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MINERAL CITY

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During the presidential campaign of 1880, John A. James and Jim Peck crossed Snake River from Baker to prospect south of Heath below Sturgill peak. They found good silver lodes with scattered superlative assays comparable (as so often was the case) to those of the Comstock lode in Nevada. Naming their lode for presidential candidate W. S. Hancock, they had to give up after their new camp finally became known as Mineral. They eventually figured out that they did not have another Comstock lode either. But a mining district was organized there September 22, 1881.

An early milling experiment with untested equipment failed, and some expensive claims litigation set their mine back as well. Not long before he became an Idaho state supreme court justice, Joseph W. Huston invested substantially in a smelter that Salt Lake tests showed were required to handle refractory ores there in 1889. Another small smelter was tried there in 1889, but both failed. Finally a new smelter installed in 1890 did better. Mineral City flourished until declining silver prices proved ruinous in 1893.

Aside from litigation and problems with smelting technology, Mineral City had some advantages. Located only four miles from a branch rail line down the Snake, the community had little difficulty obtaining supplies or in shipping ore. Slag from their smelter provided good local building material, and unlike many Idaho mining camps, Mineral City was not isolated by deep winter snow. Local fruit and gardens flourished there.

An effort to revive Mineral City with a large smelter failed in 1900, but major production finally was realized between 1903 and 1905 when most of that camp's production (a million ounces of silver) was achieved. War time revivals in 1918-1922 and for a few years after 1940 resulted from higher prices during those periods of national emergency.