

# IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY REFERENCE SERIES

## THE SKINNER ROAD

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With the opening of the Owyhee mines by Michael Jordan's discovery party in May of 1863, transportation routes to the new district a major concern to miners and merchants alike. Valuable quartz discoveries on War Eagle Mountain a few months later added to the need for improved all-weather wagon roads on which heavy recovery equipment, goods, and ore could be transported. Demands for improved road service were increased by the competition between Oregon and California transportation companies for the lion's share of the Owyhee mining trade. The Oregon Steam Navigation Company had been the earliest to supply Owyhee miners from its Columbia River-Blue Mountain route from Portland. But California merchants, allied with the California Steam Navigation Company, undermined the OSN trade by opening more direct routes from the Head of Sacramento River navigation at Red Bluff and Chico northwest to the Owyhees and then on to the Snake, where they picked up connections to Boise Basin. By 1865 the California routes to the Owyhee country were hauling the major portion of Owyhee traffic.

Despite increased use, the Cow Creek, and Reynolds Creek roads to the Owyhee mines served as rough routes at best, even in good weather. In Winter they were almost impassable, especially to wagon traffic. Recognizing the need for improved connections with the California and Boise Basin roads, Silas Skinner formed two road companies and set to work to improve the Reynolds Creek Road to the north and to construct a new wagon road between Ruby City and Jordan Valley.

Work on the road to Jordan Valley began in 1865. This route started at Ruby City, less than a mile north of Silver City. It descended Jordan Creek to Wagontown, then crossed over to Trout Creek and "by easy grades over the ridges and foothills" descended to Baxter's Ranch on Jordan Creek. From the mouth of

Trout Creek the road bypassed a long southern loop in Jordan Creek. From the mouth of Trout Creek the road generally followed an already well-established track through Jordan Valley, past the junction of the older Chico and Idaho roads at Ruby Ranch, and on to the Owyhee River. After securing a franchise from the Third Idaho Legislature which allowed him to charge a toll on the Idaho portion of the road, Skinner opened his new route to wagon traffic May 19, 1866.

The Owyhee Road was an instant success. State and freight service expanded rapidly as travel time between Chico and Silver City shortened to a week. Way stations were located ten to fifteen miles apart along the route. Only the foundations of Skinner's combined ranch and stage stop at the base of Trout Creek Grade still remain, but the ruins of two other stations still can be seen. One is at Ruby Ranch, sixteen miles west of the town of Jordan Valley on the Owyhee-Boise roads junction. The other stands at Sheep Ranch, some twelve miles farther west.

During the height of travel on the Skinner Road these stations provided fresh horses and on occasion furnished travelers with food, water, and camping facilities.

The increasing traffic of the 1860's caused considerable Indian unrest along the California-Owyhee route. To protect travelers, a number of U.S. Army posts were established, including Camp Lyon on Cow Creek. The Indians were rounded up by 1868 and placed on reservations. Jordan Valley grew steadily, prospering as a supplier of cattle and hay to travelers and Owyhee miners. By 1869 eleven ranches dotted Jordan Creek and its tributaries. Skinner's road continued to serve the Valley even though after 1875 mining in the Owyhees declined in the wake of a general nationwide economic depression. By that time, Skinner had sold his interests in the road, and in 1878 the Owyhee County Commissioners purchased the entire Idaho portion.

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