

# IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## REFERENCE SERIES

### **BOISE WATER COMPANIES (Advertiser Column By Thomas G. McFadden, Former Society Staff Member)**

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Before 1890 Boise had only a makeshift and seasonal water supply. This was not only inconvenient for residences and businesses, but a considerable danger as well in an era when the total destruction of a town by fire was not uncommon. During the late 1880's the city took steps to fireproof its buildings and to insure itself an adequate water supply for fire protection. But as far as the water was concerned, at least, success was not forthcoming. Nor did private consumers have much greater luck.

In the spring of 1890, however, the picture changed. H. B. and B. M. Eastman, during exploratory drilling near their waterworks in Hulls Gulch, struck three free-flowing artesian wells. Assured of an abundant supply of water, they began making plans for service to the city. Their action did not pass unnoticed by Nathan Falk, the largest landowner in Hulls Gulch. He promptly organized, along with several other prominent citizens including F. R. Coffin. The Artesian Water and Land Improvement Company and turned nearly 200 acres of land over to the company. Drilling began almost immediately.

About three weeks later the Eastman brothers incorporated as the Boise Water Works, pulling into the company such leading lights of Boise as Timothy Regan, Peter Sonna, C. W. Moore, Alfred Eoff, and W. H. Ridenbaugh. Within days the Artesian Company had struck its first well. The ensuing competition for the city's water supply, and for the patronage of private residences and businesses, was, to say the least, spirited. Photographs of most of the above mentioned early Boise leaders are in the files of the Idaho State Historical Society Library.

In their rush to bring water down from Hulls Gulch, the rival water companies did not always serve the public interest in the best possible way. Trenches were hastily excavated and left standing open without protection. Nor were the companies always attentive to the city's demand that they replace streets and alleys as they found them; more than one filled trench settled dangerously. And inevitably there was no little duplication of services: mains were

frequently laid side by side down the streets, an unsatisfactory situation whenever the pipes of one company broke since the other company's trenches were flooded too.

But perhaps the most unfortunate consequence of the competition, at least for the Artesian Company (the smaller of the two), was the severe rate war initiated by the Water Works. The latter company, hoping to build at the outset a substantial patronage, offered to supply water to all its customers free of charge for just over a year, beginning in October of 1890. And in the competition for the city fire hydrant contract (to take just one instance) the Water Works sharply underbid the Artesian Company. This is perhaps why the city nonetheless divided the contract between the two companies, so that the Artesian Company might still have a share in the award.

Even so, the Artesian Company remained at a disadvantage. The capitalization of the Boise Water Works was initially ten times that of the Artesian Company. The Eastman brothers already had a water supply operation, and the scale of their subsequent activities was consistently greater than that of the opposition company. Nevertheless, the Artesian Company seemed able to survive. But in late December 1890, the Boise Water Works happened into a windfall that gave them a much more extensive and powerful operation. We shall talk about this discovery, and the subsequent history of the two companies, in our next column.

[No copy of the second column, unfortunately, has been found.]