

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

LATE NINETEENTH-CENTURY PROSPECTING AND MINING

Number 740

1982

During four decades of prospecting and mineral development prior to Idaho's Thunder Mountain gold rush of 1902, miners and community leaders in a variety of isolated camps had learned many different lessons concerning resource management. They had overcome obstacles common to those faced by farmers, ranchers, and lumbermen, and had dealt with additional problems of their own. Unlike farmers and ranchers, who at least could identify lands superior for their purpose, or lumbermen who had no trouble finding forests with commercial timber stands, miners had two major problems in locating commercial mineral resources and in developing processing technology that varied greatly in different districts. Except for gold producers, miners had marketing problems similar to those of other Idaho pioneers. Lode developers also encountered identical obstacles to raising investment capital during national financial panics (particularly 1873, 1884, and 1893) that plagued large irrigation canal enterprises as well. Declining silver prices in 1888 and 1892 put many of Idaho's miners at a special disadvantage. Otherwise, they had investment experience similar to other large scale western transportation, irrigation, and forest resource enterprises. Gold and silver promoters often had an ability to induce capitalists to participate in operations that offered little or no expectation of success, or even of investment salvage. Land salesmen, however, also managed to sell worthless holdings, even though useless lands could be identified easily, while mining properties often could not be evaluated satisfactorily.

Compensating in part for unusual difficulties in mineral prospecting, exceptional opportunities to gain fabulous wealth accounted for a special kind of excitement that attended almost any search for gold and silver, or even lead and copper. Eager bonanza hunters almost never succeeded in selling high grade claims for a fortune, and many competent prospectors were too restless to quit even if they enjoyed a degree of success. Until about 1900, they always had more places to explore. Not too many large gold and silver regions remained undiscovered after 1900, and lead-silver-zinc and copper prospecting predominated after 1880. Most free-milling gold and silver had been noticed when lead-silver began to attract more interest, so new tests and prospecting procedures had to be learned. Neither silver nor

base metals could be traced from placer deposits very easily, and values of lead-silver or copper ores could not be tested at depth by simple panning methods. Prospectors managed to recognize new kinds of mineralized outcrops so that they could get assays which would identify valuable lodes, and they found enough small, rich ore bodies to keep up a mining fever through another decade after 1900. An occasional district turned out to be of major importance, but prior to extensive development, major lodes could not be distinguished from minor producers without a great application of effort.

Early Idaho lode miners had another special problem, shared with railroad transportation but with few other enterprises. Industrial labor, often employed in hazardous or disagreeable locations, required protection that had to be achieved through formation of miners unions. During times of national economic adversity, unrest and strikes, such as attended Wood River's 1884 financial reverses, resulted from economic hardships that disturbed many other Idaho camps as well. National railroad strikes, such as those of 1886, also affected Idaho's mining communities. Idaho's economy always had been subject to national financial and labor trends, but this dependence became much more evident in later years.

Regardless of economic difficulties characteristic of large scale western enterprises, Idaho's miners joined enthusiastically in resource development. They appropriated public lands for mineral rights just as farmers, ranchers, and loggers did. Farmers had obtained a homestead act in 1862 to provide a legal basis for their taking over what land they needed, and miners got a similar federal concession in 1872. (Ranchers and lumbermen, unable to obtain suitable legislation, simply went ahead using public lands anyway, although they eventually ran into restrictive statutes that farmers and miners had managed to avoid.) Miners and stockraisers sometimes failed to avoid friction, but their claims wars and sheep and cattle wars generally were fought out in court litigation with only occasional violence attending their development of Idaho's resources.