

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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SUMMARY OF IDAHO'S TWENTIETH-CENTURY FOREST HISTORY

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Not long after 1900, forest resources surpassed mining in economic importance in Idaho. Sawmills provided lumber for mining camps located in forested areas, but a regular commercial logging industry could be developed only when rail transportation offered access to regional or national markets. Although Northern Pacific service provided a late nineteenth-century outlet for northern Idaho timber, large markets were remote and limited until after 1900. By that time, Great Lakes lumbermen had largely deforested their region and begun to invest in Idaho timber lands. They planned to have logging reserves there to be used primarily after they had finished clearing out southern timber, which was closer to their major markets. Large early-twentieth-century sawmill operations sprang up in anticipation of an eventual demand for many millions of board feet of high quality white pine and other forest products.

North Idaho's lumber potential was not realized quite so easily as had been planned. By 1914, Panama Canal shipping gave Pacific coast lumbermen an Atlantic coast rate advantage as far west as Cleveland. In spite of industrious efforts to cut out southern timber, loggers there never managed to repeat their Great Lakes experience: southern forests grew fast enough to be replaced before they were completely gone. North Idaho, though, experienced devastating fires, particularly in 1910, when a conflagration unmatched in United States history burned out more lumber than loggers were prepared to cut. In spite of problems like these, lumbering surpassed mining in Idaho's economy; only agriculture had a greater production record after commercial forestry gained importance.

Most of Idaho's logging came after a national conservation movement led to United States Forest Service administration of timberlands that were less accessible to commercial exploitation.

Federal protection of Idaho's forests got off to a later start than those in some surrounding states, but a difficult terrain insured preservation of large wilderness expanses in central Idaho.

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