

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

IDAHO SETTLEMENT PATTERNS AFTER 1860

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A variety of factors have controlled Idaho settlement at different times since 1860. Mormons expanding north from Utah had come to Salt Lake in search of a religious refuge in Mexico. United States acquisition of Utah in 1848, while not unexpected, decreased their isolation, but an accommodation was reached with federal authorities. By 1860, additional territory adjacent to Utah had to be found to accommodate Mormon settlers who needed more farm land, and Idaho offered a superior avenue for growth. From bases near Utah, Mormon settlement gradually penetrated southwestern Idaho.

Thousands of Oregon and California emigrant wagons had crossed Idaho after 1840, but for two decades practically no one gave serious thought to developing premium farm land that their wagon trails crossed. Clearwater, Salmon, and Boise River gold discoveries (1860 to 1862) abruptly changed that attitude. Farming of easily irrigated land commenced immediately, and larger irrigation projects followed as they became financially and technically feasible. Prior to 1880, prospective Idaho settlers--either miners, farmers, stock raisers, or professional and service people had to make a long, hard trip to reach an isolated area. As had happened earlier in Oregon, difficulty of access provided a barrier which filtered out most potential settlers--a process not at all new in United States history. Anyone who joined in a gold rush (and relatively speaking, only a few people did, although that very small proportion still yielded thousands of fortune seekers) was prepared to take great risks in an effort to gain sudden wealth. Only a small proportion succeeded. But many settled down as farmers or town dwellers, coming out as well or better off than they would have made out if they had stayed home. Most gold seekers ended up somewhere else, but a select minority who decided to stay and found a new commonwealth made Idaho a distinctive mining and agricultural territory.

After 1880, rail transportation reduced Idaho's isolation. Expanded settlement gradually became possible. Commercial farming and logging gained access to broad regional and national markets after 1900. Substantial capital investment was required to participate in any of these activities, and many of Idaho's people wound up as employees in mines, lumber camps, or on farms in which their jobs were uncertain, or seasonal, or both. These enterprises supported a considerable number of professional trades, and service people in urban communities whose lives differed little from those elsewhere. Anyone wanting to live in a large city would not come to Idaho. But a considerable element who sought recreational opportunities or wanted access to hunting and fishing preferred to settle in a state like Idaho. This kind of selection continued to provide Idaho with a distinctive population similar to mining and farming elements which came

in search of adventure as well as fortune.

Geographical location and isolation has affected Idaho's settlement patterns greatly. Lack of coal and iron has prevented most kinds of heavy industrial development, and remoteness from large markets inhibits all but some highly specialized industrial enterprises. Protected from growth of really large metropolitan centers, Idaho offers a place where people wanting a less spoiled environment can escape to. This consideration still acts as a population selection factor.

A good place for corporate headquarters (but not most corporation operating plants) or government offices and specialized activities (a reactor testing station or a large air force base), Idaho can develop superior resorts in wilderness settings or continue to produce premium farm products. But people wanting most kinds of industrial jobs or to live in large cities still have to look elsewhere. These considerations tend to perpetuate a population selection process not unlike earlier ones which determined Idaho's demographic composition originally.