

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

EARLY LEMHI COUNTY

Number 329

June 1969

Idaho was discovered August 12, 1805 when four members of the Lewis and Clark expedition reached the continental divide by following an old Indian trail through Lemhi Pass, and the Lemhi region remained a popular route for travel during the years of the fur trade. Lewis and Clark found the Indians camped on the Lemhi to be friendly enough--especially after this proved to be the band to which Sacajawea belonged. The Lemhi Shoshoni provided Lewis and Clark with horses to pack their equipment to navigable waters of the Columbia (the lower Clearwater) and an elderly guide to show them the way across the Lolo Trail to the north. This long detour disappointed Lewis and Clark, but the precipitous canyon of the Salmon left them no alternative. They proved that Lemhi Pass led to no really good transcontinental route west to the Pacific, and later fur traders verified the inaccessibility of the mountainous country to the west. After the fur hunters began to trap the Snake country, they often came through Lemhi Pass in search of beaver rather than a good road across the continent: by 1822 Michel Bourdon led the Hudson's Bay Company's Snake brigade through the Pahsimeroi into the Salmon along Lemhi County's present southwestern boundary, and the next year Finnan MacDonald brought the same Snake expedition back through Lemhi Pass where he got into a tough battle with the Blackfeet on the Indian trail in a defile not far to the west of the pass. In 1824, Alexander Ross led this same expedition of British and Canadian trappers up the canyon of the Salmon between the Lemhi and the Pahsimeroi, and explored much of Panther Creek as well. By the time he was through, most of Lemhi County had been fairly well explored. On his return through Bannock Pass to the upper Missouri, he brought along Jedediah Smith and six more American mountain men who also began to trap in the Lemhi region.

Fur hunters continued to travel through that part of the country for more than a decade after 1824. In 1832, John Work even sent four men from the Hudson's Bay Company's Snake expedition down the canyon of the Salmon which had blocked the course of Lewis and Clark, and later that year, Captain B. L. E. Bonneville built a post in which to spend the winter several miles north of the later site of Salmon. Travel continued in that area, and in 1835 a pioneer missionary came through on his way over the Nez Perce trail to the Clearwater. But excessive fur trapping followed by declining beaver prices halted trapping

in the Lemhi region before 1840.

With the decline of the fur trade, the upper Salmon country no longer attracted the whites. Tom Pambrun of Hudson's Bay Company origin (half-French and half-Cree) settled with the Lemhi band, and a few other retired fur traders lived not too far away.

Finally a substantial Mormon settlement, organized as the Salmon River Mission, worked among the Lemhi Indians from 1855 to 1858.

This community of over 200 people brought stock raising and irrigated farming to the region, and dug ditches which are still in use over a century later. Difficulties associated with Albert Sidney Johnston's celebrated Utah expedition led to recall of the missionaries from that remote outpost, which generally became known as Fort Lemhi. The name (a not quite accurate spelling of the Mormon name Limhi) soon was applied to the river and valley surrounding the mission site, as well as to the Indians and eventually to the county.

During the Salmon River gold rush, miners from all parts of the West went to great effort to get to Florence in the spring of 1862. Many of them, especially those from Colorado, got as far as the upper Salmon around Fort Lemhi, only to discover no easy route to get down the Salmon to Florence. Some went on over Lemhi Pass to discover important new mines at East Bannock, not too far across the Continental Divide from Fort Lemhi. A few reoccupied Fort Lemhi where they raised vegetables for sale in the East Bannock mines; John McGarvey also settled on the Lemhi in 1863, where he got the local Indians to go into a fishing business to supply the mining market. Then a band of five prospectors from Deer Lodge found good placers at Leesburg, July 16, 1866. Organization of a mining district there August 10 preceded a big stampede from East Bannock to the new placers, August 19. By fall a substantial town was under construction, and about 500 people spent the winter there. Salmon City also got its start in the fall of 1866, growing from a service community for the new mines into the major center for the area. By the summer of 1867, Salmon had a newspaper, the Semi-Weekly Mining News. When Lemhi County was finally organized, Salmon became county seat.

Communications between the Leesburg mines and Florence--the county seat of Idaho County, which included the Lemhi region--involved a long hard trip over the Nez Perce Trail in summer. In the winter the trip could scarcely be made at all. So the Idaho legislature moved to establish Lemhi County, December 21, 1866. The only trouble was that the original act got mislaid after its passage. Although the county went through the form of organizing in Salmon, it seemed expedient to repeat the process in 1869 when the legislature met again. The Lemhi County statute was reenacted, January 9, and the assigned officers (headed by George L. Shoup, as chairman of the county commissioners) organized the new county again February 22. With boundaries that shifted about quite a lot in the early days (and which for a time extended

unintentionally northward to include the whole Bitterroot range all the way to Lolo Pass), Lemhi County continued to include the Salmon-Leesburg mining and stock raising area. In 1869 the mining region expanded with new discoveries on Loon Creek and Yellow Jacket. The latter still is in Lemhi County. In 1877, placers on Anderson Creek were discovered and traced to an important lode at Gibbonsville, and additional prospecting in 1880 prepared the way for more significant discoveries at Viola and Gilmore. A number of other mining areas followed, and mining and stock raising continued to support the economy of the area. Transportation proved to be a major problem for others developing lode mines; completion of the Union Pacific to Corinne, Utah, gave the Lemhi region a rather remote rail connection that was improved when the Utah Northern came up into Montana in 1880. The new road to connect with the railway there helped, but it took until 1910 for the Gilmore and Pittsburgh finally to reach Salmon. More recent large scale mining operations expanded Lemhi County's mineral production enormously. These included around \$12,000,000 in lead-silver at Gilmore, another \$10,000,000 or so in tungsten at Patterson, and a cobalt operation at Blackbird (where gold had been discovered in 1893 and copper in 1896) that eventually produced values greater than all the rest of the Lemhi mining areas combined.

Lemhi County had quite a number of able pioneers prominent in the early development of Idaho. Decidedly the outstanding of these was George L. Shoup, who came up from Colorado (as did many early Lemhi settlers) and laid out the streets of Salmon in 1867.

A merchant as well as a civic leader, Shoup provided Idaho with an elegant \$30,000 exhibit at the New Orleans Exposition of 1865, and went on to become territorial governor when Idaho became a state. A leader in the Idaho admission movement, he was elected state governor in 1890, and to the United States Senate later that year. Along with his friend, William E. Borah, Shoup represents Idaho in statuary Hall in Congress--the national Hall of Fame.