

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

BOISE MAY CELEBRATIONS (Advertiser Column by Nancy DeHamer)

Number 730

1971

May Day has again come and gone, with little fanfare or celebration. No doubt a few school children made May baskets, but there was no community-wide celebration. In the past this was not the case, although Boiseans' celebration of May Day has never been highly organized.

Historians have traced the celebration of May Day back to the Florila of the Romans, the festival in honor of flora, the goddess of flowers. It is also possible that celebration of this day stems from ancient spring fertility rites. In the United States the celebration of May Day has lost the ritualistic and symbolic character of its old-world origins. Instead, the day has been a good day for picnics, athletic contests, dancing around a May Pole, and perhaps the choosing of a May Queen.

Boise's May Day has included all of these elements at one time or another. The earliest citizens of the town found that May Day was a good time for a picnic, although they did not take place every year. In 1865, 1867, and 1870 there were picnics held at various places along the Boise River. Carriage transportation was provided for those who needed it. The ladies of the city provided the food and a good time was had by all. The 1867 picnic was rudely interrupted by the sheriff, who reminded certain parties that they had appointments in District Court that day as jurors and witnesses. The Statesman editor commented on his "cruelty" for forcing some to leave the picnic.

He continued by saying that "they thought Judge Cummins could afford to suspend proceedings on so important an occasion, but he did not see it in that light."

The 1870 picnic was sponsored by the newly organized Turnverein Club. The brass band played, and the Turnverein members performed gymnastic stunts for the entertainment of the crowd. After the event the Statesman described it as "the largest May-day gathering ever had in Boise." The reporter also went to great lengths to describe the awnings and flags which decorated the grounds, the children's swings, and the gymnastics exercises. All in all it was termed a great success.

It appears that community May Day picnics ceased after 1870. There was a young people's dance to celebrate the day in 1872. In 1875 there was no organized celebration, although a hot and cold plunge opened May 1 for use by the citizens. In the 1880's

and 1890's little May Day celebrating was done. An editorial note in the May 1, 1892, Statesman voiced worries over anarchists and labor violence in Europe. By this time May 1 was to the European working man what Labor Day was to the laborer in the United States. Radical labor groups used May Day for demonstrations which often led to riots and killings.

By 1938 the editorial theme had changed only slightly. The Statesman editor wrote an editorial titled "May is Welcome" in which he contrasted the demonstrations and riots in many parts of the world to the peace and beauty of an Idaho May Day. By this time May Day celebrations in the United States were primarily activities for school children. This was true in the Boise Valley. Nampa, for instance, was host to 3,000 rural school children who participated in many events, including a parade, complete with bands and May Queen Court. Students from fifteen schools participated in the winding of the May Pole and many competed in a track meet. In the evening Nampa school children marched in a lantern parade. On the same day an Apple Blossom festival was held in Payette. Boise had no organized celebration, but in the 1940's Boise High School students chose a May Queen and court to reign over the day.

There are several pictures in the files of the Idaho State Historical Society that illustrate two aspects of an Idaho May Day. The first shows an old-fashioned picnic group. Although this picture was taken in 1902, the Boise May Day picnics of the 1860's and 1870's must have looked much like this. Another picture is of the "Honor Girls" of Boise High School in 1938. In subsequent years this group of selected girls served the school and community as May Queen and court.