

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

SITE REPORT - SALMON FALLS CREEK AND SOUTH HILLS

Number 620

December 1981

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: South Hills Forest Service lands and Shoshone basin arid lands comprise most of this area. Farther west, Salmon Falls Creek flows through a lava gorge with a reservoir created by Salmon dam. Lack of water for storage has restricted Salmon tract irrigation development, but range lands are available above farm lands adjacent to Twin Falls tract properties. Elevations range from 7,215 feet at Grandview Peak to around Berger. Irrigation development farther west around Roseworth also is retarded by lack of water.

2. Prehistory and significant archaeological sites: People have inhabited southern Idaho for fourteen thousand years or more. Until about eight thousand years ago they were noted primarily as big game hunters. Since then, they specialized more in camas, bitterroot, and other natural crops and seeds, as well as in smaller game. But they continued to hunt large game that remained after earlier elephants, camels, giant sloth, and other ice age creatures left as climatic conditions changed.

3. Cultural resource surveys and archaeological literature:

4. Historical summary: Major historical episodes include
 1. Exploration and fur trade, 18 -18
 2. Stock raising,
 3. Sheep and cattle wars, 1896-1908
 4. Salmon tract development, 1909-1919
 5. Transportation improvement and farm depression, 1920-1932
 6. New Deal and wartime adjustment, 1933-1945
 7. Forest Service Administration,
 8. Contemporary life,

Explored by John Weber's band of mountain men and by Peter Skene Ogden's brigade of Hudson's Bay Company trappers in 1826, Salmon Falls Creek had been noticed by Ramsey Crook's westbound trappers in 1811 and Robert Stuart's return party in 1812. Not enough beaver were found to rate serious, long-term attention. So Salmon Falls Creek and Shoshone basin lack any extensive fur trade history.

Even after heavy freighting from a Central Pacific depot at Toano opened a major route across Salmon Falls Creek in Nevada in 1870, that road descended Tuana gulch to Snake River farther west. But cattlemen soon began to utilize range lands in this area, which they went to great effort to defend from Mormon sheep herders based on Goose Creek farther east. Shoshone basin, on that account, became a disputed borderland. In 1896, conflict between sheep and cattle interests erupted as Idaho's major sheep and cattle war. A long sequence of litigation erupted from that clash. Jackson Lee Davis (generally known as Diamondfield Jack) had gained a reputation for violence as a gunman employed to keep sheepherders out of Shoshone basin cattle ranges. A major shooting incident was blamed off on Diamondfield Jack, although he happened to be elsewhere when two ranchers and two sheepherders had a battle in Shoshone basin. After several years of litigation and appeals, Diamondfield Jack obtained a pardon when his attorney, J. H. Hawley, demonstrated he had not committed that particular crime.

Cattle ranchers continued to operate in Shoshone basin and South Hills grazing areas, where some of their ranges became National Forest land. But part of their territory was subject to early twentieth-century reclamation development.

Salmon Falls Creek flows into Idaho from Nevada through a canyon in good farm lands. An excellent construction site for a

dam west of Rogerson provided an attractive early twentieth-century Carey Act project. Several advantages of such a project became evident as soon as Twin Falls tract canals were dug. Adjacent lands higher up could be watered by an economical gravity system. A tunnel had to be blasted out of a lava canyon, but a canal system from a 220-foot dam could be installed at an estimated projected cost of about \$2,500,000. Over 120,000 acres--perhaps 150,000--could be watered for not much more than twenty dollars an acre. A reservoir impounding about 180,000 acre feet of storage could be obtained for such an investment. Twin Falls Land and Water Company investors did not hesitate to add this additional system to their already successful adjacent operation.

An effective promotional campaign was undertaken soon after 127,707.27 acres of Salmon tract sagebrush were segregated in 1908. Organizing an impressive project, Twin Falls-Salmon River Land and Water Company developers opened their large tract in 1909. (Salmon River, rather than Salmon Falls Creek, sounded a lot better in their title. Idaho's Salmon River had plenty of water which had nothing to do with their project. Salmon Falls Creek, their actual water source, was much more modest.) By 1910, Salmon Dam and their canal system were almost ready to deliver water. Energetic farmers were clearing thousands of acres of sagebrush from their arid lands. About all they needed was water. Some six thousand Salmon Tract acres were actually irrigated in 1911. This total rose to 19,000 in 1912. By then, some disturbing problems had become all too evident. About 35,000 acres of intended farm land were relinquished in 1912, and additional retraction appeared likely.

Two miscalculations plagued farmers trying to operate Salmon Tract properties. Their 180,000-acre foot reservoir had far more storage capacity than Salmon Falls Creek had water. Ranging from a flood stage maximum of 1,280 second feet, May 22, 1912, to a minimum of only ten second feet, July 25, 1919, during recorded years of 1909-1916 and 1919-1922, that stream lacked potential for irrigating 180,000 acres even if every drop could have been used. Approximate total acre-feet available from that small stream never approached that amount:

| | | | |
|------|---------|------|---------|
| 1911 | 98,600 | 1921 | 134,000 |
| 1912 | 143,000 | 1922 | 123,000 |
| 1919 | 63,000 | 1923 | 96,700 |
| 1920 | 83,100 | 1924 | 80,900 |

Their average total runs a little over 100,000 acre-feet annually.

Those years were critical to farmers in need of water that never reached their reservoir. Worse yet, their lava-walled reservoir, unlike their concrete arch dam, leaked like a sieve. Altogether too much water flowed around their dam. So their

large storage capacity served less than a useful purpose. Only about 76,000 acre feet can be diverted for irrigation purposes each season. Only slightly over 40% of Salmon reservoir's storage capacity could be used on an average.

Water allocations were proportional to company shares which expectant farmers owned. Those who could get no water at all, or insufficient water to grow crops, had to sell out. Farmers had to keep buying shares until they gained enough water, in good seasons at least, to get by. They quickly learned not to waste water. After enough water claims were consolidated to allow those who remained to conduct marginal farming operations, acreage under cultivation gradually stabilized. By 1918, only 35,000 acres out of an original anticipated 180,000 were irrigated. This level of farming continued from that time on. Excess land grew more handsome sagebrush than had been produced before a lot of work had gone into acreage preparation. But Salmon Tract farmers had rather a limited market for superior sagebrush.

Transportation improvements affecting Salmon Tract settlement and economic development included a Union Pacific branch line from Twin Falls to Rogerson. Construction began with Salmon Tract development in 1909 and continued on to an eventual Central Pacific transcontinental connection in Nevada. Far more important after 1920 was a greatly increased reliance upon automobiles. Highway access to Twin Falls and to Nevada brought more than tourist traffic through this area. Small towns, spaced out every five miles or so to serve local farms (Berger, Hollister, Amsterdam, and Rogerson) no longer were needed. Hollister and Rogerson survived as small communities, but local trade went more to Twin Falls. Even without severe water shortages, Salmon Tract farmers would have had to surmount problems of crop marketing and farm depression after 1920. New Deal farm programs began to offer some relief after 1933, and higher war time prices had a still greater effect after 1940.

Improved farm machinery and irrigation methods helped solve some Salmon Tract water problems after 1946, but an increased irrigation supply still was needed. Ambitious plans for a large new canal from Milner, with a pumping plant to gain a higher elevation that would cover lower Salmon Tract farms, were developed by 1976. Shortages of hydroelectric power, along with high cost of coal plant supplemental power, gave this project a less attractive cost ratio, and construction was delayed. So after almost eight decades of effort, Salmon Tract irrigators still faced many problems that had restricted their opportunities for large scale farming since 1908.

5. Historical documentation and literature:
6. Historic sites inventory:

7. Industrial archaeological and engineering sites summary:
8. Architectural resources:
9. United States Geological Survey Maps:
 - Berger 1965
 - Berger Butte 1965
 - Big Bend Crossing
 - Big Creek Ranch 1974
 - Browns Bench North 1974
 - Browns Bench South 1974
 - Buckhorn Canyon 1965
 - Buhl (15') 1959
 - Cedar Creek Reservoir 1974
 - Clover 1950
 - Coonskin Butte NE
 - Curtis Draw
 - Filer 1950
 - Grand View Peak 1965
 - Grassy Hills
 - Hollister 1965
 - Hollister SW 1965
 - Hopper Gulch 1974
 - Hub Butte 1965
 - McMullen Basin 1965
 - Magic Hot Springs 1974
 - Marion 1968
 - Meteor 1974
 - Milner Butte 1965
 - Murtaugh 1965
 - Pike Mtn. 1974
 - Rams Horn Ridge 1965
 - Rogerson 1974
 - Roseworth 1965
 - Roseworth NE 1965
 - Roseworth SE 1965
 - Salmon Butte 1974
 - Severe Spring 1974
 - Stricker Butte 1974
 - Taylor Canyon 1974
 - Timber Butte 1974
 - Trapper Peak 1974
 - Tuanna Butte 1965
10. Cultural resource management recommendations: