

# IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## REFERENCE SERIES

MARY HALLOCK FOOTE  
(Advertiser Column By Judith Austin)

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Some eight miles up the Boise River from downtown Boise, on the south side of the river, the burned-out foundation of a house can be found. The house as it looked when occupied is shown in a photograph in the files of the Idaho State Historical Society; behind it lies a most interesting story.

In 1882, a young mining engineer with considerable experience in Leadville, Colorado, and some in the mines of North Idaho came to Boise. He was intrigued with the possibilities here for developing irrigation projects using the waters of the Boise River, and he decided to tackle such a project himself. The next fall, Arthur Foote brought his wife, Mary, and their two small children out from New York and built this house for them. Their stay in the Boise Valley was not to be a very happy one; after ten years of work in irrigation--chiefly in trying to build an early version of the New York Canal, at whose head the house sat--Foote ran completely out of money. He took a job with the United States Geological Survey in Idaho for two years before he moved to the Mother Lode country of California to resume work as a mining engineer.

Her husband's dreams for water development in this area were imaginative, and most of them have since been carried out by federal projects. But Mary Hallock Foote's own ideas were just as imaginative, and they earned her a national reputation. She was born in the Hudson River Valley of New York in 1847, and she went to the forerunner of Vassar College before being sent to the Cooper Institute in New York to study art. When she married Arthur Foote in 1876, she had already done some magazine illustrations. Her experiences in the first years of their marriage, spent in New Almaden and Santa Cruz, California, led her to begin writing short stories that were published in

Schribner's magazine; and when the Footes moved to Leadville, in 1879, Mary began writing novels as well.

A photograph of Mrs. Foote at about the time she lived in Leadville is in the Idaho State Historical Society's files. She lived a rather lonely life there; mining camps had few women, and her husband worked long hours. But she learned a great deal about his work just because of her isolation, and she used this information in her short stories and novels.

One photograph in the Idaho State Historical Society files shows trees and shrubbery around the Foote house--which was just across the river from what is now Discovery State Park. When it was first built, it was pretty barren, as a close-up view taken soon after it was finished [2505-A in ISHS files] shows. The stone was all cut near the site and is of lava; the walls of the house were two feet thick to keep it cool in the summer, and--as can be seen from the metal-capped chimneys--there were three fireplaces to keep it warm in the winter. The people in this photograph are not identified, but the little girl may be the Footes' elder daughter.

When money became scarce, the family moved to Mary's sister's boarding house in Boise. There, partly to support the family, Mary wrote most of the short stories and novels based on her western experiences. Some of them deal with mining events; others especially The Chosen Valley, are about irrigation development. Although her stories may sound a bit corny to a modern reader, they are very typical of their time and quite authentic in the details they contain of mining and engineering life in the West.