

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

SITE REPORT - SNAKE RIVER FROM THE SEVEN DEVILS TO THE SALMON

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Historic-site reports contain information designed to assist in two preservation functions. One is preservation planning at the local level. The other is the work of federal agencies in carrying out their responsibilities to comply with historic-preservation requirements prescribed by federal statutes and regulations. These reports summarize local archaeological, historical, and geographical contexts; existing surveys of historic sites; architectural, engineering, industrial; and other cultural resources; and available maps and literature concerning each area. Natural geographical, rather than governmental, boundaries have been used to identify seventy-two areas that vary greatly in size. Site reports reflect a broad cultural and geographical disparity characteristic of diverse regional components found in Idaho, but the areas are designed to incorporate cultural elements of immediate local significance that need to be taken into account for preservation planning.

1. Geographical context: A high canyon wall rises above Snake River north of a still higher Seven Devils Mountain barrier, with forested upper slopes and ridge tops emerging above a desert environment below. Snake River flows through a rocky gorge with an occasional flat (mainly around Pittsburg Landing) providing a base for ranching operations. A road from White Bird to Pittsburg Landing penetrates this area, and several others reach view points high above Snake River, which also can be ascended by power boats. Elevations vary from 916 feet at Salmon River to 6,917 feet at Cold Springs.

2. Prehistory and significant archaeological sites:

3. Cultural resource surveys and archaeological literature:

4. Historical summary:

1. Exploration and fur trade, 1819-1863
2. Prospecting and ranching, 1864-1890

3. Great Eastern Mine, 1891-1900
4. Eureka Bar mines and steamboat service, 1902-1905
5. Forest Service Administration, 1906-1910
6. River navigation, 1910-

Explored by Donald Mackenzie in the spring of 1819, Snake River from the Salmon to the Seven Devils offered little attraction to beaver hunters during the fur trade period. Mackenzie hoped, after ascending the canyon all the way to the broad valley of the Snake, to use the river as a boat route when the fur trade expanded sufficiently to justify regular service there. In a letter, April 19, he pronounced the stream navigable with slight difficulties in the deep canyon. Outside of that single trip up and down the canyon that spring, though, trappers normally avoided that stretch of the river. Captain B. L. E. Bonneville crossed from the Imnaha early in 1834, after traveling from lower Powder River clear around to Grande Ronde Valley through the Wallowa country to avoid the worst part of the canyon of the Snake. Bonneville's exploration, publicized by Washington Irving in The Adventures of Captain Bonneville, brought the canyon of the Snake above the Salmon to the attention of Irving's many readers. The scenery confronting Bonneville's men there

filled them with admiration and astonishment. At times, the river was overhung by dark and stupendous rocks, rising like gigantic walls and battlements; these would be rent by wide and yawning chasms, that seemed to speak of past convulsions of nature. Sometimes the river was of a glassy smoothness and placidity, at other times it roared along in impetuous rapids and foaming cascades. Here the rocks were piled in the most fantastic crags and precipices; and in another place they were succeeded by delightful valleys carpeted with greensward. The whole of this wild and varied scenery was dominated by immense mountains rearing their distant peaks into the clouds. "The grandeur and originality of the views presented on every side," says Captain Bonneville, "beggars both the pencil and the pen. Nothing we had ever gazed upon in any other region could for a moment compare in wild majesty and impressive sternness with the series of scenes which here at every turn astonish our senses and fill us with awe and delight.

Serious exploration was not repeated in Snake River Canyon until later 1860, when the gold rush brought miners to Salmon River and Boise Basin. Mackenzie's findings had entirely been forgotten, locally at least; when gold discoveries in Boise Basin in 1862 led to new interest in Snake River navigation from

Lewiston to Fort Boise--this time for steamboat service--the matter had to be reinvestigated completely. Captain A. P. Ankeny of the Oregon Steam Navigation Company sent a party of "three reliable men" from Lewiston, September 20, 1862, to ascertain if steamboats capable of ascending the Snake to Lewiston could proceed on to Fort Boise above the canyon. In a highly imaginative account published in the Lewiston Golden Age, November 22, the scouts reported Snake River to offer a suitable route through the canyon. The next spring, Captain Leonard White set out in a steamer from Lewiston, April 10, bound for the confluence of the Salmon and the Snake. His findings apparently did not encourage any one to attempt the trip on up to the Boise.

Miners who had joined the gold rush from Lewiston to Boise could take the Boise trail along the high ridge that forms the canyon wall just east of the Snake between the Salmon and the Seven Devils. Steamboat service up the river just was not available as yet. Eventually in 1865, when the Oregon Steam Navigation Company belatedly tried to get a steamboat in operation above the canyon between Olds Ferry and Owyhee Ferry (a hundred mile stretch which would serve the Boise and the Owyhee mines), Captain Thomas J. Stump made another attempt to get the Colonel Wright up the canyon. About twenty-five miles above the Salmon, he got into serious trouble in a dangerous eddy. That was as close as anyone ever came to getting a steamer up the Snake. He salvaged the steamboat, but that was all. The engines were removed to Lake Pend d'Oreille for use in a new steamer, and the rest of the Colonel Wright had to be abandoned.

Still determined to provide service on the Snake above the canyon, the Oregon Steam Navigation Company built the Shoshone at Fort Boise in late 1866. When this venture failed, the Shoshone sailed down the Snake through the canyon. Upon reaching the difficult stretch of the canyon a little ways up Hell's Canyon Creek, Captain Cy Smith decided he did not have enough rope to let the boat safely through rough waters then known as Copper Creek Falls. So the Shoshone spent the winter of 1869-1870 tied up at Steamboat Landing. High water the next spring enabled another bold captain and a new crew to bring enough rope and try again. At last the steamboat verified the navigational possibilities of the Snake between the Seven Devils and the Salmon. Running up stream was impossible, but the right kind of steamer could get down if no one minded too much having the boat nearly demolished in the process.

With steamboat transportation out of the question, the possibility of railway service still remained. W. W. DeLacy surveyed a transcontinental route for the Northern Pacific down the Salmon in 1872. But he found the canyon at the junction of the Salmon and the Snake rather a poor place to build a railway.

Another location much farther north--around Lake Pend d'Oreille--eventually was chosen instead. When the Oregon Short Line pushed through the valley of the Snake in southern Idaho in

1882-1883, an extension down to Lewiston was contemplated. Surveys of the canyon below Huntington (where the Oregon Short Line met the Oregon Railway and Navigation for transcontinental service to Portland) discouraged the enterprise. Although only a few Chinese miners and scattered ranchers occupied the deep canyon below the Seven Devils, better transportation was badly needed--at least as far as the Seven Devils where some excellent copper prospects required development. Levi Allen had known of the Seven Devils possibilities ever since 1863, and Montana capitalists were trying to get large scale mining underway at the top of the canyon. Then still more copper discoveries in the spring of 1891--the Great Eastern, a few miles above Pittsburgh Landing--extended the Seven Devil copper region further down the canyon.

Another steamboat enterprise--this time the Norma, built at Huntington in 1891--was offered as an answer to the Seven Devils transportation problem. But the Norma got along no better than the Shoshone, and had to be sent down the canyon in another wild ride in 1895. Since then, no one has built a large steamboat on the Snake above the canyon.

By 1900, the Great Eastern was ready to resort to scows to haul ore to Lewiston. That system, though, really did not work either. Then in 1902, an excitement at Eureka Bar, near the mouth of the Imnaha not far from the Douglas Bar (where Chinese miners had been active until they were unexpectedly wiped out by white bandits in 1887), brought the final brief era of steamboat transportation to the lower canyon. Steamers had gone above Eureka Bar forty years before, so this new venture was not folly.

The steamer Imnaha, however, offered only a few months service to Eureka (a mining town of some consequence on the Oregon side) in 1903 before sinking above Mountain Sheep rapids on the fourteenth trip. Finally in place of the Imnaha came the Mountain Gem, which continued to operate to Eureka for about two years--as long as traffic justified steamer service. Eureka wound up a ghost town, and steamboats ceased to force their way to lower canyon.

River transportation finally resumed along the Snake above the Salmon in 1910. A motor boat, The Flyer, launched in Lewiston February 7, commenced running up to Pittsburgh Landing; after the government dynamited some obstacles further up stream.

The Flyer extended its route to Johnson Bar, ninety-one miles above Lewiston, in 1914. Regular service to ranchers and miners has been available ever since, and the river trip has become a considerable tourist attraction as well. The Flyer even hauled a hundred and fifty tons of \$52.00 copper ore from the Great Eastern down to Lewiston for a shipment to a smelter in Tacoma, and transported some \$63.00 ore from another nearby property as well.

When The Flyer opened the new era in transportation in the lower canyon, great expectations of a rural line were still

entertained. The Adams family, with major interest in the Union Pacific and the Oregon Short Line, had enough confidence in the possibility of a Snake River line to develop a town (Clarkston) across the Snake from Lewiston, complete with a site for terminal yards for the projected railway. Construction already had been finished to Homestead, just above the deep canyon, in order to provide better access to the Seven Devils Mine. A difficult survey of railroad route through the canyon had been concluded in 1912, but extension of the line from Homestead to Lewiston never materialized. Surveys for a scenic highway down the Snake River also were completed. Construction costs are so great, though, that no road had been built from Eagle Bar to the Salmon.

Partly because of the transportation problem, Snake River below the Seven Devils has not realized its early promise as a mining empire. A stock raisers' and lumbermen's country with excellent tourist possibilities, that slightly settled region remains a frontier largely untouched by roads and habitation. Boat service from Lewiston up above Pittsburgh Landing continues to give access to ranches which are otherwise rather isolated. Regular scheduled air service from Boise to Lewiston flies over the canyon. Tourists thus can enter the country by air and water, but a network of roads and railways through there just has not worked out. In that respect, the canyon of the Snake below the Seven Devils still remains a frontier mostly in a wilderness setting.

5. Historical documentation and literature:

M. Alfreda Elsonsohn, Pioneer Days in Idaho County (Caldwell, 1947, 1951), 2 v.

David H. Stratton, "Hells Canyon: The Missing Link in Pacific Northwest Regionalism," Idaho Yesterdays, 28/3:2-9.

Grace Jordan, Home Below Hell's Canyon (New York: Crowell, 1954) deals with Len Jordan's Kirkwood ranch.

6. Historic sites inventory:

7. Industrial archaeological and engineering sites summary: Surface evidence of placer mining in this area offers opportunities for study of industrial procedures utilized in historic production. Hydraulic pits, patterns of dredging operations, or tailings that distinguish hill claims from stream claims--or that identify Chinese services--provide information of historic importance. Prospector's pits disclose gravels that were searched unsuccessfully for gold. Ditches, flumes, stream diversions, and similar evidence of water sources also are important.

Lode mining operations left a variety of indications, many of them relatively permanent in nature. Disturbance of surface outcrops includes trenches and exploratory shafts. In other places, tunnels and raises or stopes that reached surface outlets reveal important aspects of mining activity. If accessible, underground workings have still greater importance for industrial archaeology and engineering analysis. Abandoned tools and equipment, along with items like timbering in tunnels and stopes, add to this record.

8. Architectural resources: Survey of the Snake River from Seven Devils to Salmon River has identified structures that are included in a National Register nomination inventory.

The area has no sites of architectural significance listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

9. United States Geological Survey Maps:

Cactus Mountain 1963
Grave Point
He Devil (15') 1957
Joseph 1963
Kerman Point (15') 1954
Kessler Creek 1964
Kirkwood Creek 1963
Wolf Creek 1963

10. Cultural resource management recommendations:

Publications--450 N. 4th Street, Boise, ID 83702--208-334-3428