

# IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## REFERENCE SERIES

### JOHN SKILLERN'S RANCH

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#### SIGNIFICANCE

The Skillern house represents an early example of the Rustic style summer residence. Though based on the romantic image of the pioneer cabin, it differs in plan and detail from traditional folk cabins. The design of the cabin is attributed to Mrs. John Skillern. She, in turn, credited the influence of the log hotel at Yellowstone Park, built in 1904. Of course, the cabin is a minute reflection of the massive Old Faithful Inn, but the high pitched roof and the lateral front eaved porch do bear a resemblance to it. The porch provided a suitable setting in the mountain environment for social occasions and a protected refuge for reflecting on nature. On the inside, the building continued the Rustic ideal with the simple detailing of pole railings for the two loft sleeping areas. Other features representative of the Rustic style include horizontal log construction, a steep roof pitch, the fieldstone chimney, cedar shingles, exposed logs on the interior walls, and the open plan with lofts.

The Skillern house is historically significant for its association with the Idaho sheep industry. An important element in the development of the sheep-raising industry of the western United States was the summer grazing allotments leased on government land: the meadows and open range of the high mountains, accessible only in the summer. Sheep ranchers wintered their stock in the warmer low valleys, where food was supplied to the animals and a close watch could be kept during the early spring lambing period. After the adult sheep were sheared in the late spring, large trail drives were undertaken to move the sheep onto the leased mountain land for summer grazing.

During the fall, the herd was reassembled, a portion sold to the livestock market, and the rest trailed back to winter quarters.

John Skillern entered the sheep business in 1901 and within ten years had developed a herd of 16,000 and established an allotment of 40,000 acres on government land in south-central Idaho. During the summer grazing months, sheep wagons and tents were used as headquarters, while Basque shepherders from Spain were employed to take small bands across the allotment and return them in the fall. The headquarters camp was the basis of supply pack trains and field organization. By the end of World War I,

the Seven H-L Sheep Company of John Skillern had grown upwards of 80-90,000 head of sheep. The Skillern house was built in 1921-1922 as a small headquarters cabin on the southern edge of the allotment land across Big Smokey Creek from a U.S. Forest Service station. Here a better organization and supply headquarters was established. Skillern could close his residence in Boise and move his family into the mountains for the summer season. Amidst the work of the ranching operation, entertainment of friends and visiting businessmen grew rapidly with the newly constructed cabin. Coming in by car from the town of Fairfield, twenty-five miles to the south, representatives from Chicago, Omaha, and the West Coast could discuss business transactions in a relaxed atmosphere while being provided with comfortable lodging.

A combination of the Depression and allotment reduction began the demise of the Skillern sheep operation. By 1936, the Forest Service had reduced the allotment to only enough land to handle 5,000 animals. In 1940, the Skillern family began negotiations to sell the cabin and allotment rights. The cabin was purchased by the father of the current owner. The sale was the end of one of the largest sheep ranching operations in Idaho.

#### **PHYSICAL APPEARANCE**

The Skillern house is a simple one-and-one-half-story log building with a plain gable roof. The house sits in the expansive, rolling valley floor of a mountain meadow in south central Idaho. Originally a single-room structure, the building has a main section formed by a rectangular crib, and covered by a gable roof, square in proportions, providing a large porch under the eaves and across half the lateral front of the structure. The logs are locally cut lodgepole pine with simple lap notching, sitting on a stone pier foundation. Subsequent attempts to reduce sill-log decay by the addition of concrete have covered portions of the foundation. The logs of the main crib body are chinked with split poles and covered with a daubing of lime, sand, and either well-chopped straw or manure.

The large roof is framed of 2" x 6" rough-cut milled lumber, spaced 30" off center at a 1:1 pitch. A dimensional wall plate is notched and nailed into the top log for bearing. Log poles form the bottom chord of the truss, acting as ceiling joists for a loft space inside the crib and creating the porch ceiling across the front of the building. In the porch section, upright logs provide bearing for a plat and the log joists. Rafters have a 1" x 8" collar beam and dwarf pole studs for additional support. The gable ends of the roof are covered with vertical board and batten. Rough cut 1" x 2" boards were used for sheathing over the rafters. These are covered with split cedar shakes for the roof surface.

The interior of the crib is a single room with a central atrium space. There is access to floored sleeping lofts at each

end of the atrium. Small log poles are used for loft railing. A stone chimney, located at the north gable end, was installed the year following construction of the cabin.

There are a pair of single-pane hinged windows, symmetrically located on the north elevation. A single nonoperable, nine-pane window is centrally placed on the south elevation. Originally there were a small pair of multi-paned windows on the front side, but one has been removed. The original window was reused in an addition. A log wing has been added, extending outward in the original porch area to the north side. It is constructed of logs originally cut for the building and stored for future expansion. This addition was made in 1948 by the present owner. The original wooden porch floor was replaced with concrete in 1951. Shutters and slab window trim were added in the 1950's. These few changes are all the known alterations to the building.

The property also includes a 1970's frame and sheet rock outhouse, not included in the nomination.

**(This information has not been edited.)**

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