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Intelligent, highly skilled people have lived in Idaho for the past ten or fifteen thousand years. Some of them--ten thousand or more, in fact--still were around in 1800, just before white men discovered the Idaho region. This early story of more than one hundred centuries is understood imperfectly, at best. Yet it is the opening chapter in the history of Idaho.

Searching for a good route from the Great Plains across the Rockies to the Columbia, Lewis and Clark introduced the Indians of Idaho to the white man's way of life in 1805-1806. British fur hunters followed in 1808-1809, and after 1816 the Idaho fur trade became established. From 1829 to 1840, Idaho was a disputed borderland between rival British and American trappers.

The mountain men of the fur trade traveled over the country and lived pretty much the way the Indians did. But they were joined by missionaries who began to settle some of the Indians down to a life similar to the white man's. A great wave of white emigrants followed the missionaries through Idaho over the Oregon Trail after 1840, and in 1846 this migration led to an Oregon boundary settlement. In it, Idaho became part of the United States. Idaho still belonged to the Indians, however. Yet the founding of Mormon settlements to the south, followed by the California gold rush across Idaho in 1848, foreshadowed a new day of white settlement.

Gold discoveries in the Clearwater country in 1860 laid the foundations for a new commonwealth of Idaho. A rush to Salmon River the next year, and to Boise Basin in 1861, prompted Congress to establish Idaho Territory in 1863. In Idaho's southeastern corner, Mormon expansion to Franklin (Idaho's oldest town) in 1860 was followed by new settlements on Bear Lake in 1863. Farmers in the Mormon region and around the mining towns began to irrigate river bottom lands in southern Idaho, and important service communities for the new mines began to grow in the North and South. Stock raisers started to fill the country between the miners in the north and west and the Mormons in the south and east; cattle and sheep came to the open range in Idaho just at the same time they flourished on the Great Plains to the east. Friction between stock raisers and Indians, compounded by hardships of Indian life on reservations, led to hostilities in all parts of Idaho. Finally the Nez Perce War focused national attention on Idaho in 1877. Followed by the Bannock War of 1878

and the Sheepeater campaign of 1879, this clash led to a settlement of the Indian problem that satisfied the whites and subdued the natives. With the Indian wars out of the way, Idaho was ready to emerge from the frontier after 1880.

Extensive railway construction transformed life in Idaho by 1884. New communities, some mining and others farming, sprang up along the railroads. The territory grew rapidly enough to qualify for admission as a state in 1890. Yet the growth which enabled Idaho to become a state brought serious problems. Bitter mine labor wars in the Coeur d'Alene region from 1892 to 1899 coincided with political upheavals that swept through Idaho during the Populist era. Sheep and cattle conflicts raged in the south. Irrigation expansion also created difficulties when the original system of canal companies proved incapable of meeting the challenge of watering most of Idaho's desert lands.

Twentieth-century development of forestry and reclamation brought a decade of truly rapid growth after 1900. The Twin Falls country suddenly became the nation's outstanding example of irrigation under the Carey Act, while the Boise and Minidoka projects took advantage of the federal Reclamation Act of 1902. At the same time, commercial lumbering assumed major importance.

By 1906 most of Idaho's timberlands had come under the administration of a system of national forest. Thus at the end of a half century of settlement (1910), Idaho had completed the transition from wilderness to the present pattern of settlement.

During the remainder of Idaho's first century, a modern highway system replaced the old wagon roads that had served for early day transportation, and airlines overcame the mountain barriers which divide Idaho into sections with little intercommunication. Major dams pushed irrigated farmlands farther and farther into the deserts, and generated power for distribution to cities and farms throughout the state. A fabulous new dimension came after 1949 when the National Reactor Testing Station pioneered the development of nuclear power for generation of electricity and assembled the world's largest collection of atomic reactors in the broad expanse of the upper Snake River plains. Yet vast tracts of mountains and deserts--including the land around the Reactor Testing Station--still remain a wilderness.