

# IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## REFERENCE SERIES

### IDAHO CENTRAL RAILROAD

Number 216

When the Oregon Short Line (an outlet for the Union Pacific through Snake River Valley to Portland) reached Boise Valley, the new rail line missed all the towns in the region. (That was not very many.) Leading citizens of Boise, who had spent fifteen years trying to get a railroad to their community, decided that the Union Pacific had decided upon a bypass route in order to develop a new, competing town of their own. Actually, the surveyors who established the route had something quite different in mind. When they reached Indian Creek they had a choice of following that stream on a level route to Boise River in the center of the valley, or of climbing and descending some steep, expensive grades to go over a longer, more difficult route through Boise. Naturally they selected the former.

An old stage station at the Indian Creek crossing of the Boise-Silver City Road suddenly became prominent as Boise's rail depot late in 1883. From Kuna station to Boise, an awkward fifteen-mile stage trip gave Idaho's capital city access to rail service. But that was only a temporary expedient. Boise investors arranged with the Union Pacific to construct a branch line from Indian Creek. Known as the Boise Central, this route promised to save their community from economic ruin. Promoters of the Boise Central decided, however, to ensure that no competing town would grow up at the junction of their line with the Oregon Short Line. They got control of the decent land for a townsite on the river at Indian Creek and prepared to build their railroad as soon as possible. But they planned not to build a town there.

A townsite company associated with, but not part of, the Union Pacific entered the valley anyway. The Idaho Oregon Land Improvement Company, managed by Robert E. Strahorn, undertook to develop a string of new cities along the new transportation route. Hailey, Mountain Home, and a new Weiser (located at the Oregon Short Line station not far from original Weiser, which was bypassed slightly) were among Strahorn's projects. In Boise Valley, he decided upon a townsite on Alkali Flat, on lower Indian Creek as close as he could get to the Boise Central junction. Alkali Flat left much to be desired as a location for Strahorn's projected metropolis of the Boise region. But that was the best he could do. (At least he was not wasting valuable potential farm land for metropolitan development.) Anticipating that his Alkali Flat enterprise would emerge as the major

development of the Idaho-Oregon Land Improvement Company, and would become the major city of Idaho, he named his new townsite for the company president, Alexander Caldwell.

Strahorn showed genuine imagination in his promotion of Caldwell. But a national financial panic in February 1884 delayed the Boise Central and Boise Valley Canal construction-- particularly the gigantic New York Canal project for which Caldwell might serve as an important community center. Then, after the Boise Central finally commenced construction, the Union Pacific abruptly decided to abandon the project. Work halted on April 16, 1885, and the Union Pacific offered to return the right-of-way, valued at fifty to sixty thousand dollars, to the donors.

After collapse of the Boise Central, the Union Pacific finally decided upon a shorter route. Alexander Duffes' ranch, nine miles up Indian Creek above Caldwell, offered a superior terminal. About half way between Caldwell and Kuna, this terminal made an acceptable compromise between the shortest distance (at Kuna, from which a direct route would entail some hills and grades) and the easiest, yet longest, grade from Caldwell. Incorporation of the Idaho Central Railway, June 26, 1886, followed by incorporation of a Nampa Townsite Company, November 8, led to construction of the line finally selected. By December, Nampa had a store and two houses, and final arrangements between the Boise Central promoters and the Union Pacific were concluded the next spring to substitute the Idaho Central for the original project. Construction started at the beginning of June, with an experienced Mormon contractor and crew from Montpelier handling the grading. Work went on all summer and the new line was completed in time for a train to reach Boise September 5, 1887. The original Boise depot stood on the bench close to the present passenger station, but a new line down Front Street (still used for freight service) began operation August 17, 1893.

Thirty-six years went by before Boise finally could arrange to obtain main line passenger service from the Union Pacific. When the agreed-upon line from Orchard (on Indian Creek) to Boise finally was opened to traffic, April 24, 1925, Idaho's capital city at last had good rail service east and west. By then, the Idaho Central had served its purpose. Freight continued to come through Nampa. But as long as the Union Pacific hauled passengers, the Idaho Central route carried only traffic to and from the west. That arrangement, however, lasted only about a decade longer than the passenger branch from Nampa. But the Idaho Central freight pattern continues to operate, with branch line service still available from Nampa.

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