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EXPLORATION AND SETTLEMENT OF SALMON RIVER

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Roaring through a mile deep canyon which has made the Salmon River Mountains a formidable barrier to travel, the Salmon River drains vast areas of spectacular wilderness. Only six towns in the whole Salmon River country--an area substantially larger than Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island put together--boast as many as a hundred inhabitants; Salmon City, the largest, had 2,944 in 1960. None of the others even approached a thousand. Located in sheltered mountain valleys to the east and west of the central Salmon River mountain core, these scattered communities are the product of more than a century of white settlement. With a total population of almost precisely 10,000 in 1960, Salmon River has almost--but not quite--as many people as came there during the height of the Salmon River gold rush in 1862.

Discovered August 12, 1805, by Meriwether Lewis, the Salmon River mountains forced the celebrated Lewis and Clark expedition to detour far to the north. Clark went out to inspect the river itself as a possible boat route to the Columbia. Before he got very far into the canyon below the North Fork, he encountered rapids that could be passed only with "emence" delay. Moreover, his Indian guides assured him he had seen nothing yet. Clark had good reason to be discouraged; "those rapids which I had seen he said was small & trifling in comparison to the rocks & rapids below, at no great distance & the Hills or mountains were not like those I had seen but like the side of a tree straight up." Clark was told that the Salmon River mountains close into a cliff-encompassed gorge which "continues for a great distance and that the water runs with great violence from one rock to another on each side foaming & roaring thro' rocks in every direction, so as to render the passage of anything impossible." At that point Clark turned back.

Six years after Lewis and Clark gave up the Salmon as a decidedly poor route for transcontinental travel, Donald Mackenzie explored the lower Salmon with part of an expedition of trappers headed from Saint Louis to Astoria. His men found the Snake unnavigable, and did not like the looks of the deep canyon of the Snake. So they descended the Little Salmon and the lower Salmon (presumably to Whitebird) as an alternative to working their way down the Snake. Mackenzie went on to explore much of the Snake country and in 1819 he ascended the Snake canyon past the mouth of the Salmon. If he examined any more than fringes of the Salmon River country, no record of such exploration

survives.

Fur traders eventually began to enter the upper Salmon through Lewis and Clark's Lemhi Pass. Generally they stayed clear of all but the fringes of the Salmon River mountains until they had just about

exhausted the beaver resources of the rest of the Snake country. Hudson's Bay Company expeditions from Flathead House on Clark's Fork found the Lemhi Pass route an ideal way to get to the upper Snake and on to Bear River or Green River. Hostile Blackfeet warriors made the journey hazardous. Yet after Finnan MacDonald chastised (and literally roasted) a menacing Blackfoot band during a hard fought battle on the Lemhi (then known as the east fork of the Salmon) in 1823, these adversaries suddenly grew much more respectful of the white man's strength. Alexander Ross, who succeeded MacDonald as leader of the Snake expedition in 1824, had much less trouble with the Blackfeet. He penetrated much farther into the upper Salmon country.

Ross himself reached Stanley Basin, and some of his men examined part of the unexplored Salmon River mountains as well. They found little to encourage fur hunting, and further exploration did not resume for six more years. Peter Skene Ogden's Snake brigade traveled the regular upper Salmon route a time or two, and Thomas McKay spent part of the hard winter of 1827 with a group of British trappers snow bound on the Pahsimeroi. They naturally had no chance to get out to explore much. But in 1831 a band of mountain men working for the American Fur Company came into Stanley Basin and went on to explore to the west. Finding an enterprising Indian who knew the country, they set out for Bear Valley, crossed the upper South Fork of the Salmon, and reached Long Valley on the Payette. Their Indian guide, however, saw no point in looking for beaver. What he finally showed the mountain men was a fabulous elk herd. Somehow the Indian never did understand why the whites took no interest in elk hunting in Long Valley, and the mountain men returned to Stanley Basin convinced of the futility of further exploration of the Salmon River mountains in their search for beaver.

In 1832, Salmon River finally was explored from its source practically all of the way down. John Work brought the regular Hudson's Bay Company Snake expedition back to the Salmon River late in 1831, and found American Fur Company mountain men still camped there trapping that winter. Then on March 26, 1832, four of Work's men "left in a small skin canoe to descend the river and hunt their way down." Since the main river never had been explored through the deep canyon that William Clark had found impassable, they anticipated excellent trapping along untouched streams. Unhappily, they found nothing at all in the way of beaver. Worse still, their canoe could not hold all four men; they had to take turns with two walking down the precipitous banks while the other two rode the canoe down the treacherous river. After more than a month's hard work, they passed through the worst of the canyon. Then, the canoe simply disappeared--except for the paddles which were all that the two fur hunters that were walking down the bank (out of sight of the disaster) ever found.

Destitute on the lower river (perhaps the lower Salmon, or possibly the Snake below the Salmon), the survivors luckily were rescued by friendly Nez Perce Indians. Unaware for a time of this calamity, Work and the main party crossed from the South Fork of the Boise to the head of the Salmon, May 27, 1832, and explored the upper stream down to the part of Stanley Basin below which Alexander Ross had traced out the river in 1824. Although the British at this point gave up the Salmon altogether, regarding it as exhausted of beaver, mountain men continued to work there for a time. Captain B. L. E. Bonneville, in

fact, turned up on the Salmon late in 1832 in his search for suitable quarters for winter. His choice finally was a spot only about four miles below later Salmon City. Little remained, though, for Bonneville's men; trapping on the Salmon practically was over after the 1832 hunts.

White settlement of the Salmon River country followed some two decades after fur hunting declined there. Eight years after Mormon settlers had reached Salt Lake, Brigham Young sent out a missionary colony far to the north. The original band organized on Bear River, May 20, 1855, for a month-long trip by ox team. Selecting a strategic site--the same location where Captain Lewis had met the Lemhi Shoshoni exactly fifty years before--for their Salmon River mission, they constructed a frontier outpost accessible to the Shoshoni, Bannock, Nez Perce, and Flathead Indians. "A timber stockade, sixteen rods square and about twelve feet in height, "enclosed their comfortable cabins. A mud wall stock corral, a remnant of which still stands, was built near the stockade. Eventually this whole establishment became known as Fort Lemhi. After the Mormon colonists had worked with the Indians and raised crops for two years, Brigham Young and a large party of leaders from Salt Lake made the long trip north to visit their Salmon River mission. Impressed with what they saw, they arranged for substantial reinforcements to be sent out. At the same time, the advance of Albert Sidney Johnston's Utah expedition westward across the great plains heralded the end of the mission. during the resulting Mormon war, distant outposts were recalled. Indian restlessness associated with Johnston's expedition led to an attack on the Salmon River mission, February 25, 1858. Brigham Young decided that the colony should return to Utah as soon as he heard news of the trouble. Salmon River once again was given back entirely to the Indians.

In 1860, only two years after Fort Lemhi was abandoned, gold discoveries on the Clearwater created new interest in the Salmon River country. The resulting Clearwater gold rush led prospectors to try the Salmon as well. Fabulous placer deposits found in a high mountain basin at the head of Slate Creek, August 19, 1861, brought on a stampede to the Salmon River mines that fall. No one knew at first just how extensive the new placers were. Enough claims were paying fifty dollars, or even a hundred dollars or more, a day to excite interest all along the Pacific Coast. Stories of bonanza cleanups--ranging up to six thousand dollars that Jacob Weiser's company realized in two great days (November 19-20)--intensified the Salmon River craze. The new mining town of Florence, erected hastily during the fall of 1861, suddenly became county seat of Idaho County--a domain larger than Minnesota, with boundaries extending eastward to Dakota, Nebraska, and Colorado. That winter was the terror of the century, and many of those who arrived late in fall were lucky to survive. Extreme hardship of getting to Florence did not hold back the gold seekers, though. The rush to the Salmon River mines brought well over ten thousand eager men to Florence in 1862. When they found that the exceptionally rich placers there were confined to a small area, thousands of surplus prospectors scattered over the country in their relentless search for new bonanzas. The river itself had extensive claims that would pay to work in winter; during the summer of 1862, prospectors went up and down all the way through the main

canyon of the Salmon which had turned back Lewis and Clark. They found gold most of the way, but not enough to pay anyone to come back to the tough part of the canyon. Good claims were located across the river from Florence, though, at Warrens in 1862; from then on, mining kept white settlers in the wilderness of the Salmon River mountains. Farmers and ranchers utilized what lands they could--generally along the river and its many large forks--in an effort to supply the new mining camps. Such settlers were too scattered to make much of an impression on the wilderness, but they remain there to this day.

Gradually prospectors managed to work their way through the entire wilderness of the Salmon River mountains. In 1866 a rush to Leesburg brought miners into the upper Salmon country and led to the forming of Salmon City in the valley below. Other mining operations commenced along the upper river, and in 1869 a gold rush to the still more remote Loon Creek placers brought mining to the upper Middle Fork. Next came a series of bonanza lodes on Yankee Fork, followed by a rash of new mines from the head of the Salmon down to the upper part of the main canyon.

All of this expansion finally led to serious friction with the Indians; in 1877 some of White Bird's Nez Perce band at last were provoked to hostilities on the lower Salmon, and Joseph's band from across the Snake could not escape being involved when the United States Army replied with an attack on White Bird Creek. The Indians drove the Army out in disorder, but had to retire from Salmon River when stronger white military forces took up the chase against them. Finally in 1879, the Army undertook an extremely difficult campaign right through the middle of the Salmon River mountains to round up most of the last of the Indian inhabitants--the Sheepeaters--in that rough country. These small Sheepeater bands had been surprisingly inoffensive to the whites. Yet fear of them--and of Indians who had been driven into the country as refugees from other wars--had been enough to discourage prospecting of much of the more remote mountain country. At last, with the Sheepeaters gone, new mining camps could flourish in widely scattered parts of the vast wilderness area. From Vienna and Sawtooth City at the head of the Salmon, these remote outposts continued down past Clayton and Bayhorse to Shoup and Ulysses near the point where Clark had turned back in 1805. Seafoam, Sheep Mountain, Greyhound Ridge, and Yellowjacket attracted miners into some of the more remote mountain regions even farther back. Eventually in 1902, a last big Salmon River mountain gold rush--this time to Thunder Mountain--brought still more excitement and a horde of prospectors. Some of the camps did not last long, but others proved to be important twentieth century producers. A large lead mine at Gilmore justified construction of a railway that eventually reached Salmon City in 1910. Still later, major antimony and tungsten properties at Stibnite and Patterson, and cobalt at Blackbird, contributed to the nation's mineral wealth.

Access to most of these isolated mining camps always was difficult. Many could be reached only by pack trail. No road along the river ever did connect the upper and lower Salmon; the state highway system still avoids the entire main block of the Salmon River mountains. Navigation of the river itself commenced in specially-designed boats in 1903 that could go only one way: down stream. For a half century, the Salmon continued as "the river of no return."

Then, after 1950, various kinds of power boats capable of ascending the Salmon at last were developed. These have made the river more accessible to tourists and sportsmen. Yet the main canyon, along with large blocks of the Salmon River mountains, still remains a wilderness.