

# IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## REFERENCE SERIES

### EARLY BOISE MERCHANTS (Advertiser Column By Nancy DeHamer)

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Enterprising merchants came to the Boise Basin right on the heels of the gold miners. They knew that the miners, and later permanent settlers, would need the goods that they sold. The general store was the most popular type of business establishment. In fact, Boise boasted twenty-one dry goods and general merchandise stores in 1865, two years after the founding of the city. Many of these stores were rather short-lived enterprises, but a few became quite successful.

Cyrus Jacobs was one such successful merchant. Coming to the Boise Basin in 1862 to look for gold, he soon realized that more money lay in selling goods to the miners. He had some merchandise brought to Idaho City by pack train and set up business. In 1863 he helped found the city of Boise and built his store, one of the city's first brick structures, on the corner of Seventh and Main. In 1865 he was advertising an astonishing variety of goods, especially when one considers that it all came by pack train or freight wagon into the Boise area. In one ad he listed foreign and domestic dry goods, clothing, boots, shoes, hats and caps, staple and fancy groceries, carpeting and wallpaper, blank books and stationery, crockery, glassware, tinware, blasting powder, stoves, paints, oil, brushes, glass, mechanic's and miner's tools, and many other items. All of this was located in the small building shown in a photograph in the Idaho Historical Library's Collection.

The prices the stores charged were to a large degree influenced by the cost of freighting and the availability or scarcity of the product. In 1865, print fabric was selling for 30¢ a yard and gingham for 50¢. Eggs were \$1.50 a dozen, butter

\$1.00 a pound; and in April flour rose to \$36 for 100 pounds. By June the price of flour had decreased to \$26 for 100 pounds because freight was coming in more rapidly.

The problem of prices was one which plagued both merchant and customer for many years. The editor of the local newspaper voiced the feelings of many citizens when he said in 1868, "Complaint is continually made by many of our citizens who are simply consumers, that the prices in Boise for everything required to sustain a family are unnecessarily high, or in other words, inflated." He went on to recommend that local merchants buy their goods in Chicago, rather than paying the exorbitant rates charged by San Francisco merchants.

When the Shainwald Brothers store opened in Boise in May of 1882, more than 43,000 pounds of merchandise was received in the week prior to the grand opening. All of it came by freight wagon, some from the East and some from San Francisco. It is evident from a picture of the store that all the goods were not strictly necessities. One wonders how many Boise maidens looked longingly at the pretty parasols and dress goods in the window!

One of Boise's more successful general stores was Falk's. Started in 1868 on Main Street, the business grew and prospered.

Some of the wagons used to freight goods to the area can be seen near their store in a photograph in the ISHS Collection.

With the growth of the railroad and the advent of modern transportation, the cost of freighting goods into Boise declined.

And with the advent of modern merchandising the old general store faded from the scene, to be replaced by the department store and the supermarket. But pictures from the files of the Idaho Historical Society reminds us of a colorful aspect of Boise's past.