IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY REFERENCE SERIES

MINING IN IDAHO, 1860-1878

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North Idaho mineral discoveries in 1860 led to a gold rush that brought in thousands of settlers who otherwise would never have considered moving to there for many years. Prospectors continued to find gold and silver in a variety of remote Idaho camps, with one rush after another until 1869. Another decade of less frequent major mining excitement continued to attract a restless population to more remote and often difficult surroundings.

Rich placer mines that could be worked with relatively simple equipment, often for great profit, produced most of Idaho's early local capital investment. Lode mines, which required large amounts of outside capital, soon followed. Heavy milling machinery, superior transportation facilities, and (at times anyway) a complicated technology, followed as fast as they could be developed. Because they could not be worked out quickly, lode properties contributed to Idaho's economy over a long period of time. They employed industrial labor and helped to sustain farm and ranch communities until other resources were available for additional economic development. As a result, Idaho was established a generation or two ahead of when it might otherwise have been--and principally as a mining commonwealth. As in most far western mining territories, Idaho's frontier experience differed greatly from Midwestern models that most Idaho settlers were accustomed to. And, because of a location on a route of traffic between Midwestern and Pacific Coast cultural areas, Idaho continued to function as a region of cultural interchange.

Life in early Idaho mining camps varied greatly. Some were quite wild and lawless, while others were sober and industrious. Some were accessible by wagon road, while others could be reached only by pack trails. Early Idaho packers accomplished astonishing feats in hauling heavy equipment through rough country into remote wilderness areas. Suppliers also packed groceries and other staples into areas that sometimes suffered famine and often were overstocked, with economic results disastrous to merchants who had gone to great effort and expense only to lose money rather than make a fortune. Mining in Idaho involved considerable risk, and most fortune hunters emerged with losses instead of fabulous wealth. Bust most early Idaho settlers took major risks in building a frontier society, and miners' chances were often about as good as those of most anyone else.

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