

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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BERING PLAIN

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Over a period extending back more than ten thousand years ago, people from a continent now recognized as Asia reached Idaho during a time when major geographical features did not resemble those that exist today. Continental coast lines changed greatly, but slowly and imperceptibly, over thousands of years: as vast glacial ice sheets expanded and receded, oceans got more shallow or else gained depth. When ice levels changed, shore lines diverged from their previous patterns. Rising when an ice accumulation melted, and falling when a new climate pattern brought larger ice fields that extended into North Idaho as far as Coeur d'Alene, massive accumulations of frozen ocean water controlled world geography in a remarkable way. No single generation of people would notice such changes, but during long warm or cold spells, surprising modifications transformed continents shaped by ocean depths.

Early residents of Idaho arrived at a time when Europe, Asia, and North America all were united as part of a single gigantic continent. A broad Bering Plain (hundreds of miles wide) occupied a large Arctic land area that ocean waters subsequently flooded. A vast ice sheet that overwhelmed much of later North America did not extend so completely into that northern continental expanse. Often described in more recent times as a land bridge between subsequent continents, that plain served more as a center for northern activity. Anyone's perception of northern land areas then would differ almost entirely from modern concepts. Then, when ice fields receded (but by no means disappeared) and ocean levels rose, old continents changed into new ones. Asia and North America emerged as separate features, with a narrow Bering Strait replacing an earlier broad plain. We still live in an ice age that preserves our present coastal cities. Changes in world climate continue at an imperceptible rate, so that no one can tell with any degree of certainty whether our next phase will be hotter or colder. Given enough time--perhaps only a few thousand years, or possibly far longer--our world climate might actually get past our present ice age. In that event, a great many large contemporary port cities would end up as abandoned underwater relics. Or another colder phase, with more vast continental ice sheets, could return. In that event, Bering Plain could be revived as an interesting

geographical expanse in another single continent of Asia, North America, and other areas reminiscent of older times. Idaho could wind up with more large lakes and floods, but any such possibility would be only a remote future possibility.