

# IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## REFERENCE SERIES

### HISTORIC SITES RELATED TO SNAKE RIVER FINE GOLD MINES

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Following an unpromising initial discovery at Fort Boise in 1855 and some modest downstream beginnings shortly after 1860, a large number of interesting Snake River fine gold placers gained wide attention when a decidedly low-water year made systematic prospecting possible in 1869. By 1870, miners noticed that they could locate prospects in a great many places. A few claims even turned out to be profitable. Their problem arose in finding practical methods and devices for handling large volumes of sand and gravel and for recovering gold too fine for anyone to identify. By 1880 they had microscopes that enabled them to determine that 500 particles of gold had to be collected to equal a penny in value. Consider that a ten-dollar gold piece was about as large as a dime and that up to a half-million particles of fine gold had to be assembled to provide that amount, they realized that they faced a difficult situation. Many years later, mining engineers with superior equipment verified that still finer particles of Snake River gold ran 2000 to a penny (computed at pre-1934 values), so that two million would be required for a ten-dollar gold piece. Idaho's miners could have paid off their nation's Civil War debt with Snake River fine gold if they had found an adequate recovery process, and they tried about every invention that they could think of. They located enough workable placers with larger as well as finer bits of gold that produced about two million dollars' worth (at \$20.67 an ounce) or some four hundred million at more recent prices. A substantial number of sites along Snake River still provide surface evidence of gold mining that continued for more than a century. These are conspicuous in at least a dozen southern Idaho counties, and a number of these sites merit National Register recognition.

by Merle W. Wells

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