Leesburg to justify settling there, and a constant string of pack trains set out to supply their needs. Most Idaho and Montana miners of 1866 were Confederates, but that fall a few Northern miners started Grantsville as a suburb of Leesburg. That winter, Leesburg had six stores, two butcher shops, and over a hundred houses built or under construction. Not much mining had been possible that fall, but some early claims had paid \$14 to \$16 a day. J. Marion More had a three-and-a-half-mile ditch under construction to prepare for a big 1867 season, but heavy winter snow stopped most other activity. Pack trains no longer could get through with supplies, and prices rose dramatically. In order to restore communications, Leesburg's isolated miners had to shovel out five feet of snow to open a toll pack trail--an enterprise that lasted through February until March 8, 1867. By that time Leesburg had subsisted a month without fresh meat and two weeks without bacon--their only substitute.

By May, a great influx of pack trains from Helena, Boise, Idaho City, and Walla Walla not only solved Leesburg's problem of famine, but also led to a price collapse. Far too many provisions were brought in to meet Leesburg's shortage.

A great Leesburg mining excitement brought in about 2,000 prospectors and speculators by April and May, and stage service from Montana through Lemhi pass to Salmon made access a lot easier. That spring Leesburg retained a population of about 2,000, with prospectors leaving to search for new mines balanced by those coming in to try to make a fortune in Leesburg. A sober, industrious community grew up there. J. C. Bryant reported that:

unusually quiet for a mining camp and free from fights and disturbances. Everyone who works appears to be there for business and not pleasure. There is very little gambling and spreeing such as generally

characterizes a new camp.

Mining in Leesburg suffered in 1867 from the heavy late snow followed by high water that delayed placer activity until summer, when only a short season was left. Only about \$250,000 could be produced that year, but a more favorable 1868 season increased Leesburg's total to over \$100,000,000. Such rapid production began to exhaust Leesburg's visible placers. By 1870, Leesburg's population was down to 180, and after that, placer mines there interested Chinese miners more than anyone else. An eventual recovery of more than \$6,000,000 made Leesburg into a major Idaho mining area.

Leesburg lode developers identified some massive low grade veins to exploit, but values were limited enough that they did not attempt to install large mills. O. E. Kirkpatrick, who walked ninety-two miles from Red Rock, Montana, to Leesburg in 1898, spent \$300,000 in forty years developing a lode there. He had a ten-stamp mill in operation within five years, and kept up production when economic conditions were favorable. After a \$20,000 Nebraska purchase of a promising lode, another early twentieth century ten-stamp mill was employed at Leesburg for a time. Neither of these mills began to rival Leesburg's early placers, but they helped sustain a declining camp.

Most of Leesburg's early placers had been shallow and were easily worked. But some large placer deposits could not be handled at all without more extensive ditch and drainage systems.

By 1908 a seventeen-mile ditch and flume system was available to facilitate production of Leesburg's major untouched placers. More than fifteen years of inactivity followed. Finally in 1926, hydraulic giants went into production. Shut down after a couple of seasons, Leesburg placers remained dormant until 1934, when increased gold prices and low mining costs brought a brief revival. A dragline operation in 1939 brought more life to Leesburg, but gold mining everywhere was shut down in 1942, and Leesburg faced more inactivity.

In 1982, after a year's experimentation with a less effective gold recovery system, Leesburg gravels (which, with increased gold prices, ran \$15 per cubic yard) came back into production; a large Caterpillar and loader outfit capable of handling 2,000 yards a day was employed to process a large volume of placer deposits that had been uneconomical to work in previous years. Aside from renewed mining activity, only a few old cabins and traces of early work remain as a reminder of Leesburg's nineteenth century past.