

# IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## REFERENCE SERIES

### CENTENNIAL OF IDAHO'S ADMISSION TO STATEHOOD

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Idaho's admission as a state in 1890 was notable for connecting a small group of four Pacific coast states with their thirty-eight eastern counterparts. A transcontinental band of states finally emerged at a time when a western frontier line of settlement no longer could be marked on 1890 census maps, and perceptive observers noticed that an important phase in United States history had come to an end.<sup>1</sup> Idaho's admission movement also had a special significance in preserving an odd Pacific Northwest state boundary arrangement that has persisted for a century or more in spite of having obvious defects that have been a subject for frequent complaint. An incidental result of Idaho's unsatisfactory boundary definition, of special interest to historians and ethnographers, is development of a commonwealth that continues to reflect prehistoric patterns of relationships among plateau, basin, mountain, and plains cultures. As a Pacific Northwest state with a northern Rockies orientation as well, Idaho reflects interests of all six northwestern states of 1889 and 1890 and unifies their common history.<sup>2</sup> Idaho's centennial observance should feature that heritage.

Most of Idaho's contribution to northwestern state admission history derives from congressional errors in defining boundaries for Oregon and Washington. Congress, however, simply responded to local requests offered at a time when western geography was understood imperfectly at best and when future settlement patterns could not be anticipated for a decade, let alone for enough years to develop territories into states. Problems in identifying and demarcating future western commonwealths plagued most Pacific states: California, Nevada, Arizona, Colorado, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, and western Wyoming all wound up with serious errors in design that injured local areas.<sup>3</sup> Major efforts at rectification were limited to only a few more glaring instances. Idaho came very close to obtaining a major boundary correction, but state admission needs prevailed over rational boundary selection.

Oregon and Washington started off with state admission plans that ruined almost any suitable prospect for Idaho. A decade before Idaho was established, Oregon was split on an east-west line that created Washington as a lower Columbia and Puget Sound community. From that time on, neither Oregon nor Washington could attain any reasonable size without expanding into

uninhabited deserts farther east. Such a move met opposition in eastern Oregon where The Dalles preferred a separate territorial identity of its own prior to 1860. But Willamette Valley and Puget Sound promoters dissented. Displaying a much clearer, more adequate recognition of Pacific Northwest regionalism than some of their twentieth-century successors have shown, they knew that their domain included more than a narrow coastal strip. Oregon's constitutional convention might have retained what now is western Wyoming in their grand statehood project if they thought Congress would approve that ambitious a plan.<sup>4</sup> But they concluded that Oregon west of Snake River Canyon would be all that they would be allowed to absorb.

After 1860, Washington had a somewhat different problem. Idaho's gold rush attracted thousands of people to mines then in Washington. This shift suddenly placed most of Washington's population in an area east of Oregon's state boundary. In order to prevent Walla Walla from becoming territorial capital, Olympia agents managed in 1863 to exclude Idaho's mines from their domain in 1863. For a short time when Idaho City exceeded Portland in population, and when Boise surpassed Seattle, Pacific coast leaders showed a little more respect for Walla Walla's commerce and Idaho's miners. But after 1869 Olympia partisans were willing to accept North Idaho back into Washington and to rectify their eastern boundary arrangement.<sup>5</sup>

Idaho and Montana had boundary problems also. All of later Montana, along with practically all of Wyoming, was originally incorporated into Idaho. Along with vast uninhabited eastern plains, Idaho included three mining regions separated by nearly impassible mountain barriers. One of them became Montana in 1864.<sup>6</sup> Within Idaho's boundaries, no satisfactory arrangement could be made for both mining regions that remained. So they were left together in a territory disturbed by sectional turmoil from 1864 on past state admission in 1890. Efforts to adjust Washington and Montana boundaries were rejected along with occasional proposals to rearrange Oregon's state line.<sup>7</sup> Oregon showed only limited enthusiasm for participating in massive boundary reform,<sup>8</sup> and without Oregon's contribution of a large bloc of territory, no readjustment appropriate for all sections could be identified. So southern Idaho finally insisted upon state admission without releasing any territory to Montana or Washington.

In arranging for Idaho's 1990 centennial celebration, state officials began to follow a system reminiscent of that which achieved state admission a century ago. In both instances, partisan differences were deliberately set aside and arrangements were made by governor's proclamations in an effective, yet quiet manner. As an assurance of continued bipartisan planning, both candidates for governor in 1986 are active centennial commission members, along with all surviving governors from previous terms.

And in an appropriate recognition of Idaho's closely

interrelated state admission movement with those of neighboring Washington, Montana, and Wyoming, an Idaho State Historical Society resolution of April 2, 1982, called for an Idaho state centennial commission. Coordinated planning for all six northwestern state admission observances in 1989 and 1990 was anticipated. An independent, but identical suggestion from Washington for coordination of state centennial activities emphasized interstate cooperation even more. Washington's legislature had responded to a 1979 Centennial Organizing Committee's request, and to a 1980 Senate resolution, by creating a centennial commission in 1981. Washington's committee then approached Idaho and other northwestern states to initiate joint planning programs well in advance of 1989. Governor John Evans issued an executive order on state admission day--July 3, 1982--establishing an Idaho State Centennial Commission, but so many applicants for membership had to be considered that appointments were not completed until May 17, 1985.

Unlike Dakota, Washington, and Montana, Idaho had to overcome serious problems that made state admission a dubious prospect as late as 1884, when both political parties endorsed an interesting scheme to divide Idaho in such a way that four northern counties would gain statehood as part of Washington while ten southern counties would linger indefinitely as a territory. Practically everyone in Idaho voted for congressional candidates committed to gaining approval for such a plan, but national congressional election results that year guaranteed that Washington and North Idaho had no chance for admission as a single state until after 1886. With a Republican Senate and a Democratic House of Representatives, no western territory could gain state admission. Ever since an incautious Democratic Congress had lost a presidential election by admitting Colorado as a Republican territory in 1876, neither party was reckless enough to allow that kind of disaster to happen again. All western territories had to wait until a united Congress could agree to admit some of them. Another divided Congress chosen in 1886 deferred all state admission plans another two years.<sup>9</sup> As a consequence of that delay, Dakota managed to split into two states, while Idaho survived as an undivided commonwealth.

A sectionally divided state that had to reconcile geographical separatism in 1890, Idaho went through a difficult period of adjustment. North and south Idaho had nearly identical economies (mining, farming and stock raising, and forestry) unconnected by transportation and distribution facilities. A central Idaho mountain and canyon barrier blocked communication between areas that otherwise might have developed compatible interests. In contrast, Oregon and Washington had a Cascades Mountain barrier that separated sections with different economic interests, but that did not interrupt communication so severely.

North Idaho and eastern Washington formed an economic unit dominated by Spokane. Both areas were minority sections in their

respective states, and both had occasional ambitions to emerge as a separate state that could be enlarged by acquisition of western Montana. But in 1888, southern Idaho elements had prevailed in their insistence upon preserving an unnatural political boundary between Idaho and Washington.<sup>10</sup> Idaho's government had to accommodate permanently to a difficult geography that assembled representatives of peoples who otherwise had little or no contact with each other. In 1938--after 48 years of statehood--they managed to complete a paved highway to connect both sections. But that route was noted mostly as an engineering achievement that offered spectacular scenery and a series of unforgettable grades, one of them with sharp curves and a dozen switchbacks totaling 37 complete circles. This spiral finally was supplanted by a modern grade in 1975. North Idaho traffic still tended to wander through Washington and Oregon, or else through Montana, to reach southern Idaho destinations. But most northern travelers had no incentive to go to southern Idaho at all. Those who did entered a mountain and desert country quite different from their forests and prairies. That contrast, however, was quite typical of Pacific Northwest states.

In common with a number of western states, Idaho went through some decidedly odd episodes during an era of economic distress and political upheaval after 1890. All six new western states justified their admission by voting Republican in 1890, but Idaho diverged abruptly from that allegiance in 1892. Although Grover Cleveland received a second term as president in 1892, he got only two popular votes in Idaho that year. (That startling index of his Idaho popularity was achieved by his campaign managers who preferred to deny electoral votes to Benjamin Harrison by having silver states like Idaho vote Populist.) Carried away with that kind of strategy after their state voted for General James B. Weaver for president in 1892, Idaho's Republicans decided to head their ticket with William Jennings Bryan for president in 1896. Most other Republican states somehow preferred William McKinley that year, and an ineffective Idaho Republican minority left their party to vote for McKinley, who made out better elsewhere than he did in Idaho.

With Democratic and Populist support as well, Bryan gained more than 3/4 of Idaho's popular vote.<sup>11</sup> This kind of political aberration continued until Idaho's twentieth-century voters started a consistent new habit of supporting nationally successful presidential candidates. National conformity lasted with no interruption until 1960; from that time on, Idaho has voted in presidential elections as a western state with no exception. (That recent political alignment has been typical of most western states.) But ever since 1944, state government has remained insulated from all but exceptional national trends.<sup>12</sup>

Idaho's remarkable shift from nineteenth-century flexibility and oddity to twentieth-century correlation with national and western trends came abruptly after 1900. But that adjustment did

not represent a complete break with a tradition of independence nor preclude wild future partisan realignments. Idaho's unorthodox system continued to operate for another two generations or more, but with a different set of results in presidential elections. During a century of turmoil and confusion over issues largely beyond state control, Idaho managed to develop from a collection of diverse sections and subregions into a community that provided interesting (and somewhat random) sampling of northwestern plateau, mountain, plains, and Great Basin elements. With a grand array of next to insoluble economic and cultural problems to distract attention from ordinary sectional issues, Idaho emerged as a state worthy of historical and ethnological investigation.<sup>13</sup>

Centennial observances traditionally encourage historical analysis to establish continuity between eras of local or regional development. In Idaho's case, a great deal of concentration upon broad aspects of state history is appropriate.

No general state history is available. (A preliminary analysis, non-scholarly and only partially complete, has been published to provide context for historic preservation planning, but that is already a decade out of date.)<sup>14</sup> No standard academic treatment has been attempted, although an effort to remedy that deficiency is underway. A number of special subjects have been handled very well. Important aspects of Coeur d'Alene mining history--a topic of international significance--have attracted a variety of scholars, and a number of reputable volumes have resulted.<sup>15</sup> Southern Idaho irrigation has led to a few project histories of importance. Forest history is making progress, and banking and transportation subjects have not been neglected in Idaho.<sup>16</sup> Populist, progressive, and New Deal eras of Idaho History are covered by a variety of investigations,<sup>17</sup> and a few important political leaders have been favored with reliable biographies. Almost all of them deal with William E. Borah, although governor C. Ben Ross and Senator Glen Taylor are subjects of more recent accounts.<sup>18</sup> A large number of social and cultural subjects have been neglected, and organized State Historical Society centennial planning will rectify these omissions.

As a Northwest cross section that provides or controls major routes of transportation and communication, Idaho always has offered access from plains and intermountain communities to Pacific Northwest ocean ports. Cultural interchange has moved traditionally along these same routes for thousands of years. Rather than to offer some kind of unidentified (and perhaps unidentifiable) demarcation between internal cultural areas of a broad western region, Idaho brings them together. In addition Idaho's state boundary problems with Washington and Montana have involved all three states in joint efforts to discover solutions and to develop enterprises that led to identical trends in their respective state histories. Idaho consequently is in a superior position to help provide a regional history to bring all six

northwestern states into a coordinated centennial observance.

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Frederick Jackson Turner, in his celebrated 1893 American Historical Association presentation, was not alone in expressing interest in a national transition to a post-frontier development in United States history. Settlers in all six new northwestern states took great pride in advancing past their frontier era of territorial government.

<sup>2</sup>Charles Peterson of Utah State University, concerned with preparation for Utah's admission centennial in 1996, and with coordination of Utah's observance with that of other western states, has stressed Utah's interest in a still broader context for identifying common historical aspects of territories admitted during that era. Idaho and Wyoming, in history as well as geography, connect Utah to this six-state group.

<sup>3</sup>California has a detached northeastern section that wanted to organize as part of Nevada when Nevada broke out of Utah; Nevada's western boundary, aside from northeastern California's problem, is a particularly striking example of improper definition; Arizona wound up with a disconnected northwestern corner that ought to have been assigned to Utah; Colorado is divided by a central mountain range and combines divergent mountain and plains regions; Oregon and Washington retained large desert and farming sections unhappy with their west coast state connection; Montana includes a large plains area incompatible with its western mountain mining origins; Wyoming's upper Snake region was intended to remain part of Idaho, where it should have been assigned; transfer of Idaho and Wyoming Bear River segments to Utah also is appropriate.

<sup>4</sup>Charles H. Carey, The Oregon Constitution and Proceedings and Debates of the Constitutional Convention of 1857 (Salem, 1926), 5-56, 147-148; Carey, A General History of Oregon (Portland, 1936), 490-520. Congressional rejection of a Cascades state boundary for Oregon preceded Senate adoption, February 21, 1857, of a Snake River boundary that finally was utilized.

<sup>5</sup>After an 1866-67 scheme to establish Columbia territory (eastern Washington, northern Idaho, and western Montana) failed, and after North Idaho's population no longer threatened Puget Sound's control of Washington, North Idaho joined in Washington's state admission movement with Olympia support. Puget Sound leaders remained dubious about accepting North Idaho in an 1869 admission proposal, but relented by 1874. North Idaho participated in Walla Walla's constitutional convention of 1878 and was included in all Washington admission plans for a decade.

<sup>6</sup>Idaho's original legislature, with approval of representatives from later Montana, requested an Idaho-Montana continental divide boundary, except for an area including Butte. But Montana's promoters were more avaricious and ignored that

agreement when dealing with Congress in 1864.

<sup>7</sup>North Idaho and eastern Washington continued to promote Columbia territory after Montana resistance ruined their original proposal in 1866. When they could not gain Puget Sound support for dividing Washington, both sections joined in endorsing return of North Idaho to Washington.

<sup>8</sup>Oregon aspired to get Walla Walla back from Washington for about two decades after 1857, but on one occasion, some Willamette Valley interest was raised in a proposal to exchange eastern Oregon for western Washington--a geographically superior project.

<sup>9</sup>Frederic L. Paxson, "The Admission of the 'Omnibus' States, 1889-90." Proceedings of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin (1911), 59:77-96.

<sup>10</sup>Southern Idaho determination to defeat North Idaho's efforts to achieve boundary reform after 1886 came partly from objections to being combined with Nevada. Such a change would have created a still more outlandish geographical monstrosity than Idaho already was. If southern Idaho had been able to avoid Nevada's invitation for joint statehood in 1888 (after North Idaho had joined Washington), a long continuation of Idaho's territorial period was anticipated. If southern Idaho had not resisted Nevada's aspirations to gain a territorial partner in 1888, that section would have gained statehood ahead of Dakota, Montana, and Washington-North Idaho--a remarkable triumph that had not been anticipated when southern Idaho endorsement for territorial division had been voted in 1882 and 1884. And a majority of Nevada's population would have been in counties acquired from southern Idaho--both in 1888 and for almost a century since that time. Nevada caught up with northern Idaho shortly before 1980.

<sup>11</sup>William Joseph Gaboury, "Dissension in the Rockies: A History of Idaho Populism" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Idaho, 1966), 160-219; Claudius O. Johnson, "The Story of Silver Politics in Idaho, 1892-1902," Pacific Northwest Quarterly (July 1902), 33:283.

<sup>12</sup>In 1946 Idaho shifted from two-year to four-year terms for state officials. Elected in non-presidential years, they became largely independent of national presidential election trends.

<sup>13</sup>Cultural resource specialists in Idaho's sections and subregions are inclined to reflect their own area's prehistoric orientation, so that a study of archaeological investigators and their survey approaches can be substituted for examination of their subject matter in an effort to establish cultural interaction among Idaho's diverse areas.

<sup>14</sup>Idaho: An Illustrated History (Boise: Idaho State Historical Society, 1976), 250 pp. Sales of this publication provided revenue for establishing a substantial revolving fund for additional volumes in Idaho history.

<sup>15</sup>Three Coeur d'Alene mines volumes by John T. Fahey include

Inland Empire: D. C. Corbin and Spokane (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965); The Ballyhoo Bonanza: Charles Sweeny and the Idaho Mines, (1971); and The Days of the Hercules (Moscow: University Press of Idaho, 1978). Richard G. Magnuson, Coeur d'Alene Diary: The First Ten Years of Hardrock Mining in North Idaho (Portland: Metropolitan Press, 1968).

<sup>16</sup>Forest history is summarized in Ralph W. Hidy, Frank E. Hill, and Allan Nevins, Timber and Men: The Weyerhaeuser Story (New York: MacMillan, 1963), 248-272, 512-550. Banking volumes include G. W. Barrett, Idaho Banking 1863-1967 (Boise: Boise State University Press, 1976), and J. Lynn Driscoll, Western Banker (Boise: Syms York, 1974); Eloise H. Anderson, Frontier Bankers: A History of The Idaho First National Bank (Boise: Idaho First National Bank, 1981). Transportation volumes include Betty M. and Brigham D. Madsen, North to Montana: Jehus, Bullwhackers, and Mule Skinners on the Montana Trail (Salt Lake: University of Utah Press, 1980), which covers an Idaho road; M. D. Beal, Intermountain Railroads: Standard and Narrow Gauge (Caldwell: Caxton, 1962); and Robert G. Athearn, Union Pacific Country (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1971).

<sup>17</sup>Most of these studies appear in academic journals: those prior to 1979 are noted in Richard W. Etulain and Merwin Swanson, Idaho History: A Bibliography (Pocatello: Idaho State University Press, 1979).

<sup>18</sup>Published biographies of Borah include Claudius O. Johnson, Borah of Idaho (New York, 1936; reprint edition: Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1967) Marian C. McKenna, Borah (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1961); Robert J. Maddox, William E. Borah and American Foreign Policy (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970); John Chalmers Vinson, William E. Borah and the Outlawry of War (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1957); and LeRoy Ashby, The Spearless Leader: Senator Borah and the Progressive Movement in the 1920's (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972). Michael P. Malone, C. Ben Ross and the New Deal in Idaho (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1970) and F. Ross Peterson, Prophet Without Honor: Glen H. Taylor and the Fight for American Liberalism (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1974) cover more recent Idaho history. Leroy Ashby now is working on Frank Church's career.