

# IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## REFERENCE SERIES

### HIGHWAY MARKER PROGRAM

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#### ABSTRACT

Idaho's state highway program to install interpretive historical markers commenced with a half dozen experimental signs in 1956. Responding to a proposal by W. Lloyd Adams of Rexburg, a series of attractive but inexpensive highway markers were authorized for roadside installation. Porter Ward, a State Department of Commerce and Development specialist, provided an interesting text for an initial Camas Prairie marker, and George Bowditch, a State Highway Department artist, designed an attractive, readable layout that has been employed for several hundred locations. Representing Highway Department staff interest in this new program, Pete Quarles developed six initial sites for immediate attention.

That fall, when a modern State Historical Society Museum and interpretive program was initiated, arrangements were made to have historical agency staff provide new sites and appropriate texts. Statutory recognition of this cooperative program followed with legislation, enacted early in 1957, that required State Historical Society approval for any text and format of any historical highway marker (whether part of this sign program or not) that might be installed in subsequent years. After more than thirty years, Idaho's highway marker program is being expanded rapidly, with renewed legislative interest expressed in 1987. Markers are installed in all parts of Idaho--mostly at locations designated by State Historical Society staff, but sometimes at sites requested by other agencies or individuals. Such suggestions are encouraged by State Historical Society staff. Because of its innovative features, Idaho's state highway department historical marker program received an American Association for State and Local History Award of Merit.

#### PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

Started in 1956 by Pete Quarles, a representative of one of Boise's earliest pioneer families, Idaho's standard highway markers use a design that George Bowditch developed according to sound principles of museum display. Highway markers ought to be regarded as essential features of a large outdoor museum. They interpret historic events and places in a context of state or

local history in most instances. At times they reflect national or international significance. They need to be of public interest to at least one or more identifiable audiences that might visit a vast outdoor museum that displays treasures of a regional or local heritage. Local residents form their primary patronage, and their greatest value derives from their neighborhood appeal. In some cases, they also serve travelers from distant areas. Many tourists from other regions will respond to local markers with little or no enthusiasm, but if marker texts emphasize interesting stories in something resembling a journalistic approach, they can create a welcome impression of whatever area they are designed to interpret.

Although several variations in format are available for Idaho's highway markers, none of them allow for any extended length. Each has a headline that normally can include up to three or four words. A lead paragraph of up to four lines incorporates another two dozen words or so. Then an additional paragraph of another sixty words or so--depending upon how many lines were assigned to its lead paragraph--presents more interpretive details or information. A state map indicates each sign's location, and pictures can be employed to clarify some varieties of historical explanation. Details that rely upon observers who have historical training to understand or appreciate them have to be omitted. Long, complex subjects cannot be explained adequately in such an exposition of local history. Each marker must be designed to interpret some manageable aspect of regional or local history that can be understood by passing travelers who might appreciate whatever information is provided.

A substantial degree of care and skill is essential to develop acceptable texts. Some (but by no means all) of Idaho's highway markers have been prepared to meet these essential specifications. Many need considerable revision. All of them are required to incorporate accurate detail: when errors are discovered, texts are immediately corrected or signs are replaced by new ones introducing different subjects. For example, several decades ago, some Harvard archaeologists excavated two varieties of extremely elderly dogs in Jaguar Cave at a continental divide location above Birch Creek. Those truly senior dogs, unmatched anywhere except by some subsequent discoveries of similar age in Britain and Turkey, romped about Jaguar Cave some ten thousand years ago. Then some cynic reanalyzed that archaeological evidence in 1990 and noticed that our Birch Creek dogs actually had come there about 4,500 years ago. That demoted them so far that our sign text scarcely could be salvaged. An entirely different marker about Joseph Cote, who discovered Birch Creek, had to be substituted in that emergency: a new edition of our highway marker texts was being printed just then, and since its design and layout had been completed, a blank spot hardly could be left when a marker suddenly had to be deleted. If we do any

more signs about dogs, we shall have to insist upon seeing their birth certificates. But for many local subjects, more than adequate documentation sometimes is unavailable.

### SUBJECTS

A substantial number of Idaho highway markers refer to specific events or localities, but many of them form parts of a series. Explorers such as Lewis and Clark, David Thompson, and some other fur traders each rate a number of signs. Sixteen Oregon and California Trail signs also constitute a coordinated series, although each marker carries a separate message. A set of Nez Perce campaign signs interprets another of Idaho's National Historic Trails. Those, in turn, form part of a larger sequence that identify major sites in Nez Perce National Historical Park. In a number of cases, Idaho highway markers have been regarded as National Park sites--a distinction rarely attained by current markers of any kind. Highway markers also interpret a number of National Historic Landmarks and State Parks.

Idaho's highway marker program incorporates contextual signs dealing with prehistory and geological history that involve special considerations. In 1956, only a limited amount of attention had been devoted to archaeological resources, but rapid expansion of interest in that field revolutionized that situation. Archaeologists have a special talent for controversy and dispute that historians can match only with difficulty. But they reconciled their dissension in Idaho to cooperate in our State Historical Society functions: since we had no archaeological program of our own, we served as a neutral agency through which university and federal cultural resource staffs could provide site protection and eventually gain a state archaeologist. Our responsibilities for engaging in that kind of assistance naturally led to an extensive set of highway markers interpreting regional prehistory in all parts of Idaho.

Although they deal with a much longer period of time (in some cases, billions of years), a substantial group of historical geology markers are incorporated into Idaho's highway sign system. Texts for geological markers are "non" technical, but are reviewed by competent geologists to ensure factual and interpretive integrity. These markers are particularly appropriate in locations featuring spectacular mountain scenery.

Traces of fantastic floods of only twelve to fourteen thousand years ago also provide an excellent series of subjects.

### COOPERATION AMONG AGENCIES

As devices to stimulate local interest in community history, Idaho's highway sign program has served a very useful purpose. (If tourists and other travelers occasionally benefit from those

interpretive services, those markers provide some additional value.) Practically all sites and subjects have been selected by State Historical Society staff--in this case by our agency historian--and all texts have been prepared as staff projects. H. J. Swinney devoted a great deal of effort to developing texts that would combine sound historical interpretation with a presentation that would command public interest. Formulation of such a museum display label usually required about a full day for two or three staff members who regularly engaged in that kind of enterprise. Highway Department fabricators could handle only one sign a month for many years; resorting to manual layout, they prepared silk screens that at least provided easy reproduction of replacement markers when worn-out signs had to be duplicated. When digital equipment, employed in recent years to put new markers into mass production, speeded up that process to allow for several signs a day, texts had to be supplied at high speed also. As a result, many historical societies, local governments, other local agencies, or with people interested in local history always has been emphasized. But site interpretation and text formulation always has been strictly a State Historical Society function.

Suggestions for markers must always be treated with respect, although they often have to be adapted to provide for suitable interpretive purposes. (Public submissions of material for texts rarely are appropriate for markers, any more than a donor's text for a museum object display label is likely to qualify for unaltered use.) Even if a good proposal comes in, space requirements for marker formats preclude use of almost any such material without conversion to allowable line lengths. Requests for markers can be satisfied by adaptation that usually can be achieved after a discussion of suitable possibilities: our Idaho experience has been very fortunate in that regard. Local pressures to provide inappropriate markers have been conspicuous for their absence. Requests for signs go to highway officials who may get blamed for problems: any agitation for improper marker material does not get transmitted to State Historical Society program participants, and practically no one can intimidate our highway men. (For reasons I cannot explain, we never have had highway women engaged in our program, but if we did, they would be just as impervious to false approaches to local history.) In 1990, for example, a strong local request came in simply to list some Gentile Valley nineteenth century pioneers on a marker. When I enquired if we could explain that those farmers were having to overcome armed resistance from a group of ranchers who objected to loss of their rangeland, that embellishment seemed satisfactory enough. We lacked space to enumerate names of farm families (or ranchers either, for that matter); we also were totally short of room to mention that ranch complaints against farm expansion there had a curious anti-Mormon aspect. Our markers simply cannot deal with extended reports of

complex subjects.

Aside from space limitations that are designed to thwart long, complex marker texts, problems of finding suitable turnouts for signs also restrict places and subjects that can be recognized. Highway safety considerations naturally affect our marker program, and actual locations can be determined solely by highway officials. Route changes sometimes have moved texts to places where they no longer apply. Our highway men can be quite carefree in relocating signs so that they lose their accuracy. But when text adjustments are required, they have been very accommodating. When local complaints have reached us concerning marker texts, our highway sign managers have provided revised signs to meet such inconvenient adjustments. Our historical agency policy always has featured efforts to satisfy local objections whether or not they appear well founded. While misinformation cannot be incorporated into markers, some kind of satisfactory agreement can normally be applied. Local reactions, in fact, can provide very useful textual material, as well as more effective explanation of events or sites that markers refer to. In any case, state agencies have an important obligation to avoid confrontation with local authorities or groups. Any impression that state agencies somehow exercise control over local governments and operate at a higher level of control must be dispelled. Provision for accurate, improved texts has to be made without creating suggestions of maintaining a superior level of government. In Idaho, more than in most states, federal agencies (United States Bureau of Reclamation, National Park Service, United States Forest Service, and Bureau of Land Management) frequently turn up as our local land holders. Unlike almost all local government agencies, they often have historical interpretation programs (complete with regulations more elaborate than ours) of their own. When these variant approaches collide at highway locations, awkward situations often arise. Our State Historical Society naturally exercises no control over their markers for locations away from highways, although our agency staff generally feel happier if their programs dispense accurate information. (We certainly have no authority over locally installed markers in nonhighway sites either, for that matter.) Fortunately, our federal agency officials invariably have shown indulgence in dealing with our state highway marker program, and have avoided developing any delusions of grandeur that might lead to unnecessary friction. In establishing relationships that can only be described as sensitive anyway, stimulation of any kind of resentment cannot become acceptable. Cooperation remains essential, and all features of an effective historical marker program have to incorporate devices and procedures for working together to achieve appropriate educational products.

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