

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

IDAHO'S HISTORIC PRESERVATION PROGRAM, 1966-1986

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Although some interest in historic preservation materialized in Idaho during frontier times, and serious efforts began at least eighty years ago, nothing like a successful program employing more recent standards preceded a campaign in 1960 that responded to a federal agency menace to a significant Boise building. Our United States Assay Office, used for four decades as a United States Forest Service headquarters, needed protection when federal officials contemplated a move to a larger structure.

John Hussey's thorough investigation and evaluation led to recognition as a National Historic Landmark, a determination adequate to protect it from General Services Administration's threats from then on. After donation to our State Historical Society in 1972, it became our Idaho State Historic Preservation Office headquarters. Since we had agreed to accept it a decade earlier, pending Forest Service removal, we had experience in federal preservation compliance programs a few years in advance of additional historic preservation legislation in 1966. Prior to 1966, Idaho had eight National Historic Landmarks--one of them for a building with a significance that went back only fourteen years--so a considerable range in time was represented for a recently settled state. With communities barely older than those of Montana and Wyoming, Idaho forms part of a new frontier occupied after 1860.

When information concerning congressional enactment of historic preservation legislation came out at an American Association for State and Local History convention at Atlanta in 1966, Idaho was ready to act immediately. Unlike large and powerful states, small (in population, not area) commonwealths have governors and congressional delegations that can provide direct access to agency staffs--large or small. (I have known every Idaho governor personally for forty years, along with at least four others who served before that. I have known most of our United States senators and congressional representatives as well--and so have a number of other Idaho State Historical agency staff members. In a state like California, that kind of contact remains unlikely.) Prepared for a situation in which Governor Robert E. Smylie would receive an invitation to designate a state historic preservation office, we arranged to have him respond to that National Park Service solicitation immediately. Then--in mid-December 1966--we waited to see how our national program

would be set up. Two months later, we learned that National Park Service officials did not bother to examine correspondence they received from state governors. (I found this out when my friend Bill Beckert--State Parks director--asked me how to respond to a request that Smylie's successor, Governor Don Samuelson, had received for a state historic preservation liaison assignment. The enquiry had been referred to State Parks management because it had come from a National Park Service source.) So I told Bill that we already were given that responsibility, and to have Governor Samuelson simply refer to that existing arrangement. (Fortunately Don Samuelson, while a state senator, had been very much interested in our program. Like all Idaho governors of my time, he has been a firm supporter of our agency.) What we found out, though, was that federal funding to support state participation in a new, important federal historic preservation program was unavailable until 1969. Our initial federal appropriation was too small to allow us to begin to do anything beyond attend a 1968 Western regional conference at Asilomar, where we learned how our program was designed to operate.

In Idaho, our historical agency responsibilities so greatly exceeded our fiscal resources that I had to respond that, pending funding support, we should have to defer participation in an elaborate program. (I have been interested in historic preservation for more than a half-century, so no one needed to convince me that we ought to assume such obligations. But with a state archives, historical museum, library, publication, and a group of related functions, we lacked staff to embark upon additional functions.) So we had to wait until a regional meeting in Olympia in June 1970 to learn that we had several weeks in which to submit an elegant state historic preservation plan in order to receive a \$20,000 grant to activate our program to prepare such a plan. Altogether we had to spend about two weeks assembling historical summaries, sites inventories, and other materials required for us to proceed. Then we had to spend more than a year devising a program that would provide matching contributions for federal grants. Our solutions were about as innovative as those of any state--and far more than most. We appreciated a great deal of help we received from National Park Service staff in handling that and other aspects of our program.

We always have benefited from excellent National Park Service staff support in developing our historic preservation program. Ernest Connally, Bill Murtaugh, Jerry Rogers, Carol Shull, Steve Newman, and a host of others have been more than considerate in helping us overcome unusual difficulties in program development even though they had all kinds of other duties to absorb their attention. I also must mention that because of his personal connections with Idaho, Ray Luce provided us with extensive, crucial service in more than one highly dangerous Advisory Council compliance action. Ray went far beyond his standard responsibilities to get us past some

outlandish litigation that we did not initiate, but which erupted out of our program.

We also could rely upon Advisory Council members and staff to respond to our needs during compliance emergencies. An entire national Advisory Council meeting assembled during a North Idaho mountain snowstorm one February in Wallace to deal with a truly extraordinary compliance situation there--where I managed to take Fred Williamson on his only tour to Montana, a trip of about forty minutes. Our highwaymen showed little enthusiasm for polite Advisory Council advice, but in 1981, Pat Vaughan (Governor John Evans' administrative manager) finally volunteered to straighten out that situation for us. His success showed that high state officials sometimes can operate more effectively, even in dealing with federal compliance issues, than anyone else can.

While Idaho has a great abundance of archaeological resources and spectacular sites for discovery by explorers like Lewis and Clark, along with some exceptional engineering sites, most of our architectural and related cultural resources do not compare very favorably with those of many other states. We found, though, that National Register specialists encouraged us just as much as they did far older, wealthier states. They insisted that we recognize our cultural resource assets and evaluate them in their local context by local standards. Even if other areas had far more brilliant architectural examples, we ought not to neglect ours. Their attitude assisted our program greatly.

In return, we managed to contribute some important advances in national and regional program development. For several years, certain federal agencies demonstrated little or no awareness of, or enthusiasm for, their historic preservation responsibilities.

Through a contested bit of road right-of-way litigation in Burgdorf (an early central Idaho resort) we managed to convince United States Forest Service officials--and an uninformed United States attorney--that they did not even have a road project until they had completed Advisory Council compliance procedures. Their proposed project simply was dumped and their road deferred for some years. But out of that fiasco came a national conference in Ogden, at which appropriate Forest Service officials learned what their duties were. Moreover, they have been very cooperative ever since, at least in Idaho. Actually, though, our state historic preservation policy has been to assist officials and agencies in preservation compliance, rather than to create obstacles. Our attitude has been to help everyone in a way that results in successful preservation. Rather than get into substantial procedural delays, most federal officials prefer to adopt solutions that do not affect properties eligible for National Register recognition.

Other substantial regional advances in preservation compliance came in cases where federal weatherization grants for energy conservation were modified to protect National Register

properties in Pocatello, and where Nuclear Reactor administrators learned of interest in preserving significant elements associated with a National Historic Landmark. In that case, where \$400,000 was invested in preserving two nuclear aeroplane motors, respect for Smithsonian Institution specialists accomplished more than anything else contributed.

Because of our historic preservation agency's participation in non-threatening archaeological programs, I wound up for a time presiding initially over our national conference archaeology committee. Our important contributions to archaeological matters, though, has come from our unusually talented archaeological staff--primarily Peter Schmidt, Tom Green, and Ruth Ann Knudsen. Ruth Ann participated in a major way in developing some 1980 amendments to our National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. In administrative and congressional matters, two of my old Idaho friends--Cece Andrus and Jim McClure--have had an impact upon Interior Department programs. Both have been more than ordinarily interested in historic preservation. Six years after we had gone to some effort to introduce Cece Andrus' governor's office staff to National Park Service National Register state programs, they wound up handling those problems federally. Jim McClure's historic preservation employment program turned out to represent only one of a number of innovations he set up while managing Interior Department oversight and appropriations while presiding over relevant Senate committee operations.

Idaho's state historic preservation program--still operating from a National Historic Landmark building rehabilitated according to Interior Department preservation standards--has come a long way from its modest beginnings more than two decades ago.

In a number of significant aspects, particularly in relation to Idaho Indian tribal councils, it is continuing to contribute to improved preservation procedures. Scarcely any of these gains could have been realized without our National Historic Preservation Act of 1966.

Merle Wells
September 22, 1991

DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF IDAHO'S EARLY STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION PROGRAM

Almost no state or federal funds were available for any National Park Service cooperative program in mid-December, 1966, when Governor Robert E. Smylie designated Idaho's State Historical Society to operate what emerged as a state historic preservation office. Many of our responsibilities as a state government agency had to be assigned to volunteers: Idaho's

state archives, for example, had been initiated and developed as a State Historical Society function undertaken strictly by unpaid volunteers. Such an approach conformed to more than a century-old Idaho tradition. Most or all of Idaho's early government had been provided at times by unpaid volunteers, and a century ago when a college finally was opened in order to offer an opportunity for higher education in Idaho, its faculty consisted entirely of volunteers who, fortunately, possessed exceptional talent. Two of its original faculty members went on to become state governors, while another became a supreme court chief justice. Many similar examples could be cited. Within several years, we developed an elaborate financial system for employing volunteer contributions, state funds, and federal grants to maintain our state historic preservation program.

We also had an historic preservation system designed to avoid opposition that afflicted a large number of Idaho's federal programs. Both in dealing with Advisory Council compliance requirements and with contemporary preservation approaches, we have concentrated upon assisting applicants and agencies to operate properly, rather than to act as obstacles to federal projects.

In a state where our earliest venture in architectural preservation, shortly after 1910, had consisted of replacement of a decidedly significant old landmark--Packer John's Cabin--with a new cabin of a different design useful for hunters and fishermen, and finally, after their replacement caught fire, with still another cabin with another different design, Interior Department standards seemed a little strange. But we introduced them anyway, and through our federal grants and compliance programs, have managed to gain acceptance for modern preservation practices.

We certainly have had our share of tumult and litigation, but have managed to preserve our staff and program for more than two decades during which we had considerable impact upon some national federal agency operations that required attention to historic preservation regulations and planning. In all our wilder controversies, we managed to escape from having any of our staff thrown out. Our good fortune to have a series of four helpful and supportive governors accounts for our preservation program's survival.