

# IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## REFERENCE SERIES

### MINING SUMMARY

Number 671

1981

The 1880's and 1890's were exciting years in western mining although few predominantly gold and silver bonanzas remained to be discovered. (Gold field discoveries in Nevada came only a year or two after this period.) Silver ores and some refractory gold ores not amenable to the relatively simple amalgamation process, or lead-silver and copper deposits ignored when conditions were less favorable, now attracted more attention, and prospectors also searched for undiscovered deposits of these metals. Determining mineral content of outcrops or probable values below the leached zone required more equipment and knowledge than the simple crushing and panning test for free milling gold ore. Nor could the base metals and silver be as easily traced from placer deposits. Nevertheless, prospectors soon learned to recognize various minerals from the distinctive colors of weathered and leached outcrops and to use simple flame and chemical field tests.

By the end of the century nearly all of the exposed or nearly exposed rock surfaces of the country had been prospected.

(In areas where solid rock is covered with dense vegetation or deep soil, surface prospecting is difficult--even at present with better earth moving equipment.) The result of such intensive prospecting was the discovery of numerous small mines with ore bodies frequently rich but as small, irregular, and ephemeral as those mined only for gold and silver in the earlier period. These mines contributed much to the excitement of the times, though little to production. However, substantial producers were discovered or exploited in this period also. Although the last

two decades of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth was the period of greatest excitement and most widespread activity in silver and base metal mining in Idaho, mines in several districts have been intermittently active down to the present. One district has maintained almost continuous production.

It is difficult to generalize on the reasons for failure of mines where a lack of ore was not the principal cause. It is likewise difficult to speculate upon any future production from these mines as they are usually caved and flooded, and records or maps of underground working are usually not available. In some mines underground prospecting has been extensively carried on beyond old productive workings; in others, especially where the work was confined to very hard rock with only hand drills, nearby ore bodies may remain undiscovered. Reasons for failure in the period of greatest mining activity include poor management; lack of scientific and technical knowledge to solve recovery problems; high cost of transportation in isolated locations; and a declining market. Under different circumstances some of these mines could have been successful, and perhaps a few will be quite productive at some time in the future.

By Robert L. Romig