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SIGNIFICANT FEATURES OF NINETEENTH CENTURY IDAHO MINING

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During four decades of prospecting and mineral development prior to Idaho's Thunder Mountain gold rush of 1902, miners and community leaders in a variety of isolated camps had learned many different lessons concerning resource management. They had overcome obstacles common to those faced by farmers, ranchers, and lumbermen, and had dealt with additional problems of their own. Unlike farmers and ranchers, who at least could identify lands superior for their purpose, or lumbermen who had no trouble finding forests with commercial timber stands, miners had two major problems in locating commercial mineral resources and in developing processing technology that varied greatly in different districts. Except for gold producers, miners had marketing problems similar to those of other Idaho pioneers. Lode developers also encountered identical obstacles to raising investment capital during national financial panics (particularly 1873, 1884, and 1893) that plagued large irrigation canal enterprises as well. Declining silver prices in 1888 and 1892 put many of Idaho's miners at a special disadvantage. Otherwise, they had investment experience similar to other large scale western transportation, irrigation, and forest resource enterprises. Gold and silver promoters often had an ability to induce capitalists to participate in operations that offered little or no expectation of success, or even of investment salvage. Land salesmen, however, also managed to sell worthless holdings, even though useless lands could be identified easily, while mining properties often could not be evaluated satisfactorily.

Compensating in part for unusual difficulties in mineral prospecting, exceptional opportunities to gain fabulous wealth accounted for a special kind of excitement that attended almost any search for gold and silver, or even lead and copper. Eager bonanza hunters almost never succeeded in selling high grade claims for a fortune, and many competent prospectors were too restless to quit even if they enjoyed a degree of success. Until about 1900, they always had more places to explore. Not too many large gold and silver regions remained undiscovered after 1900, and lead, silver, zinc, and copper prospecting predominated after 1880. Most free-milling gold and silver had been noticed when lead-silver began to attract more interest, so new tests and prospecting procedures had to be learned. Neither silver nor base metals could be traced from placer deposits very easily, and

values of lead-silver or copper ores could not be tested at depth by simple panning methods. Prospectors managed to recognize new kinds of mineralized outcrops so that they could get assays which would identify valuable lodes, and they found enough small, rich ore bodies to keep up a mining fever through another decade after 1900. An occasional district turned out to be of major importance, but prior to extensive development, major lodes could not be distinguished from minor producers without a great application of effort.

Early Idaho lode miners had another special problem, shared with railroad transportation but with few other enterprises. Industrial labor, often employed in hazardous or disagreeable locations, required protection that had to be achieved through formation of miners unions. During times of national economic adversity, unrest, and strikes, such as attended Wood River's 1884 financial reverses, resulted from economic hardships that disturbed many other Idaho camps as well. National railroad strikes, such as those of 1886, also affected Idaho's mining communities. Idaho's economy always had been subject to national financial and labor trends, but this dependence became much more evident in later years.

Regardless of economic difficulties characteristic of large scale western enterprises, Idaho's miners joined enthusiastically in resource development. They appropriated public lands for mineral rights just as farmers, ranchers, and loggers did. Farmers had obtained a homestead act in 1862 to provide a legal basis for their taking over what land they needed, and miners got a similar federal concession in 1872. (Ranchers and lumbermen, unable to obtain suitable legislation, simply went ahead using public lands anyway, although they eventually ran into restrictive statutes that farmers and miners had managed to avoid.) Miners and stockraisers sometimes failed to avoid friction, but their claims wars and sheep and cattle wars generally were fought out in court litigation with only occasional violence attending their development of Idaho's resources.

Late nineteenth century mining in Idaho, as in many other western mineral areas, gained a well-deserved reputation for risk and for reckless financial operation. Lode properties which could be developed only with large capital investment and advanced technology often were promoted with excessive sales pressure substituted for sound management. Following well-established precedents in Cornwall and other important mining areas where promoters sometimes did better by erecting mills without bothering to find mines at all, managers were tempted to neglect or dispense with development essential to sound operation. Even if they followed appropriate procedure, lode miners still faced considerable risk in extracting and processing ore. Veins often declined in value at depth, and miners too frequently continued to operate long after they should have quit.

(A great bonanza Comstock lode discovery at surprising depth--a circumstance not typical of many western mining districts--deceived many investors into seeking similar wealth in places where that kind of riches was not to be found.) Other properties had ores which could not be processed for many years until technological problems could be solved. Price fluctuation for lead, silver, and other metal products interfered with efficient operations. Miners as well as investors were affected adversely by such unmanageable risks. Operations started and then shut down erratically, so that miners often were left unemployed at very awkward times. Along with investors they had to absorb severe losses resulting from unemployment and from moving costs to other camps in which similar risks were encountered. As a mining territory, Idaho (like nearby California and Nevada) attracted a frontier population accustomed to taking risks but eager to gain wealth on a scale that ordinary occupations normally failed to provide.

Oregon, in contrast, had been settled by pioneers who wanted as stable a farming economy as could be developed. That kind of low risk situation did not always materialize either. Markets often were unavailable for crops that could be harvested in abundance. Some farming areas had dependable moisture where crop failures occurred rarely. When southern Idaho finally had sufficient large irrigation projects, that kind of fortunate arrangement reduced hazard in agriculture. But aside from Mormon cooperatives, which were not utilized in Idaho mining, large canal company projects entailed more risk and failure than mining. State and federal government participation (another development and management device not resorted to for mining until after 1940) eventually enabled farmers to overcome construction risks for reclamation enterprises. Aside from small farm suppliers to mining camps (in which operating risks often were as low as in placer mining, a relatively safe endeavor) nineteenth century farmers trying to irrigate large tracts of land had to deal with risks at least as serious as those confronting lode miners. Erratic price and marketing problems confronted farmers and miners alike, providing additional hazards to those fortunate enough to have been productive.

Other major nineteenth century enterprises fared no better. Stockraisers enjoyed an era of dramatic success, but terrible weather and overgrazing proved ruinous to many large operations after 1888. Commercial logging only was beginning during that time, but even after improved transportation and marketing conditions supported a large forest products industry, Idaho lumbermen had to overcome substantial risks. These arose partly from fire hazard, partly from transportation difficulties, and also from marketing problems. Failures and losses were at least comparable to those of lode mining companies. Relatively speaking, mining risks in Idaho were not out of line in an economy in which hazard abounded.

In spite of a fair share of hazard and loss, Idaho's nineteenth century miners founded substantial communities which supported a farming and ranching commonwealth that qualified for state admission in 1890. Without a mining economy, Idaho's agricultural settlement would have been retarded for many years.

Mormon expansion for Utah came independently of mining development, but other parts of southern Idaho would have had little opportunity to attract farmers and loggers until rail transportation became available. North Idaho would have remained part of Washington, and nothing resembling Idaho would have been likely to materialize. Along with a number of other western states, Idaho as developed as a mining territory, with distinctive characteristics resulting from a gold rush origin. To understand modern Idaho, a complex pattern of mining antecedents has to be investigated and explained.

(This information has not been edited.)

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