

# IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## REFERENCE SERIES

### ADA COUNTY

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Unlike the majority of Idaho's early counties, Ada County contained next to nothing in the way of mining. Farming and service communities which depended upon important nearby mines, however, constituted the early-day settlements of Ada County. Then as farmers in southern Idaho gradually ceased to rely upon local mines and developed broader regional and national markets, Ada County continued as the service and distributing center for a greatly expanded agricultural and lumbering region. The shift was anything but sudden. Within a year or two after Idaho became a state in 1890, the greater part of Ada County's early farming area had been detached to form other counties, and in the decade or two which followed, Ada County became primarily urban. By 1960 approximately 82,000 of Ada County's 93,000 people lived in Boise (including suburban residents) and the number of farmers in Ada County had declined from a high of over 12,000 to only a little over 7,000.

Created by the Idaho Territorial Legislature, December 22, 1864, Ada County was named for the daughter of H. C. Riggs, one of the founders of Boise and a member of the House of Representatives who got the bill through. Riggs, a nephew of one of the best-known pioneers active in opening the California Trail, had an ambitious legislative program that year. Aside from getting Ada County established, he induced the legislature to make Boise the permanent territorial capital, effective December 24, 1864. Boise at that time was scarcely more than a year old, yet its location (at the point where access roads to the Boise Basin and Owyhee mines crossed the Oregon Trail) made the new community a natural service center for Idaho's major mining region. Riggs himself was a pioneer Boise merchant and a livery stable operator, and had grand designs for the new city which had sprung up adjacent to the United States military post at Fort Boise. As county seat of the newly-established agricultural empire of southwestern Idaho, and as capital of the mining territory of Idaho, Boise had a bright future in 1864. As a political and transportation center for an important region, Boise and Ada County had more stability than had most of the other early Idaho settlements, and, as Idaho gradually developed from a mining to an agricultural economy, both the city and county continued to grow and to prosper.

From modest beginnings after Ada County organized February

6, 1865, county government expanded over a century to become a truly large operation. Right from the start, the future of the new county looked bright: an editorial in the Idaho Statesman expressed confidence:

Geographically our position is unequalled. With respect to the richest mines in the world, we could not be better situated. From necessity the Boise and Payette valleys must ever be the grainery, the garden and the dairy from which Boise, Owyhee and Alturas, with their unparalleled mines, must draw their supplies. The population of those counties will be doubled this year. The demands that will thus be created must stimulate to the fullest extent the reclamation of much land that is naturally unproductive, as well as to encourage the highest cultivation of what is naturally good. It is not too much, therefore, to look for this to become the richest agricultural county of equal area to be found anywhere. . . . Where else can a farmer go to raise a crop and sell it almost at his own door without competition?

There was one small drawback, though, in the county's immediate future:

Financially we have nothing to boast of except a pretty heavy debt of unknown proportions, which we inherit from the old county of Boise. [Ada County's share was expected to be about \$20,000.] But to offset that there is every reason to believe that we have a start with a set of county officers whose pride will be to administer public affairs with due regard to business-like economy. . . . Let the increase in business and in the value of property of the last six months continue for another year from this time, and this debt of twenty thousand dollars will become almost insignificant in proportion to our ability to pay. We confidently expect such increase.

Actually, Ada County did not grow quite as fast as the Statesman hoped. Moreover, the original officers designed by the Governor to organize the county served only briefly: when the county elections were held, March 6, they were displaced by a new slate that reflected the early importance of Confederate refugees from Missouri who were finding new homes in the valley along Boise River down past Middleton through a farming community then known appropriately as Dixie (the valley area between later Caldwell and Notus) and lower Boise, which extended on to Snake River and the ferry that operated at the site of the 1834-1855 Hudson's Bay Company post of Fort Boise. Some of the newly-elected officers had their troubles. D. C. Updike, the sheriff, was arrested September 28, 1865, for collecting revenue for his own personal use instead of letting the county treasurer apply the tax monies for public purposes. Since the county treasurer didn't have the slightest idea of how to keep books, he ran into no end of grief and trouble after he began to get some money to handle. The treasurer managed to hold onto his office in spite of the storm which grew out of his lack of qualification for his job, but the sheriff was induced to resign, October 4. (After

going out on an unsuccessful raid against the local Indians the next spring, he was lynched by vigilantes.) Other aspects of early county government were something less than satisfactory: the building obtained for a courthouse in 1865 was regarded as entirely inadequate even at the time. Eventually a new one was built in 1882, and even after that, ruins of the old building were still regarded as a menace to the community. Early schools were a problem also. By 1866, a full county school system had been organized, yet as late as 1879, a shortage of teachers prevented many of the outlying schools from opening at all. Most of these early difficulties, though, were a part of frontier life, and typical of the problems of living in a newly-settled region.

In 1870, the entire county had a population of only 2,675, with about 1,000 of that total in the City of Boise. (With the gold rush over, Boise had declined from a population of 1,658 in 1864.) By 1880, though, the county had gone up to 4,674, even though the Weiser region had detached to form a new county of 879 people only the year before. (Weiser Valley had been part of original Ada County, which for a time--1873-1879--had extended with a narrow strip along the Snake River northward to within twenty to thirty miles of Lewiston.) Shortly after 1880, long-sought rail service reached Ada County, and the isolated, frontier aspect of life in southwestern Idaho gave way to something quite different. By 1890, population had risen to 8,638, with almost 5,000 in the part that was to remain in Ada County after Canyon County was organized late in 1892.

Early farming in Ada County ranged from irrigated lands right along the rivers--primarily the Boise and the Payette, which could be watered by direct local diversion--to areas in small upland valleys which required little or no irrigation at all. By 1880, upper Boise Valley had 117 farms. Except for nine farms on Dry Creek and twenty-seven around later Eagle and Star, most of the rest of the farms in Ada County in 1880--119 farther down Boise Valley and 69 on the Payette--were in territories subsequently placed in other counties. Canal companies were already getting water on to some of the benchlands by 1880, and by 1900 the New York Canal was beginning to deliver water to a much larger irrigated area. Satisfactory reclamation for the valley as a whole, though, came only with the development of the Boise project in cooperation with the United States Reclamation Service. Diversion Dam in 1909 and Arrowrock in 1915 made practical a much larger irrigation development. By 1910, Ada County had 1,503 irrigated farms with a farm population of 11,559. Farm population remained relatively close to that level until 1940 when, with new agricultural trends in which fewer farmers produced much more than ever before, Ada County's farm population declined to 7,064 in 1960.

Urban growth helped to develop a number of striking changes in Ada County. Among other things, county government grew

substantially. What had once been a highly satisfactory new courthouse in 1882, and the scene of the internationally-celebrated trial of William D. Haywood (an officer of the Western Federation of Miners and a founder of the Industrial Workers of the World, charged with the assassination of Governor Frank Steunenberg) in 1907, had become an old, outmoded building by 1938, when it was replaced by a large new courthouse planned for a county whose population already had increased a thousand percent over 1882. During the next two decades or so, the county roughly doubled again. Problems of planning for this kind of expansion, of zoning, of building roads and highways, of operating city-county health centers, and of flood control in the Boise River, grew steadily more diverse and more complex. Some of these were solved with federal assistance (Lucky Peak Dam, for example, to control the river) and others with state aid. Yet county government had to offer much more than it did in the days a century ago when Ada County began to function with a treasurer who didn't know how to keep books and a sheriff who didn't know what ought to be done with the county revenue he collected. From such modest beginnings, the county had grown over a century into an operation with a \$2,991,074.43 annual budget.

Recent industrial expansion, in enterprises such as trailer factories, helped foster urban growth much as earlier industrial development (flour mills which went back practically to the beginning of settlement, and dairy product processing plants that followed) had helped support agricultural growth. By 1960, more of Ada County's people were employed in various kinds of store and retail trade enterprises than anything else. This occupation was followed by construction and manufacturing, by other professions and services, and by transportation and wholesaling.

Interestingly enough, public administration (with important federal and state, as well as municipal and county, officers) employed considerably more Ada County residents than agriculture did. With the growth of these city-oriented activities, Boise had extended far beyond the city limits, with more than half of its population outside of the city boundaries. Then after the legislature repealed the city charter in 1961, so that the city could expand its boundaries, Boise rapidly began to take in more of the urban population of the county. In 1964, Ada County was designated a standard metropolitan area for census purposes, and Boise--the central city of the area--had a population well over 72,000 within the boundaries of municipal government. Thus at the end of its first century, Ada County had grown in much the way that its optimistic founders had expected when settlement was barely beginning a hundred year ago.

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