

# IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## REFERENCE SERIES

### OAKLEY

Number 555

Unlike earlier Idaho Mormon communities (aside from Malad), a series of settlements in the Albion-Oakley area resulted from migration of individual families or small groups rather than full-scale towns organized as self-sufficient units with all trades and commercial needs represented from the beginning. After five years of scattered farm occupation of the area, this expansion reached upper Goose Creek in 1878. Then in 1879, W. C. Martindale arranged to interest a more substantial group of Mormons from Tooele, Utah, in taking up Goose Creek farms. By 1882, about 150 Saints had arrived in the region, where a central community emerged around the Oakley stage station on the Boise-Kelton Road. Stage service was displaced just then with construction of the Oregon Short Line farther north, but within another five years, Oakley had become the major Mormon settlement in that part of Idaho. Wood River mining demands created good markets for farm products there, and in 1884 construction of a large log church, school, and cultural center got underway in Oakley. Another log cabin provided space for a Cassia Stake Academy in 1889. (In 1921, this was succeeded by Oakley High School--a public institution that inherited the academy's 1910 building with ten classrooms.) Francis M. Lyman and Heber J. Grant (both of whom became church apostles, and the latter, president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints). Both had a great personal interest in developing Oakley and all the surrounding Mormon settlements. With this kind of support, Oakley grew to a population of about 2,000 shortly after 1900.

With 8,000 acres under irrigation by 1900, Oakley had become

the center of a promising oasis. Then an effort to develop a larger-scale Carey Act project of 45,000 acres with Pittsburgh capital (around \$2,000,000 was invested) led to disappointment and retraction to 21,000 acres following a lot of difficulty and friction that plagued the area for forty years. (This same kind of misfortune retarded a number of similar ventures in that region, although the Twin Falls projects developed successfully, Minidoka, Oakley, Salmon Tract, and several others ran into severe hardship situations.) Burley, in the Minidoka project along the Snake River to the north, displaced Oakley as a regional metropolis. As a result, Oakley retained many early twentieth-century structures in a context that preserved a small town atmosphere with a minimum of later modification. Adjacent to forest lands that gave Oakley a decided advantage during the early years of settlement--and provided logs for significant early structures--the community survived partly as a good location for a Forest Service ranger station, later becoming a guard station, that helped to maintain the town. Farm and forest elements combined from the beginning to account for Oakley's importance, and continue to maintain the town after a century of relatively stable development.