

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

IDAHO LEAD-SILVER MINING CAMPS, 1879-1884

Number 668

1984

Although Wood River lead-silver prospects had been noticed as early as 1864, their development came only after appropriate technology had been worked out in Nevada and Colorado. By 1879, lead-silver production in Eureka, Nevada, and Leadville, Colorado, encouraged Idaho miners to expand from gold and silver to base-metal mining. A rush to Wood River followed in 1880. Within a couple of years, a number of other important lead-silver areas gained attention, along with a major copper district on Lost River.

Additional gold discoveries around Shoup also came during southern Idaho's lead-silver excitement. Others followed after Idaho's major lead-silver operations commenced much farther north in the Coeur d'Alene country in 1884. From then on, gold mining did not begin to compare with lead-silver recovery in Idaho. Wood River became southern Idaho's leading mining empire. In later years, no other mining enterprises could begin to match Coeur d'Alene lead-silver production, which accounts for more than eighty percent of Idaho's total metal yield. Yet traditional precious mineral lodes increased their output during an era when lead-silver properties eclipsed them in overall importance. Gold and silver mining, which had maintained Idaho's mineral industry during hard and difficult times after the gold rushes, finally was helped by a still greater lead-silver development that emerged after 1880. Each of these transitions had momentous consequences in Idaho's mining history. After more than two decades of effort marked by uneven results and many failures, Idaho emerged with a large-scale corporate lode mining industry in which highly capitalized ventures displaced small or modest operations of earlier placer miners or lode promoters. New trends in which industrial labor had difficulties with mine management, and in which both faced problems accommodating to transportation and other commercial and economic variables beyond their control, accompanied this change. Wood River mining development came in a context quite different from conditions faced by Idaho's earlier miners.

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