

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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IDAHO IS DIFFERENT

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Whether compared with other Pacific Northwest states or with mountain or Great Basin neighbors, Idaho is different. Except for ocean beaches and rain forests, Idaho has much in common geographically with Oregon and Washington. But large industrial cities distinguish western Washington and Oregon from their interior sections that match Idaho very closely. Geographically similar, but politically and culturally diverse, Idaho reflects close association with Utah and Montana that make for differences from major western centers of population. Idaho's large mines, however, were managed quite differently from those of Montana, and Idaho's large Mormon population experienced a very different reception from that of their Utah brethren. Idaho and Wyoming have a decidedly different orientation and natural resource economy that sets them apart, and Nevada developed along distinctive lines that did not correspond to Idaho's experience.

Surrounded by states that had other cultural associations, Idaho emerged as a decidedly individualistic group of communities that overcame geographical and social obstacles to create a commonwealth of their own.

Investigators from a variety of academic disciplines often discover that when they examine Idaho data, their traditional interpretations fail to apply. Specialists in government sometimes wonder what Idaho's Democrats were doing in 1918, with a candidate for governor who was actually a Republican multi-millionaire trying to get his state to embark upon a Socialist farm program. Many Idaho Democrats, in fact, wondered about that in 1918. But back in 1896, Idaho's Republicans had

enthusiastically nominated William Jennings Bryan for president, rejecting William McKinley who actually was elected by Republicans from other states. Other examples of political independence and flexibility could be added as recently as 1980, when a net total of more than 60,000 voters were recorded for Republican Ronald Reagan for President and Democrat Frank Church for United States Senate. Not every state can boast of a series of such implausible combines.

Economists who explain frontier agricultural development as a process in which farmers gradually advance from a subsistence debtor operation to commercial marketing after they save enough investment capital to engage in large-scale production also notice that Idaho is different. In common with a number of mining territories, many Idaho farmers started off with high crop prices provided by nearby gold and silver camps. Then after expensive large-scale irrigation projects and farm expansion and equipment costs got them into debt, they wound up facing conditions typical of a frontier farm economy.

Because of a location along a line of contact between plains and basin cultures of later Utah, Wyoming, and Montana with Columbia plateau cultures north and west, Idaho has developed transitional patterns that exhibit traits from both of those regions. Ethnologists and sociologists often find that Idaho is different as a result of that situation. When major settlement of Idaho began as an eastward movement from Oregon and Washington, and a northward movement from California--rather than a traditional westward movement typical of most frontier expansion--Idaho's distinctive traditions continued. Life in Idaho has been generally similar to life in most western regions. But in many interesting ways, Idaho has always been different.

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