

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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IDAHO'S CULTURAL TRANSITION FROM FRONTIER TO STATEHOOD

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Possessed of a diverse cultural tradition that reflected a variety of population antecedents in a transitional geographical setting, Idaho developed a distinctive social complex not duplicated in any other western state. Mormon institutions came in from Utah; ranching practices were common to Wyoming, Oregon, and Nevada; mining technology came largely from California, Nevada, and Colorado; natural farming methods were adapted with eastern Washington from Midwestern sources; irrigated farming had Utah antecedents; logging had Great Lakes associations; and most non-Mormon attributes were shared with Montana. Because North America's major lead-silver mining area (Coeur d'Alene and Kootenay) is split between Idaho and British Columbia, miners moved back and forth in that area without regard to their entering or leaving Canada.

Chinese miners in early Idaho camps also brought an unusual cultural tradition that few white residents understood or appreciated. Chinese scholars and doctors who accompanied them made a still more distinctive contribution to Idaho's heritage. A limited number of black miners--some of them more prominent than most of their neighbors ever suspected--also came to Idaho.

Their reception in a Confederate-Democratic territory, however, was not too sympathetic. Japanese railroad builders came in modest numbers around 1900, and some remained as farmers. But Idaho never had a highly cosmopolitan society. By 1900 a small but steadily growing Basque element gave southern Idaho a remarkable (and lasting) cultural addition; Italian and Slavic colonies turned up in northern Idaho mining camps.

In architecture, literature, art, and education, Idaho's pioneer settlers went to great effort to replicate their earlier cultural background. Aside from Mormon society, with distinctive and separatist religious, social, economic, and cooperative features, Idaho followed a traditional mining, farming, and lumbering frontier development pattern. Geographical conditions, however required political and economic adaptations--strongly influenced by religious and sectional differences--that affected Idaho's cultural development in a way not matched precisely by any other state.

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