



Reference Series #1000

Interpretation Of Recent Idaho History

March 1993

In many ways, each generation of historians has important advantages in interpreting its own times. These range from awareness of many cultural features that generally were accepted as reasonable to knowing meanings of expressions in ordinary language use. As an example of variation of this kind, a generation trained in depression-era economic psychology reacts very differently from one with a different experience.

Similarly, those whose impressions of warfare were formed in different conflicts often differ greatly. Anyone with experience in farming, mining, logging, or banking naturally understands those pursuits better than someone unfamiliar with them. Each generation is responsible for an initial interpretation of its own history. To begin with, at least, any recent history ought to be recognizable to those who lived through that era.

No matter how well competent historians interpret their own era's recent history, as time goes on, new aspects will appear important. Origins of institutions that gain significance in later eras will get more emphasis. Some theories and explanations will prove inaccurate in later contexts that cannot be anticipated in earlier times. Changes in technology revise information that seemed plausible in earlier times. Important investigations that were impossible in earlier eras become feasible with different varieties of new equipment. Computers and photography offer good examples of devices that help reinterpret history. Any number of new sciences indicate how past generations have not been able to understand important characteristics of their own era, and consequent new interpretations assume great importance. Yet changes in outlook also ensure that later generations cannot appreciate some aspects of life in earlier eras. So historians of recent events need to provide a foundation for understanding their own culture.

Technological advances that offer an increased capability to interpret our heritage have an added effect of directly modifying Idaho's development. Examples can be identified with ease. An isolated desert location that impeded nineteenth century settlement no longer inhibits economic expansion so effectively as it once did. Places that did not invite early exploitation profited from characteristics that once held them back.



Some aspects of modern social and economic change occurred in--and helped transform--Idaho because of special advantages that a wilderness and desert environment offered. Nuclear power experimentation provides a compelling example. A specially selected society of specialists and engineers reinforced an important element of Idaho's population that otherwise would have been less conspicuous. Other recent industrial possibilities have been at least flexible in adapting to Idaho locations. Computer products, to which Idaho also has made significant international contributions, have flourished in communities that had little or no practical option of attracting many kinds of heavy industry. Such changes bring special incentives to interpret Idaho culture in new ways--and in addition, they provide a new capability for achieving a better understanding of our emerging era.

In a new age that allows specialists to thrive in isolated locations with direct access to informational resources and all kinds of world knowledge available in large centers, Idaho's people have gained a special advantage. With a superior environment relatively free from modern large urban problems, they have entered a new era that favors their environment.

As always, no one can foresee exactly where all these changes will lead to in a new millennium that now is at hand. But historians are getting a little better equipped to understand our past and to anticipate our future. We know that changes are underway--as they always have been. We have no way to foresee where future changes will lead us, or what will seem important about our culture within another decade or two. Estimates always can be based upon projecting current trends, but those hold up only for a limited period of time. Meanwhile, historians have at least two responsibilities: to participate in future planning and to provide--based upon present evidence--studies of a long range of past eras. As always, we need to continue to investigate all earlier periods of local, national, and world history. And because of our special ability to understand important aspects of our recent past, historians need to ensure that careful interpretation of recent Idaho history receive special attention, utilizing whatever documentation and resources are available now. Important additional documentation will become available later, as will improved methods of interpretation. But historical ability to understand our times also will decrease in future eras unless careful efforts at interpreting them are undertaken now.