

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

LODE MINES AND RAILROADS IN IDAHO, 1878-1890

Number 684

1982

Idaho's advance toward statehood depended largely upon gaining better transportation facilities. Mining speeded up settlement by a generation or more, but lode development required and encouraged railroad construction.

Important technological and transportation improvements enabled Idaho miners to develop new kinds of hard rock mines after 1880. Aside from valuable placers, gold and silver lodes had attracted early interest in a number of Idaho districts. Except for some especially rich Owyhee silver properties, most of them could not be worked successfully until after nearby rail transportation became available.

A few lead silver possibilities were identified prior to 1880, but until Nevada and Colorado technology was developed and rail lines were built, they went almost unnoticed or awaited better conditions for mining.

Although Mormon railroad builders had reached Idaho in 1874, economic depression delayed further construction toward Montana for four years. Between 1878 and 1900 Jay Gould acquired and extended Utah and Northern Railway service to Montana, which brought freight connections closer to a number of new Idaho mines. Then another Union Pacific branch was built across southern Idaho to a connection with Portland. That gave Union Pacific a protective coastal outlet, against potential southern Pacific competition. Idaho's new lead-silver Wood River district got rail service, that was essential for development of major lodes which had been neglected since 1864. Northern Pacific service reached Idaho in 1881, in time to provide transportation for a Coeur d'Alene gold rush two years later. Lead silver discoveries in that area in 1884 could be developed without excessive delay, and most of Idaho's metal production eventually resulted from those mines.

Union Pacific officials wanted more than mining traffic to provide revenue to their system, and they went to considerable effort to expand Idaho farm markets as well. Their efforts to advertise Idaho potatoes proved to be particularly important. Settlers induced by rail lines to move to Idaho assured population growth that was necessary when state admission suddenly became possible in 1890.

Aside from lead-silver mines, gold and silver lodes in a number of important camps became productive after 1884 when better transportation facilities were available. Lasting much longer than most placer districts, these properties continued to support Idaho's economy until commercial agriculture and lumbering could utilize rail service to bring more wealth in an area that was no longer a remote frontier.

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