



## IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY REFERENCE SERIES

### THE OWYHEE COUNTRY

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Fur hunters discovered the Owyhee country early in the nineteenth century. Several trappers went to work in the general neighborhood at least as early as 1812, and a temporary fur trade post was established on Snake River opposite the mouth of the Owyhee for use during the winter of 1813-1814. But early in 1814, a band of hostile Bannock Indians wiped out the enterprise. Finally Donald Mackenzie, a partner in the Northwest Company, brought a large Snake country expedition to the region in 1818. (The Northwest Company, a Montreal concern, monopolized the fur trade of the interior Pacific Northwest in those years. Then in 1821, the Northwest Company consolidated with its older British rival, the Hudson's Bay Company.) Mackenzie had a varied group under his command. His force included a substantial number of French-Canadians and of Iroquois refugees from New York. In addition, he had many other kinds of distant Indians, and several Owyhees. ("Owyhee" and Hawaii" are two different spellings for the same word. Natives of what then were known as the Sandwich Islands went by the name "Owyhees." Missionaries who came to those islands in 1820 devised an alphabet to use in writing the native language: the word spelled "Owyhee" in the English alphabet came out "Hawaii" in the new missionary version.) When Mackenzie's trapping expedition reached Boise Valley in 1818, the Iroquois chose to remain there for the winter, and some Owyhees decided to explore the country to the southwest. When Mackenzie's expedition reassembled for an early fur trade rendezvous in Boise Valley in the spring of 1819, the Owyhees did not show up. In fact, they never did turn up. But ever since then, the country in which they disappeared has been called the Owyhee country.

Boise Basin gold discoveries in 1862 brought mining to the Owyhee region the next year. Coming from the new town of Placerville, Michael Jordan's party of twenty-nine prospectors found gold on Jordan Creek, May 18, 1863; after working up the stream for a few days, they returned to Boise Basin with news that set off the Owyhee gold rush. Quartz discoveries in July and August, particularly the rich Orofino high on War Eagle Mountain, augmented the easily worked placers. But not until another important lode, the Morning Star, was located October 14, 1863, did it begin to become apparent that the Owyhee mines would be noted primarily for silver. Two leading Boise Basin miners, J. M. More and D. H. Fogus, energetically developed the Orofino and Morning Star properties; rock from their mines assayed extremely high in gold and silver, and by the fall of 1864, ore from their properties began to keep a number of different stamp mills busy producing a million dollars a year. Then in September, 1865, incredibly rich ore turned up in another magnificent War Eagle property called, somewhat imaginatively, the Poorman. A claim war stopped work on the Poorman after a production of only six days. But in

those six days, surface operations by the hastiest methods yielded over \$500,000 worth of ore. Litigation over title to the Poorman was finally compromised; in the summer of 1866, serious efforts began on that property. Fabulously spectacular Poorman ore specimens were displayed in Congress and in the Paris International Exposition, where the Poorman exhibit received a special gold medal in 1867. Additional major lode discoveries on War Eagle Mountain led to a full-scale underground claim war early in 1868, in which J. M. More was the leading casualty. But hostilities were suppressed, and the mines went on producing until the failure of the Bank of California, August 26, 1875, brought most work to a halt. The community did not collapse even then, although Silver City's daily newspaper (The Owyhee Avalanche had started August 19, 1865, and had become Idaho's earliest daily after telegraph service reached Silver City, August 31, 1874.) eventually had to become a weekly again.

Range cattle came from California and Texas to Idaho after the gold rush, and by 1868 and 1869, large herds arrived in Owyhee County. (Until 1879, when Cassia County was established, Owyhee County included all of Idaho south of Snake River and as far east as the Raft River country; the original Owyhee cattle empire was a huge one indeed.) During the years after mining had passed from initial excitement and early high-grade production into a transitional period of preparation for large-scale development, the open range cattle business reached its height. Finally, severe winter storms dealt a terrible blow to the range cattlemen--especially in 1888-1889. By that time, though, railway transportation and enlarged capital investment enabled the mines to work important lower-grade Florida Mountain and Delamar properties. More than two decades of big production enabled such Florida Mountain companies as the Trade Dollar and the Black Jack (consolidated in 1899) to surpass the total yield of the earlier War Eagle properties, which never did recover after their early shutdown. This new mining boom led to W. H. Dewey's building of the Boise, Nampa, and Owyhee Railway to Murphy, and accounts for the greater part of the \$40,000,000 or more production of the Owyhee region, realized mainly by 1912. Although mining did not cease entirely after the big producers shut down, irrigation in the Snake River Valley made farming of major importance just at the time the second era of mining production was drawing to a close. Finally in 1934, Owyhee County voted to transfer the county seat from Silver City to Murphy. After wartime restriction shut down mining in 1942, Silver City became an authentic ghost town. Irrigated farming, though, built up a larger population than the county ever had during the mining days, and agriculture and livestock account for most of the wealth of Owyhee County now.

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