IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

IDAHO TERRITORY, 1863-1872

Number 682 1982

At the time Idaho's initial gold rushes brought about dramatic Pacific Northwest population shifts, Washington Territory included all of later Idaho along with western Montana and Wyoming. Less than two years after E. D. Pierce's gold strike of 1860, a majority of Washington's population was found in Idaho mining camps. Walla Walla's leaders wanted to use that movement to justify Washington's admission as a state with their town as capital. Politicians in Olympia, Washington's existing capital, preferred to get rid of all of Washington's mining camps but retain Walla Walla's farming region, which by itself would not threaten Olympia's future. Idaho's miners largely preferred to go along with Walla Walla, but Olympia persuaded Congress to establish Idaho Territory as a separate entity. To solve problems of mining expansion from Washington into Dakota Territory, all of later Montana and practically all of later Wyoming were thrown in to Idaho as well.

Idaho's 1863 boundaries proved completely inappropriate, so in 1864 Montana was created and most of Wyoming was returned to Dakota. Idaho was left with unfortunate boundaries that enclosed a wild Salmon River Mountain area which separated some scattered mining camps that could not communicate with each other. Sectional hostility between Idaho's northern and southern counties lasted for a generation or more and very nearly prevented Idaho's admission as a state.

Idaho's original settlers came largely from Pacific Coast communities in an eastward movement not entirely typical of Midwestern frontier experience. Then a host of Missouri Civil War refugees arrived, and by 1864 Idaho was a strongly Confederate Democratic territory. This political complexion persisted until 1882, although national Reconstruction issues that absorbed almost everyone's attention for several years

receded in importance after 1872.

Territorial government in Idaho proved to be singularly difficult and unsatisfactory until 1872. Lack of federal funds to cover official salaries and operating costs created problems until 1866. After only a modest portion of early bills had been paid, an enterprising territorial official absconded with Idaho's entire treasury, concealing his theft with ingenuity sufficient that most of a year elapsed before anyone really noticed it. Other defalcations made matters worse. On more than one occasion, Idaho's entire executive department (only two officers) disappeared, leaving clerks who had no appointments but who had to improvise as best they could. Even after a permanent territorial government came into operation in 1866, a violent conflict between Idaho's Radical Republican executive department and Confederate Democratic legislature created additional turmoil. Then President Grant had to try six times before he could get an Idaho gubernatorial appointee to take office and discharge his duties long enough to be effective. Most did not even bother to try.

Idaho's Indians had an almost totally unsatisfactory situation as well. Nez Perce bands could get nowhere in trying to halt Idaho's gold rush at their reservation border, and Governor Caleb Lyon of Lyonsdale stole all their treaty money in 1867. Farther south, a series of volunteer and military campaigns was directed against southern Idaho's Snake bands. All they could do was break up and hide out--a highly successful (if decidedly inconvenient) response to an impossible situation. Treaties that were negotiated in 1864 and 1866 went unratified, although an Indian reservation at Fort Hall was set aside in 1867.

Idaho's pioneer settlers founded communities modeled as closely as they could after typical frontier settlements. But they had severe problems starting a mining commonwealth far beyond other established towns and farms. Only gold and silver mines offered enough to fund and attract settlers to undertake such a difficult project.

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