

# IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## REFERENCE SERIES

### IDAHO STATE ADMISSION

Number 916

1989

National and territorial conditions that account for Idaho's state admission:

Two essential conditions in 1880-1890 had to be met to ensure any territory's successful application for state admission. They applied for more than a decade after 1876:

1. In Congress, both houses had to be either Republican or Democratic, during a presidential administration under that same political control.
2. Only territories likely to support a congressional majority had much hope of recognition as candidates for admission.

Railroad construction had brought substantial populations to a broad western area, so that by 1890 a traditional census frontier line no longer could be identified. Congressional refusal to admit new states after 1876 hardly could have been continued much longer, but a solid tier of six northwestern states could not have gained approval from a politically divided national government as late as 1890. A political compromise might have allowed four states rather than six, with two Republican (Dakota and Washington) territories balancing two Democratic (Montana and New Mexico) commonwealths. That same solution might have resulted from a complete Democratic national control after 1888, because Dakota's claim hardly could have been deferred much longer. But Grover Cleveland's success in gaining a popular majority while being denied reelection as president resulted in an exceedingly narrow Republican margin of congressional control. Republicans in Congress, as a result, had to get six new Republican western states admitted as quickly as possible so that they could enlarge their majority enough to govern effectively. To do that, they had to hope to convert Democratic Montana into a Republican state--a venture that succeeded only marginally, but they got by in an awkwardly contested election. Even if they had lost in Montana, they obtained two additional new Republican states that they could not have included in a safely Republican group without Montana.

Democratic reluctance to admit Republican territories went

back to their misadventure with Colorado in 1876. Colorado, like many places, had strayed from its Republican preference in 1874, and House Democrats took an unfortunate, and unsuccessful, risk of retaining control there in 1876 when they agreed to a state admission proposal that year. As a result, Samuel J. Tilden lost his otherwise certain opportunity to become president; without Colorado's vote, Republicans supporting R. B. Hayes could not have contested Tilden's election. Except for 1880, a divided Congress confronted every president until after 1888. Republican Dakota lost its chance in 1882 when conservative senators complained that Yankton County had repudiated some railroad bonds, and Republican Washington-North Idaho (proposing to come in as a single state) ran into effective Boise opposition. A Democratic congressional blockade stalled admission of Dakota and Washington until 1889, when their last opportunity to delay Republican territories came to an end.

Idaho's transition from traditional Democratic control came just in time to qualify for admission as a Republican state in 1890. This shift was achieved by an election system that did not allow a large segment of Democrats to participate. Disfranchised because they had voted almost unanimously Democratic, Idaho's Mormons were identified in election statutes as having belonged to an organization that prior to 1888 had advocated plural, patriarchal, or celestial marriage. That doctrine gave radical anti-Mormons a device for Idaho politicians (who otherwise did not worry about marriage customs) to exclude their opponents from voting. Mormon voting had been a complex issue for years, but their exclusion for a decade after 1884 had an incidental effect of transforming Idaho into a Republican territory that President Benjamin Harrison and a Republican Congress were eager--over unanimous congressional Democratic opposition--to admit as a state in 1890. Idaho responded that year with a Republican congressional delegation so essential to national party needs, but in 1892, voted against Benjamin Harrison for reelection as president--preferring to replace him with a Populist candidate. Idaho's Republican era lasted barely long enough to secure state admission.