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BOISE RIVER'S 1862 FLOOD

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After an exceptionally severe winter, Boise River flowed more than two miles wide from its southern bench to northern foothills in a genuine hundred-year flood that has not been remotely matched since 1862. William E. Welsh, investigating it a century later, attempted without success to compute how many second feet flowed by during its peak discharge, but from reports of locations of trees and snags left on its flood banks he concluded that it exceeded 100,000 second feet, and probably was much greater. Boise Valley was inhabited only by Indians then, although Oregon Trail emigrant wagons had come through along a route obliterated by high water in 1862. George Grimes' party of prospectors came from Jordan Creek in the Owyhee's, on their way to Boise Basin that summer, reaching Snake River at Hudson's Bay Company's Fort Boise. They had to spend three weeks in July building a boat that enabled them to cross those flood waters at a site where emigrant wagons normally got by in much less than a day. When Boise was settled a year later, care was taken to place its townsite a long distance from present Boise Avenue, where Boise River flowed from 1862 to 1876. That was a wise precaution.

From a report by William E. Welsh, Watermaster, June 26, 1944:

1862. While precipitation records for the town of Boise date back only to 1864, indications from old-timers' stories are that the flow in 1862 probably exceeded the high water on any year since that time. I. N. Coston, who . . . homesteaded on a ranch located near the present site of Barber, came to the Boise Valley in 1862. He stated that all land in the river bottoms extending from bluff to bluff and from the present site of Boise westward to the canyon near the present site of Caldwell was completely under water on the 4th of July that year. Jeff Shelton accompanied W. G. Steward and the writer down to Canada Lane, a mile west of Star and then north more than one-half mile from Highway 44 to show us a ridge where a log was found by the first settlers of the Boise Valley (who came in 1864); all were of the opinion that the only way this log could have gotten there was to have floated in by high water from the Boise River.

Fred McConnell, now deceased, a civil engineer and graduate of the University of Idaho, who was born on McConnell Island near

the mouth of the river and who spent his life in engineering practice in Canyon County, was a profound student of the Boise River and the various problems involved. He was firmly convinced that there was extremely high water many times during the early days of settlement of the valley; and as further indication of the high water in 1862, he stated to me that his father was with the first emigrant train to travel from the Boise Valley to the Payette Valley, making the descent into Payette Valley on the ridge to the east of Freezeout Hill, as indicated by the monument by the side of the highway. Before starting on the trek across the desert between the two valleys, the party camped north of but near the present town of Eagle, close to Dry Creek and near the bluff, for about three weeks. All the time they were camped there, they burned driftwood which they all believed to have come from high water from the Boise River. This was in the fall of 1862; the party while camped there was visited by the Grimes party, who were returning from the Boise Basin after the discovery of gold on what is now Grimes Creek. An interesting sidelight to this story is the fact that the Grimes party debated the advisability of telling the McConnell party about the discovery of gold in the Boise Basin and decided not to tell it, because there were so many in the McConnell party. However, like all stories of gold discovery in those early days, someone did tell it, and news spread with the resultant gold rush to the basin in the following spring of 1863.

In the National Research Council, American Geophysical Union Transactions of 1941, prepared by the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences, Washington, D.C., 1941, there is an article entitled "A Hundred-Year Record of Truckee River runoff Estimated from Changes in Levels and Volumes of Pyramid and Winnemucca Lakes," by George Herdman and Cruz Venstrom. On page 74 is found this statement: "One of the greatest floods in the history of Nevada occurred in 1861-62." On pages 85 and 86 is a table showing for the period 1839-40 to 1929-30, among other things, a Truckee River Basin precipitation index which shows an index for 1861-62 of 215, considerably the highest shown for any year. On page 88 is a graph showing the estimated runoff of Truckee River, also with 1862 as the highest year of record.

I also have a tracing prepared by Lynn Crandall, Idaho Falls, showing the annual flow into Great Salt Lake. Although this does not show 1862 as the highest year of record, it shows it as one of the highest, exceeded only by 1868, 1864, and 1907. The information from these two sources does seem to indicate that 1862 was a year of unusually high runoff throughout the entire intermountain area, thus confirming the statements of the early settlers along the Boise River. In fact, there is little doubt in my mind that the flood of 1862 was at least four times the amount of the flood of 1943 and probably much greater [100,000 second feet or greater].

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