

# IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## REFERENCE SERIES

### NINETEENTH-CENTURY IDAHO AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

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Early Idaho mining provided economic support for farming communities that soon surpassed mining in economic importance. North Idaho had lands suitable for traditional farming, but most southern Idaho agriculture required irrigation or dry farming procedures that had not been utilized extensively prior to Mormon settlement of Utah. Some Nez Perce Indians had engaged in irrigated farming above Lewiston ever since 1838, and Idaho's Clearwater gold rush provided them with important markets after 1860. Cache Valley Mormon farmers expanded into later Idaho in 1860, and Bear Lake farm settlements soon followed. But Oregon Trail emigrants generally failed to show any interest in farming Snake River desert lands until a gold rush to Boise Basin suddenly provided local markets. North Idaho's mines supported Washington farms for a time, but after a decade of expansion, Palouse and Camas Prairie farmers gained importance characteristic of Mormon and miners' supply communities in southern Idaho. Ranching in Idaho had fur-trade antecedents at Fort Hall and Fort Boise but gained prominence after mining markets made cattle raising more attractive. Cattle from Oregon, Washington, California, and Utah reached Idaho mining camps before long drives from Texas provided stock to augment Idaho herds in 1868 and 1869. By then, annual Texas cattle drives were stocking Idaho ranches, and stock from Oregon, Washington, and Idaho soon followed Oregon Trail routes eastward to rail transportation in Wyoming. Severe winter losses interrupted Idaho's ranching expansion in 1889, but cattle raising continued and sheep herding became more prominent after Idaho became a

state in 1890.

Irrigated farming in southern Idaho developed gradually from easily watered river bottom lands to larger canal projects that required more extensive capital investment. Mormon cooperative efforts developed larger community canals in southeastern Idaho, but major Boise Valley construction efforts did not get too far prior to 1890. State and federal participation was necessary after 1900 for successful development of large scale non-Mormon canal enterprises.

Dry farming began to expand in Idaho after some late-nineteenth-century experimentation in Utah, but most earlier non-irrigated farming was confined to Palouse and Camas prairie lands that, along with a few higher valleys, could do well without investing in canal projects. After 1880, rail construction enabled farmers in all sections of Idaho to enter a large regional or national market. They also had to compete with regional and national distributors of farm commodities. Since local sales for large harvests of wheat and other crops could not begin to justify Palouse farm development, let alone major irrigated areas, access to a national rail system was essential.

That brought national problems in agricultural economics to Idaho's farmers, who responded by showing their interest in national as well as local farm issues. Idaho had a strong Populist movement after 1890, to which farm concerns contributed.

By that time, Idaho's agricultural frontier was giving way to a new phase of commercial development.